

RELIGION AND COMPUTER GAMES:  
A THEOLOGICAL EXPLORATION OF RELIGIOUS THEMES  
IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT

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A Thesis Submitted to  
The University of Birmingham  
For the degree of  
MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

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The University of Birmingham  
January 2012

## ABSTRACT

The virtual worlds provided by online games give players the opportunity to engage with the virtual reality manifested by symbols and images. These symbols and images have the particular characteristic of communicating meanings to people who interpret them. Virtual experience, in relation to these symbols and images, provides a different dimension of engaging with symbolic meanings. In particular, online games based on mythological and religious narratives display religious themes in terms of theological and philosophical ideas contained within virtual experiences. This thesis focuses on the use of religious themes which may be found in the online game, *World of Warcraft*, utilising empirical observation by means of the observation, in particular, of a human priest character; this has enabled a focus on the use of religious symbols and images in relation to virtual priestly abilities and talents. It represents how the virtual world reflects religious symbols in a particular religious character's life. Theological and philosophical themes relating to death and resurrection have been researched through an analysis based on virtual participant observation. This research shows how dualistic interpretations have been applied to important matters such as the nature of a character's existence and of the virtual world.

## **DEDICATION**

For God, who has inspired this project.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank both Ian Draper and Edmond Tang who, as my supervisors, gave me constant support and help during my studies. Ian made insightful comments referring to cyberspace and helped me to deal with general academic issues. Edmond inspired me to develop my basic ideas into an insightful discussion, giving theological advice and comments. I could not have completed the research without their ideas, criticism and encouragement. I would like to thank Pam, who proof-read my whole thesis with deep consideration, even though she had to teach her students at the same time. I would like to thank both Sung-jin Lee and Young-sook Han who, as my parents-in-law, gave me financial and emotional support to continue studying. They paid my whole tuition fees and the total cost of my studies and constantly prayed for me. Without their help I could not have completed my studies. I also thank my parents, Hyun-dong Kim and Hyun-hee Cho, who have supported my whole life with constant love. They sacrificed themselves for my studies, spending most of their time taking care of their grandchild. They dealt with most of my private concerns and chores which I needed to do but could not.

I thank both my husband and daughter, whom I love. Sae-hoon Lee, my husband, always encouraged me to concentrate on my studies. He also suggested ideas referring to computer games, based on his work experience with Microsoft. With his love and support I could endure studying whenever I despaired. Dain Lee, my beloved child, always gave support without complaining about my frequent absence. And finally, I

thank God who gave me strength and everlasting love. Without Him I couldn't do anything.

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## **LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS**

CG	Computer Graphics
CMC	Computer-Mediated Communication
DMB	Digital Multimedia Broadcasting
GDP	Gross Domestic Product
HP	Health Point
KWMA	The Korea World Missions Association
MMORPG	Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game
MP	Mana Point
MUD	Multi-User Dungeon
NPC	Non-Player Character
PvE	Player vs. Environment
PvP	Player vs. Player
TP	Talent Point
WoW	World of Warcraft
XP	Experience Point
2D	Two Dimensional
3D	Three Dimensional

**CHAPTER 1**

**INTRODUCTION**

## 1.1 Introduction

### 1.1.1 The Emergence of Virtual Worlds

"Everything is backwards now, like out there is the true world and in here is the dream."

This is part of a narration by the main character, Sully in the middle of the movie, *Avatar*, directed by James Cameron. The movie was released in 2010 and was a great hit all over the world. Sully, who cannot use his legs, becomes a hybrid body, an avatar. Unlike in his physical state he can walk and run with his avatar and can explore another world called *Pandora* where the native clan, *Na'vi* dwells. Through scientific technology, an avatar connects to human consciousness and can be operated by it. While he is exploring with his hybrid body, he can feel simultaneously what his avatar feels. After he begins to communicate with the world of *Pandora* and with its indigenous people, he becomes confused between the two worlds. He feels *Pandora* is the true world for him and reality, where his physical body exists, is the dream. Finally, Sully chooses to abandon his human physical body and becomes the avatar, through the help of a sacred power in Pandora. The movie, *Avatar*, shows how people are able to have virtual experiences through virtual characters in other worlds.

As the computer has come to be the indispensable medium of communication in everyday life, people utilise the Internet for their social activities and to share their ideas and opinions. Virtual reality has occupied people's lives to a greater extent than television or radio has. The Internet allows people to engage with a network system,

through which they can visit millions of websites, spread all over the world, at any time. Virtual space has come to contain everything that already exists in real life: for example, cyber-shops, cyber-churches, cyber-cafes and cyber-communities have been created. In particular, virtual religion has had enormous quantitative and qualitative growth over the past decade. Brenda E. Brasher, in her book, *Give Me That Online Religion*, introduced the concept of religious activities carried out by online religions which have developed in cyberspace:

On the Web, Jewish sites bring cherished text to the electronic medium through online Torah education, Parsha commentaries, 'Ask the Rabbi' interactive sites, and even a Cyber-Seder. In churches each Sunday, Christians recount the story of Jesus' life and suffering, his death and resurrection. In cyberspace, Christian Websites typically link to versions of the Bible, display images of Jesus, and present the sponsoring denomination's unique relationship to the central Christian story. (Brasher 2004, 25-26)

Conventional religions have utilised Internet space with advanced computer programs and graphic art skills, and made remarkable content and visuals for their own religious purposes. Diverse pagan religions performing cyber rituals through text-based communications can also be found (Cowan 2005). Cyberspace has come to possess diverse activities, symbols and means of communication related to religious life. In this current shift of cyberspace, it is important that we should also focus on the virtual worlds created by online games.

Online games have been developing since the early MUD (Multi User Dungeon) gained huge popularity. They are distinguished from existing offline computer games which include whole ranges of electronic console, arcade and PC games. Online games manifest persistent virtual worlds which provide diverse virtual activities and

communication among players. Even though players leave the virtual world, the world is not paused but is transformed according to the activities and virtual life of other players. While existing offline games provide virtual characters manipulated by the computer system through artificial intelligence, online games have both NPCs (Non-Player Characters) and PCs (Player Characters). This means that players can engage with other players in the same virtual world through communications provided by chat channels and a mail box. Moreover, players encounter diverse artificial factors while playing. They have to engage with visualised symbols and images such as virtual characters and items. No player can play online games without engaging with these. It is very difficult to avoid communicating with other players or engaging with symbolic factors unless a player stays only in an isolated cabin, giving up any progress within the game. (Even if a player decides to stay in isolation, he/she still has to engage with their own virtual character, which is also a symbolic factor.)

Engagement with the symbolic environment means that the player needs to go through information gathering processes in order to solve the puzzles that the designers of these virtual worlds have created. The designers do not explain all the rules, themes and principles through words, but also through images. Images tell stories to players and virtual experiences mean engaging with these images. Living players as physical beings are also represented by images through virtual characters and their expressions. Their movements, behaviours and features represent meanings. For example, if a virtual character buffs<sup>1</sup> other characters, this represents hospitality and kindness to them. On the other hand, if a virtual character steals virtual items from other characters, this

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<sup>1</sup> Applies beneficial spells or effects to others.



represents violent and immoral attitudes. Moreover, to play online games also means to relate to and read virtual environments as images. While players are struggling to make progress, they have to find the exact place to go and the correct enemy to fight. In order to complete their assigned quests, they need to read the map of the virtual world (image) and to read virtual characters (image). Hence, in order to conduct a virtual life it is inevitable to read images which are manifested by symbolic factors.

Symbolic factors in virtual worlds represent not only in-game principles related to a player's progression but also various themes and concepts. This is because each game world provides its own coherent themes and narratives. For example, WoW manifests a world which was corrupted by evil power after the creation. There is an army, the Alliance, which wants to keep the world from the evil power. On the other hand, there is another army, Horde, which exists for the evil power, struggling with Alliance. The virtual world of WoW is organised by two opposite factions engaging in constant battles and conflicts. From this main theme, WoW manifests a persistent world, creating diverse episodes and situations in which players can participate. Each event is not alienated from the others but takes part in the whole theme and narratives. The virtual world, however, does not provide wholly novel and strange themes compared to the real world. In the virtual world, we can find real-world content related to philosophical and religious ideas. Through virtual characters and their lives, diverse kinds of religious symbolism can be observed. In basic narratives and myths there exist theological and philosophical interpretations of human beings, universe and spiritual world. Some images display realistic religious events as showing death and resurrection, the life of religious characters and the after-world. Therefore, engagement with symbolic factors in

virtual worlds could also mean engagement with their meanings, and if the meanings reflect real-world religious ideas, the virtual experience may be related to not only pure virtual reality but also existing knowledge, ideas and probably some part of reality.

In fact, virtual worlds are related to the real world through sharing people, symbols and experiences. They are not isolated worlds but another dimension of reality as a continuum. Even though they apply different rules and conditions from the real world, they provide a certain extent of human experience and communications. This is similar to playing games in the real world. People play football games in the playground, engaging with certain rules, conditions and identities, but what they experience is part of reality. Through playing football games, players can learn not only specific techniques and skills but also life principles, for example team work or respecting rules. They also build relationships with other players, forming a community.

This new virtual dimension is widely open to people, providing diverse activities and relationships through images and symbolic factors. In fact, people enjoy coming and going from one dimension to another and the borders between the two dimensions are even more blurred than before. In this situation, it is necessary to understand the nature of this new dimension before illuminating its effects and phenomena, because an aspect of the nature of virtual reality is a basic framework for interpreting cultural, religious or economic issues occurring in cyberspace. Therefore, we will discuss some aspects of cyberspace from a viewpoint of religious and theological study in the next section.

### 1.1.2 Religious and Theological Aspects

As the Internet has penetrated deeply into our life, scholars from diverse disciplines have studied issues related to it. Its sociological aspects, such as how it influences social practices and how it transforms society are discussed vigorously. Psychology has mainly focused on the problem of Internet addiction. Scholars in media studies or semiotics emphasise the significant roles of internet communication, developing conceptual frameworks in order to interpret what it displays. Most studies related to the above disciplines have been more interested in phenomena that occur in cyberspace than asking fundamental questions about what it truly is.

In the mid-1990s, the first studies on religion and the Internet were made, which are now referred to as the first wave of research (Zaleski 1997; O’Leary and Brasher 1996; Brooke 1997). According to Højsgaard and Warburg, at this stage “the very novelty and potential of the subject were grasped with enthusiasm” (2005, 1-2). Heidi Campbell (2003) illustrated three groups who respond to the Internet, which she named *Advocates*, *Critics* and *Critical friends*. *Advocates* assert that Internet technology is not merely a technological tool, but a blessing from God, and their view is an optimistic one. Scholars who belong to this group regard cyberspace as a utopia which is able to improve people’s life through bringing liberty of communication and human equality, overcoming existing inequalities such as race and gender discrimination. For example, Wertheim (1999) regards cyberspace as a spiritual place in this modern age, comparing it to the Kingdom of Heaven. He compares cyberspace to the Christian Heaven from the point of view of that there are no obscure forms of national boundaries. He concentrates

on the communicative nature and openness of cyberspace, which empowers all nations to be unified without distinctions. Jennifer Cobb (1998) also regards cyberspace as a spiritual place for encountering the divinity as creativity. She focuses on the idea that the divinity empowers every evolutionary process of His creatures, even in cyberspace. Emphasising the utopian aspect of cyberspace, however, dismisses the negative phenomena that occur in cyberspace. As in the real world, there are social and economic conflicts in cyberspace. In addition, problems occurring in cyberspace also impact on the real world, because people are involved in both dimensions. Online fraud destroys people's lives in terms of economic and mental conditions, devastating their real lives.

On the other hand, *Critics* depict the Internet as a de-humanising and delusional medium, at the same time stressing the weakness of technology (Campbell 2003, 215). Brooks Alexander emphasises the fact that all humans have ambivalent natures which can lead them to behave in different and unpredictable ways. Human beings have two opposite natures in their mind, the fallen nature and godly nature from the image of God. Our double nature influences our behaviours in different ways. Sometimes, bad intentions bring good results as a "side effect"; however, our fallen nature seems to be strong enough to suppress the opposite nature when it meets the fallen world. His emphasis is on the fallen factors of human nature which disable people from accomplishing utopian dreams in cyberspace. Moreover, he regards cyberspace as a delusional and negative place, full of fantasy, insisting that people seek cyberspace in order to escape from reality based on their fallen nature of denial (Alexander 1997, 99-103). In the same book, Tal Brooke (1997) describes virtual reality as a poor imitation of the God-created world and as alternative reality. He even does not hesitate to regard cyberspace as a darkened chamber of ghosts who abandon the real world.

However, this critical reaction has been raised against false assumptions provided by the advocates. The Utopian idea of joining a pure spiritual place (cyberspace) with pure consciousness was based on dualistic thinking on human existence. Can we actually participate in cyberspace with pure consciousness? More fundamentally, can we separate our consciousness from ourselves? This is related to existential questions on human beings. Moreover, cyberspace is not a pure spiritual environment either. The gnostic<sup>2</sup> ideals of the early advocates exaggerated the spiritual value of cyberspace and this idea has influenced general understanding of the nature of cyberspace within religious and philosophical studies. In fact, both advocates and critics simultaneously agree with the idea that virtual reality is apart from reality, but they claim it in different ways. Advocates claim that cyberspace is a pure spiritual world (distinguished from reality); on the other hand critics claim that people seek cyberspace in order to escape from reality. There is a tendency to separate virtual reality from reality.

*Critical Friends* emphasise the need for balance when confronting Internet technology.

The Christian response to technology not only considers just how the Internet affects social and communicative relationships, it also reflects on how its use

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<sup>2</sup> Some early advocates of cyberspace insist that a pure disembodied mind freely explore cyberspace in terms of gnostic ideal or dream (Alexander 1997, 99-103). Gnosticism is a term used by scholars since the 18th century and generally indicates religious movements of late antiquity. It examines diverse and complex theories which are hardly composed by a consistent theory but a main claim is that the system of gnosis is a unique way of redemption (Rudolph 1984, 55). An elected person who holds gnosis (esoteric knowledge) by revelation can only ascend to a spiritual dimension after being released from the body of prison (see the section 6.2). In fact, most advocates avoid mentioning a specific gnostic tradition in detail but focuses on the dichotomy between the body and soul. Heim introduced a gnostic aspect of cyberspace in his book, the *Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*. 'The cybernaut leaves the prison of the body and emerges in a world of digital sensation' (Heim 1994, 101). A gnostic aspect of cyberspace mainly emphasizes on that human consciousness separated from its body of prison and explores cyberspace as a spiritual dimension (cyberspace is explained as an ideal world which bears some resemblances to platonic ideal forms according to Heim). The gnostic concept of disdain of body and the concept of freedom seem to have influence on the aspect, praising 'limitless freedom of pure disembodied intelligence' in cyberspace (Alexander 1997, 99).

shapes the soul and cultural values. The most desirable position is that of a critical friend, as it highlights both advantages and disadvantages and responds to both extremes by trying balance to the debate. (Campbell 2003, 216-217)

As Campbell asserts, it is important to consider both the strengths and the weaknesses of cyberspace and to respond to the diverse issues and impacts raised by it. Stephan D. O' Leary (2005) criticises his earlier optimistic aspect on cyberspace as naïve and attempts to balance to the debate. He does not doubt that new communicative technologies will transform the future of religion and humanity itself (which is inevitable). However, after much study of cyberspace and religious activities, he has become aware of both the possibilities and limitations of new communicative technologies. He argues that even though computer technology manifests a realistic simulation through the advancement of graphic or audio skills, ritual performance in the physical world can never be replaced by cyber-ritual. The Korean scholar Jung (2004) also discusses the possibilities and limitations of cyber-rituals and cyber-churches. He agrees with the idea that cyber-ritual cannot replace a whole range of physical ritual, giving the example of the Eucharist. However, he still emphasises the significance of cyber-churches and cyber-rituals in order to evangelise people who are not able to participate in physical ritual, like Christians in Muslim countries and disabled people. He suggests that local churches and cyber-churches should cooperate in order to complement each other.

In the 21<sup>st</sup> century, through diverse subjects which link with religion and the Internet, a second wave of academic research is in progress. Scholars of religion tend to focus on current tendencies or usage of the Internet in relation to religious practices and spiritual

journeys. Cyber-religions or religious communities have been observed and analysed in empirical studies. There is more of a focus on how cyberspace is currently transforming or will transform our religious life, which includes both belief itself and ways of believing, than arguing about whether we have to avoid certain transformations.

### **1.1.3 Online Games and WoW**

From the 1970s, when arcade video games became popular among children and young people, video games could be accessed at shopping malls or restaurants. In America, commercial arcades spread to most corners of the country between 1980 and 1985, called “The Golden Age of video arcades” (Compton 2000, 58-59). After that, home gaming systems, such as *Nintendo*, came out and were marketed to be used by young children (at that time, games were mostly played by children), and players had access to games at home without coins. As computer technology developed, people were able to enjoy video games through the medium of computers, and countless computer games were released. As Internet technology has become widely used, online games have developed enormously; nowadays, people can enjoy games with other players from all over the world.

Research into the history spanning video games to online games reveals that there are millions of games in the world. Selecting games is the most important process prior to observing games. At first, I divided games into five sections as below.

1.Video games in the beginning	1970s
2.Video arcades in the Golden age	1980-1985
3.Offline video games on home gaming systems	mid 1980s-present
4.Offline computer games on private computers	mid 1980s-present
5.Online computer games	mid 1990s-present

**Table 1 Computer games sorted into five categories**

In my thesis, computer games are the most important materials to observe. I chose an online game as the main object for case study, considering its popularity, its level of impact on its players, and the richness of its religious themes. Computer games<sup>3</sup> can be divided into two categories and there are clear differences between them, as highlighted in the table below. In order to understand online games properly, it is important to understand their characteristics.

<b>Offline games</b>	<b>Online games (MMORPGs<sup>4</sup>)</b>
One-way play	Multi-play
Playing with NPC	Playing with real people on the network
A chance to reset	No chance to reset the world
No interaction with people	Interaction with other people through a chat box
Limited world	Persistent world
Fixed environment	Changeable environment
Less addictive game play	More addictive game play

**Table 2 Comparison between offline and online games**

As we can observe in Table 2, offline and online games possess distinctive features. The most significant characteristic of online games is the interactions among players through Computer-Mediated Communication (hereafter CMC), unlike offline games, in which

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<sup>3</sup> In this thesis, computer games represent the whole range of electronic games, including arcade games, console games, PC games and online games.

<sup>4</sup> Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games



players are isolated from social relationships. As in the movie *Avatar*, where a main character visits *Pandora* with his colleagues who also wear avatars, online game players can join virtual worlds with other players. They can communicate with both the virtual characters of players and non-player characters (hereafter NPC). Moreover, online games simulate persistent worlds which exist in an ongoing process. Whereas offline game worlds have to be paused by the player's absence, online game worlds are still in progress whether an individual player leaves or not. Hence they are changeable, because they are influenced by the way other players communicate with them. If offline game play can be explained as the interaction between an individual player and a more fixed environment, using a computer program, online game play can be depicted as the interaction between players and a fluid environment which can be transformed by other players under the ongoing governance of the game company. Therefore, online games, because of their social interaction and superior resemblance to the real world, could be seen to be more attractive than their offline counterparts, and for this reason, more likely to lead to game addiction. In recent times, online game addiction has become more of a serious problem than ever before, even being mentioned in divorce cases. Experts predict that this addiction problem increase in the future (Warren 2011). Online game play should not be regarded as only entertainment or as a child's toy, but also as a way of participating in social interactions while conducting a virtual life. Players can achieve goals, expand relationships and experience other dimensions of life while taking part in virtual worlds.

Online game study has been conducted mainly by researchers in sociology, psychology and media studies so far. The main focus of these studies has been game addiction,

social activities and communication in game play (e.g. Ducheneaut and Moore 2004; Muta 2006; Kelly 2004; Steinkuehler and Williams 2006; Taylor 2006). However, as online games have a greater impact on society, other recent studies have started to focus on online games. For example, Edward Castronova (2007), one of the first economists to be concerned with the virtual world economy, seriously attempted to analyse the economic system in the virtual world of *EverQuest* and found that the GDP (Gross Domestic Product) of the fictional world could be larger than that of some real countries. He also insists we should regard virtual world production seriously, because the border between the real and virtual world economies would be more obscured in the future. For example, some Chinese prisoners were forced by guards to collect in-game money while playing WoW. They had to fight with monsters and cast spells during the night after heavy work in coal mines in the daytime, in order to allow the guards to trade in-game money for real world money. This kind of “gold farming” is welcomed by gamers who want to progress their characters and are willing to pay real-world money for this (Vincent 2011).

Academic legal scholars, F. Gregory Lastowka and Dan Hunter (2006), have investigated the law and virtual worlds and also emphasise the obscure border between the two worlds. In their article “Virtual Worlds: A Primer”, they provide three primary reasons for exploring the laws of virtual worlds:

First, virtual worlds are attracting an ever-increasing population of participants who believe that the social interactions that occur within these environments are important . . . A second reason why virtual worlds are worthy of consideration is that the economic boundaries between the real and the virtual world are not as distinct as they might appear . . . A third reason for exploring the laws of virtual

worlds is they provide a parallel alternative to existing legal systems, where new forms of social regulation can be explored. (Lastowka and Hunter 2006, 16-17)

Many scholars who concern themselves with virtual worlds seriously assert that the real and virtual worlds are not separated from one another. This could be the most significant reason why we should keep considering virtual worlds in diverse aspects related to real-world study.

In this thesis I researched the virtual worlds of online games, especially WoW. WoW, by Blizzard Entertainment, is one of the most popular online games in the world. *The Burning Crusade* (the first expansion set) was released in 2007 and *The Wrath of the Lich King* (the next expansion) was released in 2008. According to WoW official websites there are more than 11.5 million subscribers (who pay a subscription monthly) to WoW (“World of Warcraft® Subscriber Base Reaches 11.5 Million Worldwide” 2008). It is a Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Game (hereafter MMORPG) with a first or third-person view, controlling a virtual character to obtain personal in-game goals; players can earn virtual items or money, exploring the virtual world, fighting with enemies or completing quests. Through diverse chat channels players can also communicate with other players while they are playing.

In WoW, players can encounter religious themes or philosophical concepts behind religious symbols and virtual experience. For example, the death of virtual characters and the existence of an afterlife reflect the idea of “immortality of soul” in WoW. The event of death demands the player release their character’s spirit and immediately move the spirit into the world of the afterlife. Before being resurrected, players can observe

the character's physical body lying on the ground. The dichotomy between perpetual soul and destructible body is experienced by players through their characters' deaths. In this respect, we can assume that this aspect of virtual characters is based on the metaphysical approach to human existence in terms of dualism. My thesis focuses on such religious themes through empirical observation. With a human priest character, it mainly focuses on religious themes in the human priest life and the process of death and resurrection.

In 2009, a Dutch student, Theo Zijderveld, published his Master's thesis *Cyberpilgrims* through his website. In his theology thesis, he mentioned that the virtual world of WoW could be a spiritual dimension which empowers players to have cyber-self realisation. He approaches the virtual world of WoW as a spiritual dimension related to spiritual identity construction. His thesis is significant because his key contribution is to argue that WoW could be a topic for theological study. He argues that traditional religion refers to institutional religion: in recent times, people are looking for a more personal or individual religious life, as they do not take part in institutions such as the new age movement. Hence, according to his writings, virtual worlds could provide a substitute for religion, because those who seek a religious life without belonging to religious institutions could access spiritual identity construction there. However, his attempt to identify WoW with a church seems to place too much emphasis on the community dimension. He mainly emphasises the social aspect of a church, referring to people who attend a church in order to have relationships with other people. In this respect, he posits the possibility of WoW as a replacement for church because it provides a community dimension for people.

But when you look at religion as far as a replacement, most religions are organized religions, and so you go because it is part of a community. And it establishes a community for yourself. So World of Warcraft really can be a replacement for that, because it establishes a community where people have their own connected by the same aspect. The people might enjoying a particular aspect of it, but it is just like people that go to church but don't, you know, believe anymore in the religious aspect. It's still, it is the community that brings them to that relationship. I think you could call it definitely a replacement for church, in the sense that it forms a community that people can interact in. (Zijderveld 2008b, 19)

In his work, Zijderveld generally focuses on religious life as no more than participating in community and having social relationships, exaggerating the community value of church. It is possible to consider WoW as a replacement for church if the essence of church could be defined as building social relationships or participating communities. However, without belief in Jesus Christ, no community can replace a church. If we understand the church as a kind of community without belief about higher reality or doctrine, it has already lost its intrinsic characteristics.

Christian faith is held by Christians in common ('our faith'), and their commonness, constituted by the substance of the faith that they hold, is what is called 'the church'. Christian faith is itself formative of the church because its content is social, derived from the communion within the Trinitarian God. In God Christians find the true basis for the social life of humanity, its true sociality, realized in heaven (the church triumphant) and in the world (the church militant). This is what existing churches, despite their differences, their inadequacies, and their sin, have to exemplify. (Hardy 2000, 118)

How could a community without faith be identified with a church constituted by the substance of the faith? Relationships between members in a church are based on their common belief in Jesus Christ which vitalises their social relationships and network.

There are three primary reasons why WoW has been chosen as a main research topic in my thesis. Firstly, WoW is one of the most popular online games in the world, with growing user numbers and a powerful impact. In contrast to some online games which are popular specific realms such as Asia and USA, WoW attracts a diverse range of worldwide players, providing active online servers in Europe, the USA and Asia. Its global impact cannot be overlooked, and consequently a study of the game will be significant. Secondly, WoW shares with other MMORPGs the fact that it is a role-playing game. It is important that I should focus on a general online game which is not totally alienated from common features of other games. For example, WoW provides similar characteristics to other MMORPGs related to game play, virtual characters and goals. Hence, a study of WoW could also represent the general characteristics of other MMORPGs because they share similar concepts, symbols and systems. Finally, the core reason why I chose WoW as my research topic is because it represents a process of death and the resurrection in game play. Players are able to experience a character's death and resurrection through a more systematic process, and through this they can also experience the world after death. In WoW, a virtual character encounters the afterlife when they die. This world is only accessible to the 'souls' of the virtual characters and is isolated from 'living' creatures. The process between death and resurrection includes intrinsic theological concepts related to speculations of human existence.

As WoW has become popular among people from all around the world, it has produced diverse cultural and academic discussions (e.g., Corneliussen and Rettberg 2008; Bainbridge 2010; Cuddy and Nordlinger 2009). In this current field, I think it is necessary to consider WoW from a theological viewpoint because the virtual world

vigorously mentions theological and religious issues (in relation to supernatural power, spiritual dimension and divinity) through religious images, symbols and artefacts. In the next section, we will focus on the nature of religious symbolism and its relationship with virtual reality, referring to its representative role for delivering meaning.

## **1.2 Religious Themes and Virtual Worlds**

### **1.2.1 Religious Symbols and concepts**

Religious belief and education construct people's ways of thinking, from trivial matters to the vital problems of life. It provides interpretations of existential problems such as life and death. Religion itself is a kind of way to have a relationship with transcendent reality. In order to make invisible sacred reality comprehensible to people who seek, most religions represent religious symbolism in relation to the nature of sacred reality. For example, in Christianity God has been represented as the image of a father and Jesus as living water or a sacrificial lamb. Moreover, spiritual experiences and concerns on a spiritual dimension are sometimes difficult to represent by logical and discursive conceptual frameworks. However, religious symbolism is an effective method to project images of them through physical objects which we can easily experience in this world. This also simplifies the doctrinal concepts announced by religious authorities and delivers them to people through abstract forms. Some religious symbols have been regarded as real iterations of sacred reality and worshipped by people. Those symbols are sanctified among people and identified with the authentic existence of sacred reality.

On the other hand, some religious symbols reflect divine image and nature through visible and tangible objects, even though they are not identified with divine reality. Those symbolic objects function to project a sacred image of God and enable people to conceive of sacred reality through consciousness. Religious symbols also have a revelatory function of disclosing hidden meanings to people. This means that the meaning of a symbol is sometimes veiled from people who have not concerned themselves with it, and only revealed to people who have sought and perceived it.

Religious themes are represented through diverse religious symbols, images and virtual experiences in computer games. Symbols and images have important functions to enclose meanings and knowledge for the people who read them. Our misplaced assumption that true knowledge only comes from intellectual domains is criticised by scholars of symbols. For example, James Paul Gee (2003) who has devoted himself to the study of linguistics and literacy, not only criticised this idea but also attempted to prove that symbols and artefacts in computer games can teach us in “36 ways”. The theologian, Paul Tillich (1958), focuses on the idea that genuine religious symbols give a true awareness of absolute and transcendent reality. He insists that religious symbols help us to perceive unconditioned reality, which is beyond human understanding (further discussion will be developed in 3.3 Religious Symbolism).

In traditional communication methods, people mainly utilise words in order to deliver meanings to others. For example, political or social events are known through everyday newspapers or journals. Important knowledge and information is passed on through textbooks by schools, and personal information or greetings are delivered by mail. This



means that social practices are written in texts and delivered to readers. For example, a journalist writes an article about a football match. In the article, he may write about players and their positions, how they played the game and which team scored. However, in recent days, communication channels have been broadened by images, audio and videos. Many parts of text communication have been replaced by images which deliver meanings as much or more than words did. For example, the football match is broadcast by video through the television or internet and even newspapers use images like photographs with texts. In this situation, the significant point is that these images actually communicate meanings to people.

Film is probably the most influential modern medium through which the figure of Jesus and the stories of his life and ministry contained in the gospels have been portrayed: our overall image of Jesus is likely to be shaped more by film than taken directly from the Bible. Thus, whereas historical study takes place in universities, and is communicated in conferences and learned publications, film presents an image of Jesus that is public, immediate and memorable. Such mediation raises important questions for the Church, for its effect lies largely outside Christian control. Christians therefore take an interest in film images of Christ, for this medium can make their truths accessible to millions of people, Christian and non-Christian alike. (Moyise and Pearson 2001, 36)

As Moyise and Pearson mention, film has had an influential power to shape the image of Jesus in everyday life. They also mention there are common conventions for portraying the image of Jesus in which films mediate his features and characteristics. In fact, we are used to the image of a white, bearded, thin young man, even though, historically he was a Jewish man. The important point is that the image which has been provided by films could have a more powerful impact than what we have learned from religious tradition.

Recently, religious symbols have moved to the computer screen from the real dimension. Many MMORPGs have created characters and backgrounds based on narratives and myths which are full of religious symbolism. They even manifest them through more realistic and embodied experiences. For example, players can interact with religious symbols manifested by 3D graphic features and audio effect. They can participate in virtual experiences in relation to religious images by locating their character in an environment which is full of religious symbols or by being a religious symbol themselves, such as a virtual priest or shaman. In the past, religious symbolism has been presented to people who participated in religious activity or by people who were interested in religion. However, after the emergence of some popular MMORPGs which have manifested virtual worlds based on myths, players are exposed to diverse religious symbols and themes, even if they do not have any particular interest in religion. This means that religious symbols and subjects within the religious boundary have been imported by general secular communities online.

Computer game producers design characters and backgrounds according to their usual stereotypes. For example, skulls, ghosts and dragons have generally been used for evil characters, whereas lions, crosses, knights, fairies and angels are represented as good characters. Moreover, characters frequently fight in an old castle or church building where firelight and candles are displayed in a Middle Ages background. These kinds of symbolic factors are displayed based on the narratives and myths of each game. In his article “Utopian and Dystopian Possibilities”, O’Leary described some examples of the virtual environment of the ‘Harry Potter’ computer game.

Many children have spent weeks exploring the world of the 'Harry Potter' computer game. As they have found their way through the mysterious building and grounds of the Hogwarts School for Witchcraft and Wizardry, they have solved puzzles, mixed magical potions, and cast spells. The virtual environment of this game is highly detailed and realistic, calling to mind a sort of Gothic cathedral/labyrinth. As I watched my own children (or rather, their game avatars) enter virtual chambers lit by torchlight in order to struggle against the magic of the evil Lord Voldemort in this game, I was struck by how similar the world of the game was to a temple or church, and by how little of this sort of sophisticated design can be found in web pages devoted to online religion. (O'Leary 2005, 43-44)

As O'Leary emphasises, religious symbols in virtual environments are more sophisticated and realistic than those to be found on religious web pages, even though the latter are created for religious purposes. Religious symbols from diverse religions are utilised for constructing virtual environments in both online and offline games. It is not abnormal to point out that virtual worlds import symbols from the real world. However, the significant matter is that virtual worlds have used a large number of "religious" symbols.

Other popular media such as television or traditional publications have also manifested religious symbolism and themes to their audiences through movies, drama or fiction. However, they only provide one-way transmission and a passive experience to audiences. In this case, audiences cannot actively participate in the virtual world because it is fixed by its creators. Furthermore, the world is only manifested temporarily, unless they watch the same movie every day. However, online games provide interactive game play and persistent worlds to players. Playing online games is not temporary participation but long process in order to conduct a virtual life. Training virtual characters and completing quests takes them on a long journey. Therefore in general players have to consistently engage with the world in order to make progress.

This means that religious symbolism in the virtual world of online games could communicate meanings to players through repetitive, persistent and interactive virtual experiences.

If there is little denying that symbolism in the real world communicates meanings to people, then how about symbolism in virtual worlds? Does it represent meanings to people or just illusionary artefacts? In addition, we need to focus on the idea that virtual worlds not only provide symbols and their meanings but also make players engage with them through embodied virtual experiences. Playing games does not mean passive observation as an audience but active participation in virtual life through virtual presence. Therefore, in the next section more details in relation to virtual experience will be discussed, focusing on religious experiences which can be obtained by general game playing.

### **1.2.2 Virtual Experience**

Virtual reality opens another dimension to people. People can take a rest by reading a book, watching TV or movies, and sometimes become completely lost in virtual reality for a few hours. Since the 1990s online game addiction has increased in South Korea and Japan, and it has become a serious social problem. The reason why online gaming is more addictive than the other media is its resemblance to reality. Online game players can meet people, chat with them, get married and even die. They can manage their virtual life with lots of fun, wearing new identities and controlling characters who are

substitutes for themselves. The Japanese scholar, Muta, mentions online game addiction in his book *Game Addiction*:

There, at a computer monitor, is virtual reality which is very similar to real society. It is full of a thrill, suspense and interest compared with the real world, and players are not bored in every time for a new function and event. For it is a real person who controls a character, the communication is the one does not get tired of. There is justice, love, kindness, and grief like real world. Even though someone feels life is not interesting any more and lost his/her own position, could be a celebrity and an object of veneration or a formidable opponent, getting his/her recognition. If a player spends all his/her time playing online games for those purposes, he/she is already under the category of "game addiction". (Muta 2006, 33)

Online game addiction shows us the powerful influence of online games, and its problems arise from the ambiguous boundary between real and virtual life. The resemblance between virtual society and real society attracts people very strongly, providing a virtual paradise and substitute for players, while not demanding much expense. In this respect, what are the main characteristics of the virtual worlds of online games compared with other virtual communities?

The difference between the virtual worlds of online games and religion elsewhere on the Internet can be summarised into three categories. Firstly, as I mention above, online games are addictive, probably more so than other forms of religion online. Secondly, religious communities online tend to be organised by members who are interested in religious purposes hence they might have limitations in approaching ordinary people. Popular online games, however, are spread all over the world through diverse age groups with unpredictable users. Thirdly, online games contain playable characters controlled by real players. They are used for communication, combat and the living of

virtual life. This is probably different from textual chatting with friends on Messenger, or reading and writing a few words on the board of a religious community on a website. Hence, the study of online games must be approached in different ways to the study of religion online, characterising the unique functions of online games.

Sometimes participating in virtual worlds can be depicted as a religious experience. In *WoW*, from level one to seventy, players can experience the progress of virtual characters. They are matured through completing quests and through training themselves. Moreover, characters experience processes between death and resurrection while they are participating in the game play. This could be regarded as a religious experience, for it constructs meanings of death and afterlife by referring to specific theological interpretations. Players can also be controlled by hierarchies created by different participants in online game groups. Communications in online game communities can provide some experiences that enrich players in their efforts to construct their own identity. Access to online games opens up possibilities for presenting and exploring the nature of one's ideology and faith that is seemingly free from local boundaries. It is important to remember that sharing experience and thoughts among players not only relates to virtual experience but also to real experience, because players are likely to share their real lives and issues with other members of virtual groups.

*Second Life* by Linden Research, which started its service from 2003, has acquired 5 million users in a few years, making a huge cultural and economic impact. Compared to other games, it does not provide particular in-game goals like winning or losing, but it

provides diverse social relationships and group activities and allows for the creation of virtual properties which can be traded by players. It also provides opportunities for religious seekers to experience diverse religious activities and expressions. Players locate their virtual characters in virtual churches or temples by praying or listening to messages and conducting religious activities.

It's one of seven churches and Bible study groups that will feature Easter messages, a Passion day and enactments of scenes from the life of Christ as part of a "Redemption Week 2007" tour, complete with virtual T-shirt souvenirs . . . And any day, any hour, anywhere on the globe, believers and seekers of all stripes will congregate. Some spiritual sites have coded in "pray-ables," animated spots that will pop an avatar into proper prayer position, whether bowing on a carpet, kneeling in a cathedral or landing in the lotus position in a Buddhist center. (Grossman 2007)

The virtual world of *Second Life* provides a new kind of spiritual dimension for a player's religious life. What we have experienced through religious institutions in the real world has been replaced by virtual experience, which can be enlarged through the virtual life. Religious doctrines and teachings are delivered by virtual churches and CMC, provoking a network of believers who are satisfied with sharing their inner beliefs and religious experiences. This new trend of religious life can reach players with diverse religious educations and performances, and can eventually influence their religious ideas, spiritual condition or existing religious practice. It may already be transforming our life by providing diverse ranges of social and religious experiences which are limited to religious authorities or institutions in the real world.

What we have to focus on in the virtual worlds of online games is that there are religious symbols and concepts which provide not only religious knowledge or

information but also virtual experiences. For example, in WoW, a priest's holy talents include beneficial healing spells which can give healing effects to other characters. Priests can call upon a guardian spirit to protect a friendly target or can decide to be the spirit of redemption in order to cast healing spells even after death. On the other hand, priests can choose to call a demon to destroy other characters or can use diverse destructive spells in shadow talents. Through priests' lives, players can observe two opposite powers, shadow and holy, finding meanings of shadow as destructive and evil and of holy as positive and beneficial. They not only gain meanings from them but also participate in virtual experience, choosing to be a holy priest or shadow priest through their own decisions. In addition, there is a process between death and resurrection which most characters have to pass through whenever they are dead. As soon as characters are dead, players have to decide to release their spirit from the character's corpse.

Playing online games involves participating in virtual experience through virtual characters directed by players. Through virtual experience, players can learn problem-solving and adjustment skills and even social skills like collaboration. However, what we need to examine from the theological aspect is that religious symbols and themes are not only displayed on the computer screen but are also provided through virtual experiences. Religious meanings and theological ideas are simulated through vigorous images and dynamic animation which players can not only read but also engage with in a repetitive and endless virtual experience.



### 1.3 Research Questions

The main focus of this thesis is religious themes in the virtual world of WoW. Therefore, the main research question is: how are religious themes being used in the virtual world of WoW? In order to research use of religious themes in the virtual world, this thesis chooses two main subject matters: The first is the virtual life of a “human priest character” which includes its general life and abilities. The other is the “death and resurrection process” which includes the event of death, afterlife and resurrection. Hence, there are two subsidiary questions in relation to the main one: How does a religious character (a human priest) represent religious symbolism and concepts through its virtual life and abilities? How does the death and resurrection process experienced by virtual characters reveal theological and philosophical subjects?

Religious characters are significant for researching religious symbols in the virtual world because they reveal diverse religious spells and talents which are full of religious symbolism and concepts. For example, the priest class has three categories of talents: discipline, holy and shadow. Each talent group reveals diverse spells and abilities in relation to religious themes such as resurrection and redemption. The shaman class can utilise totems as main power sources in order to defeat enemies. It possesses spells which reveal religious themes such as ancestral spirits and feral spirits. Moreover, the warlock class is based on demonology, representing religious themes of blood sacrifice which is related to witchcraft in real-world history. In many cases, the spells and talents of each class are not unrelated to real-world professions, as a shaman uses totems and a warlock worships demonic power. The interesting and significant trend is that each

religious character corresponds to each profession in real-world history but some of them do not follow pure concepts, transforming and adding new sources. For example, if we observe the features and appearance of a particular human priest class, it seems to be a Catholic priest in the Middle Age. However it can possess two opposite power sources, holy and shadow power, and the latter is related to destructive and evil spells.

The death and resurrection process in WoW is also an important research subject in my thesis, because it represents philosophical and theological themes in terms of body and soul dualism. The theme of body and soul dualism flows beneath whole virtual world: for example, the division between the HP (Health Point) and MP (Mana Point) of a caster's power source can signify that the virtual world understands some characters' existence (e.g., priest, shaman, warlock, etc.) as a combination of spiritual (magical) and physical power. Moreover, in WoW myths, soul is depicted as fluid, incorporeal and immortal, able to be separated from a body. Ideas of the migration of the soul and offering a soul are also developed. However, the death of a virtual character is a core event which represents this body and soul dichotomy through visualisation and embodied experience. Many players might not acknowledge myths, but they cannot avoid the death of their own virtual character while playing WoW. The afterlife also belongs to the process between death and resurrection. After releasing the spirit from a corpse, a character is immediately moved into the world after death. There is a spirit healer in front of the spiritual being of a character and this world is isolated and independent from the living world. This world represents a spiritual dimension of the world and shows characteristics of spiritual being. Finally, resurrection occurs when a soul finds the exact spot where its physical being was dead. The process of unification

confirms the idea that the soul and body were separated once in death and become alive when a soul infuses into a body.

Searching religious themes in WoW is not alienated from studying philosophy and theology in the real world, because the virtual world itself and many symbolic factors, even though they are artefacts, reflect real-world ideas and speculations. Therefore, the exploration of religious themes and symbolic meanings in WoW is also related to finding sources from real-world studies to compare meanings and ideas. For example, if the death of a virtual character reveals body and soul dualism, it is necessary to find philosophical and religious traditions in terms of dualism in order to know how the idea have been imported and developed in the virtual world. Furthermore, understanding the nature of virtual reality and online game play is also necessary in order to comprehend the virtual world as a research field, because the aspect of virtual reality itself can affect the aspect of religious themes and symbols in the virtual world. For example, if someone regards virtual reality as pure sacred place beyond reality, artefacts in the virtual world can be evaluated as something sacred revealed in the spiritual dimension. This view can lead to a dangerous assumption that every religious symbol is regarded as sanctified. On the other hand, if someone takes a critical view of virtual reality, all symbolic factors in the virtual world can be regarded as delusion. This view can lead people to ignore the whole virtual experience and the symbolic factors which can communicate meanings there. Therefore, this thesis also will develop useful discussions of issues in relation to virtual reality and experience, illuminating a true meaning of online game play.

Religious themes in the virtual world are unexplored from a theological viewpoint so far. Through this thesis, I hope to disclose and focus on hidden meanings of religious symbols and virtual experience as providing empirical data and analysis. The next section will focus on how to examine the research question, providing methodologies which are appropriate for the study of virtual worlds.

## **1.4 Methodology**

### **1.4.1 The Difference between Cyberspace and Real-World Study**

Before discussing methodologies, and to understand them more deeply, it is necessary to examine main characteristics of cyberspace study. Cyberspace study can be distinguished from real-world study in some ways because of its peculiar nature and interactivity. Firstly, people who study cyber-culture or cyber-religions are able to access their research subject at anytime in any place via Internet technology. Consequently, they can easily collect a large amount of varied data through the computer network.

By 2004, the number of religious web pages had grown considerably worldwide. There were then approximately 51 million pages on religion, 65million web pages dealing with churches, and 83 million web pages containing the word *God*. (Højsgaard and Warburg 2005, 2)

In cyberspace researchers can, instead of visiting a real religious institution, explore millions of websites from all over the world, with only the small effort of clicking a mouse button or typing an address.

Secondly, access to information is available to people who visit religious websites and the observation of selected websites is more convenient than observing conventional churches or organisations in the real world. According to Stewart M. Hoover, the trends in contemporary religion are depicted as “personal autonomy”, “seeking” or “questing”, “re-articulation” and “definitive[ness]” (Hoover 2003). However, how can scholars of religion approach these kinds of private and individual religious trends? As religious life becomes more transformed by these factors, conventional religious institutions are confronted with many difficulties in their communication with individual identity in a public sphere like a church. However, Internet technology has prompted people to express inner belief or spirituality through virtual identity (or with a cyber-identity); religious leaders or scholars can easily deal with individual religious life which is reflective and experimental. But what a researcher has to consider is the authenticity of data collected from websites; because of the anonymity it brings, sometimes data takes on an ambiguous meaning which is alienated from the actual conditions of the individual.

Thirdly, reaction and result can appear immediately in cyberspace. The representative characteristic of cyberspace is described as easy and quick access, 24 hours a day. Therefore, reflections on any religious matter or problem are instantly described in cyberspace. In online communities, religious discourses are frequently held and people

exchange their opinions with others. No geographical and time limitation is applied to people, and diverse opinions can be spread widely in a few minutes.

Cyberspace gives people the chance to communicate with others in diverse ways. Moreover, it also provides the chance to observe individual communication and expression through a screen without local restriction. In my research, the virtual world also allows me to visit it anytime from anywhere, after paying a monthly subscription for it. I can observe other players' activities and game play without disturbing them. The public chatting channel is always open to anyone and private contact is also available. When I want to collect empirical data on religious themes, the liberty of access and exploration allows me to experience virtual life as much as I need, and to take screen-shots at any point. For example, I was able to experience the death and resurrection process repeatedly until I understood its meanings and hidden ideas. It was a repetitive and long process of research, but there were no restrictions. Religious symbols and virtual experiences were captured by screen-shots, but there was no limitation to their numbers (apart from my computer memory space). Communications with other players were also helpful in order to gain information in relation to the research subjects.

#### **1.4.2 Main Methodologies**

Heidi Campbell (2003) introduces four major approaches to religious research online.: "Observational analysis", "Philosophical/theological examination", "Theoretical development" and "Social ethnography." The first, observational analysis, points to "the general phenomenon of cyber-religion, evaluating the extent of its influence and effects by taking a survey analysis approach". The second, philosophical/theological

examination emphasises theological and philosophical issues provided by cyberspace: “These studies draw heavily on literature reviews and historical surveys of underlying theories and spiritual concepts emanating from computer technology” (Campbell 2003, 217-220). The third, theoretical development, focuses on the necessity of building a conceptual framework for interpreting the collected data in cyberspace:

Alf Linderman and Mia Lövheim of Uppsala University (Sweden) exemplify this in their work on religious identity and community formation online. One of their projects involves the application and adaptation of social semiology, which, they argue, is an appropriate and useful method for studying meaning-making in the online context. Semiotics focuses on how individuals construct meaning through symbols and sign systems . . . they have developed a model that can be applied to CMC studies investigating issues of meaning and identity construction. (Campbell 2003, 219)

The fourth approach, social ethnography, emphasises observing online communities which are built by social interactions. This is important in order to analyse online communication and relationships related to both individual and group identities and social meanings. Based on these methodologies, I develop methodologies which are appropriate to examine my research questions and concerns.

Observing games is an effective way to research general game play and virtual experiences. There are two ways of observing games for my research: “to play the game oneself” and “to observe the games of other players”. The first method I have called “real participation in games”, and the second, the “observation of games as an outsider”. Real participation helps a researcher to concentrate on the details of games, and by third-party observation a researcher can collect general information such as the flow of game play and other characters’ virtual life. For real participation I created a human priest character called *Hatarina* in the virtual world of WoW. From level one to fifty-

three, *Hatarina* spent more than five hundred hours leading a virtual life and collected diverse religious themes there. In order to collect religious symbols and concepts in human priest life, *Hatarina* trained in diverse spells and talents which belong to the holy and shadow categories of the discipline. While *Hatarina* performed religious spells in real play, I could observe how they were realised and visualised, taking screen-shots and memos. The death and resurrection process is also observed through the eyes of character. In order to experience the spiritual state of characters and the spiritual dimension, *Hatarina* needed to explore the world after life frequently, undertaking experiments such as running and levitating. As the character reached higher levels, there were more possibilities to visit unexplored lands where higher level monsters and enemies dwell. Therefore, as the character matured, I can observe broader areas, collecting religious themes and concepts. Joining party plays also gave opportunities to discover priestly functions, because healing spells are most effective in group play. This also provided a useful chance to observe other players' game play and other characters' performance at close hand. To ensure the accuracy of my record, a personal diary was written based on the virtual experiences accumulated by *Hatarina* and approximately 1,000 screen-shots were taken to save visual data for analysis. For example, its virtual experience as holy priest and performances of religious spells were recorded through screen-shots, and religious symbols represented by virtual items and other characters were also saved for the next step, analysis.

When first observing computer games, I discovered there were familiar visuals which represented religious symbols or performances. Religious symbols function as important elements, contributing to the storyline, decor and characters' abilities in games. In my thesis, I illustrate symbols and themes collected by real participation in WoW and then



compared them with the meanings of existing religious symbols and subjects in order to examine how they convey meanings from the real world. For example, when I examined the virtual experience of death in relation to body and soul dualism, I studied theories and ideas on dualism in theological and philosophical sources (for the literature review). This comparative analysis enhanced the understanding of the meanings of symbols in the virtual world and showed relationships between symbolisms in two dimensions. In this research process, sometimes, it is impossible to avoid using web sources, because traditional scholarly sources are not always available to describe the virtual environment and virtual experiences or to discuss academic issues in terms of religious themes in WoW. It is necessary to indicate that there is limited literature in this kind of research and alternative sources have been used. For example, in order to analyse religious symbolism in priests' spells I need to research priestly functions and general descriptions of priest characters in the game but there are not enough academic sources or publications related to them. Therefore, sometimes, WoW official websites and related blog sites were researched and are quoted instead of traditional academic sources.

For my theoretical approach, I studied James Paul Gee's theory on visual literacy and theologian Paul Tillich's definition of symbolism. Their ideas in terms of the interpretation of symbols are a useful conceptual framework for analysing visual images in computer games. At first, James Paul Gee, who has studied linguistics and literacy, emphasises the necessity of visual literacy in the emergence of various semiotic domains from technological advancement (Gee 2003, 13).

People need to be able to learn to be literate in new semiotic domains throughout their lives. If our modern, global, high-tech, and science-driven world does anything, it certainly gives rise to new semiotic domains and transforms old ones at an ever faster rate (Gee 2003, 19).

Words, symbols, images, and artifacts have meanings that are specific to particular semiotic domains and particular situations (Gee 2003, 24).

The crucial claim from Gee is around how people read and write images. He focuses on what is the true meaning of literacy at this time. He suggests we need “visual literacy” in order to properly read and write images. As texts are replaced by images, we need to learn how to interpret those images, which deliver meanings as texts did. Even text literacy requires the ability to interpret, not just literal reading. In order to extract meanings from texts, we need to remember that each text requires different ways of reading. For example, we do not read poems and academic articles in the same way. There is a particular purpose and rule in reading each text. Moreover, different people read the same text differently. For example, a feminist theologian and a Minjung theologian read the Bible differently. People read a text according to their experience, which is deeply related to the social groups in which they have participated, according to Gee.

Gee expands the boundary of the subjects of literacy by adding diverse modalities, including video games. This is a crucial point related to my research subject because he insists that video games can be a semiotic domain which communicates meanings. He defines a semiotic domain as a “set of practices that recruits one or more modalities to communicate distinctive types of meanings” (Gee 2003, 18). Here, “modalities” means something which can take on meaning, like symbols, images, sounds or gestures. In my thesis, Chapters 5 and 6 show how WoW uses religious symbols and concepts in the

virtual world and how they stand for meanings. For example, in WoW narratives, dualistic meaning is consistently revealed through the event of separation between body and soul, the migration of the soul and offering a soul to a higher entity. In the world after death, WoW shows a character's spirit only surviving when it finds its bodily corpse. As soon as the spirit finds a corpse it can confirm that its bodily part lay down in death. These virtual images and events represent immortality and the superiority of soul after death. Images as religious symbols are thus communicating meanings in WoW.

Secondly, Tillich (1958) defines religious symbols as something representing invisible and transcendent reality in perceptive objects. The difference between symbols and signs is innate power, according to Tillich. Innate power is the most important characteristic which imbues reality to a symbol. Then, how can objects hold innate power? Tillich's definition of symbols can be summarised as this one crucial claim. Symbols are evaluated or read by what they ultimately signify. Hence, in order to interpret a symbol, it is significant to focus on the connection between a symbolic object and the reality it symbolises. For example, in the Catholic mass, bread in the Eucharist is sanctified and seen as sacred by people. This is not because it is made of special ingredients but because it represents the true body of Christ. His definition of religious symbolism is useful for my thesis because it insists that the value of a symbol is evaluated, not by its aesthetic appearance but by the reality which is ultimately signified by it. Many symbols in online games have relationships with real-world symbolism. In order to create the virtual world, designers import existing religious symbols and concepts from the real world. Through this process, some religious symbols lose the deep connection with reality or meaning which they signified in the real world. On the other hand, some of them still symbolise the same meaning as they did in the real world.

Hence, in order to read religious symbols and concepts which have been moved from one dimension to another, we need to focus on what they ultimately symbolise in relation to the place in which they exist. In addition, in order to study conceptual theories in relation to symbolism, interdisciplinary study has been introduced. It is important to examine the nature of virtual reality in order to understand symbolism in online games, and meanings of virtual reality have been illuminated by scholars of diverse disciplines, particularly computer science, communication research and media studies. Virtual reality is deeply related to computer technology and human communication in the present era, hence it was necessary to research theories and ideas from the above disciplines.

Social ethnography is also relevant because it was necessary to engage with the virtual world (as an online community) to discover the religious themes in the first place. For my study I took part in observation in order to understand the religious themes being used in virtual activities more deeply. Moreover, in order to understand general online game play, including communication among players and virtual experiences, I explored the whole land of the virtual world through my virtual characters' feet. This fieldwork was useful to introduce general information on the virtual world of WoW (in Chapter 4). I also observed players' chatting through public and party chat channels, taking screen shots and records. However, this is not a full scale ethnographical study. There are some problematical issues around applying an ethnographical approach in the virtual worlds of online games. Traditional ethnographical study depends on personal profiles such as age and social background. However, it is difficult to define those profiles in the situations of virtual worlds. It is hard to find sufficient ethnographical methodologies to deal with online games because of identity issues like anonymity, the liberty of game

play and the huge scale of virtual worlds. Some ethnographical studies have attempted to choose a few hundred players in order to study how real-world backgrounds impact on players' game play. However, it is problematical to prove that the data collected by a few hundred players implicate the whole virtual world and players, because the virtual world is massive, with millions of players. My research involves more participant observation of the virtual world of WoW in order to understand the religious themes being used in the situations of game. However, some examples of communications with other players are quoted in my thesis, focusing on how a few players share their thoughts and ideas as a small group. In order to protect personal information I do not give entire virtual names but replace the last three characters with triple X when I quote conversations between players.

World of Warcraft continued to release extension packs after I had finished my empirical research. Some parts of the virtual world and rules have been changed or upgraded by the game company or by players. Hence some information in my thesis might not match the current situations of WoW (e.g., characters' abilities, level limitation). Moreover, depending on cultural background, game play or environment might be not identical among countries. I played WoW through European servers because I was physically in the UK while I was conducting the empirical study. Therefore, my experience and description of WoW might differ slightly from that of other game servers, reflecting different cultural and social phenomena.

## 1.5 Outline of the thesis

This thesis has seven chapters including the Introduction and Conclusion and each chapter has a specific goal in relation to the main research questions. As this thesis aims to focus on virtual reality and how religious themes are being used in virtual dimensions, manifested by online games, the research area must be concerned with its nature and impacts.

Therefore, in Chapter Two, we examine online games and significant issues related to online gaming from a theological perspective. The meaning of playing computer games has been changed as online games have evolved and their cultural and social impacts have been expanded. Therefore, discussion of the issues in terms of online games have to be developed in order to understand the current transformation of human life and culture which is also deeply related to the transformation of human ideas and experience.

Chapter Three focuses on theoretical issues in terms of virtual reality and religious symbolism based on the fundamental question in relation to the research subject, “what are symbols displayed by virtual reality?” Symbols are being moved from the real dimension to the virtual dimension and hence it is easy to encounter them through a computer screen. Symbols existing in virtual reality can be regarded as illusion or sacred things, according to one’s understanding of the nature of virtual reality itself. Therefore, it is significant to illuminate the nature of the virtual reality where symbols exist and of religious symbolism, through theoretical study. Related issues such as

virtual identity and experience are also discussed because symbols and images in the virtual world are experienced by virtual experience through virtual identity.

After the basic theoretical discussions on the research area and subject, Chapter Four introduces the actual world of WoW and its virtual life. This is related to the question, “what is the virtual world of WoW?” Issues related to WoW are examined and features of the world are described based on real-participation and observation. This chapter is important in order to understand actual game play and virtual life; it is deeply related to understand the following chapters because Chapters Five and Six deal with religious themes in a human priest’s life and the general death and resurrection of characters. Therefore, in Chapter Four, basic information about the virtual world and life is presented.

Chapter Five focuses on a human priest character and the religious symbols in its life. Through the virtual life of *Hatarina*, which was created for the purpose of the empirical research, the priestly abilities and talents of the character are examined with the help of collected data such as screen shots and web resources. In particular, the opposing features of ‘shadow’ and ‘holy’ are represented through priestly spells, and more specific religious terms are used in its life.

In Chapter Six, theological and philosophical themes concerning death and resurrection are outlined and analysed in order to discern how existing religious themes are applied in the virtual world of WoW. In particular, dualistic interpretations are applied widely in the understanding of virtual characters, and of the universe, as revealing opposing

power sources. A character's death is examined as focusing the virtual experience of releasing the soul from the character's body. The features of the world after death, as representative of the spiritual dimension of WoW, are discussed because they confirm the idea of the immortality of the soul. The destructible body and the immortal soul are opposing sources which constitute a virtual character's existence and this dualistic theme is mainly explored through this chapter.

## **1.6 Contributions**

### **1.6.1 Bringing the Dimension of the Virtual Worlds of Online Games into Theological Debate**

In general, the academic issues related to computer games have not become a main subject of theological study so far. Even though some computer games raise religious debate on use of religious themes and symbols, the issues have been limited to whether they blaspheme, and to particular games (e.g. *Left Behind*, *Faith Fighter*). However, as virtual worlds become popular culture among contemporary people and possess social value for them, online games become reilluminated from the social or cultural dimension (e.g. sociology, psychology, economics). The cultural framework of virtual worlds has broadened, generating particular online game cultures in engagement with real-world culture.

This thesis generally attempts to introduce the virtual worlds of online games as connecting the new dimension to virtual reality. This study brings the dimension of



online games into theological debate, along with current issues related to cyberspace. The study of religious symbolism in the virtual world also provides a new viewpoint on computer games as illuminating virtual worlds as simulated and symbolic environments in relation to real-world religious symbolism.

### **1.6.2 Collection of Empirical Data about Religious Themes in the Virtual World**

Even if players do not specialise in religious materials, it is not difficult for them to discover religious images in computer games. Religious symbols have taken more sophisticated forms through advanced three dimensional (hereafter 3D) computer graphics technology. Religious symbols and images in computer games can be found through observational analysis, and within this process I compared them to the meanings of religious symbols and concepts in conventional religious history. Empirical data was preserved by screenshots and personal records and analysed in this thesis. Moreover, the textual communication in online games was recorded, and I created systematic photographic records with explanations of the religious behaviour of avatars or virtual characters. This thesis contributes to identifying meanings and sources of religious symbols which have penetrated into the virtual world from the real world. Chapter 5 focuses on the religious character, a human priest in the virtual world, and exemplifies how it possesses religious symbols that convey meanings in relation to real-world symbolism. Chapter 6 emphasises the death and resurrection process of virtual characters in order to research how the virtual event implicates theological and

philosophical ideas referring to existing real-world religious traditions. This analysis based on comparative study might contribute to reflecting relationships between the symbolisms in the two dimensions.

At this stage, a significant question could be asked: Why is this important? Why do we need to collect data related to religious symbols? Nowadays, there are uncountable computer games released by diverse game companies. However, compared to other media, computer games possess large quantities of religious symbols, and some of them cause serious problems between specific religions and the companies which produce those games. For example, when the game *Left Behind* was launched, there was serious debate between Muslims and Christians, and some institutions such as CrossWalk America and the Christian Alliance for Progress (CAP) boycotted the game company (Clarkson 2006). Another example is the game, *Faith Fighter*, which caused a crucial religious argument in 2010. This game possesses six religious characters fighting each other: “Jesus”, “Muhammad”, “Buddha”, “Ganesha”, “God” and “Xenu.” This game has been criticised by conventional religious communities for blasphemy, because characters are portrayed as having similar features to gods or religious leaders worshiped by real religions (Harvey 2009). Hence, some game companies attempt to use religious symbols in their games while trying to avoid accusations of blasphemy, which would affect their sales. This sort of debate is still continuing between believers who seek to keep religious life sacred and companies whose purpose is to make a profit from releasing special games.

Collecting data from case studies shows how religious symbols are actually employed within them. Debates about religious symbols in games will become more serious as computer games provide ever more sophisticated graphic expressions and as they provide realistic features of virtual reality. Experts on gaming predicted that 3D experience through TV and computer games at home would be available, and this has finally become realised in recent years. This technological advancement will quite possibly create a cultural and social shift in society. As virtual reality becomes more realistic, virtual artefacts and virtual experiences are likely to have a serious and meaningful place in our lives. Religious symbols relating to religious meanings and thoughts will also be manifested through a simulated environment which has no clear distinction from the real world. Hence it is imperative that we grasp the situation of how religious symbols exist in virtual reality before we are overwhelmed by their power and impact.

### **1.6.3 Development of a New Theoretical Framework Engaged with Religious Symbolism and Computer Games**

The Internet is a significant medium for contemporary culture; it is described as a complex of diversity, multi-cultures, interrelationships, spirituality, and both identified and unidentified information. The phenomena of cyberspace could not be predicted and settled, and cyberspace constructs a new insecure culture or trend every minute or second. Brasher explained in her book about the significance and challenge of cyberspace: “Whereas TV opened the door to seeing carefully staged presentations of

other cultures, cyberspace puts us in direct, one-on-one contact with neighbours around the world” (Brasher 2004, 117).

Korean theologian In-Sik Choi asserts that technology will be the dominant cultural framework for understanding humanity and society in his book, *Jesus and Cyberworld*.

There is always a huge cultural framework for determining a shift of time. In ancient times there was mythology and in the Middle Ages theology played a role in that. In modern ages, we understand human and world based on framework of ideology. However, what is dominate cultural framework in the present age? It is technology. This means the whole understanding about culture and its activities will be determined by technology in the future. (Choi 2001, 54)

Cyberspace is a representative technological product of this era. It was born through the Internet and computer technology, and has become a cultural framework for understanding humanity and our world. Therefore an appropriate theoretical framework seems to be necessary in order to understand cyberspace (or virtual reality) itself and its effects on humanity. As a part of this effort, semiology has been interested in interpreting the meanings of symbols and artefacts in the virtual dimension. Now it is our turn to focus on religious meanings and experience in this dimension through theological study. In this respect, examining the nature of virtual reality and searching for meanings of religious themes from a theological aspect is an effort to provide a theoretical framework for understanding current cultural and social changes. Concerning ourselves with how religious ideas and meanings are represented by the computer medium is a significant subject because it can impact on how people think and construct religious meanings. In my thesis, a new theoretical framework engaging with “religious symbolism” as it appears particularly in “virtual reality” will be developed,

contributing to help people to understand religious symbols and ideas in computer games.

### **1.7 Summary and Conclusion**

The online game industry has developed rapidly because of the enormous amount of money and advanced technological knowledge available to it. Each company is eager to create the most attractive virtual world and to provide a realistic virtual experience. *Nintendo*, the well-known game company, released a game console, *Wii*, which manifests our physical movements in virtual reality through special devices. The *Xbox 360 Kinect* provides a motion-detecting camera in order to display players' movements without any handheld device. In this respect, I can predict that there will be more realistic participation in "religious" activities in the near future. If we reach this stage, our relationship with religious symbols will be more concrete and sensational, and many physical activities will be replaced by virtual performances.

In the face of this cultural and social shift, this thesis attempts to research the virtual world of *WoW* as a significant research subject. To reveal religious themes in the virtual world seems to be related to disclosing a new dimension which enables people to perceive theological and religious ideas through virtual experience. In fact, the online game communicates with people through symbols and images, engaging with more informal methods of communication than traditionally.

**CHAPTER 2**

**APPROACHING VIRTUAL WORLDS**

## 2.1 Introduction

Computer games have taken on a role of entertainment and gradually expanded their power and impact from the 1970s. In particular, people born since the late 20<sup>th</sup> century have grown up with the history of computer games, generating and being affected by game culture. From legendary games such as *Pac Man* and *Super Mario* to popular games like *Final Fantasy*, innumerable computer games have been played, not only by children, but also by adults, raising issues and having cultural impact on real-world societies. In recent days, as a development of online games, players have encountered a new dimension of virtual worlds created by both computer systems and other players. Individual game play has been replaced by social and collaborative activity through connecting with other players around world, overcoming physical and local restrictions. Advancements in computer graphics skills enhance the virtual worlds to represent more sophisticated and realistic features than ever before. What is more remarkable is that computer games have started to manifest their own virtual worlds based on coherent and systematised narratives and myths, delivering an explicit worldview. In this circumstance, playing computer games can present complicated and meaningful activities to players with many powerful attractions and a different dimension of entertainment from early computer games. For example, early computer games such as *Super Mario I* released by Nintendo in 1985 only provided a simple storyline and activities based on a fixed environment, hence there are more limitations on players' participation. This means that there are not too many conditions which players can choose according to their individual tastes and purposes in interacting with their virtual characters and virtual worlds. However, in recent computer games (especially role-

playing games) players can encounter a semi-fixed environment which enables them to direct their virtual life under their own direction and choices.

In these circumstances, the meaning and value of virtual life seems to be significant to players who have become deeply related to a virtual world and their character. Nurturing characters to advance through levels needs concerted efforts involving much time and labour, because players need to complete quests and missions in order to gain the Experience Points necessary for upgrading to the next level. Moreover, as they conduct their virtual life, there are social interactions with other players for diverse purposes such as a party play for a group quest and guild activity for social intimacy. Players have to be helped by other players in some situations and vice versa. In fact, virtual life comes to resemble real life. In this respect, we need to pose some important questions. What is the true meaning of conducting virtual life in this era? How does virtual reality influence humanity? Bearing these questions in mind, this chapter attempts to approach a meaning of playing online games, introducing cyber and online game culture. In its engagement with human existence, the virtual life of online games has the possibility to transform players' ideas and thoughts in terms of identity construction and human experience. Interpretations of diverse issues, especially existential problems such as life and death are being provided by symbols and images through the virtual experience. Theology, which concerns itself with issues around human existence in relation to God and the universe, has eventually encountered a new dimension of virtual reality which has the power to suggest theological and philosophical interpretations of these issues. Moreover, religious life as conducted through online communications and virtual reality promotes new aspects of spiritual life,



impacting on religious usages and activities in the real world. On this aspect, this chapter also attempts to discuss the relationship between theology and virtual reality (cyberspace and virtual worlds), emphasising the significant role of theology in the new era.

## **2.2 To Play, or not to Play: That Is the Question**

“To be, or not to be: that is the question” is the famous phrase written by William Shakespeare (1564-1616) in his play, *Hamlet*. This phrase has since been repeated by many people who have confronted existential questions and struggled with conflicts between life and death. Human beings have been constantly concerned about their existence in the world, as is demonstrated by their interpretations through philosophical and religious studies. The careful consideration of human existence seems to be an inevitable task which has no clear answer but could lead us to reflect on ourselves as human beings. Interpretations of existential issues not only involve metaphysical debates but are also related to more practical debates such as euthanasia and suicide, and they teach us how to accept life issues and the attitude to take towards our existence, that of others, and the whole universe, too. However, if, up until now, existential concerns have only belonged to human life in the real world, the area in which they are involved has expanded towards the virtual world, through the latest developments in Internet technology and cyber-culture in the contemporary world. In fact, we cannot deny the truth that our existence is not only reflected by real life but is also reflected by

virtual life. Thus, in the contemporary world, the attempt to understand human existence should alter to regard virtual life as a significant factor of ourselves for the processing of existential concerns.

Through electronic mail, people take on various identities in different conversations. Being a member of an electronic “group” means that the person must maintain the identity over time, often while sustaining different identities in other e-mail communities or exchanges. (Beaudoin 1998, 135)

As Beaudoin highlights, people can take on virtual selves or other identities when they connect to cyberspace. They connect to the virtual world by communicating with other existences such as virtual artefacts and other people. Cyberspace provides images and information through graphics, sounds and text. The sensory information empowers people to have virtual experiences by participating in virtual reality. No matter where we are, we can enter cyberspace with wifi and a cable connection for Internet access. By communicating with virtual reality and by overcoming the restrictions of the real world, people can become immersed in cyberspace beyond a computer screen. The number of people wishing to connect with cyberspace is rapidly growing all the time, and we cannot overlook its powerful impact on them, if we consider its diverse functions, its popularity and its countless attractions. The border between the real world and the virtual world is gradually becoming blurred.

Among the diverse factors of cyberspace, the virtual worlds provided by online games are seductive and attractive to people. Since the 1990s, as computer communication technology has developed, online games have, become more popular. Compared to existing offline games, most online games now concentrate on interactions among

players by providing CMC (Computer-Mediated Communication) within simulation, first-person shooter and browser games, MMORPGs (Massively Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games), etc. Online games have grown rapidly and attract millions of users because of this active participation and an accompanying increase in investment by the online games industry. Players are attracted by the social networking system in online games which affords opportunities for interaction, social relationships and collaborative play. Among the online games, MMORPGs provide more spacious dimensions for their players' social activity. MMORPGs allow millions of players to join in the same game simultaneously. In the virtual worlds of MMORPGs, players take on their own character and conduct a virtual life by undertaking various activities, including achieving goals, advancing through levels, manufacturing, trading, collaborating and constructing artefacts within the game. A character's behaviour can reveal a player's intention, will and direction during online game play. Each character possesses distinguishing skills, talents and basic statistics. The virtual world of an MMORPG is full of characters conducted by real players who have an influence not only on each other but also on the entire virtual world.

The body is the tool by which the mind receives sensation and manipulates the environment, and this avatar body does exactly and only that. And it makes sense to think of it as *your body*, just as someone with a prosthetic arm should think of it as *his* arm. Coming to own the avatar, psychologically, is so natural among those who spend time in synthetic worlds that it is barely noticed. No one ever says, "My character's strength is depleted," or, "My avatar owns a dune buggy." They say "my strength" and "my dune buggy." (Castronova 2005, 45)

The unification of a player with his or her virtual character takes place when conducting virtual life in MMORPGs. In most role-playing games, players need to create virtual

characters and take on that role. Each character is identified by its race, class, gender, appearance and assigned level. Players choose various options based on their preference and in-game goal. Virtual characters represent the player's desire to live in the virtual realm, are moved by the player's operation and express the player's feelings, emotions and thoughts. A player's consciousness is therefore infused into a character when he/she enters into the virtual world. It is a new identified entity with the features of a two dimensional (hereafter 2D) or 3D graphic model. The visual model can be animated and imbued with the player's intentions through the use of a mouse and keyboard.

Some MMORPGs create worlds that are supernatural in appearance and function. In these worlds, characters can use supernatural power like magical spells and religious powers in order to fight with other characters and complete quests. Sometimes a mythical form appears as a Non-player Character (hereafter NPC) and spiritual entities pass a character on the road. Magical potions are usually consumed by characters after an injury, rather than medical pills. Moreover, diverse items which empower a character's armour are designed based on supernatural belief and function. Therefore, religious symbols are more vividly observed in these supernatural worlds than in the real world, where scientific evidence tends to take precedence over superstition. What we have read in fantasy fiction, mythology and scriptures is reflected in the virtual worlds through the designer's imagination and use of visual effects, creating sophisticated supernatural worlds through the use of advanced graphic technology. Graphic technology has the ability to make objects and actions in the virtual world resemble those in the actual world, thereby making it a more accommodating place to be in for most players, and thus encouraging immersive play.

Furthermore, social activities make this world a more dynamic and attractive place to stay in. Even though each player is in the room by him/herself, he/she is not solitary, but is communicating with others while playing online games. Social and cultural activities have been generated by interactive play among players, developing diverse social relationships, communities and peculiar online game communications. Since Gutenberg (1398-1468) invented the mechanical printing press, the media have exerted increasing influence over a country's population. As computer technology has advanced, the digital media have rapidly expanded the power of that influence, especially by the use of Internet technology. Communication through the Internet by email, chatting and online communities has become popular. Most online games also provide communication between players through chat channels, mailing services and diverse communities like guilds. Because MMORPGs allow multiple players in virtual worlds, they also allow powerful and vivid social interactions to occur between players. This is not face-to-face communication, but character-to-character communication through the players' operation. Even though they cannot face each other's character, they are able to communicate through chat channels from any distance. While they are concentrating on their individual play, they can communicate with other players by sharing in-game experiences, trading virtual goods and making friends. Especially within party-play, communication plays a more important role for members who want to share strategy, receive information and achieve a common goal. Most social activities in MMORPGs are based on communication through chat channels.

{party}(Hatarina): do u know where is darnassus?  
{party}(ChaspXXX): You must go to wetlang  
{party}(ChaspXXX): wetlands

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{party}(ChaspXXX): and take the ship
{party}(ChaspXXX): to go auburdine and then teleport to darnassus
{party}(Hatarina): stormwind is more closer
{party}(ChaspXXX): you want to go darnassus or in a priest trainer?
{party}(Hatarina): I want to go to a priest trainer so ask to komXXX and he said
I must go to darnassus
{party}(ChaspXXX): lol
{party}(Hatarina): but I did not know where it is, so I tired to go back to stormwind
{party}(ChaspXXX): ok w8 here ok Im on the way
{party}(Hatarina): so i am here ironforge to get a tram
{party}(ChaspXXX): in 1sec im there
{party}(Hatarina): ok1

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MMORPGs also provide communication between the media and the player. We have considered communications among players so far, but we should not overlook how players have relationships with the virtual worlds of MMORPGs. The worlds are affected by the players' play through them changing and moving their own figure. If the medium of television is regarded as one-sided, online games are two-way media which allow players to interact with them. Virtual worlds are operated and advanced by both players and creators. Upgrade patches, which are released regularly from game creators, and virtual events provoked by a player's actions both influence virtual worlds. The worlds are persistent places, unless a game company fails. Hence, interactivity is one of the most significant characteristics among online games, especially MMORPGs. Players experience communication with other players and also interact with the game world itself.

Virtual worlds provided by online games possess diverse and multitude symbols and concepts. Like the other media, they also provide various interpretations of real-life

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<sup>1</sup> This is a conversation between *Hatarina*, who is my virtual character in WoW and other party members. For privacy and research ethics reasons, the last three letters of the virtual name have been replaced by triple X.

issues which have been considered important throughout human history. When creating virtual worlds, online games take existing interpretations from the real world or make their own meanings and interpretations about these symbols and subjects. They also present a variety of human concerns and meanings-of-life events through their own perspective or through a specific philosophical and theological viewpoint. Therefore in the virtual world it is necessary to consider how symbols are being used and how their meanings are defined among the various interpretations from the real world. Moreover these symbols are deeply related to the overall story and theme of each virtual world. Most MMORPGs seek to create a coherent virtual world based on its own narratives and myths. For example, the game *Lineage* released by NCsoft in 1998 was created around existing comics with the same name. The main city, Aden, is a virtual city whose design is informed by the background of Europe around the 10<sup>th</sup> Century. Hence, feudalism is the basic cultural and economic system in the virtual world of *Lineage*. The game, *The Kingdom of the Wind* released by Nexon in 1996, is also based on a famous Korean comic with the same name. The game world was designed around a war and love story based on the Korean history of Koguryo. Hence the representation of the virtual world and characters are deeply related to Korean traditional culture and systems in the period of the Three Kingdoms.

In most virtual worlds, there seem to be possibilities for transformation and advancement by communicating with players, and constant attempts by their creators to upgrade the worlds. In these ongoing worlds, players encounter various meanings and concepts provided by the worlds, either directly or indirectly. As long as they play online games, players can communicate with the virtual entities existing in the virtual

worlds. Therefore, through contact with these worlds, players can constantly experience the process of accepting or denying diverse meanings. Some players might consider them as false ideas; on the other hand, others might think of them as serious and reliable ideas. Among diverse symbols, we cannot overlook some religious and philosophical interpretations which are deeply related to concerns of human existence such as life and death, and should not overlook the fact that engaging with them is a part of the virtual life. Moreover, the virtual life of each player is not alienated from that player's real life. This is because the border between the virtual world and the real world has become obscured, and interactivity between the two worlds has influenced players who have access to both dimensions. To separate the two dimensions or to differentiate between virtual reality and reality is a difficult task, as online game worlds have penetrated their users' lives deeply.

Today, Strategy Analytics released a forecast of virtual world adoption. This study, titled "Market Forecasts for Virtual World Experiences," predicts that 22 percent of global broadband users will register for one or more virtual worlds over the next 10 years. This will expand the virtual world market to one billion registrants, with roughly an eight billion dollar services opportunity. (Radd 2008)

As the above article reports, the number of potential registrants of online games will be huge in the near future. The power and impact of virtual worlds will grow as populations increase and the market expands. As the virtual life conducted by players becomes more active and spacious, human existence as virtual beings will be of significant concern in the near future. As humans participate in virtual reality through online games, they experience new identities and dimensions which have not been explored before. Virtual life and conditions allow players to concern themselves with



their new existence and roles in virtual worlds, empowering them to undertake diverse activities as a virtual character and as a real player. Therefore, as a virtual being one significant question could be asked in this situation: “To play, or not to play: that is the question” could be another existential concern after confronting a virtual life manipulated both by a virtual character (with a new identity) and a player oneself (with an existing identity).

In the next section, virtual worlds and cyber-culture will be considered more profoundly by observing conditions in South Korea. Particular examples of online game culture will provide more practical information on its cultural impact, particularly as South Korea is at the forefront of online game development. This study will address some practical issues in terms of cyber culture and online games, examining how societies could be transformed by the emergence of cyberspace and by their great enthusiasm for online games.

### **2.3 Cyber-Culture and Online Games in South Korea**

There was a popular advertisement among Koreans in 1998. A man was trying to buy a fish, while talking to his wife through a digital camera phone. He filmed the fish that he had chosen with the camera phone and at the same time, his wife watched it through the screen attached to the refrigerator at home. The woman who was selling fish tried to ask him what he was doing, and he replied, “it is a digital world”, then the woman asked a

question in return “duegital<sup>2</sup>?” with much curiosity. This humorous advertisement made people aware of the emerging digital technology with the amusing word “duegital”. Over a decade after releasing this advertisement, South Korea has become known as the leading country as far as digital technology and culture is concerned. The Guardian newspaper reported:

According to Tomi Ahonen and Jim O'Reilly's book *Digital Korea*, 43% of South Korea's population maintain an online profile or blog site, while nine in 10 twentysomethings use a social network daily. Online gaming is also mainstream - the South Korean's most desired car is not a Ferrari but a Solid Pro, a virtual car from the online game *Kart Rider*. The average broadband connection is between 50 and 100 megabits a second (compared with the UK's average 4.6Mbps), and the country is already rolling out pilot connections at 1,000Mbps. South Koreans pay less for their broadband than any other OECD country - about £10 per month for connections that download films in minutes. (Fitzpatrick 2008)

The continued progress of digital technology and emerging cyber-culture has changed people's life in diverse ways. People can watch another person on a digital screen while talking on the phone and watch television with a DMB<sup>3</sup> phone while walking along the street. Some cars manufactured in South Korea have a pre-attached digital screen for television broadcasting and navigation services while driving. Online mobile games are rapidly becoming popular among Koreans and other Asians, and a high pixel camera phone released by a Korean company has met with great success, not only in South Korea, but throughout the world. The progress of digital technology and high technology in South Korea has become the focus of public attention worldwide. These advances in the digital industry have contributed to South Korea's wealth, and they have

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<sup>2</sup> This word has a very similar pronunciation to digital, but its meaning is different. It means “pig fur” in Korean.

<sup>3</sup> Digital Multimedia Broadcasting, which was invented in South Korea.

also accompanied the generation of an active cyber-culture. The unique South Korean cyber-culture was introduced to the world by BBC radio and a book called *Digital Korea* by Tomi Ahonen and Jim O'Reilly (2007).

South Korea has its own remarkably strong online game culture, which has produced a significant social impact. The world is interested in the South Korean online game industry and attempts are being made to emulate their success. Some Korean online games are considered by other Asian countries to be the best of their kind, and some games have already been imported to the USA and Europe. The Korean online game industry has grown rapidly from the 1990s and has become the main cyber-culture of Koreans.

Nowadays South Korea is known as the greatest online game industrial country. USA who has the largest game market in the world does not have a big online game market yet because of insufficiency of super high speed cable net such as ADSL, etc. Moreover approximately 0.7 billion dollars of the American online game market consists of Web games in the Online Simulation game category. In Japan because of the insufficiency of super high speed cable net and payment devices, the online game market is still fragile. However, the online games market has grown rapidly in South Korea contrasting with America and Japan, from late 1990's (Rho and Wi 2007, 9-10).

As the report above shows, South Korea has made enormous advances in the online game industry in the past decade and, as a consequence, has a widespread online game culture. In this section, we will observe the online game culture in South Korea, and try to discover how South Korean's rapid growth in cyber-culture happened. This will also, perhaps, help make predictions about future online game cultures which may emerge in other countries. For example, serious online game addiction problems, which have

occurred in South Korea and some Asian countries, are also on the increase in some European countries nowadays.

South Korean cyber-culture obviously has its own special elements compared to other countries. Four major factors constitute these characteristics of South Korean cyber-culture: PC-bang, virtual cafés, personal blogs and MMORPGs. To begin with, the focus will be on Game-bang or PC-bang (this means game-room or PC-room and has the same function as an Internet café), which has spread all over the country. There were approximately twenty thousand PC-bangs in 2007, according to statistics, an increase of approximately seventeen thousand PC-bangs since 1998. The dramatic increase of PC-bangs is deeply related to the development of the Korean game industry and Internet technology (2008 White Paper on Korean Games 2008, 186-187). PC-bangs have provided a high-speed Internet service through broadband from the late 1990s and have rapidly been expanded by online gamers who wanted to play online games without interruption from poor quality Internet connections. Many of them sought to play exactly the same game with friends in the same PC-bang while sharing strategies and experiences through offline connection as well. Users spend between one to three hours per day in PC-bangs on average, and approximately seven percent of PC-bang users spend five hours per day. People pay less than one pound per hour for the service and most payments are made in cash (2008 White Paper on Korean Games 2008, 220-221).

It was 1997 that Korean online game culture really took off with a game called *Starcraft* from Blizzard. The PC-rooms were founded rapidly in Korea, and contributed to the spreading of this game. The PC-room with super-speed broadband Internet service was the best place for playing network games. This

game is multi-player online game. Hence it is very different from single-player PC-game, providing social interactivity and the experience of interrelationship. (Hwang 2007, 152-153)

Most PC-bangs are noisy, with sounds generated by games and by players. Online game players usually talk about the game which they are playing simultaneously. Less than twelve-hundred won (approximately sixty pence in GBP) is normally enough to pay for an hour at a PC-bang. A cheap and convenient service is provided twenty-four hours a day, seven days a week. Online game players are the main customers of PC-bang (approximately eighty percent of the users) and there are some people who stay at a PC-bang for days at a time (2008 White Paper on Korean Games 2008, 213). They have played a leading role in generating a peculiar South-Korean youth culture and have also contributed to the development of online games and their popularity.

The second factor which helped create the peculiar South-Korean cyber-culture was the massive increase in *Daum* cafés from the late 1990s, connecting on the websites of *Daum Communications*. In this case, “café” does not mean a physical venue but a general virtual community provided by *Daum*. *Daum* was established in 1995 and gradually provided services like email, a search engine, news, virtual communities and personal blogs to its eighteen million active users (Lee and Lee 2003, 154). *Daum* provides diverse virtual communities for people who wanted to share common interests and relationships through online communications. Seven months after its foundation, *Daum Cafes* had increased in number by thirty thousand; they had one million members in 1999, and they gradually increased in number to 270,000 with fifteen million members in 2000 (Do, et al. 2000). *Daum* empowered people to join diverse communities by connecting websites easily, then it provided a simple process which

enabled users to create their own café without any restrictions or difficulty. They were like real-world outdoor cafés where people could share their views and engage in chat with others. People share their common interests, hobbies, ideas, opinions and specific information at cafés in cyberspace, and offline meetings are frequently arranged as well.

A meeting in cyberspace, especially with people with the same interests is a representative phenomenon of Korean cyber-culture. People with common interests share their thoughts, ideas and express emotive experiences. As a first step, this kind of meeting was founded by individual interest, but as people joined cafés it became an organization. A virtual community *Nosamo*<sup>4</sup> which supports a specific politician is an appropriate example of this. *Nosamo* developed into a very powerful political tool for the last presidential election. (Hwang 2007, 257)

As cafes increased rapidly and generated dynamic activities, their influence extended to the real world as well. Most real-world communities attempted to create their own café in order to expand their relationships into cyberspace, and conversely, cafés organised through virtual relationships also tried to engage in regular offline meetings (Do, et al. 2000, 114-115). They provided diverse methods of communication with other people and of expanding social relationships through both cyberspace and the real world. For example, students shared their homework and information through a café organised by class members, and this could impact on social relationships between members in the real world. Furthermore, offline meetings held by anonymous members who had only participated in virtual relationships could provide a chance to expand real-world relationships as well. Hence the *Daum* café boom since 1999 has contributed to the expansion of social networking through cyberspace and the real world, and it has

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<sup>4</sup> This word is composed from the initials of ‘the meeting with whom loves Moo-hyeon No’. *Nosamo* was the first Korean fan club for a politician, in 2000.

participated in blurring the border between the virtual world and the real world. Large numbers of cafés are still being generated in the virtual realm, with active members participating in social activities. On the other hand, some of them are disappearing due to the indifference of their members.

The third factor in the remarkable phenomenon of Korean cyber-culture is the creation of personal blog sites and mini homepages. A remarkable fact about Korean cyber-culture compared to other countries is the percentage of the population using online blogs. As the book *Digital Korea* (Ahohen and O'Reilly 2007) states, 43% of the Korean population have their own blog site or online profile in *Cyworld* ([www.cyworld.com](http://www.cyworld.com)). In Korea, *Cyworld* became a famous website for providing personal web blogs since it started providing services in 2001, because creating one's own blog site in *Cyworld* is an uncomplicated process and can be accomplished without any professional skill. Users can upload their daily photos with photo edit-tools, and they can enjoy displaying their custom background and mini-room at the front page of their web blog (Hwang and Sung 2006, 36-42). *Cyworld* expanded their business by selling items such as wallpaper, styles of font, virtual ornaments and music for blog decoration. This could be seen as similar to other blogs, but *Cyworld* owes its remarkable distinctiveness to its Il-chon service. This service reflects a typical form of Korean tradition, where people uphold their blood relationships very seriously. The word "Il-chon" means the closest relative. However, in *Cyworld* it denotes a special relationship among members. The Il-chon system provides distinct social relationships between members by allowing each other more private information. For example, if someone wants to be an Il-chon to someone else in *Cyworld*, he/she needs to follow a

particular process. At first, an asker should request permission to be a member from a blog owner. After acceptance, he/she can join Il-chon membership with an owner who allows their information and photos to be only opened to Il-chon members. This Il-chon process can help people to protect their personal privacy from strangers and promote friendly relationships among Il-chon members. Moreover, when *Cyworld* users log on to their website, they see a box revealing members' names which has been uploaded to their own blog site. And it also reminds them of Il-chon members' birthdays, providing an opportunity for members to give cyber items for gifts. Sometimes, when people meet a new person in the real world, they share blog addresses on *Cyworld* with an email address or mobile numbers. "Do you have a *Cy*<sup>5</sup>?" or "May I ask you to be my Il-chon?" are typical questions asked when Korean young people gather in a group in the real world. Through visiting each blog site they can share their personal information and become closer than before. Writing emails has already become old fashioned among young people in South Korea. Instead, they write a message on the visitor's book of a *Cyworld* blog and the message is delivered to the blog owner's mobile simultaneously through a free service. In addition, users can visit *Cyworld* by mobile phone by connecting with an Internet service. A new way of forming relationships has appeared with the *Cyworld* blog service, and it has created a novel cyber-culture in South Korea.

The fourth, and undoubtedly the most significant factor in the creation of South-Korean cyber-culture, is the boom in online games.

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<sup>5</sup> Young people typically call *Cyworld* "Cy".



In Korea, for example, the games are popular enough that television ratings plummet when people abandon the tube in favor of game life. Television stations have fought back by creating TV shows featuring people actually playing online games against each other in live contests. (Kelly 2004, 16)

Role-Playing online games have a very strong attraction for players. There are only 4% of *Lineage* players, who spend less than 1 hour a day. There are, however, 60% of players who play minimum of 3 hours. In extreme cases, 12% of players spend more than ten hours a day playing *Lineage*. (Hwang 2007, 155-156)

MMORPGs are what most Korean people like to play. Console games have lost their popularity among Korean players. After school or extra class, many students go to a PC-room and spend their time playing online games (2008 White Paper on Korean Games 2008, 220). In the PC-room people can buy food or drinks and play for 24 hours a day. This convenient and cheap service helps a player to enjoy games easily. Unfortunately, however, the strong attractions of online games cause some players to become addicted, more so than to video games.

No one freezes "his game" into a save state when they depart, the way they do with a traditional video game. So MMORPG characters can live and grow indefinitely. They become stronger, smarter, and more adept over time. And after they've piled up some experience, they're able to do things that they couldn't do when they started. (Kelly 2004, 29)

When a game called *Starcraft* by Blizzard Entertainment was released in Korea, it became more famous than had been expected. It contributed to the spread of e-sports and pro-gamers (professional game players) in Korean society. Game tournaments have been opened up as the game has become more famous. From early 1999, pro-gamers have appeared with sponsors and the game league for *Starcraft* has grown with star pro-gamers (Kim 2008), who are trained like real sports players. In 2008, BBC

Radio 4 introduced “South Korean Gamers”. The reporter, Julian Pettifer, interviewed a former pro-gamer called Ga-eun Kim who is now training other Samsung pro-gamers. She said, “Usually the training takes place for ten to twelve hours a day. And we work out two hours a day in the training centre. The exercise just strengthens the arms and wrists” (Pettifer 2008). There are also a few television channels which broadcast online game battles for 24 hours a day in Korea. These phenomena reflect the enthusiasm for online games among Koreans.

The potential influences and experience of online games are underestimated by the older generation from time to time. However, this should be a leading research subject for the 21st century, not only for Korea. Since online games have become established as the main cyber-culture it is obvious that they have created social phenomena and caused cultural impacts in Korean society. For instance, online game play already provokes psychological issues such as “Online game addiction and identity construction”. Sociological issues like “stealing game items and social conflicts” have been raised since the beginning of online games. Moreover, political and religious movements in virtual worlds have influenced real-world circumstances. Religious rites and meetings have taken place at cyber churches or synagogues in online games, and public discussion has been held by players about non-game issues.

So far, we have observed South Korean cyber-culture by considering four main factors which have had a wide impact on Korean society. As was mentioned earlier, this section aims to aid the understanding cultural and social phenomena occurring in the emerging cyberspace and online games by providing detailed examples. Korean psychologist,

Hwang (2007), examines Korean online games and their psychological effects in his book, *Korean New Cyber Mankind*. He focuses on people who have experienced virtual society or online games in Korean society. He portrays their remarkable experiences and behaviours in the virtual world, and introduces specific Korean circumstances and the existing state of online games. He also articulates that “new cyber mankind” is creating a new valuable culture, including most essential skills and ideas in the digital network society. In fact, cyber culture is influenced by digital technology and its users gradually come to shape current popular culture with a great impact. Members of “New cyber mankind” create their own virtual space for expressing themselves with ideas and skills, and expand their relationships with others through internet communications. This tendency is also observed in other countries in Europe and America nowadays (e.g., *Youtube, Facebook, WoW*), generating a new type of cultural and social phenomenon. In these circumstances, online games can also be a significant factor which can influence the cultural and social framework through providing well-simulated virtual reality and social communications with advanced graphical and technological effects. Hence, in the next section, online games will be illuminated more profoundly as an academic research subject, examining their significant characteristics and features.

#### **2.4 Cyberspace, Online games and Theology**

In this transitional period from an analogue to a digital culture, the power of cyberspace and the electronic media cannot be resisted. The world has been transformed into a digital world which is activated by computer technology. The Internet has spread

rapidly all over the world and cyberspace has created massive and various cultural and social products. The boundary between the virtual world and the real world has also become obscured and confused. Therefore, without cognition of the nature of cyberspace, sometimes people interpret virtual events and phenomena based on real-world values and framework, raising serious confusions and conflicts. For example, PK (Player killing in online games) is regarded as real violence by some people, and they attempt to boycott PK in online games in South Korea. The virtual world and the real world cannot be regarded as separate spheres but they are connected to each other and communicate in many ways. For example, in an online community, the members arrange offline meetings to keep up their acquaintance in South Korea. Moreover, most real-world communities in South Korea also have official websites or virtual communities online, and have expanded their real-world relationships into cyberspace as well. In these circumstances, how does theology perform its role in cyberspace and to the people? And why is this necessary?

Korean theologian Choi (2001), in his book, *Jesus and Cyber World*, argues that churches have to read this digital and chaotic culture in cyberspace.

Even the cyber world has been given a Utopian ideology; it needs to carry ethics of “responsibility” for its future in potential danger. Technology has changed not only the present world but also revealed and changed the depth of metaphysics. It produces a new ontology. It is hard to control the cyber world with traditional ethics. In theology, it is also impossible to talk about God with traditional methodologies, especially for the cyber world which has become a range of reality through technological advancement. (Choi 2001, 35-36)

He stresses the fact that an effort should be made to analyse cyber-culture profoundly, in order to create proper methodologies for theology in this era. Cyberspace creates diverse meanings and interpretations of metaphysical, philosophical, theological and ontological subjects. In addition, the more technology is advanced, the more it provides practical and essential activities for people. Some crucial activities have already been replaced by virtual tasks, such as online banking and shopping. Social activities or entertainment have been placed in the cyber world and are continually attracting more people. With this prospect in mind, theology should grasp the cultural and social changes taking place in society in relation to cyberspace. As Choi insists, traditional methodologies would be inadequate to describe theological issues for people who have different cultural backgrounds. Theology has to discover the contemporary issues which are occurring in the new realm and also transform its way of approaching these issues. For example, theology should consider how people obtain religious experiences from cyberspace and how to interpret those experiences from a theological perspective. With CMC people have tried to exchange their religious experiences and to share a common belief. Worldwide networks have demolished geographical boundaries, and expanded the range of relationships for people who have common interests. This phenomenon has also enhanced opportunities for religious activities through religious websites or communities. Theological work needs to be developed and the phenomenon of religion in cyberspace needs to be addressed, and a theoretical framework which could help to illuminate theological subjects related to cyberspace also needs to be created.

Brasher (2004, 29-30), in her examination of religious phenomena in cyberspace, argues that significant spiritual activities have occurred through the electronic media. She

asserts that traditional and alternative religious groups have related to cyberspace through the creation of official websites and through communicating with people who have common beliefs. People share religious experiences and join religious communities, creating various new spiritual practices in cyberspace.

Examining the evolution of online religion in cyberspace gives some intimation of the direction human spirituality may take in the third millennium. Some people already navigate the virtual world with grace and ease; others are hard at work constructing their first virtual surfboard. Whether you choose to surf or run, the tidal wave of computer inspired spiritual change is coming. Though the particular variations in religion it will unleash are unpredictable and at this point extremely difficult to perceive, you can no longer say that you weren't warned. (Brasher 2004, 43-44)

Religious movements and religious communities in cyberspace have been surveyed by scholars of religion for several years (e.g. Campell 2005; Cowan 2005). Online rituals, religious identity and experiences through cyberspace have been studied as the main research subjects (Brasher 2004; Dawson 2005; Park 2004; Lövheim 2004). In fact, countless religious websites relating to diverse denominations, existing religions and paganism, have been generated in cyberspace. Through some of these websites, religious practices and rituals have been held through an online network based on common faith and purposes. Religious institutions have attempted to generate official websites and people who want to share their belief also create their own individual space in cyberspace. Paganism also involves various websites through the organisation of pagan rituals<sup>6</sup>. A growing number of people are trying to seek their religious life in cyberspace instead of visiting physical institutions and joining communities in the real

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<sup>6</sup> For more practical information, see Chapter 5, "Among the Stones of Cyberhenge: Modern Pagan Ritual on the World Wide Web" in *Cyberhenge* written by Douglas E. Cowan.

world. In fact, “Computer inspired spiritual change” is close to our life through emerging diverse religious practices and online communities in cyberspace, as Brasher (2004) has indicated. Religious websites are powerfully attractive because they allow us to visit religious communities and virtual sacred places beyond our physical boundaries and without time restrictions.

In the flood of religious websites people are attempting to fulfil their religious desires through virtual practice. By visiting a specific website and watching a Sunday service, they can participate in sacred time mediated by a media player. Some of them seek to visit a virtual temple and to post their prayer on a web prayer board. In some online games, a player participates in virtual worship by locating his/her own character in a virtual church in a specific place. Different and more tangible religious practices are provided by religious websites. People join online chatting to share their inner beliefs and religious ideas through typing on a computer keyboard. The Korean scholar, Choong-young Jung (2004) addresses religious debates on the adequacy of cyber-churches in South Korea. According to him, cyberspace possess a great possibility to attract people to search for cyber-churches from the aspect of interaction, easy access and anonymity. He introduces some cyber-churches in South Korea in order to examine how they provide a place of worship through organising religious content such as text files of sermons and audio files of hymns. He asserts that it is neither necessary nor possible to forbid the emergence of cyber-churches just because they cannot administrate Communion and Baptism. However, existing churches should be challenged by them and participate in cyberspace in order to accomplish the last commandment of Jesus Christ, fulfilling the deficiency of existing cyber-churches from

the aspect of coalition. For example, churches in the real world could provide physical places to cyber-churches regularly in order to help them to administrate Baptism and Communion.

Both Brasher and Jung seem to be aware that cyberspace is an unpredictable but unavoidable place for contemporary people, alerting us to the significance of spirituality and religiosity in this virtual realm. As many real activities have been replaced by virtual practices nowadays, we should not overlook how cyberspace has generated diverse human activities engaged with religious life. Theologians especially should be aware of how religious practices or activities are held in cyberspace and how theological ideas are interpreted and revealed. In this respect, the virtual worlds of online games still remain unexplored fields among theologians, even though some of them have already participated in religious websites or communities.

Previous scholarly study of the virtual world of online games has been from the perspective of sociology, economics, psychology and law, etc. *The State of Play* (Balkin and Noveck 2006) is a collection of essays by critical thinkers on virtual worlds and law. After outlining the history of the virtual world, it attempts to describe conflicts between players, game owners and the state from a legal point of view. Castronova (2005), in his book *Synthetic Worlds*, explains the GDP and economy of Norah, a virtual place belonging to an online game called *EverQuest*. Online games are one of the most powerful media in cyberspace in our age. Millions of players play online games, and they experience diverse cultural, social and religious activities through playing them. The enormous numbers of players would be an important motive for researching this



subject, but the manner of their engagement with virtual realities, and the way they experience virtual life through online games, is of significance, and should not be ignored. As outlined in the first section, a player's existence as a virtual being should be examined from different perspectives, including a theological one. However, why is theology not interested in virtual worlds that even religious websites have surveyed? And why does theology need to focus on the virtual worlds of online games?

Generally, the latest MMORPGs provide 3D graphic images, thereby attempting to describe virtual reality with real-world features. These images more closely resemble reality than do the images depicted by religious websites or virtual communities. Most religious websites and communities use 2D graphics to represent their content and most of them are based on text rather than graphic images. However, cutting-edge technology for shaping virtual realities as realities through visual images and sounds has developed in the game industries. This development is based on the intention of creators who want to provoke players to have immersive play through experiencing a more realistic virtual life. Consequently, the number of online game players has grown rapidly.

Under these assumptions, the population of synthetic worlds would grow to over 40 million people by 2020 and almost 100 million by 2030. I hesitate to project much farther than that, but it seems that the base is significant enough that even a moderate growth rate, over just the course of the next generation, would transform synthetic worlds into a broadly significant phenomenon. And this also raises the possibility that, from that point forward, their impact may end up being comparable to the media innovations of the twentieth century—radio, film, television. (Castronova 2005, 67)

There is, so far, no other virtual place and community where people can actually communicate with hundreds, thousands and millions of users simultaneously. This

could be the most significant factor which distinguishes virtual worlds from other virtual communities and websites. Popular MMORPGs already possess millions of players who register and create their own account in the games. Moreover, for a variety of reasons, normal players actually visit virtual worlds frequently or regularly and spend more time in them.

Ordinary players typically spend 20 to 30 hours a week in these worlds, but obsessed players spend every night, every weekend, every vacation- forgoing sleep, food, and real human companionship just to experience more time in the virtual world. MMORPGs have, in fact, acquired such a reputation for addicting players that they're regularly referred to as "electronic crack" and "heroin ware". (Kelly 2004, 13-14)

The strong attractions of online games tempt players to stay in a virtual world for a long time. The possibility of interactivity and simultaneous playing with other players can also fulfil a player's desire for social activity. In addition, most MMORPGs have never-ending or longer storylines compared to video games (where the characters have short lifetimes) hence they cannot be played through one sitting. For example, if a player starts playing an MMORPG with his/her virtual character, it would take more than one year from birth to being highly matured, if they are a "normal" player. Seeking progress is one of the crucial reasons why players want to visit online games frequently for a long time. Besides, from the perspective of the players, they, too, develop through their character's growth and become more mature through virtual experiences and endurance. For example, in order to complete quests and earn virtual money, players have to labour long and hard. Some tasks are repetitive and boring without special entertainment. Through this process players can learn how to endure and survive in special

circumstances with their characters' limited abilities, feeling intimacy with their own character.

Through virtual characters, players can experience diverse and multiple identities, reflecting themselves or an alter ego. Players can choose the face, gender, age and class of their virtual characters and have relationships with other characters, making friends, lovers and families. Sometimes, they marry other characters, join communities and engage in business, thus embracing most activities of the real world. Characters also allow players to fulfil their wish to explore a virtual world without any physical limitations. Even though there are some restrictions on characters' behaviour, characters still grow and mature, allowing their skills to develop. In fact, there are numerous choices available for players in terms of accumulating their own virtual experiences and training their characters to possess their own professional skills. Through this process a virtual character and player are able to have a profound connection. It is hard to split a character from a player, because a player might consider the virtual character as a reflection of himself/herself. In this respect, a character's progressive experience should not be considered as solely a virtual event.

In virtual worlds, there is also a religious life and virtual rituals which are performed by virtual characters. In some online games, people gather at a virtual church or temple, sharing religious experiences and expressing religious belief. This means that religious identity can be constructed by playing games, especially when players engage with other players in virtual worlds. They can share what they believe and what they experience while playing games. Religious activities and experiences are not only

shared by traditional religious institutions or virtual communities but also shared by online game players in virtual worlds. Virtual worlds allow players to consider a specific virtual place as a public sphere for free speech and even as a sacred place for religious rituals. While players conduct a virtual life with their characters they also encounter diverse religious concepts and ideas which have penetrated into features of characters' spells, talents and narratives. For instance, in WoW, if a priest character learns a stronger spiritual spell by advancing through levels, they can protect themselves through the spells of "inner fire" or "desperate prayer". Inner fire is a kind of spiritual strength which increases a character's armour. This religious expression and the concept of casting spells could influence a player's religious ideas. When the priest character reaches an advanced level, the player will have a better understanding of the theological and religious concepts which are infused into his/her character's virtual life. Moreover, players can come to grasp the meaning of death and life through the repetitious experiences of their character's death and resurrection. Players can learn virtual-virtue and virtual-vice through encountering diverse characters and their behaviour, even if they have not been educated in special ethics for game playing. For example, in virtual worlds there are some players who try to be good players by buffing<sup>7</sup> and helping others. Some players give money to a poor player without any reward. On the other hand, some players attack other players for damaging or stealing valuable items. Through these experiences, players can naturally learn how to live a moral life in the virtual world.

From this stance, theology needs to be aware of the religious images and concepts which are created by both producers and players, and theologians need to be reminded

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<sup>7</sup> Casting beneficial spells for others.

of their responsibility by suggesting how these images should be read. James Paul Gee (2003) talks about the importance of “visual literacy” in his book *What Video Games Have To Teach Us About Learning And Literacy*. He stresses the fact that because we are surrounded by various images from the media, literacy is not only necessary for reading and writing but is also required for interpreting visual symbols and images from TV, advertisements, video games, etc. He calls it visual literacy:

Today images, symbols, graphs, diagrams, artifacts and many other visual symbols are particularly significant. Thus, the idea of different types of "visual literacy" would seem to be an important one. For example, being able to "read" the images in advertising is one type of visual literacy. And, of course, there are different ways to read such images, ways that are more or less aligned with the intentions and interests of the advertisers. Knowing how to read interior designs in homes, modernist art in museums, and videos on MTV are other forms of visual literacy. (Gee 2003, 13)

General religious websites include content which are based on text, but online games are mostly established by visual images and models which can be moved and changed. Hence, visual literacy is essential for online game players who are directly exposed to the flood of symbols and images in games. These images embrace diverse meanings and reflections from the real world, creating hybrid meanings or novel concepts in the virtual realm. In fact, they can become important, not through the aspect of their appearance, but through the aspect of their power of communicating meanings. Unprovable and unintelligible reality could be the object of perception through these symbols, representing abstract meanings and ideas (Further discussion on symbolism will be addressed in Chapter 3). Thus, because different materials require different rules for their interpretation: what needs to be done is to study carefully the nature of virtual reality and visual symbols in online games in order to interpret them properly. Playing

online games cannot be compared with reading books or watching TV: they even have different features from traditional offline video games.

## **2.5 Summary and Conclusion**

Over the computer screen there is a new and spacious universe. It is an unlimited and uncontrolled world with ongoing advancement. It does not need a special device to explore and does not belong to a gravity-controlled state like a physical universe. This new dimension has huge possibilities to allow people to overcome their limited physical borders, providing opportunities to obtain new identities and experiences. It also provides a diverse cultural and social dimension which is persistent and advanced. The virtual worlds of online games open up new possibilities of human experience and communications. Therefore, one meaning of playing online games can be regarded as an engagement with this virtual universe, generating cultural and social activities. It is not just for an entertainment made up of simply manipulating a character or escaping from reality. It is an opportunity to experience a virtual presence in a mediated environment.

Moreover, most virtual worlds have a relationship with the real world, sharing common values or knowledge. They represent rules and conditions which are not alienated from this real world. Moreover, the outcome of virtual life such as accumulated knowledge and social experience could impact on players' real existence and life. In this respect, our meaning of existence in relation to the emergence of virtual environments has to be reconsidered from diverse disciplines. The issues of virtual identity and virtual

experience have to be examined in the light of the problems of immersive game playing and the gravity of online culture. Online games have already demonstrated huge power to reconstruct people's lives and culture, generating serious social issues and problems. Moreover, religious ideas and speculations have been introduced into them and players who are involved in virtual worlds must engage with these meanings, particularly as they are delivered by symbols and images through their virtual experience. Engagement with religious symbols and themes is an important experience because symbols provide meanings to players as reflecting reality. If symbols or images deliver meanings to players, it means players can gain knowledge and ideas through playing games, which have previously been only available through activities such as reading books and watching educational videos, or attending organised traditional religious activities.

Throughout history, theology has provided interpretations of our existential problems based on the relationship between human beings and God. Theology has been focused on diverse issues which are related to human life and experience. Therefore, if a new dimension impacts on the human experience in relation to cultural and social life, including religious life as well, it is necessary to illuminate the dimension from a theological viewpoint. Online gaming experiences can provide a more immersive and immediate religious experience than religious organisations' websites and forums, and this must be explored too.

**CHAPTER 3**

**THEOLOGICAL EXPLORATION**



### 3.1 Introduction

As the previous chapter has shown, the virtual worlds of online games and cyberspace in general have provided a new dimension of human experience in relation to identity construction and the communication of meanings. In particular, symbolic factors in virtual worlds have provided their own meanings to players in while engaging with real-world symbolism. Religious themes communicated by symbols and images have particularly presented theological ideas and interpretations to players based on real-world theology and philosophy. Moreover, the meanings of religious symbols and images in the virtual world are delivered through an interactive virtual experience which promotes players' more active participation than do traditional media. In addition, virtual characters have a significant relationship with players' identity construction, providing many choices and opportunities to form one's own character's identity, which also could affect that of the player.

In these circumstances, we need to examine some significant issues in relation to online gaming. If playing an online game means engagement with virtual reality represented by symbols and images, subjects related to virtual reality or symbolism have to be illuminated through theoretical concerns. What is a true nature of virtual reality? What is symbolism and how can we interpret symbolism in the virtual world? What is the border between virtual and real experiences? How is virtual identity constructed by playing games? With these basic questions in mind, this chapter focuses on

representative issues related to virtual reality through theoretical concern and theological theory viewpoint.

First, the nature of virtual reality will be examined in the light of philosophy and current debates about cyberspace. A constant effort to define both reality and virtual reality has produced diverse aspects and speculations in both philosophy and theology. For example, in Ancient philosophy, Plato and Aristotle struggled against each other as they offered opinions to define a true reality. In order to deeply examine symbolism and virtual experience in virtual worlds, it is necessary to illuminate the nature of virtual reality first. The matter of how we understand virtual reality is a pivotal concern because aspects of virtual reality could impact on the fundamental examination of how symbolic factors in virtual worlds are interpreted. Secondly, the subject of symbolism will be discussed in order to suggest how religious symbolism represented by computer games might be experienced by players. From a basic assumption that symbols communicate meanings, this section will approach the main characteristics and functions of symbolism. Many numbers of religious symbols are actually delivered from real-world religions into virtual worlds in order to represent a mystical virtual environment, being used for manifesting religious characters and their abilities. It is significant to examine how players interpret these symbols that have been moved into virtual worlds, because symbols are deeply related to the place and environment in which they exist. Therefore, transformation of place is an important factor which can affect the meaning of a symbol during the process of interpretation. This work will provide a theoretical framework on religious symbolism in virtual reality based on Paul Gee's and Paul Tillich's theories. This chapter also addresses issues of virtual identity and experiences, as an extension of the debates on virtual reality and symbolism.

Pastoral and ethical issues will be addressed, emphasising the fact that virtual worlds also need moral instruction and missionary work by churches, as in the real world.

### **3.2 Reality and Virtual Reality**

Nowadays, we hear more and more about virtual reality. As computer technology has become more important in our lives, we have also been exposed to the various virtual realities created by the computer medium. However, virtual reality has not only developed through technological advancement as we thought: it has existed in human experiences throughout history. For example, dreaming provides vivid virtual realities without any technological devices. Reading a book might help us experience virtual reality, too. By immersing ourselves in stories, sometimes we can forget about the reality in which our physical body is present. Through imagination and daydreams we can also experience virtual reality beyond our physical restrictions and conditions. Virtual reality expands the dimensions of our consciousness and deepens our experiences. In recent times, however, we have been more frequently exposed to virtual reality mediated by computer technology. Through text, sounds and graphics, virtual reality has been created and delivered to us. Our sensory organs receive diverse signals mediated by computer devices. Technological advancement enables the creation of more precise figures of virtual reality and displays them to us. Computer games with sophisticated graphic figures and sound effects are especially adept at presenting the virtual as the real.

Chuang-tzu (369-298 BC), who was a famous Chinese philosopher, described a dream, in which one day he was a butterfly. After waking from the dream, he was uncertain whether he was a man who was having a butterfly dream or a butterfly who was having a man dream. This episode illustrates the difficulty and confusion of distinguishing between virtual reality and reality. In human life, is it possible to separate virtual experiences from real experiences? This question should be asked especially in relation to the situation of the emergence of the virtual worlds of online games.

Human experiences are subjective. They are stitched like a web into our consciousness and are related to each other. Past experiences can impact on present behaviours and decisions. Experience itself is deeply related to how an individual interprets every event and problem occurring in their own life, and these events and problems are not limited by physical reality any more. Online game play provides diverse virtual experiences, impacting on players' ideas and thoughts with virtual experience. Moreover, players do not only gain these experiences from pure virtual reality but also from relationships with other players. Experiences gained from such relationships cannot be easily categorised as either virtual or real experiences. Dreaming or reading a book is a one-way activity; online game play, however, involves communication between several real humans. It means the virtual worlds of online games are not only constructed by pure virtual reality but also changed and formed by human players. Given this uncertainty, we might possibly consider how virtual experiences can be evaluated in comparison with human experiences. Do they possess any gravity? Do they impact on our lives? How do people achieve virtual experiences and how do they respond to them?

We could reasonably suppose that society mirrors “actual” reality. However, it is closer to virtual reality in some respects. The concept of society only exists in our minds, without any physical shape or form, and seems to be intangible and invisible. However, we believe that we are members of society, conducting social activities and experiencing social phenomena. How about religious communities? In their specific sacred place, members gather and conduct special rituals according to their religious traditions and doctrines. There is no physical presence that they can worship and praise, but they imagine or picture objects of belief in their mind. Religious life is hardly concerned with the physical or manifest. Instead, it depends more on spiritual - or virtual - experiences. For example, communication with the Divinity is closer to those personal experiences that have fewer physical characteristics. Even in confronting common events, such as a Sunday service or a prayer meeting, each participant might encounter different experiences according to individual interpretations and to diverse types of religious belief. Moreover, fellowship with others not only extends to the church members in a physical building but also beyond, to Christians not personally known to us, and not physically present. In this regard religious communities have something in common with virtual communities. Both involve relationships with non-physical forms.

As a general definition we could describe virtual reality as a technologically simulated environment accessed by particular hardware, like eye goggles and gloves. However, there seems to be a lack of any conceptual analysis which attempts to define virtual reality outside the extent of its technological systems. Jonathan Steuer (1992) criticises the common technological definition of virtual reality. Instead, he attempts to explain

virtual reality from the perspective of human experience through mental processes. Without specific technological devices, we could experience virtual reality through our consciousness. Consciousness is a controversial subject to discuss: its nature is uncertain.

In understanding the emergence of cyberspace, we could focus more on the nature of consciousness, as consciousness functions more in the non-physical realm than the physical. Virtual reality could be regarded as a simulated virtual environment where humans interact directly through their consciousness, involving the physical body less. Generally cyberspace provides visual graphics and audio effects for displaying virtual environments. However, even though virtual reality offers less sensory data than actual reality, it can immerse people in the virtual environment more deeply. Michael Heim warns against cyberspace: it could disrupt the unification of body and mind by provoking people to experience “telepresence” in the extended realm of virtual reality, cyberspace. Beneath his caution lies the implication that Heim basically considers that experiencing virtual reality involves mind processes more than physical or sensational processes. This seems to be the general view of people who participate in and study cyberspace, as we have discussed in the first chapter.

However, in neuroscience, Sanchez-Vives and Slater (2005) mention that consigning the consciousness to the virtual environment could actually impact on the real condition of the body. They agree that such “transportation of consciousness” could affect the physical body, producing various reactions like a changing heart-rate. For example, if one participates in a serious battle against a final boss at a dungeon in a virtual world, one could feel that one’s body is under tension, with a high heart-rate and sweating.

Even though one is fully aware that the events are only virtual and unreal, immersive play and deep concentration within virtual environment can cause physical reactions, as if one were in the middle of a real battle. This scientific aspect helps us broaden our understanding of virtual reality, and how it can have an impact, not only on one's consciousness but also on one's physical body. In the same way that it is impossible to isolate one's consciousness from one's body, one cannot consider virtual reality as the realm of consciousness only, without any physical activities. However, contemporary religious speculations on cyberspace generally seem to emphasise the mental or spiritual aspects of virtual reality, whether they advocate or criticise its nature. Heim (1993) basically considers cyberspace as a "form of information" which can be experienced by human consciousness. In the same book, he warns that this system could raise the problem of losing humanity without accumulating bodily experience. In the contemporary world, there have been general considerations about cyberspace as a virtual reality which only empowers activities through mind, spirit or consciousness. Based on those speculations, commentators such as Heim have expressed concern about the danger of diminishing physical activities and about the separation of body and spirit at the moment of experiencing one's presence in a virtual environment.

Steuer attempts to establish the nature of virtual reality by building a theoretical framework, emphasising the experiential aspect. In the field of communication research, Steuer defines virtual reality using concepts of "presence" and "telepresence", separating it from the more general, technology-based view. He explains presence as "the sense of being in an environment", which refers to the experience and the natural perception of physical surroundings by one's organs of sense. If presence refers to perceptions within one's immediate physical surroundings, telepresence could be

“defined as the experience of presence in an environment by means of a communication medium”. Therefore, this mediated experience could be gained through all kinds of communication tools rather than particular technological hardware (Steuer 1992, 73-80). The term telepresence was invented by Marvin Minsky, referring to a “teleoperator” or “teletactor” system which could operate physical objects through remote-control systems (Minsky 1980). However, Steuer expands the meaning of telepresence, referring to overall virtual environments mediated by media. In fact, we could encounter more diverse virtual environments through the advancement of technology in media. Media not only communicate information to us but also deliver simulated virtual environments. According to Steuer, virtual reality seems to be regarded as a dimension of our environment where we could feel telepresence. However his definition of virtual reality only implicates environments mediated by media and does not embrace pure virtual reality like illusions and dreams. However it helps us to reconsider general definitions of virtual reality within narrow limits that only refer to technological devices. His approach could be related to the research question of virtual reality and could be a guideline to evaluating its nature as an environment where one can communicate and experience one’s presence.

In *The Metaphysics of Virtual Reality*, Michael Heim endeavours to explain the nature of virtual reality using a metaphysical framework. He describes the difficulty of defining virtual reality with a clear conceptual explanation of its controversial nature. He summarises philosophical disputes about the controversial subject of “reality” from Plato and Aristotle (384-322 BC) onwards, and insists that two thousand years of argument are far from over.



The reality question has always been a question about direction, about focus, about what we should acknowledge and be concerned with. We should not therefore be surprised when VR<sup>1</sup> proves controversial and elusive. Creating a new layer of reality demands our best shot, all our curiosity and imagination, especially since for us, technology and reality are beginning to merge. (Heim 1993, 118)

An unending history of attempts to grasp the essence of both reality and virtual reality has been found, especially in the philosophy and theology of ancient times. As Heim has argued, this work is very controversial and also important for humanity, having produced diverse speculations and interpretations throughout history. We can find two main streams of thought which have developed from the two Greek scholars, Plato and Aristotle. Plato thought that the physical world which could be accessed by our sensors was not real. He explained that universals are abstract forms of particulars; they do not exist in the material world but independently in the immaterial world. Hence, according to his theory, genuine knowledge could not be grasped by our sensory organs because it is invisible and intangible in a transcendent realm. In contrast, Aristotle took the opposite direction in the process of identifying reality. He did not accept that the abstract universal is separated from the natural world but emphasised that it is experienced through the empirical knowledge of physical objects. He also insisted on the idea that if universals are not predicated, they are not real.

Augustine of Hippo (353-430) can be seen as a representative theologian who adopted Platonic theory through his works. He was influenced by Platonic speculation about reality which is transcendent and spiritual, and attempted to identify reality with goodness as following the Platonic theory of “form”. He emphasised that “God is a

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<sup>1</sup> Virtual Reality.

uniquely simple unity whose attributes are identical with each other and with himself” (Stead 1983, 447-448). The omnipotence of God was an important concept compared to human imperfection and he asserted that the aid of divine grace is necessary to people who have possessed a fallen nature for ascending to the soul and to good. However, he highlights the necessity of belief in Christ for “attaining truth” rather than emphasising “confidence of reason”; he remained within the biblical interpretation and Christian tradition (Harrison 2000). On the other hand, Thomas Aquinas (1225-74) is a representative theologian who followed Aristotelian tradition in order to establish his theological beliefs. He adopted Aristotle’s view of the natural world. In contrast to Augustine, Aquinas emphasised human reason as a tool which could help us grasp a knowledge of reality through empirical perception of the natural world. However, he insisted that a core knowledge of reality which transcends human reason could be gained only through the revelation of God. He inferred that, “God’s essence is identified with his existence, as pure actuality”, referring to the notion of ‘unmoved mover’ from Aristotelian philosophy (Blackburn 2008, 21).

In order to deeply understand cyberspace, it is significant to study its ontological nature. A fundamental examination of reality in intellectual properties could demonstrate how to illuminate a new type of virtual reality: cyberspace. As part of this attempt, Michael Heim adopts Platonic theory in order to consider the ontological nature of cyberspace. According to Heim, cyberspace does not represent “a sensationless world of pure concepts”, but it inherits “the ideality of the stable knowledge of the Forms”. He connects Platonic ‘forms’ to information in cyberspace, emphasising that both could be experienced by human consciousness separated from the physical body (Heim 1993, 88-

89). Heim attempts to adopt Platonic notions of 'forms' to reveal the ontological nature of cyberspace:

The computer recycles ancient Platonism by injecting the ideal content of cognition with empirical specifics. Computerized representation of knowledge, then, is not the direct mental insight fostered by Platonism. The computer clothes the details of empirical experience so that they seem to share the ideality of the stable knowledge of the Forms. (Heim 1993, 89)

The Platonic concept of 'forms', absolute reality, is the ideal domain which is totally isolated from our physical sensations. According to Plato, 'forms' are abstract forms of knowledge and of truth, being intangible and untouchable. However, 'forms' are original and pure knowledge, and what we can see and touch in the material world is not real. According to Heim, cyberspace enables users to make contact with the "ideality of the stable knowledge" like Platonic forms, and he even regards cyberspace as "Platonism as a working product" (Heim 1993, 89). However, does it really possess ideality of perpetual and absolute knowledge like Platonic Forms? Does information in cyberspace lead us into stable knowledge for expanding our mental or spiritual dimensions? In the emergence of cyberspace, we can easily obtain diverse information and fulfil our desire for knowledge. However, it also enables us to spread inaccurate and unauthorised information which could be easily shared by anyone who seeks to transmit it. Cyberspace is not made up of the isolated pure forms like the Platonic definition, but is a vulnerable state of ideality because of its simple accessibility. Cyberspace is not an isolated and ideal world but it allows users to produce and access information with fewer restrictions than ever. Knowledge, information and content in virtual reality are neither absolute nor alienated from reality.

Recently, interactions in cyberspace have been focused upon by researchers, and its function as social sphere has been highlighted. In cyberspace, people can form relationships with others. Interactivity is a core principle in cyberspace and it broadens our social experiences. As Chapter 2 has discovered, cyberspace has produced cultural and social phenomena, impacting on real society and people. Particularly, the section about cyber-culture showed the example of cyberspace not being an ideal world, but a social sphere containing various social interactions and activities. In this circumstance, if cyberspace tries to expand its ideal type of environment to an actual social place for interactions in virtual and real life, how can it resemble Platonic Forms, as Heim insisted? Moreover, cyberspace comes to depend more on sensual signals and information as technology advances. Compared to the earlier conditions of cyberspace, more sophisticated graphic figures and sound effects are displayed and transferred to us. In online games, we can more explicitly observe this tendency through the rapid advancement of graphic technology. In 1970s, the online game MUD (Multi-User Dungeon), the forerunner of MMORPG, spread through the world. It was first developed by students at the University of Essex (Railton 2005, 85), and it could be represented as a kind of text-based role-playing game. It provided a description of a virtual environment through written dialogue rather than through visual figures of objects. Players interacted with the virtual world with written commands and could also communicate with other players through it. However, this kind of text-based online game promoted the birth of graphic-based online games which can display the visual environment of virtual worlds. Text-based games have transformed to 2D graphic games. And 3D graphic games have now been released, providing more advanced, sophisticated and realistic virtual worlds. During this advancement, virtual worlds came

to depend on sensual data which manifests virtual objects as more like actual objects, compared to text-based games, which relied on the player's imagination springing from literal symbols. Sensual experiences through the virtual environment could diminish the ideality of game play and simultaneously could bring more actual feeling of involvement or immersion in virtual worlds as one encounters their more physical forms. Online game communities also have distinguished figures compared to other virtual communities in cyberspace, revealing more actual forms of simulated worlds. Descriptions of characters and environment seem to be achieved through 3D feature graphics and audio effects in contrast to the general virtual communities that are limited by text communication and formless characters. Virtual worlds attempt to manifest virtual environments that are closer to physical reality, thus providing more actual sensual data, and they elaborate to develop sophisticated graphic technology for them. In fact, the most important problem which confronts game designers is how to create virtual objects which feel real. In this transformation, it is hard to regard cyberspace as a state of ideality and it seems to be insufficient to connect it to Platonic forms. Cyberspace provides more sensual experiences by using a diverse series of signals and devices in order to provide realistic virtual experience. More sensational and realistic experiences are gained by virtual experiences and broaden the territory of people's life. Therefore, cyberspace is not only interacting with people's consciousness but with their whole organic body. Heim's attempts to relate Platonic forms to cyberspace seem to be influenced by the dualistic interpretation which separates a human into body and a spirit, and regards cyberspace as a world which can only be accessed by consciousness. However, his attempt could mean that we have to consider virtual reality with deep ontological concerns.

The first religious studies on cyberspace were mainly focused on utopian or dystopian views of cyberspace emerging from technological advancement and through human desire. Cyberspace as a new technological invention was judged by different religious voices referring to biblical interpretations or to theological attitudes towards technology and human culture. Optimistic views about cyberspace were expressed by Margaret Wertheim and Jennifer Cob. Wertheim regards cyberspace as a spiritual place in this age, comparable to the kingdom of Heaven. She insists, “Like the Heavenly City, cyberspace is also unfractured by national boundaries, a space where people of all nations can in theory mix together with mutual ease” (Wertheim 1999, 22). She also argues that cyberspace provides meeting places for virtual communities, so avoiding the isolation of individuals and loneliness, “as in the New Jerusalem” (Wertheim 1999, 25). She exhibits enthusiasm for cyberspace as a spiritual place, established as a secular product of this scientific age. Jennifer Cobb (1998) also regards this place as a spiritual environment for encountering the divinity as creativity, which empowers every evolutionary process of his creatures, even in cyberspace:

Through the power of computation, the universal spirit of divine creativity is extending into a new terrain. It is when this knowledge comes fully into our conscious awareness that our deeper journey with cyberspace will truly have begun. May we travel in the wisdom of divine spirit and self-knowledge. (Cobb 1998, 239)

She asserts that “cyberspace has a fundamental role to play in the ongoing movement of soul and spirit through the universe” (Cobb 1998, 45). According to her, cyberspace provides a perfect place for collective consciousness to be unified and a place where people can encounter creative divine forces which empower evolutionary processes.

However, positive aspects of cyberspace as a sacred place can be criticised in the light of humankind's fallen nature, which could impact on not only our physical world but also on our new invented world, cyberspace. Is it possible to proceed with a collective evolutionary process in cyberspace which has failed in the real world, as in Cobb's dream? Could it be a purely sacred place for fulfilling spiritual hunger, as Wertheim insists? These dreams seem to go even beyond biblical understanding of Genesis and its references to our fallen history. Brooks Alexander cautions people against the optimistic and gnostic<sup>2</sup> voices regarding cyberspace. He emphasises that all humans have ambivalent natures which can produce different directions of behaviour. He argues that "we disguise our unbroken failure in that regard with ideologies of progress and evolution" (Alexander 1997, 103). According to him, "denial" is one way in which humankind's sinful nature leads people to delusional cyberspace. He maintains that people want to deny reality and escape from where they belong. Both gnostic dreams of praising "pure digital intelligence" and the desire of building "the Tower of Babel" are based on this nature of "denial" (Alexander 1997, 99). His dystopian view of cyberspace presents it as a delusional place, full of fantasy. In the same book, Tal Brooke regards virtual reality as illusion and as a dark place. He insists that virtual reality is an artificial realm for people who abandon the real world. According to Brooke "virtual realities can never be more than either a poor mirror of the actual reality that God created, thus borrowing from whatever is already in existence, or they will simply be mutations and perversions of these previously created things" (Brooke 1997, 126). However, these dystopian views of cyberspace could miss interactions and computer-mediated communications between real humans in cyberspace. Even humans,

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<sup>2</sup> See the footnote at page 9

with their fallen nature, are recommended to regulate their lives and to communicate with others by delivering messages from God. Hence, as we could not abandon our real life and world, so we should not abandon cyberspace, where people connect continually and communicate.

These two opposite views of cyberspace might be confusing, and it is difficult to use them to define the true nature of virtual reality. The viewpoint that cyberspace is a sacred place could not properly explain the shadowy parts of cyberspace such as crime and pornography without concerning the corruptible nature of human beings. On the other hand, the viewpoint that cyberspace is a delusional place could abandon all of the activities and outcomes from cyberspace as a significant place of cultural, economic and even religious activities. Is it really a sacred place for spiritual evolution? Or is it a delusional place apart from reality? For Christians, is it really an evil place where one should not connect? Or is it blessed place where one could encounter the Divinity? Then how should Christians deal with cyberspace? These are significant questions for people who are living in this digital era, because opinions about cyberspace could affect their strategies for dealing with this computer-generated environment.

Edward Castronova seeks to prove that virtual reality can affect the real-world economy. He tried to find how players trade virtual goods with real-world money and how that might impact on the real-world economy. He claims economic events in the virtual environment could prove real:

A standard assumption in all benefit-cost analyses is that anything of value can be denominated in terms of Earth money, as in “an hour of gem-hunting is worth so many dollars.” Applying this reasoning more broadly to the case of digital items in synthetic worlds, it is obvious that these things do have value



that can be counted in terms of dollars. They take time to acquire—the cost—but they help you do things you might want to do—the benefit. This means that in the normal case, there will indeed be a market-clearing price for these goods. And in all other circumstances, economists are quite content to say that this price is the social value of the item. Just as one cannot conclude that diamonds are worthless because they are said to “have no valuable uses,” one also cannot conclude that the items in synthetic worlds are useless because “they are only virtual.” Price indicates social value; virtual items have a price; therefore virtual items do have social value. (Castronova 2005, 46)

Virtual labour occurs in virtual worlds when players devote their time and effort to online game play. They may produce virtual goods or virtual money while conducting economic activities. However, these outputs can be traded for real-world currency through some online websites. In fact, there is a new type of job which aims to enhance a client’s virtual character in South Korea. Hence, as Castronova insists, virtual labour could possess social value with an assigned market price, and it could be real. This means that what we have regarded as virtual reality could be reality. On the other hand, what we have believed to be reality could be virtual reality. For example, money itself has an intrinsically symbolic value, even though it is a piece of paper. People do not evaluate the value of money through its physical quality, but through what it symbolises.

Cyberspace could be regarded as another type of reality in this era. This space continually interacts with the real world and real people. Both the utopian and dystopian interpretations portray cyberspace as separable from reality. Gnostic views have separated cyberspace from the physical world and have called it a pure spiritual realm. Both Alexander and Brooke insist that cyberspace is a delusional place built by humans and abandoning reality and God’s creatures. However, as Castronova points out, virtual reality has become a more actual place, interacting with the real world. It is not important to separate virtual reality from reality and attempt to make a clear border

between them. Cyberspace has peculiar characteristics compared to other technological inventions that are commonly encountered. With just a small computer device, people can experience an unlimited virtual world which enables diverse human interactions and activities. It can provide both evil and good influences on one's life, and is woven into real life in many ways.

According to Platonic theory, pure and abstract forms are reality. However, an attempt to connect cyberspace to Platonic forms is inadequate, because cyberspace represents neither pure forms of information nor a wholly intelligible place. Instead, there is another reason why cyberspace can be a part of reality. It is not only because of the fact that it produces real impacts on real economy, culture and life, but also because it shares common elements with reality. As a sports game shares common values and rules which can also be applied in our real life, people can learn and share significant values or information through virtual reality. Meanings and knowledge can be acquired through symbols, images and virtual experiences. People can learn useful information and values through interacting with virtual reality, interpreting visual artefacts and symbols by learning visual literacy. In the real world, people have been accustomed to obtaining meanings through text communication such as books and articles or through listening to other people's words. These are traditional ways of acquiring meanings and knowledge. However, through virtual reality, more dynamic and novel ways of approaching ideas and knowledge are developed. People can encounter innumerable symbols and images which communicate meaningful and important values and knowledge which are applicable to their real life and thoughts (more discussion on this will be developed in the next section). Moreover, in cyberspace, there are humans who create or destroy,

interact or isolate, seek a spiritual or a physical life. It is one different type of reality which we should deal with carefully but should not ignore or deny. In the virtual world of WoW, we can observe a fantasy land which is full of magic, spiritual characters and mystic atmosphere. However, at the same time people can acknowledge that this world possesses real human interactions and events. People can meet real-world friends and families, communicating daily issues relating to both real life and virtual life. On the way to play, players can meet other players who voluntarily support weaker characters who deserve help or can be attacked by evil players who seek to steal virtual items. This world may seem to be an illusionary place, but the more time participants spend in it, the more they can discover how similar it is to the real world.

Cyberspace possesses an ambivalent nature, like reality. Cyberspace can prompt communication between people. This can restore the blessing of communication which was lost after people built the tower of Babel. It has been already used for missionary work as it provides diverse opportunities to contact people who live far from physical locations; delivering messages, for example. It has been used for forming networks and creating virtual communities among Christian believers. On the other hand, it could provoke both the dehumanisation and neglect of real-world life through serious addiction problems, for example, or through attracting people to wander through cyberspace without any explicit purpose.

So far, this section has been concerned about concepts of reality and virtual reality from ancient philosophy to current debates related to cyberspace. The emergence of cyberspace has prompted people to see virtual reality as a significant subject, because it has a serious and powerful impact upon society, transforming people's lives and

perceptions. Therefore, studies on cyberspace have become popular among contemporary scholars from sociological and scientific backgrounds, but ontological concerns about virtual reality are still dissatisfied. In order to study subjects related to cyberspace such as virtual communities and phenomena, it is important to understand the nature of virtual reality deeply from a metaphysical aspect.

In fact, the virtual worlds of online games provide diverse religious symbols and experiences. Death and resurrection can be experienced by a player's own character and through these experiences players can find philosophical meanings and ideas (see Chapter 6). However, depending on how they understand pure virtual reality, the meanings and impacts of virtual experiences can be interpreted in different ways. For example, diverse religious activities such as cyber-rituals and cyber-communities are organised in cyberspace. In these circumstances, how can we evaluate religious activities in cyberspace? Is it reality or illusion? Reality and virtual reality cannot be clearly distinguished from one another, but both constitute our life in a correlative way. However, if virtual reality possesses the power to construct reality, virtual reality could be regarded as a part of reality.

### **3.3 Religious Symbolism**

Every day modern life is full of diverse symbols. With the development of media such as television and the Internet, contemporary people have encountered a flood of

symbols and images that are rapidly created and destroyed. As simulated environments, virtual worlds have also contributed to this tendency, generating diverse visual symbols which can also be animated and controlled by players. This means that symbols are not only transformed into virtual reality but are also infused by their owners' (creators or players) perceptions, giving another impact on people who read them. For example, virtual characters in games represent existing symbols such as a priest and shaman with animated figures in contrast to the fixed forms of images in illustrations and pictures. The method of representing symbols is actually changed, even though their functions are still communicating meanings.

Once people have learned the proper meaning of a symbol, they can directly associate the symbol with its meaning. Every symbol has its own meaning and some have multiple meanings. Symbols can represent different meanings and interpretations, depending on the conditions and places where they exist. For example, an image of a small apple could represent an apple itself in a children's education book, however it signifies a famous computer company if it is found on a white laptop cover or mobile phone. Therefore, it is very significant to examine the context of symbols when interpreting their proper meanings. Moreover, we must also bear in mind that symbols have been represented by various types. They are represented as visual images (in animated or fixed forms), sounds (through natural or artificial signals) or texts (in various languages). As television has encroached on everyday life, people have become more accustomed to visual imagery and sound symbols. Shows or commercial advertisements display many symbols for delivering messages to viewers, making an effort to represent more memorable and sensational images. Moreover, sometimes they

attempt to provide new interpretations of existing symbols. Their original meanings can be regenerated and twisted by television and communicated to viewers. Computer games also have a similar function to television in their display of symbols for communicating ideas and messages. However, it is remarkable that computer games definitely reflect the real world, but that the worlds they created also seek to possess more supernatural characteristics than the real world. The virtual worlds they create are not limited by physical laws like gravity, hence they can represent supernatural worlds containing many religious and magical symbols based on their own theme and myths.

In fact, religious symbols are becoming an indispensable source of inspiration and content for computer games. For example, *Lineage* by NC Soft possesses diverse religious symbols. The Celtic cross is the main visual symbol, which has spread all over the virtual world. In the village, there is a huge cathedral which allows players to pray for their redemption. In fact, this redemption does not represent eternal life or religious salvation, as in real-world concepts; instead the creators of *Lineage* have adapted its basic formulation and provided their own interpretation of what redemption means. Hence, the true meaning of redemption in the game actually points to recovering recent damage to XP (Experience Point) by praying in the Cathedral. Another game called *Black and White* by EA Games allows a player to be a god in a village, *Eden*. Players can choose to be a good god or an evil god in the game, while playing the part of ruling the village. In this case, clear religious symbols and concepts have been more directly adapted from real-world religious interpretations based on polytheism and dualism. In *Civilization IV* by 2K Games and Aspyr, players can encounter seven religions, Buddhism, Christianity, Confucianism, Hinduism, Islam, Judaism and Taoism, while they are playing. In the process of creating their own world, players can also find pop-

up windows which show related religious phrases from real, existing scriptures. Famous religious leaders and characters also appear according to the in-game history.

In addition, as part of the advancement in interactive communication in online games, players can have more chances to encounter religious symbols, not only through the computer game itself but also through their interactions with other players:

Christian game enthusiasts around the US are putting on the full armor of Christ and gearing up for *World of Warcraft's Wrath of the Lich King* expansion pack. They are prepared to share the Gospel and turn the demon infested *World of Warcraft*, into a mission field, where virtual battles are fought and *real souls are won* to the Lord Jesus Christ! "May the living God Almighty be praised as the good news of His Holy name is spread throughout the land and into the farthest corners of cyberspace. ("Winning Souls to Christ in The World of Warcraft" n.d.)

As players can manipulate their own character and create virtual items, it is possible to create a virtual character with a religious identity. Moreover, in a virtual world like WoW, there are religious characters such as priests and shamans, with lots of religious items (crosses, totems and spiritual scrolls) which relate to existing real-world religions. Therefore, in some cases it is possible to represent the real religious identity of players through limited characters and virtual items, spreading religious messages through chat channels and social relationships. Like the above example, it is also possible to create a community that meets in the virtual world, organising missionary works. This means that religious symbols in the virtual world not only communicate meanings by themselves, but they are also being used by players in order to represent religious identity and deliver meanings to other players.

In this circumstance, why should these religious symbols in virtual worlds be examined? It is because we cannot and should not diminish the power of symbols and images, even in virtual reality. Symbols are significant because they project meanings and reality which are not easily recognised through human perception. Symbols can signify both intelligible reality, like physical objects, and unintelligible reality, such as specific ideals and beliefs. Moreover, some symbols do not only deliver meanings or project reality, but are also regarded as like reality itself. Therefore, if someone burns a national flag in public, it could be regarded seriously as a rebellious performance against a government. In particular, religious symbols have a significant characteristic in relation to this matter, because they signify sacred and transcendent reality in relation to spiritual dimension. It is important to bear in mind that religion itself is more interested in the spiritual dimension than in physical reality. Therefore, symbols being used in religions rely more on delivering meanings in terms of transcending reality, being treated as holy and sacred objects in some cases. In this respect, it is important to examine how religious symbols are being used in the virtual world and to provide guidelines on how to interpret them in the virtual dimension, with regard to their powerful nature.

The virtual worlds of online games are full of symbolic factors in relation to real-world symbolism. Researching religious symbols in virtual worlds also helps to reveal how the virtual world and the real world share religious concepts and ideas. In Chapter 5, we will observe that religious symbols which appear in a priest's life, for example, reflect diverse religious concepts and ideas in terms of real-world religious professions and doctrines. Some of them are purely delivered as representing similar interpretations of the real world and some of them possess altered meanings or meanings newly invented



by the creators of the virtual world. However, what is clear is that real-world religious concepts and meanings constitute part of virtual worlds.

Contemporary people are exposed to diverse images appearing through television broadcasting, cinemas, books or newspapers. Even a flood of visual images in posters are displayed around shops. Moreover, contemporary media is not only using simple types of image but also mixing them; for example in some fashion magazines there are pictures, text and sometimes a perfume strip on the same page for advertising. Visual images are actually taking on the roles of languages and probably, in the future, other types of image will communicate meanings, which could impact on diverse types of human sensations. In this circumstance, how can people read and write those images? What is the true meaning of literacy in this contemporary world with a flood of images?

Gee asserts that reading should not be denoted as decoding. In his book, he asserts that people read books in different ways for different purposes. Hence, in the process of reading, two people are unlikely to gain identical meanings from the same material. According to him, these different meanings depend on one's "own experiences in interacting with other people who are members of various sorts of social groups" (Gee 2003, 1). Moreover, each type of material requires different ways of reading, having "a different literacy" according to "its own rules and requirements" (Gee 2003, 14). His crucial points referring to this section can be summarised by two points: the meaning of true literacy and the significance of new literacy.

By a semiotic domain I mean any set of practices that recruits one or more modalities (e.g., oral or written language, images, equations, symbols, sounds, gestures, graphs, artifacts, etc.) to communicate distinctive types of meanings.

Here are some examples of semiotic domains: cellular biology, postmodern literary criticism, first-person-shooter video games, high-fashion advertisements, Roman Catholic theology, modernist painting, midwifery, rap music, wine connoisseurship—through a nearly endless, motley, and ever-changing list. (Gee 2003, 18)

Virtual worlds possess all kinds of diverse modalities which Gee has mentioned. Languages, visual images, gesture, sounds and artefacts constitute the worlds, communicating diverse meanings to players. In fact, the meaning of each symbol could be interpreted differently depending on an individual player's experience. For example, a Christian player has actually insisted that displaying a cross symbol in WoW is a sin, and asked WoW producers to stop using it. For the player, the cross symbol in WoW was interpreted only through its Christian background associated with the crucifixion. The spell 'Holy Fire' could be interpreted as the Holy Spirit in the biblical tradition, but could be read differently by other players from different religious and cultural backgrounds. Meanings or knowledge can be learned through diverse signs or symbols and their meanings are not generalised depending on each situation. In this respect, religious symbols in online games can also impact on players' cognition of meanings and knowledge during the process of playing. Moreover, if a meaning of a virtual symbol is identical to the real meaning of an existing symbol, this could encourage players to acquire general knowledge which could be applicable both in the real world and in virtual worlds. However, if the meaning is not identical to the real meaning of the existing symbol, it could cause confusion to players, as in the above example. In particular, more confusion could be created around religious symbols because of their special characteristics.

Dillistone, in his book, *The Power of Symbols*, asserts that Paul Tillich (1886-1965) is a representative theologian who elaborated on “the nature and function of symbols” in his theology (Dillistone 1986, 123). In his work, Tillich mentions the four major characteristics of symbols: “figurative quality”, “perceptibility”, “innate power” and “acceptability”. He asserts that “the inner attitude which is oriented to the symbol does not have the symbol itself in view but rather that which is symbolized in it”. He means here that symbols represent what they symbolise rather than themselves, and that ultimately they are evaluated according to what they correspond to and correlate with. “Perceptibility” is related to the “objectivity” of symbols, so that what is “invisible, ideal, or transcendent is made perceptible in the symbol”. For example, a cross represents the event of redemption through Jesus Christ in Christianity. Tillich emphasises “innate power” as the most important characteristic which makes a distinction between symbols and signs. He asserts that “it gives to the symbol the reality”, and without it symbols will lose their genuine symbolic characteristic and merely become signs (Tillich 1958, 3-4). Finally, Tillich mentions the relationship between symbols and community. He emphasises that creating symbols is not confined to an individual act, but is rather a social act. He says, “this implies that the symbol is socially rooted and socially supported. Hence it is not correct to say that a thing is first a symbol and then gains acceptance; the process of becoming a symbol and the acceptance of it as a symbol belong together” (Tillich 1958, 4). In the process of creating symbols there is social support and acceptance which allows symbols to imply meanings. According to Tillich, symbols are explicitly distinguished from signs because they correlate deeply with what they signify.

It is important to point out from Tillich's definition that symbols have innate power. His viewpoint on symbols relies heavily on the assumption that symbols have the power to open a true dimension of reality to people who can acknowledge and read them. This does not rely on the external features of symbols but on their internal power, which reflects reality onto another dimension. In his book (1953), he explains this characteristic of symbols, comparing it to a function of the arts. Pictures, and even photographs, have a power to present a reality which is not even represented directly in them. Therefore, people who appreciate them can find what those pictures are attempting to reflect ultimately, feeling the power of the reality projected by them. In this respect, symbols can be used more effectively to deliver meanings or sensational feelings which are hard to communicate. Therefore, in religions, symbols are very significant tools which communicate religious doctrines, ideas and divinity, because religions have to talk about sacred reality, which people cannot perceive or confirm easily. In this case, symbols help people to understand and be reminded of intangible and transcendent reality through physical forms which are more perceptible. Moreover, if symbols directly signify divinity, they have power for the people who acknowledge them. Tillich also comments that religious symbols represent "ultimate reality" or "the transcendent", thus distinguishing them from other symbols (Tillich 1958, 4-5).

Recently, as we have seen, religious symbols have been moved from traditional religions into the virtual dimension. They are utilised in the display on religious websites or communities, depicted in colourful and animated figures. Moreover, computer games have generally utilised diverse religious symbols without specific religious purposes. This all means the places where symbols are located have been

transformed, generating confusion through the problem of how to interpret these symbols after their relocation. In order to interpret symbols properly, it is important to consider the context in which the symbols exist. In this respect, several questions remain about symbols in virtual worlds. How should religious symbols delivered in virtual worlds be read? Do they still possess the characteristics of genuine symbols, as Tillich emphasises?

Religious symbols are not randomly displayed in the virtual world of WoW. Each class in WoW has a sample profession, which once existed or still exists in the real world. The designers of the virtual world generally use relevant sources of religious symbols to display the characteristics for each class. Do they still signify the same meaning after being moved into the virtual worlds? Chapter 5 shows that some Christian symbols are used to display the virtual life of a priest class. While creating a virtual priest, designers might use religious symbols related to Christianity, especially Roman Catholicism. However, what they signify varies from their meaning in the real world, if we consider what they ultimately signify. The meaning of Christian symbols such as a cross and church is deeply related to the Christian doctrine of the redemption of Christ. The cross in Christianity signifies the meaning of crucifixion and the belief in the truth that Jesus died in order to save people from their sin. A church is a representative symbol of Christianity in relation to the body of Christ and a Christian community gathered together by people who believe in Jesus Christ as a messiah. However, a big cathedral in WoW does not actually stand for a real Christian community or the worship of Jesus: rather, its main function is assigning quests and training human priests. The human priest class is ultimately concerned with, not Christianity, but the Holy Light. WoW has its own religions based on its own narratives. There are seven major religions:

“Church of the Holy Light”, “Worship of Elune”, “Mystery of the Makers”, “Followers of the Old Gods”, “Loa-worship”, “The Earthmother” and “Cult of Forgotten Shadow.” Among the religions, “Church of the Holy Light” shares similar religious symbols and concepts with Christianity.

The Church of the Holy Light is a religion devoted to worshipping the Light. It is most predominately found in Alliance regions, yet Horde beings wishing to join would not be turned down—or so they say. The Church is based out of Stormwind, in the Cathedral of Light. The current main leader of the church is Archbishop Benedictus. The main teaching of the Holy Light is the Three Virtues - Respect, Tenacity, and Compassion. (Queggy 2009)

However, even when a WoW religion has used Christian religious symbols for establishing its characteristics, it is still not clear what “Holy Light” signifies. It can be assumed that WoW has used real-world Christian symbols for formulating its own virtual religions, but has avoided attributing its own exact meanings. An essential characteristic of Christianity is that it proclaims Jesus Christ as “signifying Master, Lord, Saviour, or Word of God” (Hastings 2000, 113). However, in the virtual world of WoW, it is hard to discover any references to Jesus Christ in any spells, talents and narratives. “The Church of the Holy Light” is attempting to imitate the major characteristics of Christianity but, in order to avoid accusations of blasphemy, it does not adopt any of Christianity’s core beliefs. Hence, some religious symbols transposed into the virtual world lose their own innate power. For example, a cross pattern on a priest’s armour does not represent the Crucifixion or the act of Redemption but ultimately stands just for Holy Light, a virtually created religion. On the other hand, some symbols might not lose the deeper associations with real-world religious symbolism. For example, through

the narratives and virtual experience of death, players can encounter a dualistic<sup>3</sup> interpretation of human existence. The event of separation between the body and the soul represents the dualistic aspect of the moment of death, and the afterlife of virtual characters reflects the immortality of the soul in relation to the speculation of Socrates and Plato. Hence it is significant to consider the meaning of symbols through examining what they ultimately signify, researching their context and background and their narratives in relation to the place to which the symbol has been moved.

The significant characteristic of symbols in the virtual world is that the symbols are not only observed by visual images but also experienced through more diverse sensations. Symbols in the virtual world have to be concerned with the aspect that game play provides more immersive and embodied experiences than other media. Those symbols which do not lose their innate power and meanings can be related to human experience through more sensational and realistic methods of communication. For example, when players encounter the death of their virtual character they have to decide to release the spirit of the character by clicking an icon which suddenly appears on the computer screen. The game play requires the player to deal interactively with virtual events in the process of their conducting virtual life. Hence, the meaning of symbols is accompanied by active participation in virtual events which are repetitive and endless.

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<sup>3</sup> It is an aspect saying that human existence is constituted by two substances, the immortal soul and the mortal body. This dualistic aspect generally insists that the human soul is the only important substance which will survive after death, released from the destructible body. The Platonic aspect on human existence is mainly influenced by Socrates who articulates that human soul is trapped in bodily prison in this life but will be free after death. In his view, death is a good event for human soul because it causes the soul to ascend to a divine world. According to Plato, soul is also essential and prime substance which has already existed before the birth of the body.

Symbols have the power to disclose what we cannot express in words. Symbols are not merely evaluated by their visual characteristics but also by what they correspond to. Dillistone comments that “symbols open the door into a larger world full of hitherto unknown features and even ultimately to the world of mystery, transcending all human powers of description” (Dillistone 1986, 18). As people are exposed to electronic media, they encounter various types of symbol. Through sound and graphical images, symbols represent another reality. They imply meanings, ideal and higher realities, and disclose them to people who approach them. Religious symbols represent religious doctrine, theological ideas or sacred reality. Thus the symbols become imbued with power and life. However, if a symbol loses its association with what it symbolises, it will have lost its power and its meaning.

As this thesis has frequently maintained, WoW possesses as many religious symbols as any other religious websites in cyberspace. Cyberspace has been scrutinised by scholars of religion because of its function as a sacred place, mediating religious rituals or online prayer. In the process of mediating religious activities, religious symbols are also adapted for delivering religious meanings and information. However, in virtual worlds without specific religious purposes, religious symbols have been used for decorating the graphic atmosphere and for creating narratives or identifying religious characters. It is important to read the flood of religious symbols in computer games appropriately. As Gee emphasises, we are confronting diverse semiotic domains which deliver symbols and signs. Some of the symbols merely become signs after losing their association with the reality which they originally symbolised, while some others continue to possess innate powers and significance. Hence, for a new literacy, the most important thing is to



distinguish genuine symbols and this will be possible when what they ultimately want to express is properly examined.

### **3.4 Virtual Identity**

Every human being possesses his or her own identity, formed by various factors, including age, gender and nationality. These factors are mostly inherited characteristics even though some of them can be transformed in particular cases. Identity can also be influenced by human experiences, by social roles, and by interactions with other people. Countless factors affect identity construction both directly and indirectly. In the community, people's attitude toward and evaluation of each other can impact on the formation of identity. Identity is not permanent and fixed, as it can be changed by circumstances, experiences and conditions. Mia Lövheim explains identity construction as "a reflexive process" because it is being formed through "the lessons learned from different situations that arise in everyday life" (Lövheim 2004, 59). Therefore, human identity is not in stagnation but in mutation. As people live their lives, they experience ongoing identity construction. Identities are not solid forms, but changeable and fluid forms.

Once cyberspace was discovered it was soon established that virtual activities could provide powerful experiences. What was regarded as a delusional place became a new reality which could provide diverse social, economical and religious activities for visitors. In these circumstances it was, therefore, inevitable that identity construction

would take place in this virtual environment, and that diverse virtual names and characters would be created. In creating virtual characters, some people reflect their real-world state and some attempt to hide it. A virtual character could be described as an alter ego, created by a person who seeks to contact the new world. In virtual worlds, participants can wear diverse virtual identities while conducting virtual life. Virtual characters live their own virtual lives as directed by the players. Particularly in MMORPGs, virtual characters wear various identities according to class, gender and race. Whenever players visit virtual worlds, they can operate their own character according to their in-game purposes and intentions. Virtual worlds are full of chances and decisions, just like the real world. Even though characters might start a game simultaneously, their identities and lives will be distinctive according to their life journeys. This might suggest that virtual life is not standardised but contains a wide variety, depending on individual experiences in game play. Hence, each character has different processes of identity construction, according to the game content and their virtual experiences.

Virtual life is conducted by both virtual characters and players. Players represent themselves through their characters and virtual characters are the only way to communicate with virtual worlds in most MMORPGs. Virtual characters reflect both the players' human identities and their created virtual identities, represented by computer programs. T.L. Taylor, a sociologist, discusses identity construction while playing games:

“Identity exploration” is also typically seen as a primary play goal for women and girls. Both because of the nature of game (in which a character is created)

and the engagement with avatars, users can construct identities that may or may not correlate to their offline persona. (Taylor 2006, 95)

Taylor emphasises that virtual characters not only reflect existing players' identities but also impact on identity construction and relationships. Especially in role-playing games, choosing characters is a task which precedes all others. WoW allows players to choose a character which they want to be in the virtual world. Players can choose facial features, gender, race and class, then create their own virtual character with a virtual name. While conducting a virtual life with their own characters, players can express themselves through gestures, performances or text messages. Through their character's behaviour and expressions players can reveal their emotions and wills, and through them they can communicate with others. The virtual character's identity not only reveals its virtual condition but also reflects the players' intentions and conditions. Moreover, through ongoing virtual life, players constantly reconstruct and transform their virtual identity while confronting diverse events and accumulating social experiences. As Lövheim (2004, 59) asserts, identity construction is "a reflexive process" in everyday experiences. However, players can also experience this reflexive process in everyday virtual experiences, learning lessons from diverse circumstances. Virtual life from level one to seventy could be regarded as an ongoing process of forming identity.

Social interactions are the core factor in the construction of human identity, and online games are providing these interactions through various means. Communication through chatting, team play and guild activities allows players to interact with other players. Online games actually provide a variety of chat channels, guild activities and even offline meetings for their players. For example, as explained in Chapter 5, virtual identity as a priest class can be formed through constant participation in team play.

Through Chapters 5 and 6, it will be observed that religious symbols and concepts are spreading in the virtual world. Through interaction with them, players can also construct meanings and integrate them into the process of religious identity construction. Interpretations of religious concepts and symbols are communicated to players through visual graphics or sound effects. Once the meanings behind religious symbols have been understood, one can then grasp theological knowledge or interpretations related to specific matters. In these circumstances, players are inevitably exposed to diverse meanings and speculations of religious symbols and concepts in virtual worlds. Moreover, the meanings of symbols and interpretations of religious concepts are mostly dependent on the real world. Players communicate with virtual worlds and virtual worlds also communicate with the real world. That means that virtual identity is not constructed purely by virtual reality, but is also constructed by sources delivered from the real world.

Sherry Turkle, a sociologist, discusses the transformation of identity after players are able to produce diverse characters in virtual worlds. She says “When each player can create many characters and participate in many games, the self is not only decentred but multiplied without limit” (Turkle 1995, 185). As she states, we are in fact experiencing a great revolution in technology which broadens experiences through diverse activities, information and communications beyond a traditional way of life. Now that virtual worlds have allowed the creation of virtual characters, players can free themselves from their inner selves and from their physical boundaries in the real world. Moreover they can experience other perspectives and lives through the virtual life of their own created

character and its personality. Transformation of identity is an ongoing process in virtual reality, impacting on players' thoughts and real life.

### **3.5 Virtual Experiences? Or Real Experiences?**

Experiences can be accumulated from diverse sources, including social events, relationships, communities and religious activities. Some experiences are beneficial and aid the progress of people's lives and some can be painful and dreadful. However, every human being accumulates experiences during their life. The emergence of virtual worlds has increased the range of these experiences. Virtual experiences which have been restricted within narrow limits like books and dreams have expanded into the electronic realm, which provides vast areas of opportunities. Economic, social, political and religious activities are performed by players. They buy and sell their virtual products, and participate in virtual communities. Some of them gather in virtual churches and perform rituals. How do the experiences of these two worlds differ?

Experiences are subjective and personal because they are accumulated through one's own consciousness. They can be accumulated through exterior events or circumstances but they finally form an interior part of a person's make-up. Experiences are related to the process of acknowledgement because people self-reflect and obtain abstract information through what they experience. In his book, *Method in Theology*, Bernard Lonergan notes, "For consciousness is just experience, but knowledge is a compound of experience, understanding, and judging" (Lonergan 2007, 106). In fact, experiences

give rise to reflective events. In this process, people can gain their own subjective perceptions and these perceptions can be the basis of their own knowledge, which can impact future decisions and behaviours. Therefore, depending on one's reflective process, the same experience could provide different perceptions and knowledge to different individuals. As borders between the real world and virtual worlds have blurred, we cannot easily say that real experiences are from the real world and virtual experiences are from virtual worlds. Even though virtual worlds appear strange on the surface because of their atmosphere and alien figures, they also include principles which exist in real-world philosophy and theology. Moreover, players undergo human interactions. They can share various types of human relationship and obtain social experiences through them. In human relationships, communication is a very significant factor for engaging with each other. However, communication is not only brought about by physical attendance or by face-to-face meetings, but people can also communicate by phone, mail or email and thereby achieve social experiences.

Some players learn the principles of economics through trading virtual goods, but it is difficult to judge if these are real experiences or virtual experiences. Similarly, if children are taught numeracy through educational games, is their experience virtual or real? In fact, this is too confusing to define clearly. R.V. Kelly, who has devoted his time to describing the nature of MMORPGs from various perspectives, comments on the emotional progress that can be achieved by playing these games. He says, "they're not just getting ahead in the virtual world, but actually maturing, growing, learning from their experiments with behavior, and reformulating their views of themselves and their fellow human beings as a result of their experiences in the virtual world." Moreover, he

asserts that what we have learnt from virtual progress is applicable not only to virtual worlds but also to the real world, as with flight simulators (Kelly 2004, 85). He also explains why real life resembles virtual life. As he describes it, virtual life in MMORPG takes one year or more to reach the highest level, if the average amount of play is four hours per day. Through this long journey, players can make progress by practising their skills in class ability, team play and social relationships.

In his book Gee (2003, 45) also states, that by playing video games, players can learn “to experience (see and act on) the world in a new way” and “multiple modalities (words, images, actions, sounds, etc.)” in video games could be related to learning processes. He notes, “Meaning and knowledge are built up through various modalities” (Gee 2003, 111). However, those modalities which could constitute players’ knowledge are not alienated from the real world. Kelly (2004, 85) considers them to be “metaphors for real life”, and these can be found throughout the virtual world. If these modalities carry meanings to people, video games could provide diverse sources of knowledge to players through embodied experiences. This could prove a more efficient way of learning than existing educative methods such as reading and listening. The meanings and knowledge communicated by diverse modalities could be accumulated by players as compound knowledge. This compound knowledge probably originates from real-world history, philosophy or even theology, because many games create virtual worlds referring to real-world resources in order to design their background, main plot and characters. For example, death, the world after death and resurrection are the major concerns of Chapter 6. Players experience numerous events regarding the death and resurrection of virtual characters as they conduct their virtual lives. However, what kinds of knowledge can be gained from those experiences? Chapter 6 will note that

dualism is deeply embedded in the virtual world in forming narratives and experiences of death and resurrection. After death, the soul leaves the body but is able to visit the world after death. Separation between the body and the soul explicitly expresses the idea of body and soul dualism, and this is also represented by the view of the world of WoW, formulated out of two opposite factions (Horde vs. Alliance) and sources of power (light vs. shadow). This does not mean that players will believe what they learn from it, but it does show that through gaining knowledge about the virtual world they could also learn what they could learn from the real world, through embodied virtual experiences. However, interiorised meanings from embodied experiences could influence players' views about theological issues such as death and the spiritual world while they devote their time to playing online games.

As online games have developed diverse types of interactions, players have encountered a vast dimension of communications which empower them to conduct social activities. The online games world provides diverse social experiences by provoking players to form relationships with other players. Hence, players who are limited by the physical boundaries of real life could expand their territory of social experiences by engaging via the computer network system with others all over the world. Through this process of communication, players can experience virtual communities, contribute to collaboration and share their inner thoughts and experiences. Moreover, some players also share religious experiences through virtual communities and conduct religious practices. Some of them share their beliefs with co-believers and preach the gospel to nonbelievers, in the same way that they do in the real world in missionary work. Biblical study is also conducted and religious rituals such as services or masses are



performed in virtual places. In some Christian guilds, a leader challenges other players to conduct conversion duels with him in order to encourage them to accept Jesus Christ as their saviour:

He has a strict policy against letting unsaved people join our group. I think he's from Alabama in real life. In fact, he won't even party-up with anyone who isn't a Christian. He's a level 71 Priest, and gets a lot of respect. He can climb right up to the top of the dwarf statue by the gates of Stormwind City and start street preaching to the Dark Elves and they will listen to everything he says. He's done conversion duels on multiple servers where he challenges other players to fight him. If he wins, they accept Jesus Christ as their Lord and Savior. If he loses, which he does pretty often, he gives them 5 gold. My Youth Director got a bunch of Asian Christian dudes to give us a ton of gold so we can concentrate on soul-winning. You see, we don't have much time to level our characters or do quests because we are busy cutting and pasting Bible verses into General Chat, Trade Chat and all over the place until someone listens. But you gotta understand, there are times we need to buy the latest cool items so other players will respect us if we meet to talk about Jesus in one of the major cities. ("Winning Souls to Christ in The World of Warcraft" n.d.)

As in the real world, some Christian guild members attempt to preach the gospel to other players. However, their method is sometimes different from the real world. Conversion duels seem to be an invention peculiar to online game culture. Online games, especially MMORPGs, possess duel systems which provide an opportunity to fight with other players. To win is a glorious moment, even without rewards. In this case, conversion duels appear to be a way to approach nonbeliever players in order to preach the gospel more intimately to them. In addition, the Narrow Path, a Christian guild in WoW, provides daily Bible verses and daily devotionals through its websites. This Christian guild aims to encourage fellowship among players based on the Christian principle of "Love God and love one another", devoting itself to organising a clean and safe environment for WoW players (The Narrow Path n.d.). Some forms of religious

activity are being transformed according to the emergence of virtual worlds and their cultures.

In her book, *Give Me That Online Religion*, Brasher asserts that in the same way that radio and television and previously the printing press has impacted on religion, CMC (Computer-Mediated Communication) will have “a transformative impact on religion” (2004, 16). Korean scholar Su-ho Park analysed selected Korean religious websites and communities, then summarised, “In general, the Internet is used as a tool for empowering beliefs and spiritual growth for individual purposes, and it is used for public information and extension of religious influences for community purpose” (2004, 49). In fact, in recent times, people have gradually started to participate in new types of religious practices such as reading virtual scriptures, visiting religious websites and listening to online sermons. In some online games, players actually gather at virtual church buildings and worship God while playing the part of their virtual characters. They praise God through their character’s behaviour and with words. Cyberspace actually possesses more beneficial tools for communication than radio or TV. CMC connects people from all over the world, providing interactive online communication tools. Both Park and Brasher are aware that Internet communications have already started to impact religion and individual religious life.

In South Korea, there is a popular comic show which chooses ambiguous subjects such as “how can we distinguish a close friend from others?” and “what is a borderline between tall and short?” and tries to give criteria with a humorous explanation. However, if we ask a question about a borderline between virtual experience and real experience, it seems to be hard to get a clear answer from anyone. It is undeniable that

the development of cyberspace causes the opportunity for diverse virtual experiences unlimited by physical boundaries. Social, economic, political and even religious activities are being held in cyberspace, expanding their dimension with the help of the unlimited virtual universe. This means that the range of experiences accumulated within virtual reality will be diversified and expanded by the development of technology and active participation of people in the future. Moreover, as long as people do not give up accessing virtual reality, real experience and virtual experience are interwoven in human life as impacting on reality. In this respect, it seems to be meaningless to delineate a border between virtual experience and real experience; however, it is necessary to examine how people accumulate virtual experience through virtual reality, illuminating its impact on humanity.

### **3.6 Ethical and pastoral issues**

#### **3.6.1 Ethical issues**

In South Korea, a game player committed a crime by attacking another player physically, not virtually, in the real world, because the latter had stolen his friend's virtual items. Now that virtual items have a monetary value among online game players in South Korea, a new type of virtual crime related to virtual items has been identified in virtual worlds. This has caused a new social problem in society. As more people participate in virtual worlds, ethical problems which previously existed only in the real world have also started to be experienced in virtual worlds. Fraud, violence, stealing and the invasion of personal privacy and information are increasingly common in virtual

worlds and are causing economic and emotional damage to players. Korean scholar Geun-seo Park emphasises that most types of virtual crime do not seem to be hugely different from those in the real world, and they are also related to the real lives of people worldwide (2005, 54-55). Hence ethical problems or crimes occurring in virtual worlds are not separated from the real world, real life and real people. For example, if one's own virtual character is attacked by another character and virtual items are stolen, it is not only a problem for the virtual character but also impacts on the person who has created the virtual character and conducted their virtual life, spending lots of time and even money. In this respect, religions should not avoid being concerned about ethical problems in the virtual world, which could impact on people who conduct both virtual and real lives:

Historically, it has been the province of religion to establish the norms that dictate how people should behave in response to moral dilemmas. In certain times and places—medieval Europe, for example—religious institutions fulfilled this role with the aid of philosophy. At other times—as in Classical Greece—religionists and philosophers were at odds over whose voice should be decisive in defining human moral life. However, religion has consistently been the popular favorite and remains the moral source of choice for people the world over. People turn to religion for insight and instruction when confronted with moral dilemma. From Judaism and Christianity to Buddhism and Islam, religious traditions provide their adherents with ethical codes and standards of moral conduct to follow in this world. (Brasher 2004, 115)

Religions have played a significant religious role in providing ethical standards for people throughout history. As Brasher insists, on encountering moral dilemmas, people turn for help to religious instruction. However, unlike the situation in Europe during medieval times, contemporary religion has lost much of its function as a teacher of ethics. Modern society has witnessed a decline in religious authority. As one of the popular media, cyberspace has replaced religious instruction as an arena for debating

emerging moral issues. Rather than issuing specific moral instruction it prefers to offer a public place for the discussion of moral issues and to offer the chance to participate in it without any restriction. During debates, people can obtain information about public opinion regarding various moral issues. In this respect, people could expect cyberspace to take religion's role in providing ethical instruction for contemporary people, while religion has lost its authority to guide people who are experiencing moral conflicts. However, in this circumstance, contemporary churches should recover their essential religious role as an ethical guide. How could they achieve this goal? How can they gain access to people who are in a moral dilemma? How can they deliver moral instructions which have been drawn up by religion? Churches have a responsibility to participate in virtual activities in order to make contact with contemporary people who are becoming more familiar with the virtual life. This is a challenge for any contemporary churches all around the world which are concerned with their pastoral duties.

In cyberspace, there are diverse moral issues only related to cyberspace awaiting ethical instruction as well. They are mostly caused by the emergence of cyber-culture and virtual activities. People encounter moral dilemmas not only in real life but also in virtual life, as cyberspace expands and provides a variety of cultural events and social interactions. Sexual issues, virtual crime and unethical behaviour in virtual communities are problems which have been encountered recently. In the virtual worlds of online games, serious moral conflicts arise between players. As the virtual life in online games becomes more important to players, virtual items or characters possess great value for them, causing ethical conflicts. Virtue and vice seem to have been re-evaluated in respect to the way these conflicts are considered. Ethical regulations, peculiar to online game culture, have been built into the games. Players learn them through struggling

with other players and encountering diverse moral dilemmas. For example, in party-play, players may experience a moral dilemma when collecting virtual items as rewarded for collaborative play. This may be regarded as a trivial problem for players who do not attach great importance to their virtual life, but if the value of virtual items in recent times is considered, it is not difficult to understand the gravity of virtual item distribution among players. Stealing virtual items and attacking virtual characters are significant issues which occur in virtual worlds. Moreover, some conflicts occurring in virtual worlds have developed into real-world crime and have been judged by a trial.

Churches have to take a role in communicating with people and communities in cyberspace in order to educate people on moral values, recovering people's moral sense, even in cyberspace. People could disdain the activities and relationships committed by virtual reality because of some condition like anonymity or of the idea that virtual reality is a delusional place and less important than reality. However, virtual crimes and immoral acts which have occurred in cyberspace can also destroy relationships in virtual communities and damage other people, devastating both the real and virtual life of others. Efforts to provide ethical guidelines in cyberspace can contribute to both the real and the virtual life of people because they can recover people's moral sense and instruct them to perform moral acts in every circumstance.

### **3.6.2 Pastoral issues**

Modern churches propagate the gospel in diverse ways, utilising tools such as television and radio broadcasting, or the Internet. Millions of websites of conventional churches and organisations exist, and some of them are very well-known to people seeking an online religious life. They serve up daily sermons or prayers, songs of praise or hymns and a consultation board for whomever is in trouble or needs spiritual pastoring. But the missionary attempts with the new medium which has influenced young people does not actively work in the contemporary world. As much as television or radio, the Internet is becoming familiar in ordinary peoples' lives, but religious websites are difficult for young people to access, unless they actually have an active interest in them. Computer games, however, sink into young peoples' minds easily, whether they are interested in religion or not. If religious symbols or concepts in computer games are influential over players, religions can use them with a missionary purpose in some way. If they make games more fascinating and attractive to young people, the games can be accessed by anyone in the world with effective results and economic benefits. Moreover, interest or concern about computer games, which are represented as a prime facet of youth popular culture, can help religion to understand young people and, conversely, it encourages young people to move their eyes towards conventional religions, when they are of interest in their favourite game.

However, if a church aims to be separated from culture, it is the same as compounding the spirit of the gospel in the church. On the other hand, if a church attempts to assimilate with culture, it could fall into the error of declining spirit of gospel. The appropriate attitude of the church toward culture should focus on the people who conduct their lives there rather than take notice of culture itself. The minds of the people who constitute culture are toward God, the culture will come to possess its creative life force. The people who participate in culture created by people whose minds belong to God will experience righteousness, peace and the joy of the Kingdom of God. (Choi 2001, 125)

The virtual worlds of online games can be depicted as human networks and communications of vast dimensions which include, of course, not only people who seek a religious life, but all kinds of people. This offers new opportunities for future missionary work in order to deliver the message of Jesus Christ all over the world. However, these new dimensions have not been focused on and explored actively for missionary purposes so far. Before Jesus was born, Jewish people did not look towards the Gentile world. They thought Gentiles lived in a territory untouched by God's salvation. The Jews regarded the Gentile world as an evil, enemy and pagan world. However, Paul's missionary work to the Gentiles resulted in the gospel spreading into the whole world.

That Jesus himself and all his disciples were Jews, and that his message of the Kingdom was initially preached to his own people, are facts that were soon eclipsed by history, as the mission of Paul and his companions to other peoples of the Roman empire quickly took precedence. (Burrell 2000, 344)

This was an important turning point for the Jewish people. The unexplored and unknown Gentile world was revealed to them and Christianity eventually became the heritage of whole nations, as Jesus had proclaimed in his last command.

Then the eleven disciples went to Galilee, to the mountain where Jesus had told them to go. When they saw him, they worshiped him; but some doubted. Then Jesus came to them and said, "All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age". (Mathew, 28:16-20)

In recent times, the gospel has been widely propagated to many nations and in numerous different languages. In South Korea in 2009, there were 20,503 missionary



workers devoted to the propagation of Christianity, according to KWMA (The Korea World Missions Association) (*Missionmagazine* 2009). They travel to Asia, Africa, Europe and America, just as English and American missionary workers came to Korea. However, there is another world which is still unreached and unexplored by them. People have not considered this world seriously because they think of it as a delusional or fantasy land, and not as reality. This is very similar to Paul's circumstances when he attempted to teach the gospel to the Gentiles. The Jewish people thought that only Israel belonged to God and that they were His only, beloved people. When they heard that Gentile worlds had become the focus of missionary work, some of them denied the truth forcefully.

A new, unexplored and unexpected world has suddenly appeared to us in the 21<sup>st</sup> century. It is of unlimited dimensions and it continually expanding and advancing. Just as the Jewish people could not ignore or deny the Gentiles for following Jesus, so the churches cannot and should not ignore this world. As a world which embraces all nations, it offers hitherto unimaginable opportunities for missionary work. Players have already built virtual churches and organised virtual religious communities in the virtual worlds of online games. Some of them are teaching the gospel to players and converting them to Christianity in the public squares of virtual cities. However, in comparison to the number of Christians and churches in the real world, these virtual religious groups are very small in number. After deep consideration, it is important to develop methodologies of mission in the dimension of virtual reality. Virtual worlds have their own cultures, languages and features, which are distinguished from the real world. If missionaries do not consider their unique culture and lives, it will be very difficult to

approach them. For example, in South Korea, many Anglican churches were constructed by early English missionaries and followed the traditional Korean style of architecture. The methodologies of mission have to be developed in order to communicate with people in the virtual world, with reference to the indigenisation of missions in real-world history. This project could be actualised by some practical interventions such as organising missionary guilds and propagating the gospel through chat channels.

### **3.7 Summary and Conclusion**

The age-old debate about reality and virtual reality is still very much alive today. Virtual reality itself has no clear boundary, as reality has not. The debate about reality and virtual reality cannot provide an explicit and absolute definition but reflects their ambiguous boundary and obscurity in history. Since the emergence of cyberspace, virtual reality has been defined mainly from the technological aspect as emphasising special technological devices such as eye goggles or headgear. However, virtual reality is a simulated environment where people can experience a virtual presence, and this environment is not separated from the real world but shares many features such as symbols and rules. The existing boundary of our life is expanded by conducting a virtual life, which provides diverse virtual activities that enable us to engage with both symbolic factors and many varied images.

In particular, symbols are significant factors to examine while engaging with virtual reality. They are vividly used for displaying virtual reality through the medium of computers. Visual symbols are inspired by computer programs and become animated images. Online games present a representative virtual reality, which actively displays diverse symbols and images. Virtual characters and environments are manifested by visual images and symbols, being manipulated by players. Players not only watch and read symbols and images, but deeply engage with their meanings through their virtual experience. What players learn by virtual experience can also impact on their ideas and thoughts. Moreover, social relationships accumulated during online interactions can also be incorporated in social life in the real world. Therefore, it is ambiguous to distinguish virtual experiences from real experiences, as it is difficult to separate virtual reality from reality.

In this contemporary world, it seems to be impossible to abandon virtual reality in order to conduct normal life. The cultural and economical impact of virtual reality has penetrated into our real life more deeply than ever. Engaging with virtual reality is not an extraordinary job but a part of life. In fact, cyberspace is not a neutral world but has the possibility to possess everything that reality possesses. In this respect, it is not significant to divide the virtual world and the real world with a clear definition. This seems to be impossible. However, it is necessary to consider virtual reality as a part of reality, realizing that virtual reality reflects reality and has a power to transform reality.

**CHAPTER 4**

**INTRODUCING WORLD OF WARCRAFT**

#### 4.1 Introduction

In order to explore a new world, explorers have to encounter diverse risks. Different weather, culture, language and race could cause cultural and social conflicts and shocks. However, brave explorers constantly attempt to discover unexplored lands and enjoy adapting themselves to new circumstances, overcoming many difficulties. In the virtual worlds of online games, we can find lots of explorers who make an effort to conquer the worlds without hesitation and fear. For example, it is quite difficult to learn both the public game rules and unseen values when they start to play. In order to find a place where a quest directs players to go, they might have to get lost many times. Killing a group of monsters and elite boss takes quite a long time and involves boring and repetitive combat. In social interactions, players have to learn how to use the appropriate languages according to in-game culture and how to get along with other players. The virtual worlds of online games are full of activities that must be learned without a personal tutor or public education.

One of the huge misunderstandings is that online game play is regarded as a simple activity like early casual computer games. People who have no experience of online game play can assume that it only requires the simple manipulation of a character or joystick to score and win. However, online games like WoW actually have no ultimate winning and losing. They have diverse in-game purposes according to individual taste regarding virtual characters' lives and features (like class and race), based on game narratives and myth. For example, some players aim to progress their character through upgrading levels and some of them focus on collecting special armour and items. Some players enjoy having relationships with other players, sharing in-game experiences and

offline mundane life. While playing online games, what we can be convinced of is that engaging with virtual worlds requires complicated and often difficult activities involving many decisions and tasks.

In this respect, it is necessary to understand the virtual world of WoW properly as the main research area. In this chapter, we shall focus more on details of the virtual world of WoW to reveal its nature and atmosphere, examining general game play in WoW. The main concern of this thesis is religious themes in the virtual world of WoW however, it is difficult to analyse these without first examining the virtual world. For example, it is necessary to understand general information on virtual life in WoW in order to discover and examine the symbols which exist in specific characters' virtual lives. If previous chapters have concerned themselves about the true meaning of online game play through discussing related subjects such as virtual reality and experience, this chapter focuses on how to play and conduct virtual life in the virtual world.

WoW has multiple fixed inner elements which have been designed by either game designers or by players. These factors have influenced the rules of the virtual world and the way participants play. For example, ranges of races and classes are not changeable by players. Players can only choose a class and race among a given list unless an upgrade patch allows new invented characters. If a player creates a character by choosing a race and class, he/she has to follow each character's semi-fixed life according to the in-game narratives. However, while conducting virtual life, players can encounter diverse choices in relation to their character's talents and professions. These kinds of elements are interwoven with a player's individual choices and create the particular life of a character in the virtual world. Therefore, it is quite difficult to find

exactly identical virtual life among players, even though there are many players who choose the same characters (in terms of race and class) at the first stage.

WoW as a representative popular online game allows massive involvement from all over the world. Moreover, its environment is continually upgraded by designers and game programmers, providing more dynamic and exciting virtual experiences to WoW participants. The attractions of the virtual world of WoW do not compel players to leave the world, but frequently give rise to serious addiction problems. Its power of impact on society is gradually growing, as affecting even the divorce rate of couples or crime issues. In fact, WoW has both interior and exterior elements which can impact on our reality.

#### **4.2 Characteristics of WoW**

South Korean police have arrested a couple for starving their three-month-old daughter to death while they devoted hours to playing a computer game that involved raising a virtual character of a young girl. The 41-year-old man and 25-year-old woman, who met through a chat website, reportedly left their infant unattended while they went to Internet cafes. They only occasionally dropped by to feed her powdered milk. (Tran 2010)

A schoolboy collapsed and went into convulsions after playing a new version of the *World of Warcraft* computer game for 24 hours straight. The 15-year-old boy and his friends were playing *Wrath of the Lich King* when he suffered what appeared to be an epileptic seizure, it was reported today. (D. Brown 2008)

As online game addiction becomes an increasingly serious social problem, WoW cannot avoid becoming implicated in this issue. WoW has become the most popular online game, and the social impact of the game has grown as the number of subscribers has rapidly increased. Psychological studies have considered game addiction from the perspective of accidents which occur, dangerous health problems, or deaths in South Korea and Europe. For example, Takeo Muta (2006) in his book, *Game Addiction*, considered the negative effects of playing online games and found a relationship between online game addiction and Hikikomori.<sup>1</sup>

As some psychologists have noted, the virtual world of online games has involved various social and psychological impacts. The world has been developed with advanced technology and has tempted people to become immersed in its magical environment. In this circumstance, basic questions need to be asked: why do some players become deeply immersed in the virtual world of online games? What kinds of factors cause some players to become addicted? How do players live in the virtual world? It has already been noted that in some characteristics, online games are distinct from video games, the main distinguishing feature being that, unlike in video games, there is social arrangement and collaborative playing in online games. Broadband cable allows huge numbers of players to be connected simultaneously, thereby enabling this world to be a social arena for individual players. This innovative development creates a distinctive online game culture among millions of players, and opens up their lives to a pure fantasy world, closely resembling the real world. In this section, the characteristic

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<sup>1</sup> A Japanese term representing “social withdrawal” from school or social life.



features of online games will be examined through an exploration of the virtual world of WoW, and a deeper understanding of the virtual world will be reached.

When a player first explores the land of WoW, they might be surprised by its realistic 3D graphics. This realistic and attractive depiction of characters and scenery impresses players, who prefer it to the crude graphics encountered in other 2D games. Furthermore, the user interface is easily accessed, having no complicated or diverse contents which can cause confusion, especially to new players.



**Picture 1 User interface of WoW**

On the top left of Picture 1, there are two bars which reveal a character's Mana Points (hereafter MP) and Health Points (hereafter HP). A character's physical health is measured by numbers and the length of the green bar, and these numbers increase as the

character advances through levels, reflecting its increased health and strength. A character's health can therefore be easily checked while it is engaging in combat or exploring because the green bar is easy to access, as can be seen in Picture 1. HP is one of the most important factors because it relates to the physical death of a character. If a character loses all of its health points, it dies immediately.

The blue bar shows a caster's magical or spiritual power, which relates to its ability to cast spells. It is important to cast magic when a character defeats monsters or buffs. Although mana points are not directly linked to physical death, an insufficient number can put a character in dangerous position, especially during combat. For example, if a character is fighting with dangerous monsters without enough mana points, that character cannot use magic properly in order to defeat them. The result would be a dishonourable escape from the monsters, and the enforced relinquishment of health points to the enemy.

At the top right of Picture 1 is a mini map which shows a character's location in the virtual world. At the top of the circle, there is a zone name where the character belongs, and a small triangular arrow points to the spot where the character is standing. There is also time information in the virtual world with a day/night clock, and if a player clicks on an icon in the shape of a magnifying glass, they can find particular non-player characters or objects which are in the list.

Square icons are located to the left of the mini map, and these indicate magic buffed by other players or by themselves.

A new player is suddenly surprised by a soft whooshing noise. A colorful icon appears near the top of her screen, and she experiences a moment of alarm. Was that a game-generated attack? No—the player has been “buffed,” that is, she is the recipient of a beneficial spell cast by a nearby player. A buff increases an ability for a short period of time so that while in combat the player has a small advantage . . . Buffs are part of the culture of the game in which players commit small acts of kindness to maintain a mutually beneficial atmosphere even though no immediate reciprocity is in the offing and no rewards such as experience points are gained. (Nardi and Harris 2006, 151)

Nardi and Harris define buff as the kind acts of players in a collaborative atmosphere. A player can be buffed when he/she is walking along a road or resting in a town. Unexpected acts of kindness from other players suddenly make a player stronger, even if it only lasts for a few minute. Sometimes, a player asks other players for buffing, or, in the battleground or during group-play, players buff each other spontaneously.

In the bottom left of the screen, players can share their conversation with other players. Sometimes there is some trading information from other players, and guild chats or general chats appear with distinctively coloured letters. Chat channels are very useful when players are playing with a group, because they help them communicate with each other when trying to obtain the same goals. These chat channels are the most important tools for players’ social activity and interactivity in the online game culture. Here they share their experiences and information about a game. Moreover, these chat channels act as a bridge between the virtual world and an individual gamer, and between a guild member and a community. According to Steinkuehler and Williams (2006), players do not only share their adventures during the game, but also share their “offline mundanities”, which is actually about “out of character”. This means that chat channels

contribute to a player's social activities, and these are not only correlated to the game world, but are also connected to a player's social life, both online and offline.

At the bottom of the picture is a long purple bar running from left to right. This shows a character's experience points (hereafter XP). XP are generally awarded by exploring a new world, completing quests and killing monsters. They are also essential for advancing a character through levels. When the purple bar reaches the end, a character can advance to the next level. In addition, WoW has the concept of a "rest state" which allows players to gain double XP when they come back from rest. "The Rest State modifier gives players a time-limited bonus to combat (PvE<sup>2</sup>) experience. Rest State is gradually earned while you are logged out of the game, or when your character is located in a city or inn" ("Resting" n.d.). This is an innovative concept only to be found in WoW: players who have left the game for a while to catch up with other players' progress.

Another of the game's subtle but important design innovations is there to benefit those who can't necessarily commit to making World of Warcraft a huge part of everyday life (as much as it can threaten to do so). The way it works is that whenever you're not playing the game, your character is considered to be in a rest state. When you return to a well-rested character, you'll temporarily accrue double the experience points you'd normally earn by defeating monsters, and the more time you spend between play sessions, the longer you'll enjoy the experience bonus when you resume play. (Kasavin 2004)

Another innovative concept in WoW is the fact that a player does not need to pay the penalty of losing XP after a death. In most MMORPGs, after a death, players sustain

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<sup>2</sup> Player vs. Environment

huge damage when they experience a reduction of XP because it has a direct influence on their speed rate and time consumption for advancing. For example, players (from level 5) lose their XP when they are killed by monsters in the game called *Lineage* by NCsoft. WoW developed a novel process between death and resurrection by enabling players to achieve something in a short time by decreasing the penalty for a death. Finally, underneath the XP bar, there is an action bar which holds the spells and abilities mastered by the character. These abilities are used by players for purposes such as combat and buffing.

### **4.3 The Virtual World of WoW**

In the previous section the functions and features of the user interface were explained. In this section, the nature of the virtual world of the game, and the general procedures for playing WoW will be discussed. Most people who have no experience of MMORPGs would perhaps expect an MMORPG to be similar to the video games they played in childhood. However, when a player is immersed in the virtual world they finally understand that they had only a partial understanding of this world. An overall impression of the virtual world of WoW, can be implied by two words: “spacious” and “attractive”. It is a world that provides opportunities for doing things which cannot easily be done, or would be impossible to do, in the real world. Players are rewarded for completing quests and can buy fancy armour using in-game money. While their physical body is restricted by daily life, their characters can explore new lands

whenever they want. The virtual world may be regarded as an unrealistic, illusionary world, but the effects of experiences in this world should not be underestimated.

In 2001 I conducted a survey of virtual-world players and found that a shocking 20 percent of them indicated that they think of the virtual world as their true home. The Earth was a place they merely visited from time to time. . . There's no reason to believe that the desire to escape into fantasy will decrease. On the contrary, as fantasy gets better and better, more and more people will want to spend time in virtual reality. (Castronova 2007, 13)

As Castronova indicates, the virtual world has become a familiar place for players and for some of them it feels like be their true home. They feel comfortable when they log on the server of the game, and their artificial characters can be real reflections of their identity, more so than their physical body in the real world. They become immersed in the virtual world with the experience of reflecting their inner desires through their characters' behaviour, and expressing their inner thoughts and ideas through chat channels. Sophisticated landscapes and familiar virtual places also facilitate this immersion in the world.



In virtual worlds, including those of novels and movies, there is even greater freedom of choice. Not only are there no pre-given heritage and local traditions, there are also no planning bureaucracies, no NIMBY neighbors, no need for sustainability, no budget and no need to make profit. Theoretically, the identities of virtual places depend only on the whims of their designers and they can be as exotic as imagination allows. . . Digital reality is, however, such a recent medium that conventions for presenting virtual places are still being worked out. The fantastic virtual worlds of massively multi-player on-line games that ignore laws of physics, ecology and society can perhaps be regarded as experiments to find conventions of representation. (Relph 2007, 21)

As Relph mentions, designers are given a free rein to create virtual reality with limitless imagination and total freedom from the laws and restraints that pertain to the real world. The basic features of WoW originate from a western, medieval background, demonstrating how its game designers created the world using a mixture of fascinating factors from both the actual world and their imagination. In fact, the virtual world is an artificial world originally created from people's general preferences. For example, an

aesthetic and mysterious atmosphere is created without the dirt and squalor, class distinction or racism, that exist in the real world. Players can be rewarded for their attempts to complete a quest with equal opportunities. A player can meet new people or familiar friends in this world and have social relationships from a position of equality. With these attractions, the virtual worlds of online games have become a popular and even comforting place to many players. On this issue, Bartle insists in his article that virtual spaces are regarded as actual places by players.<sup>3</sup>

I do regard these products entirely as worlds: others may debate whether or not virtual spaces are *actual* places, but for players and designers there's no conception that they might not be. The six million people who enjoy *World of Warcraft* certainly look upon it as a world and in the face of this any argument to the contrary is pretty well moot. People play these games for two to four hours every day, every week, every month, . . . I have *MUD2* players who are still going strong after 15 years. Tell *them* that the Dragon Island is not a place and you'll get the same blank look you'd get if you told them London wasn't. (Bartle 2007, 41)

As players get drawn into the virtual world, it becomes more attractive and interesting, and as they spend more time in the virtual world, the distinction between it and the real world becomes blurred. Virtual world experiences could be seen as superior to those of the real world. Bartle also argues that it is vital to examine the virtual world with profound consideration and real practice, avoiding pre-conceived ideas. He criticises external researchers who access the virtual world with careless observation and short-term understanding. In this section the virtual world of WoW will be introduced through an attempt to avoid the previous mistakes of external researchers. The following survey was conducted through real participation in WoW with a human priest character,

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<sup>3</sup> Bartle is the co-author of MUD (Multi-User Dungeon)



*Hatarina*. I have spent more than five hundred hours playing the game since I created the character in 2008.

When a player starts WoW, the first step is to choose a character. There are two factions, Alliance and Horde, and ten characters available to choose from (up until 2008). In the Alliance there are five races: Draenei, Dwarves, Gnomes, Humans and Night Elves. In the opposite faction, Horde, there are also five races: Blood Elves, Orcs, Tauren, Trolls and Undead. Each race has own special skills and selectable classes: Druid, Hunter, Mage, Paladin, Priest, Rogue, Shaman, Warlock, Warrior and Death Knight. Druids possess shape-shifting skills which can help them perform as other forms of virtual beings such as bear and cat. Hunters can be excellent solo characters, using combat pets in order to defeat enemies: special weapons such as bows and guns are only allowed to them. Mages have very special utility spells which are able to create portals to capital cities in order to teleport characters immediately. Paladins are very efficient for supporting a group with powerful armour and buff abilities, and Priests are able to heal and resurrect people with diverse healing spells and talents. Rogues are excellent at incapacitating their enemies and Shamans can utilise their own totems which provide diverse effects. On the other hand, Warlocks have very special skills which can drain other characters' strength, using dark magic, and Warriors' powers are mostly generated by their various gear and armour. Death Knights are only able to be created by players who already possess level 55 virtual characters in terms of a hero class. After a player has chosen a character among these characters, they need to choose a realm and decide

whether the character will exist in a PvP<sup>4</sup> (Player vs. Player) game play mode or PvE<sup>5</sup> (Player vs. Environment) game play mode. A character will start the game in the newbie zone, which is diverse, depending on the race. The newbie zone is a safe place for new players, where similar levels of monsters exist. In this place, a character can learn the basic skills for playing and the overall rules of the world. Sometimes, a new player receives help from other players and can seek support from them.

In the newbie zone, there are non-player characters who sell items and foods or safety guards. However, a player needs to concentrate on quest-givers, who have an exclamation mark above their heads. A player can take quests from them, and pursue them for the rewards of in-game money, items or XP. Quests force players to explore other lands, deliver special items, kill monsters or bring an item from an enemy camp, etc. By pursuing quests, players gain more knowledge of the virtual world, and advance their character through the levels. A player can have several quests in their quest log at the same time, and when they complete a quest, the exclamation mark on the non-player character is changed to a question mark. Hence, the player needs to find the quest-giver with the question mark, and collect their reward. There are also non-player characters that exist to train class skills. As a character advances to higher levels, it can learn stronger skills from class trainers. Some skills can be improved from minimum rank one to maximum rank six, and a character can learn new skills in every even numbered level by paying in-game money. In addition, a character can also find professional trainers among the non-player characters. They train a player for various skills like “cooking”,

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<sup>4</sup> This mode allows a player to attack other players.

<sup>5</sup> This mode does not approve of attacking other player except in “duels”. In duels, players from the same faction can challenge each other to combat with the players’ agreement.

“enchanting”, engineering”, “fishing”, “tailoring”, etc. Players use these skills to advance their characters and they produce virtual products with those skills, earning virtual money as a business as well.

In a game like *World of Warcraft*, you cannot make just *anything*, as you can in *Second Life*. But you can make one of hundreds of thousands of things, using specific recipes, and then you can sell them using a synthetic currency. Your business acumen will matter. If you do well, like Carla, you will soon acquire a mass of virtual currency. (Castronova 2007, 9).

Players also can learn talents from each class. “Once a character achieves tenth level, it will begin earning talent points at the rate of one per level. Talent points can then be spent at the Talents window” (“Your Character” n.d.). Several talents have the function of improving a character’s existing skills or abilities, promoting efficient playing. For example, a priest’s talents of “Improved Power World: Fortitude” and “Improved Power World: Shield” affect their existing skills of “Power World: Fortitude” and “Power World: Shield”, upgrading their basic abilities in terms of time consumption and power efficiency. Some talents like “Absolution” enhance a group of existing spells by reducing mana consumption in order to enable a priest to cast more spells with limited mana points. Players can accumulate these talents by paying talent points which they have collected from level 10.

Playing in WoW could be described as exploring, advancing, trading and communicating. However, one of the most interesting aspects of WoW is its collaborative playing. Players in WoW can make up a group with other players they have only just met, or they can invite their friends or appropriate members from the search system in the user interface. Group playing enables each character to attain a

difficult goal which would not normally be possible, or which would take too long if played individually. By working together, players complement each other's efforts. For example, a priest normally has an important role in group-playing. When priests play individually, they are not adept at fighting with monsters because their main role is healing or resurrecting other characters. In group-play, most members demand that priests be part of the group for this reason. When fighters are fighting in front of a priest, the priest hides itself from the monsters' attacks while healing the other players by watching their HP bars. Fighters try to cover a priest against attack, because if a priest dies, they cannot go into combat without a main healer. Moreover, when a member is killed by a monster, the priest approaches the corpse and casts a spell for resurrection. Generally, if a character is dead, the player suddenly encounters a spirit healer which offers direct resurrection from the spot where they are standing. However, when a character decides to be resurrected by a spirit healer, they have to lose 15% of their armour durability and get resurrection sickness. Otherwise players have to take another choice which costs too much time, for they need to run to the corpse for resurrection. However, a priest is able to reduce these processes and to promote the efficiency of the group-playing by casting an appropriate and powerful resurrection spell. In group-playing, all group members share XP equally from killing monsters, and they share items or in-game money according to the rules agreed by all members. After achieving the goal, members leave a group or share another quest for future playing.

There are various activities for players in the virtual world. As mentioned above, group-playing can be perceived as being an impressive social activity in this world. Economic activities are also enabled through the production and consumption of virtual goods.

Players can earn in-game money through rewards for quests or loot from dead monsters, or they can produce items through their professional skills and sell them to other players or merchants. With in-game money they can buy food, armour, swords and other virtual items, and there are auction houses in towns for trading virtual goods among players. Players can also trade their items privately through chat channels. Furthermore, it is worth mentioning that players trade these virtual items through real-world Internet auction sites, thereby expanding into the real-world economy. They trade not only virtual products or items but also personal game accounts and advanced characters. In addition, people can directly buy in-game money through some online sites, and can sell it to earn real-world money.

In April of 2000 Sony Online Entertainment secured cooperation with the Internet auction sites eBay and Yahoo! to prevent *EverQuest* users from selling game accounts and in-game goods. Up until that time a cottage industry had sprung up in which users were turning their online labor into offline cash. . . A search for *EQ* items on eBay in 2000 would have found a wide variety of available items, ranging from equipment such as armor, weapons, and spells to in-game coins being bought and sold with real-world currency. Players not only would sell odds and ends from the game but the ultimate item- their avatars and character accounts. (Taylor 2006, 130)

These activities raise various issues. Firstly, a player's offline financial status could affect the virtual world. The virtual world has provided equal opportunities to players; hence, if they spend more time playing, they can acquire more things. However, if players can buy virtual goods or characters with real-world money, it will influence the social structure of equality as well as the economic system in the virtual world. Secondly, there will be players who do not concentrate on enjoying the game for itself, but whose motive for playing will be to sell virtual goods for real-world money. There are two opposing aspects to this issue. One is about "the nature of playing" and the

other is related to “generating more new jobs”. As players can earn money through playing, some players actually play just to obtain virtual goods. For instance, there are some people who play the game as a job for the whole day and night in Internet cafés in South Korea. This kind of playing could be represented as being against the pure nature of online game playing, because it considers and uses the virtual world as a tool for making money. On the other hand, however, the provision of new opportunities for virtual employment needs to be emphasised. Once again, in this case, the blurring of distinctions between the real and virtual worlds can be observed, because some people now regard virtual economic activities as actual real-world economic activities. In fact, the virtual world has gradually penetrated our real life with effects and influences that were originally unimagined when games were first invented as children’s entertainment.

In this section, a detailed account of several important features has been made, in order to better understand the virtual world of WoW. These include information about characters and their abilities, basic rules and social and economic activities. In the next section, the notable communicative roles of WoW will be considered through an examination of chat channels, players’ relationships and guilds.

#### **4.4 Players and Their Communication in WoW**

Interaction among players is one of the significant characteristics of online games. Although each player seems to be isolated in a room without any social interaction, they are actually involved in an enormous social sphere and connected to other players. Most

social interactions are held through chat channels using text-based communications in WoW. There are also voice interactions through microphones and headsets, and email contact is also available. However, players rely mostly on text-based communication through the chat box. When players visit the world for the first time, they might be surprised by the rapidly floating words in the chat box. There are familiar words which are also used in real life and strange, new words invented by WoW players according to online game culture and usage. The chat box represents the circumstances of the world and the characters. It also provides useful information and ideas. It can be seen as a sort of entrance into social and economic activities, providing private and public conversations in relation to trading virtual items, recruitment or guild activity.



On the bottom left of the screen we find a virtual tool for communicating with the world of the game. This tool enables players to avoid a solitary life in the virtual world and provides them with a chance to share their experiences and information.

Players communicate with each other by typing text in the “chat box” at the lower left of the screen. Several communication channels are available: private, one-to-one “tells,” group chat, guild chat, “spatial” chat (heard by all players within a certain radius), and finally “zone chat,” which reaches all the players in a given zone of the game (zone chat is further subdivided into four channels: general, trade, local defense, and “looking for group”). (Ducheneaut, Yee, et al. 2006, 284)

As the above depiction shows, several functions are available in the chat box. For example, there are two logs in the chat box in WoW and players can choose which log will be represented as the main log in a particular situation. The two logs provide different kinds of information, as demonstrated below.

	<b>General Log</b>	<b>Combat Log</b>
<b>Chat</b>	Private chat, Party chat, Guild chat, Spatial chat, Zone chat	Unavailable
<b>Information</b>	Company announcements, Trading, Guild recruitment, Location, NPC’s report, Gained items, Duel, Group joining, Battle	Casting spells, damaged health points, Gained XP, Enemy’s attack, Enemy’s state
<b>Character</b>	Reputation	Behaviour

**Table 3 Classification of representative examples by each log**

Two logs, general and combat logs, exist in the chat box and each of them provides a different function and purpose. General logs are normally utilised for the purpose of communication in relation to party play, member recruitment and guild activity. However, the combat log provides general information in the battlefield, representing characters’ damage points and XP in order to assist players in fighting efficiently. So



the chat box is a window which bridges the gap between an individual player and the virtual world. Players talk to other players through chat channels while they are enjoying the game play. Sometimes they communicate with guild members by gaining information and sharing experiences, or they buy and sell particular items through a trading channel. As players actively participate in the chat box, they can communicate with large numbers of people in the world, thereby creating social relationships of vast dimensions. During party-play especially, chat channels are notable tools for improving the efficiency of play.

[Party] [PasXXX]: were do you get the orbs?  
[Party] [HardcXXX]: from killing the Shadowcasters  
[Party] [HardcXXX]: but, killing a Lt. is fine with me  
[Party] [PasXXX]: next one north east well get your orbs first?  
[Party] [HardcXXX]: never mind do this later  
[Party] [HardcXXX]: help u 2 out 1 st!  
[Party] [PasXXX]: ok cheers :)  
[Party] [Hatarina]: yep

In the above conversation, party members are discussing a recent quest. Generally, party members share common quests and try to give a role to each member. Members project an appropriate strategy for a common goal or agree regulations for ethical and effective party-play. In the process of playing, players also vividly share information about their own characters' conditions. They have to organise the various tasks that emerge for the group. They should also help each other and exchange information whilst engaging in combat. In fact, collaborative play would not be effective without communication among members. It is like radio communication in the middle of a battle in a real-world situation. It is the core tool of party-play and collaboration.

In single-play, communication through chat channels is also important. When new players enter the world, there are a lot of things to be learned. The virtual atmosphere seems to be strange and frightening for some people. They encounter difficulties in finding special locations indicated by quests. They have to learn how to buy and sell virtual items. They need to avoid dangerous areas with scary monsters and find the appropriate location from which to advance the level of each character. They also have to try to get used to the world. However, the world is actually filled with amazing, new things to learn and practise. It is like a new world with novel rules and systems which have never been explored by them. As players enter the world they have to learn about its circumstances and find how to adjust to it. Then how do new players accommodate themselves to the world? What is the most effective way of learning about the virtual conditions and rules? Most players attempt to contact other players through chat channels in order to get information.

Players can also direct their own character's emotional state and some character traits. For example, if a player types the word `"/shy"` in the chat box, their character makes motions of shyness by moving its head and arms. There are more options like `"/applaud"`, `"/cry"`, `"/laugh"`, `"/rude"`, `"/roar"`, etc. The character makes the appropriate motions through the player's direction by means of a text-based message. In addition, voice messages can be generated through a character through text-based direction. For example, if a player types a word `"/congratulate"`, then a character responds to the direction by saying `"/excellent"` or `"/congratulations"`. When a player puts the words `"/open fire"` in the chat box, a character yells towards others with the word `"/fire!"` or `"/attack!"` These are very useful tools for social interactions with others as they represent

the emotional state of both the character and the player, provoking emotional exchanges. Characters' behaviours are more subordinated to players' directions in this situation and this means that virtual characters have come to reflect more specific emotional expressions of the players than can be achieved through text expression alone.

Finally, guilds, which represent communities organised by players in WoW, need to be examined.

Players establish guilds which are named groups that socialize and play together. Guilds can be designed to create somewhat customized play experiences. For example, an LDS (Church of the Latter Day Saints) guild stated on an online guild recruitment forum, "We welcome all players as long as they can respect our standards (i.e., no dirty language/swearing). If you wish to have fun in a clean gaming environment, contact us." There are religious-themed guilds, geography-based guilds, guilds for power gamers, guilds for casual players, large ambitious guilds, small intimate guilds. An important focus for many guilds is collecting reliable players for advanced play. (Nardi and Harris 2006, 150)

As Nardi and Harris mention, there are several kinds of guilds in the virtual world of WoW. They are not organised by the game company, but by players. Various social practices and events have been generated by guilds, enriching game play with dynamic social interactions. Dmitri Williams and four other scholars (2006) surveyed the social life of guilds in WoW. They classified guilds into four types depending on their goal: social, PvP, raid and role-play guilds. A social guild would focus more on social interactions than on in-game goals. The members concentrate on enriching relationships among members and caring for others. A PvP guild would put the main emphasis on battle with the enemy faction on an assigned battleground. A raiding guild's purpose is to perform raids. It makes a raid schedule and organises members for raids, encouraging

both teamwork and individual practice so that players perform properly. The purpose of role-play guilds is to encourage players to perform according to their characters (Williams, et al. 2006, 344-345). In WoW, players can choose their own guild according to their purpose and preference. However, even though each guild has a specific goal, they all share common aims, activities and social interactions. Even in those guilds devoted to performing raids or to role-playing, social interactions between members are basic activities, necessary for communicating and forming relationships. Moreover, guild members also help each other over in-game purposes and sometimes expand their relationships into the real world. Their daily topics do not always belong to the in-game situation; instead they also share real-world experiences and conditions.

Communications are significant factors which distinguish online games from other, offline, games. Social interactions and activities are generated by communication tools in the virtual world. Through interacting, players not only acquire information or knowledge from other players, but can also be inspired by them. As a sort of global environment, the virtual world is enriched and promoted by the players' solidarity. Individual players are also advanced through communicating with others, sharing experiences and getting help. Collaborative play can be activated through the use of communicative tools. Most importantly, communications held in the virtual world gradually expand real-world relationships, enabling players to contact unknown others. Players can overcome geographical boundaries and physical restrictions in order to enter into relationships with others.

Individual playing of computer games has been raised the issue of social isolation in terms of dehumanisation. It disconnects relationships among humans through attracting players to participate in isolated virtual realm simulated by computer programs. However, what we have regarded as an anti-social place has transformed into a dynamic social place, providing more opportunities to interact with other people. Character-to-character interactions are held through players' sophisticated expressions, representing the emotional states of individuals and the details of gestures. The community value of WoW could be one of the most significant game purposes to the people who are seeking social life beyond existing restrictions such as gender discrimination and social hierarchy, as Zijderveld (2008b) highlighted. Community value in online games is also important because individuals reflect themselves in their relationships with others. One's own identity could be constructed through aspects of other people and by inter-relationships in the community. Therefore, WoW could challenge us to re-examine its community value, which could impact on the identity construction and social experiences of players where online games playing can be related to players' real existence and lives.

#### **4.5 Summary and Conclusion**

We observed throughout this chapter how players enter the world and how they interact with virtual reality. The virtual world mediated through computer programs provides a vast simulated dimension containing many animated images such as virtual characters and visual effects. People who are accustomed to the fixed environment represented by

television shows and movies could be amazed by the fluid environment which can be manipulated by themselves. In the virtual world, players are more than audiences. The important point is that players can engage with the environment, interacting with its content by directing their character's actions and decisions. This means that players can directly contribute to changes in the virtual world. For example, if a player creates a specific virtual item, it becomes one of the possessions of the virtual world. It will exist until someone destroys or consumes it. If player builds special architecture in some virtual place, it belongs to that player's property and does not disappear. Therefore, if we reflect on this aspect, the difference between the virtual reality of online games and that of other media becomes explicit.

WoW possesses the general characteristics of MMORPGs. Interactions between players are mostly conducted through a small chat box as a social window. Many different types of guilds exist in virtual worlds for different purposes. In these worlds players can become another self, conducting a virtual life in the direction of their choice in terms of in-game purposes and their character's life journey. They meet other characters for team play, experience collaboration and expand their relationships. Because of this possibility of social interactions between players, online games can be distinguished from offline games, which only allow individual play. The virtual worlds of online games provide not only virtual reality, empowering players to engage with it, but also social interactions with other players. On the other hand, WoW has unique characteristics such as "rest state" and "no death penalty", compared to other MMORPGs. In particular, the process between death and resurrection is a peculiar and systematic virtual experience. It reflects how the virtual world of WoW interprets virtual characters' existence and the spiritual dimension through displaying symbols and images.

This chapter will help in understanding general features of the virtual world and virtual life in order to approach the next two chapters. The following chapters will examine virtual reality as represented by symbols and images, and the basic information and aspects introduced by this chapter will form the groundwork to illuminate the environment where this is displayed.

**CHAPTER 5**

**THE PRIESTHOOD IN WORLD OF WARCRAFT**



## 5.1 Introduction

If a researcher wants to find religious symbols, which character is the most proper object to study? The answer: a priest. *Hatarina* is a human priest of the virtual world of WoW. She loves to help other characters through healing and resurrecting. She usually wears a thin robe without any mail armour, being protected by the spell, Inner Fire. Often, she visits the priest trainer at the church in the centre of *Stormwind* city to train in special spells and skills as soon as she has been upgraded to a new level. In her bag, she normally carries more than ten portions of liquid medicines to charge her mana points at any time and some food for health. She loves to be invited by other characters for a party-play and to get along with them. She has a swift horse for private transportation and sometimes takes a Gryphon as paid transportation throughout Alliance territories. She finally has become a level fifty-three Holy Priest.

Researching religious symbols through a human priest life is an interesting job because *Hatarina's* life engages with diverse religious symbols in relation to her special priest quests, spells and talents. There are some popular religious symbols, which can also be easily found in the real world, and some special symbols which are hardly observed in modern times. However, those symbols communicate meanings to players, engaging with real-world symbolisms from both traditional and pagan religions. In fact, players can encounter religious symbols in the virtual world more than any place in the real world because many virtual worlds seek to present supernatural worlds in terms of

magic, superstition and mystical environments. However, we must bear in mind that these symbols (either being used for a special purpose in terms of narratives and characters' identities or being only used for art effects) can also deliver meanings (in relation to circumstances of both the real and virtual worlds) to players, accompanying a process of interpretation.

If the general virtual life and virtual world has been examined in the last chapter, this chapter will focus on a specific character's virtual life, finding how religious symbols and themes are represented. This chapter will examine religious symbols and expressions from the point of view of a human priest character in WoW, focusing on their meanings and functions. The virtual life of a human priest will be observed and analysed through real-participation and its abilities and talents will be researched through the aid of internet resources and virtual experience.

## **5.2 The Life of a Human Priest in WoW**

This section will be concerned with following the journey of a female human priest called *Hatarina* and with observing the religious symbols and concepts of her life. A priest can be described as a holy character who demonstrates his/her devotion to other characters by casting beneficial spells. Most of the spells allowed to a priest are for healing and protecting other characters. However, a priest also can be a shadow character who tries to harm enemies with destructive shadow spells. This section will

depict the virtual life of *Hatarina* with an overall description of the character and its play. Additionally, the religious symbols and concepts attached to the priestly life in the virtual world will be examined.

At the start of the game, there is a place offering various options for the future character. The Celtic cross icon on the left side of the screen among other class icons, symbolises the priest class. When *Hatarina* is born, through clicking the icon, an overall explanation of the characteristics of a priest appears on the right side of the screen.

Priests guide the spiritual destiny of their people. Through their unique insight into the mind, they are able to shape on individual's beliefs, whether to inspire or terrify, sooth or dominate, heal or harm. Just as the heart can hold both darkness and light, priests wield powers of creation and devastation by channeling the potent forces underlying faith.<sup>1</sup>

The priest class can be depicted best as healers in WoW, using various healing spells. In the Holy Light belief system, human priests are also likely to heal and restore friendly characters, saving them from death. Hence, a priest class is well-demanded in group playing in order to protect and preserve members' health and power. However, a priest class also possesses destructive and shadowy spells which could harm enemies. If a priest decides to possess more shadow talents than holy talents, it can become a shadow priest, which is more effective at fighting and killing enemies. In the virtual world, a priest can decide whether to become a holy or shadow priest when faced with diverse choices, shaping its own identity and virtual life between two opposite characteristics.

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<sup>1</sup> This account is quoted from the game WoW which allows a player to choose the character options.

*Hatarina* was a female human priest wearing a simple, white shirt and the robe of a neophyte when she started her first step as a priest. Neophyte's robe, Neophyte's shirt, Neophyte's cloth and Neophyte's boots are what she brings from the beginning of the game. From level one she is already adult, and her appearance will not change as she advances through the levels. She holds just a few skills, such as Lesser Heal (rank1) or Smite (rank1), two leather bags of spring water and some pieces of cheese. She is a character who possesses a human spirit which will increase as she rises through the levels. As the word "neophyte" indicates, the first stage of a priest character is simple and weak. However, by training her special skills and by gaining XP (experience points) through pursuing quests and hunting monsters, she will mature.

When a priest character is born at the first stage in WoW, it enters an abbey in the middle of the town where it will be trained or embark on a quest. A priest-trainer in the abbey teaches class skills from three ranges of discipline, holy and shadow magic. When the character is mature enough to enter the Stormwind City, a medieval style castle, they find a huge cathedral in the middle of the city. The cathedral functions as the principal training place for priests, and there are people who give quests to players in several rooms. A bishop is located at the front and welcomes characters who visit the cathedral. There is also a special quest which reinforces a priest's ability by rewarding them with the "Friar's Robes of the Light" at Goldshire Town. The word 'friar' indicates a member of a Roman Catholic order and so it can be assumed that the priests in the game might be similar to Catholic priests in their appearance.

When a priest is walking down the road, sometimes other characters ask him/her to shield them. This is because a priest character has the very useful skill of being able to protect characters against attacks from enemies. It is not permanent magic but instant spell-casting, lasting only seconds, depending on the rank of the magic Power Word: Shield. A priest can upgrade the rank of Power Word: Shield through advancing levels. When a priest accepts the demand of another character for shielding, that character will have a bubble-shaped halo around their body. This protects them from enemy attacks by absorbing the blows.



At level 10, *Hatarina* encounters a special experience which is related to a religious discipline. She undertakes a quest, “Garments of the Light” which allows her to receive her first robe, called “Friar’s robes of the light”. It is a priestly quest from the priestess Josseta, and requires her to heal a wounded soldier. He is to be found near the lake and she has to heal his wound by casting a Lesser Heal spell. Then she must grant him Power Word: Fortitude. After fulfilling the quest, she will observe a blue, shiny cross around the soldier’s head, indicating that he is fully recovered. This is her official debut as a priest and she is finally rewarded with her first robe, which is “a sign that the church outwardly approves of the priestess and supports her.”<sup>2</sup> Moreover, at level 10, she is finally trained in how to cast the spell Resurrection (rank1) which enables a dead character to return to life, thereby gaining 70 health and 135 mana points. The power of resurrection proves her qualification for proper group-playing, because most members in a group play prefer to have a priest who has the ability to revive members. Hence, acquiring the power to resurrect is a significant transformation in a priest’s life.

Through the virtual life of a human priest we can observe that it possesses three significant roles of healing, preserving and resurrecting. All of these functions are related to the priestly functions of real-world priests from diverse backgrounds. On the surface, the priest character in WoW seems to be a Catholic priest in the Middle Ages. However, if we compare the priests’ roles, it is clear that there is little similarity apart from their outward appearances and the setting. Even though a priest in the WoW has the authority to resurrect and heal other characters, there is no obligation for them to

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<sup>2</sup> This is quoted from the indication of the quest called “Garments of the light” in WoW.

perform worship of administer the sacraments. Neither do they have any civic duties to perform. Educating and preaching are not among a priest-character's duties in the game.

In the Middle Ages, priests handled various tasks for a church and parish. They said mass or performed rites and managed the tasks of civic officials. Education was also one of their duties. Hans Küng describes priesthood in the Middle Ages and its historical background in the book, *Why Priests?*

From the fifth and sixth centuries above all, there was a process of full sacralization and ritualization: the service of the word regressed; cultic and ritual activity became that which was proper to the priesthood; liturgical power and the specific sanctity and dignity of the ministry were reified. In the background of this development it is important to note an increasing solemnization of worship, the establishment of a parallel between the ministries of the New Testament and the priesthood of the Old Testament, and unrestricted assimilation of extra-Christian religious customs, a reduction in catechetical instruction and an associated increase in infant baptism, and the inadequate education of priests in politically difficult times. (Küng 1972, 38)

According to Küng, the titles of 'priest' and 'high priest' started being used again from the third century, having previously been prohibited. In the process of ritualisation, the Eucharist was more emphasised than the service of the word. Moreover, as bishops also administered civil service in a province, this prevented them from concentrating on their ministry. Hence, in the Middle Ages, priests frequently administrated liturgical service and they became the key figure in masses. When the priests performed the Eucharist in their church every Sunday, they acquired the power of "calling God down from heaven" (Hanson 1979, 80). Therefore, if we compare the roles of a human priest in WoW to the medieval Catholic priesthood, it is difficult to find cultic functions which are representative of the historical medieval priesthood. A human priest in the virtual world



has rather a Charismatic feature as an independent leader who is not bound to community service and cultic duties. Even though a human priest heals and resurrects other characters in party-play, it is more instant and temporary play for individual reward (gaining items, completing hard quests, getting experience points) than pure service.

Through the human priest journey, *Hatarina* may obtain various items through looting from enemies, rewards from quest-holders or by purchasing them from merchants. Among these items are some which take on religious characteristics or names. For example, there are “disciple’s bracers”, “scroll of spirit”, “crusader belt”, “wizard’s belt”, “shepherd’s glove”, “Holy candle”, “symbol of divinity”, etc. These items do not have a particularly religious function, although most of them have been borrowed from religious terms in real-world religions. However, some of them have a function which is related to the spiritual ability of the character; for instance, “scroll of spirit” increases a target’s spiritual points. Spiritual points also improve the health regeneration of a character, and this relationship signifies the concept of the interdependence between spirit and body. This concept can explain how a human's body and spirit are related as an organic whole in the game.

At level 12, *Hatarina* is trained in the useful discipline of Inner Fire (rank1). After she has been approved by her priestess at level 10, she maintains inner fire by learning this spell. First discipline at level 10 confirmed her as an authoritative priest by the church, then the next step allows her to obtain interior holiness through holy fire. This is a similar system to the Catholic sacraments of baptism and confirmation. “Inner fire” is a

spell which reinforces the caster's armour, enabling them to achieve higher points. Normally, most of the other classes increase their armour by wearing thicker clothes, but these cannot be worn by the priest class. A priest is only allowed to wear armour made of cloth rather than armour made of mail. Early in the game play, a player could become dissatisfied or frustrated with this discriminatory situation. However, the mystery of faith is suddenly proved at level 12, when a priest is allowed to cast the spell, Inner Fire. A priest's reliance on material fades as they advance on their spiritual path. Finally, *Hatarina* can have strong armour not through solid creations made by humans, but through fire from the inner aspect. This theme implies a connection with the significant Christian doctrine of faith, which reinforces both the interior and exterior parts of a human. In Christianity, faith is one of the important principles for the believers that arms them against evil power. The apostle Peter said, "who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time" (1 Peter, 1:5).

Through the life of a priest, *Hatarina*, in all probability, receives attractive invitations from other players for team play, because it is hard to find a priest character in the virtual world. A priest character cannot be treated as a good warrior, so for normal players, the priest class is not perceived to be as exciting as other classes. However, when they depart from individual play, priests can play effectively when they take part in team play. After obtaining more opportunities to play with groups, she eventually gains her own strategy and skills which raise the efficiency of the priestly function.

- ✚ A priest should avoid combating directly with monsters
- ✚ A priest must pay careful attention to the HP bars of other group members.
- ✚ A priest should not be killed when there is no other person with the power to resurrect them.
- ✚ A priest has to maintain enough mana points in order to be able to heal the members within a certain period of time.
- ✚ A priest must keep hidden from monsters or enemies, or they could be attacked.

The above principles have been learned by *Hatarina* during many team plays, and they can be commonly applied to the normal priest class as main healer. The most important rules for them are to avoid death and to keep their mana points fully charged. If a priest is killed by enemies, other group members are obliged to wait until the priest comes back to their corpse to be revived. This procedure causes combat to be interrupted and can disrupt the overall plan for defeating enemies. Moreover, running out of mana points prevents a priest from healing members, because most spells are powered by the caster's mana energy. Mana points represent the character's magical energy and the word *mana* has been borrowed from the real world.

*Mana*, a Polynesian word, means “occult power.” In all *taboo* things there is enough *mana* to destroy violators who do not possess an equivalent *mana*. A priest entering into a *mana*-charged cemetery to perform ceremonies has nothing to fear since his *mana* protects him. (Sabourin 1973, 231)

This mysterious power protects a priest and members and ensures that they are not destroyed by enemies in the game. For a deeper comprehension, an example of real team play, held in dungeon Uldaman, at level 39 of *Hatarina*, will be considered. When she is summoned by members to Uldaman, she faces group members “VikingejXXX”, “TineyXXX”, “MiniaXXX” and “HonborXXX.” They buff each other with beneficial spells in preparation for combat and share their strategies for achieving the common goal. They stress the priest's task of healing and the importance of avoiding direct

combat with enemies. Then they enter a cave and find a large gate leading to a dungeon with the features of an ancient temple. When the other characters run into enemies, the priest has to hide herself and cast healing spells on them. This process needs time-management skills, because in most cases in team play there is only one priest as a main healer, who perhaps has to heal several members simultaneously. After a mortal struggle, members have time to charge their health or mana points before going forward to the next step. When members get to the “Hall of the Crafters”, they encounter an altar called the “Altar of the Keepers” in the middle of the room. The leader of the group suddenly jumps up onto the altar and shouts “Press altar.” Every member follows his instruction and attempts to press the altar. This causes the players to emit purple light from their left hands. This performance awakens their enemies to fight against them as in Picture 5.



The team play in Dungeon Uldaman shows that part of the virtual life is heavily related to religious themes and symbols. For example, mana power which enforces the characters' health and awakens enemy characters through touching the mystical altar is a religious concept based on magical beliefs and myths. Some religious factors would be more familiar to members of the priest class. A priest must keep their magical power for casting spells and the ability grows by advancing through levels. A priest casts a spell Power Word: Fortitude which reveals a cross pattern when it is performed. A priest is kneeling down when they are eating or resting. Sometimes, a priest visits the cathedral in a big city and meets the archbishop. They explore dungeons, which are normally located in Christian monasteries or ancient temples. Some items increase their spirituality, and inner fire protects them like strong armour. Healing and resurrecting people are the specialities of a priest.

At level 39, *Hatarina* accepts a spiritual task which allows the spirits to rest. It is a quest called "Spirits of Stonmaul Hold."

Brogg has completed the totem that will put the spirits of his friends to rest. When the dragonkin came, they killed all Stonmaul who did not flee. Brogg fled with overlord Mok'Morokk, hoping to lead a counterattack with other stonemaul survivors. The counterattack never came and the spirits of the Stonmaul dead still haunt Brogg and the others. Take this totem north to Stonmaul Ruins and use it near ogre skeletons to draw the spirit to you. Defeat the spirit to give it rest with its bones.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> This is quoted in the indication of the quest "Spirit of Stonmaul Hold" in WoW.



The priest goes to Stonmaul Ruins where it finds ogre skeletons scattered all over the place. Some crocodiles disturb the priest when it approaches the skeletons. As it bends to touch them, a spirit suddenly appears in front of it. It is clear that the virtual world believes in the existence of spirits which might appear after death. The immortality of soul (characters' souls are released after death) and the existence of a world after death (characters can enter into the world whenever they decide to release their souls) also relates to the spiritual dimension of the virtual world. Some spirits have assumed a good aspect and others an evil aspect, struggling against each other. Sometimes, priests can defeat these spirits and also help them to rest, using supernatural powers such as Holy Fire and Mind Blast. Most spirits are shown as being translucent and can be easily discerned among the other creatures. Moreover, there is no blood or corpse after the death of a spirit. It simply disappears. This feature of spiritual entities reflects the fact that spirits are distinguished from materials, which have clear visible shapes and destructible natures.

Sociologist William Bainbridge argues that “the fictional religions in World of Warcraft actually can teach us much about the facts of religion in the real world” (Bainbridge 2010, 56). In a human priest life in WoW, observed religious themes and concepts represent the fact that some of the principles in games are related to religious principles in the real world. This means that the virtual world does not only reflect the exterior appearance of real-world religions from the aspect of aesthetic effects, but also imports religious meanings and insights in terms of more systemic reflection. In particular, in order to manipulate the spiritual dimension of virtual life, WoW has created spiritual classes such as priests and warlocks which can use magical power and energy to



controlling other characters' physical bodies and even their souls. Therefore, the virtual life of a priest has to be deeply related to spiritual practice and performances and its abilities (spells and talents) rely more on spiritual or magical sources than those of other non-religious characters. In this process, what is significant is that religious concepts, which were originally examined through texts or two-dimensional symbols such as icons and pictures, have been visualised through animated 3D figures. Souls, magical energies and spiritual worlds are actually represented on the screen. What had been obscurely described and abstractly recognised in the real world becomes objectified in the virtual world. Moreover, these objectified religious entities are directly experienced by players as part of virtual life, communicating meanings.

In the next two sections, the abilities of the priest class will be examined in order to illuminate the priest life in more detail in terms of religious symbolism. Through these sections, priest spells and talents will be examined and classified by their functions and meanings, because this is deeply related to the priest characteristics and life which we have observed through this section. This study will also represent how religious themes are revealed in priests' abilities in practical game play.

### **5.3 Priestly Abilities**

One of the most important things that we need to discern through this section is that a priest is a special character who can control supernatural power and spiritual energy in the virtual world. Using data about priestly skills in WoW, this section will classify those skills into several categories in order to analyse their functions and sources. First

of all, the categories of priestly skills: Discipline, Holy and Shadow Magic will be analysed, and an attempt made to compose a new classification.

When a priest meets a priest-trainer at the appointed spot, there is a log box containing all the spells in which a priest can be trained. At level 1, the log holds just a few skills that can be learned by a lower-level priest, but as it matures, more available skills will appear in the trainer's log. A priest has to pay the trainer for each spell: higher-grade spells are more expensive than lower-grade spells. When a priest decides to be trained in a skill, the trainer casts a spell by stretching both hands towards the priest. A beam of light is exposed by the trainer's hands and the priest suddenly stands with its hand in a salute. The performance is completed within a few seconds, and the priest is now able to cast the spell. There are forty-seven priestly skills comprising three categories of Discipline, Holy and Shadow Magic.

<b>Categories</b>	<b>Contents</b>
Discipline	Dispel Magic (Rank 1-2), Fear Ward, Inner Fire (Rank 1-9), Levitate, Mana Burn, Power Word: Fortitude (Rank 1-8), Power Word: Shield (Rank 1-14), Shackle Undead (Rank 1-3), Divine Spirit (Rank 1-6), Prayer of Fortitude (Rank 1-4), Prayer of Spirit (Rank 1-3), Mass Dispel, Penance (Rank 1-4)
Holy	Abolish Disease, Cure Disease, Flash Heal (Rank 1-11), Heal (Rank 1-4), Holy Fire (Rank 1-11), Holy Nova (Rank 1-9), Lesser Heal (Rank 1-3), Prayer of Healing (Rank 1-7), Renew (Rank 1-14), Resurrection (Rank 1-7), Smite (Rank 1-12), Desperate Prayer (Rank 1-9), Greater Heal (Rank 1-9), Light Well (Rank 1-6), Circle of Healing (Rank 1-7), Hymn of Hope, Binding Heal (Rank 1-3), Prayer of Mending (Rank 1-3), Divine Hymn
Shadow Magic	Fade, Mind Blast (Rank 1-13), Mind Control, Mind Soothe, Mind Vision (Rank 1-2), Psychic Scream (Rank 1-4), Shadow Protection (Rank 1-5), Shadow Word: Pain (Rank 1-12), Devouring Plague (Rank 1-9), Mind Flay (Rank 1-9), Prayer of Shadow Protection (Rank 1-3), Vampiric Touch (Rank 1-5), Shadow Word: Death (Rank 1-4), Shadowfiend, Mind Sear (Rank 1-2)

**Table 4 Existing classifications of priestly skills**

Table 4 shows one remarkable characteristic on initial observation, that most healing spells are located in the “Holy” section. It is evident that healing skills are related to restoring the HP of characters. Flash Heal, Prayer of Healing, Renew, Greater Heal, Light Well, Circle of Healing, Binding Heal and Prayer of Mending are beneficial spells to friendly targets or to a caster themselves, for restoring HP. Moreover, there are spells which have dual impacts on enemies and group members simultaneously. For example, casting Holy Nova damages all enemy targets and heals all group members within ten yards. In addition, Divine Hymn incapacitates the ten closest enemies for twenty seconds, and ten friendly targets are healed for six seconds. Another factor to be considered is that the Resurrection skill is also categorised in the Holy section. Resurrection enables a priest to revive a dead character with appropriate HP and MP and the number of points is controlled by the caster’s level and ability. A priest can upgrade its Resurrection skill from rank one to seven in its lifetime. With Resurrection of rank 1 a caster can give a revived dead character 160 HP and 300MP, but when he can cast Resurrection of rank 7, a dead character can be resurrected with 2200 HP and 1659 MP. Therefore, even though most priests can resurrect other characters from level 10, ability to restore the HP and MP of a dead character depends on the caster’s level. Overall spells in Holy section are related to HP but Resurrection represents a spell which can also control a character’s MP.

In addition, the function of Hymn of Hope cannot be overlooked because it has a connection with restoring MP. It is hard to find spells which control a member’s MP in the priestly spell log. There is a spell, Mana Burn, in the Discipline section, but this spell destroys the enemy target’s MP, and has no effect on friendly targets. Hymn of

Hope is a spell which allows all group members to charge their MP by singing a priestly hymn. Most healing skills are used to recover physical health, but only inspiring hope can charge spiritual health to every group member. In this respect, consideration must be given to how the game designers discovered the relationship between hope and spiritual welfare and now use the concept throughout the virtual world. The word 'hope' is used widely in several books in the Bible, especially in Psalms, Isaiah, Romans and Hebrews. In the Psalms most words of hope represent hope in the Lord, in God or in His word. We can find that God will protect and give strength to people who put their hope in Him (Psalms, 25:21; 119:114). In Romans, most words of hope represent hope of redemption or hope in Jesus Christ. Paul wrote in his letters about hope which would deliver people through Jesus Christ and he insisted that Gentiles also had a chance to bear this hope. After all, hope is one of the principles of Christianity, along with faith and love (1 Corinthians, 13:13; 1 Thessalonians, 5:8). In the virtual world, Hymn of Hope is meant to increase all group members' MP; their spiritual energy. It could be interpreted that hope could charge the spiritual energy of members and there is some relationship between hope and spiritual energy. Can the relationship between these two factors be found in the Bible?

In Romans chapter 15, verse 13, Paul talks about "hope by the power of the Holy Spirit". Hope is inspired by the Holy Spirit and it fills people with joy and peace. Moreover, Paul describes hope "as an anchor for the soul" in Hebrews (6:18-19). These phrases demonstrate that the Holy Spirit inspires hope in believers and hope encourages their soul to be firm and secure. Finally it delivers them to the inner sanctuary or holy place. In the virtual world, the firming of soul or charging of spiritual energy could be

represented by restoring characters' MP. Therefore, Hymn of Hope, performed by a priest, is able to restore a character's spiritual power like "hope" in Christianity. Even if the spell does not contain details about the direction or the object of hope, it is clear that hope can cause characters to recover their spiritual strength through the medium of a priestly hymn. This means that in this virtual world there is a priestly spell which can reinforce a member's spiritual power and it can be performed by hope, which is one of Christianity's principles.

<b>Character</b>	<b>Function</b>	<b>Contents</b>
Beneficial spells	Healing	Flash Heal, Lesser Heal, Renew, Desperate Prayer, Binding Heal, Prayer of Mending, Greater Heal, Light Well, Circle of Healing
	Curing disease	Abolish Disease, Cure Disease,
	Increasing base stats	Inner fire, Power Word: Fortitude, Divine Spirit, Prayer of Fortitude, Prayer of Spirit,
	Protecting	Fear Ward, Power Word: Shield, Fade, Shadow Protection, Prayer of Shadow Protection,
	Resurrecting	Resurrection
	Restoring MP	Hymn of Hope
Harmful spells	Giving a Disease	Devouring Plague
	Damaging	Holy Fire, Smite, Mind Blast, Shadow Word: Pain, Mind Flay, Mind Sear
	Killing	Shadow Word: Death
	Creating spirit	Shadowfiend
	Controlling	Shackle Undead, Mind Control, Mind Soothe, Mind Vision, Psychic Scream
	Decreasing MP	Mana Burn
Dual characteristic spells	Dispel Magic, Mass Dispel, Holy Nova, Divine Hymn, Vampiric Touch, Penance	
Miscellaneous	Levitate	

**Table 5** New classification of priestly spells

Table 5 shows a new classification of priestly spells according to their function and characteristics. It helps to comprehend the typical functions of spells, by putting them in the appropriate category. Moreover the table indicates whether a spell has a source of

beneficial power or not. It provides some spells which have a dual impact, both on friendly characters and on enemy characters. As can be seen in Table 5, it is clear that a priest has various kinds of healing spells and these spells constitute the largest percentage of the whole. It means that, in the virtual world, healing is the most important of a priest's skills and it can be assumed that the spells are frequently used by them. Each healing spell is distinguished by its recovering capacity, available distance, time limitation and the caster's MP consumption. A priest can choose an effective spell for each member by regarding the member's circumstances and MP. On the other hand, there are opposite spells which damage the HP of enemies with harmful spells.

A priest has the ability to both heal and damage and can give or take away certain diseases. They can protect friendly targets or control enemy targets, and can infuse or destroy spiritual power. Above all, they can even kill and resurrect characters. Most of their duties are created to help other characters and to restore their health and spiritual condition by the power of divine, spirit and shadow magic. Moreover, various methods are used for casting the spells. Some spells are activated by prayer, hymn and incantation, and most methods are related to religious performance in the real world. Through priestly talents, some spells can be developed and strengthened in order to improve and specialise existing functions and characteristics. Therefore priestly abilities can influence priest life with the aids of talents in which players can choose to be trained by assigning the given talent points.

## **5.4 Priestly Talents**

In every class in WoW, there are three kinds of talent trees which include additional class-specific abilities. In order to learn these talents, a character needs to gain talent points, which are automatically acquired by advancing through levels. Each character will collect one talent point starting at level 10 and finally a character will gain a maximum of 61 talent points at level 70. When a character acquires talent points (hereafter TP), a player can assign TP to three sorts of tree depending on how specialised their character is. This talent system enables characters to be distinguished from others of the same class possessing identical spells. It also provides the possibility to nurture a character by highlighting its special abilities among the three talent trees. A player must consider carefully when they assign TP to talent trees, because to unlearn those skills needs game money to pay for a class trainer. A priest class has three talent trees in the ranges of Discipline, Holy and Shadow. A disciplined priest possesses the ability to combat and a holy priest has powerful healing skills. Alternatively, a priest can choose to dominate in shadow power through assigning TP to the shadow talent tree. The choices made by a player can decide a character's nature, as well as expand their skills in different areas, thereby creating virtual beings with distinctive abilities and characteristics. In this section, priestly talents and the way in which they relate to religious concepts and symbols in the real world will be examined.

### **5.4.1 Discipline**

In order to understand discipline talents, the following table is provided. It is classified according to their functional types.

<b>Functions</b>	<b>Talents</b>
Reducing harmful effects	Unbreakable Will, Silent Resolve, Martyrdom
Improving special spells	Improved Inner Fire, Improved Power Word: Fortitude, Improved Power Word: Shield, Improved Mana Burn, Improved Divine Spirit, Reflective Shield, Renewed Hope, Aspiration, Grace, Borrowed Time
Instant cast	Inner Focus, Divine Spirit, Power Infusion, Pain Suppression
Helping Mana Regeneration	Meditation, Rapture
Reducing Mana Cost	Absolution, Mental Agility
Increasing Base Stats	Mental Strength, Enlightenment
Increasing Damage and Healing done by spells	Twin disciplines, Focused Power
Reducing damage sustained and increasing healing effects	Focused Will
Critical Healing	Divine Aegis
Holy damage to an enemy, healing to an ally	Penance

**Table 6 Talents in the Discipline Tree**

Table 6 shows that the twenty-eight talents which comprise the discipline talent tree. Most of them relate to religious expressions which have been used by traditional religions in the real world. For example, there are some phrases, such as Divine Spirit, Penance and Absolution, which represent clear and intense religious characteristics. Unbreakable Will, Silent Resolve and Martyrdom seem to have a common point, which is that they are related to self-will. If the meanings of the phrases are considered they are closer to individual will than to powerful intervention from the Divine. Solid will based on belief can reduce harmful effects such as fear, stun and threat in the priest life. In contrast, there are powerful and active talents which are given by the Divine. Divine Spirit, which is an instant cast, means, “holy power infuses the target, increasing their



spirit.”<sup>4</sup> This quotation reveals that the understanding of the infusion of holy power in the priest life resembles the Christian understanding of the Spirit of God infusing His breath or spirit to His creatures in order to give them life during the creation of the world. Moreover, it should not be overlooked that an important qualification is needed to be able to learn this talent. A priest who wants to have Divine Spirit must learn Meditation talent (rank 1-3) and then become qualified to possess Divine Spirit. Only two discipline talents require other talents before they can be learned. A talent with a special qualification means it is significant and valuable among talents. Divine Spirit could be illustrated as one of the main talents in the discipline talent tree and it reminds us how divinity is respected in the virtual world through the priest class, while other classes rely on nature and totems as their power sources. Another important talent is Power Infusion which also requires the priest to obtain Mental Strength before learning the talent. It is also related to infusion and has an effect on the MP of a character. For a priest, infusion is a powerful way of increasing their ability, and it depends on divinity or sacred reality from a higher place.

Some talents are related to MP and these can help mana regeneration or reduce the cost of MP. MP is an important source of energy for a priest when casting spells and it also represents the spiritual strength of the priest. Meditation and Rapture restore a priest's spiritual power. Meditation is a general method of making contact with deities among religions. It empowers believers to reach spiritual communion with sacred reality and to experience spiritual growth. This spiritual growth is replaced by the idea of restoring MP in the priest life. Absolution, which is able to remove two harmful magical effects

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<sup>4</sup> This is quoted in the indication of the talent “Divine Spirit” in WoW.

from friendly targets is also a familiar religious term which has been used in the Roman Catholic, Anglican, and Eastern Orthodox Churches and Lutheranism. It is a theological term which belongs to the Sacrament of Reconciliation in relation to the forgiveness of sins. For example, in the prayer book of the Korean Anglican church, there is a prayer of reconciliation of the Penitent. This prayer needs to be said by a priest and penitent for the forgiveness of confessed sins, giving authority to the priest to proclaim that the sins are forgiven in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.

For our Lord, Jesus Christ gave the authority to forgive sins of every sinner who truly repent and believe in him to the church, forgive your (a penitent's) sins in his great mercy. And from the authority given by Lord, I forgive all your sins in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit. (Taejon 1999, 107)

In the prayer, we also can confirm that Korean Anglican Church believes that priests and churches have an authority to forgive sins which is given by Jesus Christ. Therefore, when the penitent confesses their sins and is truly contrite, a priest can proclaim that the Lord removes all of their sins. In the virtual world, Absolution is a priestly spell which can remove harmful magical effects from characters. The theological idea that a priest is able to remove the sins of the penitent is replaced by the concept of removing magical effects (most spells), as opposed to natural effects (diseases or poisons).

In the discipline area, there are some talents which also participate in healing practice. This is because healing is the most significant role of a priest and various healing spells already exist. Twin Disciplines increases the healing performed by instant cast spells and Focused Will only increases healing effects on the caster. However, most healing effects belong to the holy talent tree, enabling a priest character to be a holy priest who

is professional at healing other members in group-play. In the next section, we will focus on the kinds of healing spells in the holy section and how they reveal their effects and power.

#### 5.4.2 Holy

At the Holy Talent Tree, we find most of the healing talents that improve existing healing spells or create a new healing impact. It has been stressed that healing is the most valuable of a priest's skills in group-play and so it is important to increase their healing capability by assigning TP to the holy talent tree. It depends on the player's choice as to whether they stress discipline or holy talents, but most players have noticed that for effective group-playing it is advantageous to increase healing skills rather than others. By classifying holy talents according to their functional aspect, the way these talents influence a priest's healing spells and ability can be analysed.

<b>Functions</b>	<b>Talents</b>
Increasing effects of healing capability	Divine Fury, Improved Renew, Holy Reach, Improved Healing, Searing Light, Healing Prayers, Surge of Light, Healing Focus, Spiritual Healing, Blessed Recovery, Holy Concentration, Light Well, Empowered Healing, Serendipity, Improved Holy Concentration, Test of Faith, Divine Providence, Guardian Spirit, Desperate Prayer, Circle of Healing, Spiritual Guidance, Spirit of Redemption
Protecting	Blessed Resilience
Reducing all spell damage	Spell Warding
Assisting Holy Spells	Holy Specialization
Increasing target's armor	Inspiration

**Table 7 Talents at the Holy Tree**

Table 7 shows that twenty-two out of twenty-six talents relate to a priest's healing skills. Some talents assist existing healing spells and some of them have interesting concepts and ways of increasing healing amounts. Most healing talents do not only have healing functions but also have multiple functions such as regenerating MP and increasing critical strike rating. For example, Spirit of Redemption has a very unusual method of healing members. It "increases total Spirit by 5% and upon death, the priest becomes the Spirit of Redemption for 15 sec. The Spirit of Redemption cannot move, attack, be attacked or targeted by any spells or effects. While in this form the priest can cast any healing spell free of cost. When the effect ends, the priest dies" ("Priest Talents" n.d.). Although the priest is dead, they can still watch members and heal them for a moment. This talent empowers the most important priestly function of healing and at the same time, the priest is given the important privilege of experiencing redemption. In general, when characters are dead, they cannot cast any spells or do anything except running back to the corpse. They are invisible to other players and find themselves in front of a spirit healer in the nearest graveyard. Death sets them apart from the place where they belong. In dangerous circumstances, the death of a priest could cause the death of every member because there is no more healing practice from the priest. However, the priest's redemption affects every member of the group because of the extra healing practice at a dangerous moment. Members are saved by the spirit of redemption at a desperate moment, not by their special armour, or the actual existence of the healer, but by the Spirit of Redemption. This spell reveals that a spirit can also influence the physical state of characters in the virtual world and shows the possibility that the spiritual dimension is not alienated from the physical world. This is a basic speculation in the virtual world,

if we consider the visible existence of spiritual beings in the physical world, and conflicts between spirits and physical characters. Another remarkable example of the holy talent tree is the talent called Guardian Spirit, which “calls upon a guardian spirit to watch over the friendly target. The spirit increases the healing received by the target by 40%, and also prevents the target from dying by sacrificing itself. This sacrifice terminates the effect but heals the target of 50% of their maximum health” (“Priest Talents” n.d.). This is in contrast to the spell of Shadowfiend, because Shadowfiend calls a demon to destroy a target and a guardian spirit sacrifices itself by protecting and healing a character. A priest can choose whether to call a demon to destroy enemies or a guardian spirit to sacrifice itself for a friendly target. This means that the priest can have ambivalent characteristics, controlling holy and shadow power, and having the authority to call spiritual entities as a spiritual medium.

As with the Discipline Talent Tree, a few talents in the Holy Talent Tree require a qualification before they can be learned. Searing Light can be learned after training in Divine Fury (Rank 5). The talent increases the damage of several holy spells and Penance of a discipline spell. Moreover, Light Well also needs to pay one talent point to Spirit of Redemption before it can be possessed. There are three talents related to the concept of light, and two of them need a qualification. Light Well “creates a holy Lightwell. Members of your raid and party targets can click the Lightwell to restore 656 Mana and 4620 Health over 6 sec” (“Priest Talents” n.d.).

Light, traditionally, is equated with the spirit. Ely Star asserts that the superiority of the spirit is immediately recognizable by its luminous intensity. Light is the manifestation of morality, of the intellect and the seven virtues. Its whiteness alludes to just such a synthesis of the All. Light of any given colour possesses a symbolism corresponding to that colour, plus the significance of

emanation from the 'Centre', for light is also the creative force, cosmic energy, irradiation. Symbolically, illumination comes from the East. Psychologically speaking, to become illuminated is to become aware of a source of light, and, in consequences, of spiritual strength. (Cirlot 1971, 187-188)

Sometimes in the virtual world, light can be a source of both spiritual and physical health, and it can also increase the impact of holy spells and power, just as in real-world traditions, light symbolises spiritual power and energy. Light can be represented as a creative power from divinity rather than from evil factions in the case of priests, and as promoting other characters by assisting health and mana. Creating a holy light well indicates that priests can produce a medium able to generate spiritual power for healing and it also means they have authority to call down spiritual power from the higher existence of the virtual world.

As opposed to light, shadow is described as destructive and harmful power source of priests in relation to killing, attacking and afflicting. In the next section, the shadow talent tree will be examined in comparison with the holy talent tree, emphasising how the two sources (light and shadow) are opposed to each other from the dualistic aspect.

### **5.4.3 Shadow**

If a holy priest is distinguished by healing practice, a shadow priest is a prominent destroyer in combat or PvP. The shadow specification increases the damage output of priest spells and shadow priests have less effective healing powers than holy priests.

Hence shadow priests are better suited to be damage dealers rather than to be primary healers in group-playing.

As the Sun is the light of the spirit, so shadow is the negative ‘double’ of the body, or the image of its evil and base side. Among primitive peoples, the notion that the shadow is the *àlter ego* or soul is firmly established; it is also reflected in the folklore and literature of some advanced cultures. As Frazer has noted, the primitive often regards his shadow, or his reflection in water or in a mirror, as his soul or as a vital part of himself. (Cirlot 1971, 290-291)

In comparison to light, shadow, as a symbol of evil, has a negative meaning. It also denotes the soul or reflection of an individual’s ego. In the Talent Tree, shadow talents have opposite characteristics from holy talents, which are operated by light, holy and divine power. As the opposite meaning to holy, WoW has selected the term ‘shadow’ to describe evil energy. Hence, most talents in Shadow Tree concentrate on destroying enemy targets through shadow magic rather than assisting or helping friendly members.

<b>Functions</b>	<b>Talents</b>
Bonus to spirit after killing	Spirit Tap
Increasing total spirit after some shadow spells	Improved Spirit Tap
Improving the effects of shadow spells	Blackout, Shadow Affinity, Improved Shadow Word: Pain, Shadow Focus, Improved Psychic Scream, Improved Mind Blast, Veiled Shadows, Shadow Reach, Shadow Weaving, Focused Mind, Mind Melt, Darkness, Shadowform, Shadow Power, Improved Shadowform, Misery, Psychic Horror, Pain and Suffering, Twisted Faith, Vampiric Touch
Giving shadow damage	Mind Flay
Preventing target from casting spells	Silence
Afflicting target and getting healed	Vampiric Embrace, Improved Vampiric Embrace
Reducing damage	Dispersion

**Table 8 Talents of the Shadow Tree**

Table 8 shows that most talents are deeply engaged with shadow spells, increasing their effects, which mostly deal shadow damage. Some talents enforce specific spells, such as Improved Mind Blast and Improved Psychic Scream. On the other hand, some talents can influence multiple spells and the ability of the shadow part. For example, Misery increases the chance of three harmful shadow spells hitting by 1/2/3 % and increases the damage of three mind spells by an amount equal to 5/10/15% of the spell's power. They can help priests to produce a high degree of efficiency when casting shadow spells by reducing physical damage or mana cost and by increasing shadow damage or the total spirit of a caster. In contrast to holy talents, most shadow spells specialise in harming enemies or in killing them, rather than protecting friendly targets by healing or resurrecting. However, there are also healing talents in the shadow part: Vampiric Embrace and Improved Vampiric Embrace. Vampiric Embrace "afflicts your target with Shadow energy that causes you to be healed for 15% and other party members to be healed for 3% of any Shadow spell damage you deal for 1 min" ("Priest Talents" n.d.). The spell has a healing effect on the caster and members, but the remarkable fact is that the effect comes from Shadow energy. The effect of Shadow energy is also revealed in the instruction for Dispersion talent, which is characterised as "pure shadow energy, reducing all damage taken by 90%" ("Priest Talents" n.d.). One remarkable shadow talent demonstrates the fact that the two energies (from shadow and holy) stand in opposition in its instructions. Shadowform prohibits the casting of Holy spells, which means that the two energies cannot coexist in some cases. Twisted Faith can be named as the opposite of Test of Faith in the Holy Talent Tree. Darkness and light, damage and healing, vampires and the divinity, protecting and afflicting, and killing and resurrecting, confront each other by holding opposite sources and meaning as constructed in the



character of a virtual priest. Moreover, the division between holy and shadow creates a distinct border between good and evil in the virtual world by revealing a dualistic way of thinking, denoting shadow energy as harmful or negative and holy power as positive and beneficial.

### **5.5 Summary and Conclusion**

Conducting a priest life is a peculiar experience in the virtual world of WoW. A player's engagement with religious symbols and terms could be deepened through the interactive virtual experience. Many visual images related to real-world religions or magic are frequently represented in its life with colourful and attractive graphic art. Animated religious images and symbols suddenly appear and disappear. Divine and shadow power, holy and shadow energy, and guardians and dark spirits are opposite sources of priestly power, engaging with and interwoven into the overall priest life. The priest's life is quite complicated without an explicit identity, although it has the possibility to possess shadow or holy characteristics according to the player's choice in terms of their abilities and talents. However, it is quite difficult to be a pure holy or shadow priest without spells from an opposite power source, in spite of a priest character being called a holy or shadow priest. A human priest officially belongs to Holy Light but they could have a source of shadow energy which is deeply related to destroying enemy characters in relation to dark magic, reflecting a real-world interpretation on the ambivalent nature of being human.

What we have to bear in mind is that religious terms and symbols are massively imported and used in the virtual world, especially in the priest life. We have confirmed through examining a priest life and abilities that it given neither an exaggerated nor a special experience by a player's religious intention (Of course, there are differences according to individual players' choices in relation to virtual items, quests and characters' abilities but there is a general and semi-fixed environment which a player has to follow in light of a chosen narrative of race and class). The players who have chosen a priest character have to encounter religious symbols and terms which have already been displayed and settled in a priest life. Players can only partially manipulate a character and form their identity in a particular direction, but cannot avoid and control existing symbols and terms fixed in the journey of the priest's virtual life. For example, they can choose to learn specific spells but cannot delete or change religious symbols and terms in relation to the spells. It is impossible to change the function and meaning of specific spell in terms of religious symbolism or to break the chain linking the meaning and the symbol. Anyway, a player has to keep encountering religious symbolism and images provided by a computer game while playing the online game with a priest character in WoW.

Therefore, both game designers and players have to acknowledge the function and power of religious symbolism even in the virtual world. How to interpret and deal with them is an important issue in terms of playing a computer game. Moreover, virtual experiences in relation to interactive engagement with them have to be considered from diverse disciplines such as theology, semiology and psychology in relation to the study of computer games and cyberspace, particularly theology, which has a responsibility to

suggest the right way for humanity to actively participate in this work in order to ensure people are not confused by the true nature and impact of religious symbolism mediated by virtual reality. As a basic step it is necessary to illuminate the virtual worlds of online games which represent and display many religious images and terms, and to investigate how those symbols are being used for game play. Finding and analysing religious symbolism in the priest life of WoW is the basic work supporting this responsibility, discovering and showing religious symbolism and images in this well-known online game. The next section will focus deeply on theological subjects which can be experienced by all virtual characters in WoW in order to analyse how the virtual world delivers a specific interpretation of human existence as following theological and philosophical traditions which exist in the real world.

**CHAPTER 6**

**DEATH AND RESURRECTION**

## 6.1 Introduction

In our life everyone has to die. Death is an age-old subject for humanity, raising diverse interpretations and speculations from various disciplines. Most religions have been deeply concerned on this subject in the effort to give a proper theological answer to both questions of “why do people have to die?” and “what will be after death?” People are limited from knowing the world after death and only real death can confirm what exactly will happen after death. On the other hand, in the virtual world of WoW virtual characters experience death very frequently. The world after death is a familiar place to players, with its spirit healer (which players meet as soon as they are transported into the world at any time) in the graveyard. Players can encounter their virtual character’s soul and even meet other characters’ souls in the world after death. Death does not mean the end of virtual life but it belongs to the process of life, because virtual characters can be revived and return to the living world, with or without a penalty.

Virtual life is a full of religious symbols and images but the death and resurrection process is a particularly core area to study for religious themes. A character’s death has been equated to being ‘disappeared’ in traditional role-playing games. The disappeared character is suddenly appeared after a few seconds as a form of resurrection. This simple formulation has been replaced by a more complicated and sophisticated process in WoW, developing a more systematic process while adding a spiritual dimension called the afterlife. In the process, theological and philosophical ideas on human

existence are applied in relation to some parts of real-world traditions. In this respect, this chapter will concentrate on theological and philosophical speculations which have penetrated into the virtual world of WoW, especially on the death and resurrection processes of virtual characters. First, it will analyse how dualistic ideas exist in the narratives of WoW, examining the idea of dualism in relation to Platonic philosophy. Then it will focus more on the subject of death in order to interpret the meaning of virtual death in computer games. In the event of death in WoW, the dualistic concept can be also found to confirm the separation between the body and spirit of a virtual character. Immortality of the soul will be discussed in Section 6.4, as highlighting the special features of the after-death conditions, and the resurrection process will be discussed in the final section.

## **6.2 Dualistic Ideas in WoW**

When exploring the virtual world, players experience a new and unknown planet. It is filled with mysterious elements, unfamiliar creatures and strange architecture. On the other hand, there are familiar factors which are commonly encountered in the real world. There are, for example, European-style pubs, the human race, familiar animals and a market street. However, beyond the external appearance of the virtual world, are internal, invisible factors such as an existing ideology, an economic system, religious beliefs and moral values. The virtual world has adapted many models and ideas from the real world to build its own economic system, religions, and rules. Moreover, the virtual world seems to contain more creative and abnormal elements than does the real world, particularly in its characteristics of overcoming physical restrictions and gravity.

Even with all this freedom to create a totally new world, however, the virtual world hardly relinquishes the values and systems of the real world. The founders of the world have attempted to create novel characters and a fantasy atmosphere on the surface but they have not entirely constructed a new world with inner novelty. Dualism is one of the prime examples of this phenomenon.

Dualism in the real world has been developed by theology and philosophy in order to explain the principles or causes of the world, universe or human being. In dualism, two opposed elements are the fundamental dualistic principles which constitute the world and universe. Therefore, opposite concepts such as man and woman and black and white cannot be called 'dualism' unless they are related to accounts of the existence of the world or human beings. In philosophy, Socrates and his pupil Plato are representative scholars who attempted to explain the world and human beings in terms of dualism. Socrates, as we know, did not leave any publications or writings, but through Plato's books such as *Apology* and *Phaedo*, it is possible to encounter his main ideas and thoughts. In his life, Socrates constantly demonstrated his belief in the immortality of the soul in opposition to the mortality of body. He regards a human as a composition of a body and soul, and the two substances will be separated after death. He also claims that a body interrupts us in conducting a good life in the direction of our soul (Plato 1955). Plato maintained that what we have experienced in this world is not constant and stable (because it is changeable and destructible), however, "Form" is an eternal and unchangeable source of all creatures and virtues beyond our perception. Socrates and Plato's dualism influenced Gnosticism in late antiquity and the mind and body problem in Cartesian Dualism (This will be discussed later).

As in the real world, the virtual world has possessed accounts of the origin of the world and universe. In its narratives, it is possible to find how the world was created and developed through conflicts and wars among different races and factions, and how WoW in particular understands the existence of its universe and races. It is significant to examine those narratives and myths because they reflect core and abstract views of the virtual world, providing a coherent and systematic storyline. WoW myths provide not only historical accounts of the world but also the fundamental principles and ideas of the world in relation to the spiritual and material dimensions.

In the beginning of the myth, the Titans, powerful beings, created the world from the chaotic universe:

The Titans, colossal, metallic-skinned gods from the far reaches of the cosmos, explored the newborn universe and set to work on the worlds they encountered. They shaped the world by raising mighty mountains and dredging out vast seas. They breathed skies and raging atmospheres into being. It was all part of their unfathomable, far-sighted plan to create order out of chaos. They even empowered primitive races to tend to their works and maintain the integrity of their respective worlds. (“Warcraft History: Chapter 1: Mythos” n.d.)

The history of the world started with the Titans who had decided to build a new world. It was shaped as a stable world by their strength, containing mountains, seas and races. However, demonic beings that attempted to demolish the Titans’ world with their wickedness and chaotic magic:



The Nether, an ethereal dimension of chaotic magics that connected the myriad worlds of the universe, was home to an infinite number of malefic, demonic beings who sought to only to destroy life and devour the energies of the living universe. Unable to conceive of evil or wickedness in any form, the Titans struggled to find a way to end the demons' constant threat. ("Warcraft History: Chapter 1: Mythos" n.d.)

In contrast to the Titans, who are depicted as creators, the demonic beings are described as destroyers and a threat to the world. Demons have attempted to invade the world throughout its history, causing constant war and conflicts between the two factions, good and evil. In fact, all WoW narratives can be summarised as battles between good and evil powers. The Titans are represented as good deities who have attempted to protect the physical world from demons. The demonic beings are represented as evil destroyers from Twisting Nether who possess magical powers and are determined to dominate the physical universe. This description reveals two kinds of dualistic views. One is the dichotomy between a good faction and an evil faction since the beginning of the world and the other is the dichotomy between the physical world of the Titans and the non-physical world of the demons. Twisting Nether is a formless place which is inaccessible to mortal races. It is also chaotic and illusionary, with chaotic magic, and can be contrasted with the ordered and material place of the physical world. Good and evil are two fundamental principles which underlie the existence of the virtual universe, and the struggles between these two factions constitute most of the narratives about WoW history and the present circumstances of the virtual world. Horde was raised by the evil powers in order to unite warring clans into a single faction ready for its invasion of Azeroth<sup>1</sup>. The Horde faction includes the races of Blood Elf, Undead, Orc, Tauren and Troll. The Alliance is the opposing faction to Horde, and it was raised in order to

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<sup>1</sup> A continent of the Eastern Kingdom in WoW

unite to defend Azeroth from the threat of Horde. The Alliance faction includes the races of Human, Draenei, Dwarf, Gnome and Night Elf. These opposing powers struggle against each other through PvP and raids. They possess different parts of the virtual land and tensions between them are raised. Horde and Alliance cannot communicate with each other normally. They are opposing political factions with different backgrounds and purposes. It is assumed that Horde followed the Burning Legion's evil army from its origins and Alliance is represented as a good faction which attempted to protect the Titans' world from the evil faction. A dualistic division of power between good deities and demons has existed since the origin of the world, and has continued with the division of the races into two opposing factions. This kind of dualistic idea constitutes the whole world of WoW, conceiving good and evil as two coeternal principles.

The Socratic philosophical description of a person can be summarised as a soul and body duality. He asserted that a person is divided into two parts, the soul and the body, and these two parts are separated after death: the soul is immortal and indestructible, in contrast to the destructible and perishable body. He attempted to demonstrate that our souls even existed, possessing wisdom, before taking bodies. He constantly asserted that our souls have pure and divine characteristics and that if we keep our souls from evil desire originating from bodily life, our souls can join the divine world after death. On the other hand, if we fail to keep our souls from bodily desire, our souls have to be confined in other bodies, of animals or humans, as a punishment. He emphasised that the physical body is a prison for the soul, discriminating reincarnation (Plato 1955). Following Socrates' idea of the immortality of the soul, Plato insists that the soul is the

essence and fundamental factor of a person, which fills the body with life. Therefore, the soul existed before the creation of the body and will survive after the death of body. They are separable from each other and different substances.

Gnosticism is a term used by scholars since the 18<sup>th</sup> century, generally denoting religious movements of late antiquity which believed that only chosen elites who possessed Gnosis (esoteric knowledge of the Divine) could experience redemption. Gnostic interpretations of scripture and doctrine have consistently challenged Catholic Christianity, articulating a system of Gnosis as the unique and prime way of redemption. In particular, the Church Fathers dedicated themselves to refuting Gnosticism in order to maintain the unity of the Church. For example, Irenaeus of Lyons (2nd century AD – c. 202) who was a heresiologist and the first Church Father, came into conflict against Gnostic heretics, disclosing Gnostic ideas and traditions (Rudolph 1984, 11). His work was the most significant source for studying Gnosticism until a collection of Coptic texts, including the *Gospel of Thomas* and the *Apocryphon of John*, was discovered near Nag Hammadi in 1945 (Logan 2000, 268).

The term of Gnosticism, in this thesis, only represents central features of Gnostic traditions rather than integrating details of diverse Gnostic systems and ideas. Gnostic traditions examine diverse and complex theories which are hardly composed by a consistent and systematised theory. However, there is a main claim about the ‘gnosis’ system which covers the overall Gnostic traditions.

The essential basic features of Gnosis can easily be extracted from the gnostic traditions, even if they belong to the teachings of different schools. There is

first of all the idea of “gnosis” itself, a word which derives from Greek and means “knowledge” or “understanding” and in fact became a catchword of that religious movement. . . It is a knowledge given by revelation, which has been made available only to the elect who are capable of receiving it, and therefore has an esoteric character. (Rudolph 1984, 55)

In Gnosticism, through knowledge about the unknown God and the revelation of his secret, an elected man can be led toward redemption. Only chosen people can perceive that they possess the ‘divine spark’ in their soul and through this knowledge (gnosis), their soul can be purified and made sacred as much as being ascended. In opposition to the soul, the body is discriminated as an evil substance enforcing worldly life. Hence, Gnosticism’s main dualistic claim is that the body is an evil prison for the soul and the soul is originally pure and sacred through possessing divinity. This dualistic claim is also deeply related to Gnostic cosmology.

In Gnostic cosmology, the world is regarded as an evil place created by a subordinate deity, the demiurge. Therefore, human beings suffer in this evil world, being locked up in a bodily prison:

The Gnostic dualism is distinguished from these above all in the one essential point, that it is “anti-cosmic”; that is, its conception includes an unequivocally negative evaluation of the visible world together with its creator; it ranks as a kingdom of evil and darkness. The identification of “evil” and “matter”, which is not to be found in Iranian and Zoroastrian thought, occurs in Gnosis as a fundamental conception. (Rudolph 1984, 60)

Hence Gnostic dualism represents that the unknown God (who is not a creator of the world) is beyond the visible world, which is corrupted and opposed to the divine pole (because the world was created by an evil god). Moreover, in a similar aspect, the

spiritual part of man is confronted with the physical body of man. Hence, our body corresponds to the world and our soul to the unknown God.

This dualistic idea from antiquity was repeated by the philosopher, Descartes (1596-1650). Descartes' explorations of human existence were based on the assumption that the body is separable from the human mind. In his book, in order to seek truth, he attempts to exclude everything that could be viewed sceptically such as anything drawn by the senses and hypothetical inferences demonstrated by unstable intelligence, because he wants to search for what remains at the end. In this process, even though he removes everything hypothetical from himself, he realises that his mind which has been thinking about what is hypothetical is reality and a true self (Descartes 2010). This means that only the human mind as a thinking substance is the essential factor proving our existence. According to him, the body is non-thinking and simply an extended substance in the nature of a mechanical object. Hence, his fundamental concern around human existence is deeply related to dualism (Smith and Jones 1986). Moreover, Cartesian dualism, the philosophical and scientific traditions influenced by the ideas of Descartes, maintains that mental objects such as consciousness are "private and (quasi-) observable", and physical objects such as clockwork are "public and observable" through our senses (Baker and Morris 1996, 11). Therefore, the division between body and mind (soul) is emphasised by Descartes and his followers, raising the problem of how two different and separate substances are related to each other during the human lifetime.

A dualistic view of people has also come to be applied to the virtual world through its narratives and conditions. In fact, it is not difficult to find the idea of body and soul dichotomy in the history of the virtual world:

Fearing that Sarger's spirit would linger on, the naive Aegwynn locked the ruined husk of his body within one of the ancient halls of Kalimdor that had been blasted to the bottom of the sea when the Well of Eternity collapsed. . .She had inadvertently sealed the fate of the mortal world, for Sarger, at the time of his corporeal death, had transferred his spirit into Aegwynn's weakened body. Unbeknownst to the young Guardian, Sarger would remain cloaked within the darkest recesses of her soul for many long years. ("Warcraft History: Chapter 2: The New World" n.d.)

In the narratives, the soul can be separated from the body after death and can roam and settle in another body. The narratives reveal that the spirit is easily divided from the body and can enter an enemy's body in order to control its power. Sarger, the leader of the evil warriors in Burning Legion, was originally the Titans' warrior, but he betrayed them. He was corrupted by demons and blamed the Titans for being responsible for the failure of creation. By building his armies and invading the Titans' world, Sarger has raised constant conflicts between the good and evil factions throughout history. When one of the last Guardians, Aegwynn, who was very proud of her power, expelled the last demon from the mortal world, she confronted the demon king, Sarger. She killed the demon king's body with her power, but this was not the end. She did not realize that Sarger's spirit could remain and be imbued into her own body. In this part of the narratives, the dualistic idea is apparently observed. Even after the death of the body, the spirit still survives and separates from its own body. After the infusion of Sarger's spirit, Aegwynn was affected by a hidden evil spirit when she had a child. The dark spirit possessed her son, Medivh, and worked towards its final goal of

invading the world, by “twisting his thought and emotion”. “When Medivh reached the age of fourteen, the cosmic power inside him awakened and clashed with the pervasive spirit of Sargeras that lurked within his soul” (“Warcraft History: Chapter 2: The New World” n.d.).

The dichotomy between the soul and body is also evident in the acts of offering a soul to a higher entity in order to gain strength.

There, in the endless cavern of ice and shadows, he prostrated himself before the Frozen Throne and offered his soul to the dark lord of the dead. (“Warcraft History: Chapter 4: Alliance and Horde” n.d.)

The soul is regarded as an object that can be offered to a higher entity and something that can be possessed by another owner. Possessing the soul means possessing everything, including the body, because there is an idea that the soul can control the body. This idea leads to the deal between a lower entity and a higher entity, evaluating the soul as a valuable object to offer. It also proves that the corporeal body is less important than the immortal soul, which inhabits another physical entity whenever it is possible. The essence of an entity is the soul rather than the body, because the latter is a physical object which can be destroyed and replaced. This is similar in some ways to the conception of the person in Cartesian Dualism. Cartesian Dualism emphasised that the body is a mechanical object which is operated through the spirit’s flows (Baker and Morris 1996, 11-17).

HP (Health Points) and MP (Mana Points) are two factors which can also be considered to be part of the dualism underlying WoW. Casters<sup>2</sup> have an MP bar which shows the state of the caster's magical resources, or mana. The two sources of energy are needed for a living character to combat and survive. However, why is a character's energy state displayed using dual bars rather than triple or multiple bars? Why are physical health and spiritual strength divided? It could be assumed that a body and soul dualism also underlies this way of expressing a caster's state. HP could be represented as the physical health of a character. A lack of energy eventually leads to a character's physical death. However, MP could be regarded as the state of non-physical energy or spiritual power, empowering the casting of spells. Hence an insufficiency of the energy does not directly contribute to physical death but could result in physical danger in the case of combat. The MP is a kind of visible calculation of spiritual (or magical) strength and HP represents physical and bodily strength. The idea of division between physical health and spiritual health seems to be extended from the body and the soul duality.

This section has been concerned with analysing the dualism existing in the virtual world as revealed in the narratives and rules of the game. Duality between good and evil was evident from the origin of the world and extended with the division of the Horde and Alliance factions. The body-soul duality in a character is also represented in narratives and the system of expressing a character's energy state with MP and HP. The next section will concentrate on the event of death in the virtual world, because death, with its separation of body and soul, illustrates dualistic thinking. In contrast to most games, which omit the path between a character's death and its resurrection, WoW allows

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<sup>2</sup> Druid, Mage, Paladin, Priest, Shaman and Warlock class.



players to encounter circumstances after death. This is the essential area that reveals the dualism which lies at the heart of WoW, because the separation between body and soul is made visible within the real game play.

### **6.3 Experiencing Virtual Death**

#### **6.3.1 Theological Concerns about Death**

*Les Thanatonaute* by a French author, Bernard Weber is a story about some people who attempt to explore life after death through the use of clinically-assisted death or euthanasia (Weber 1996). In the novel, a group of people attempt to obtain information about the world after death as facing a great danger. This fiction reflects human beings' constant desire to seek information about the world after death. Death has been always concerned people as generating diverse speculations and theories in diverse disciplines such as theology and philosophy. Even though it is difficult to clarify either death or after-life, which are beyond our consciousness and real experience, most religions have explained the subjects of death and the after-life in terms of their own religious principles and theology through myths and traditional scriptures. Furthermore, as most religions are concerned with eternal life and life after death, the meaning of death can be a central pivot, insisting on the religion's own theological comprehension about most of its principles. For example, Christianity insists that death results from human sin in Genesis. Death is contrary to the creator who gave life and vitality to the world, and is negative and evil. This negative understanding of death address the paradoxical question

of why all human beings are destined to experience death in their life, which was created by an omnipotent and life-giving God. It proves that death did not originate from God but from human sin, because of Adam's disobedience to God. Moreover, death is also related to the Christian doctrine of salvation and redemption accomplished by Christ. He conquered death by revealing his bodily resurrection from the grave and accomplished redemption by being crucified. Death is a part of salvation in Christianity. Karl Rahner (1904-84) insisted that "Christianity is the religion which regards the death of a certain man as the most fundamental event of the history of salvation" (Rahner 1975, 329).

Constant investigation into death is the consequence not only of curiosity toward unexplored death but also the consequence of reflective and profound concerns about life itself. Death and life are indivisible partners when exploring human existence in theological and philosophical debates. Living is replaced by the process of closing, or death, which is a universal and inevitable truth. Most people have experienced the deaths of other people close to them and they will encounter their own death at the end of their life. Socrates also regards the relationship between life and death as indivisible and dependable in his discussion before his own death (Plato 1955). In discussing human existence, death influences the definition of the meaning of life. Our life itself can only be defined in the light of death. Davies emphasises in his book, *The Theology of Death*, the intimate relevance between the subjects of death and life as they concern human existence:

A major aspect of any theology of death, then, is that it must also be a theology of life. To say this is not to play with words but is to highlight the

place of self-reflection within our experience of being human. It is also to raise the crucial topic of the method by which theology works. This is highly problematic and must not be ignored because it concerns the source and means by which we discuss the profound issues of our existence. (Davies 2008, 15)

Seeking the meaning of our life is deeply related to reflecting on ourselves. This self-reflection is performed based on what we have experienced through relationships and the uncountable events of daily life. In this process, the subject of death is constantly encountered by the self in relation to life experiences. Death is the universal problem to deal with in order to interpret problems occurring in our lifetime. Moreover, existing philosophical and theological ideas and theories also help us to illuminate the true meaning of self and life. For example, if a death is considered as a positive event which releases the soul from the bodily prison, life itself has to be understood as a terrible prison. And if we understand a death as a path to another life in terms of reincarnation, our life in this time could be regarded as a consequence of a former life. Depending on the understanding of death, the understanding of life and human existence can represent different meanings and reflections. Therefore, a discussion about death cannot be avoided when reflecting on our existence and the true meaning of life. However, in spite of the importance of understanding the meaning of death, there has been less serious discussion about death from theological and philosophical perspectives in recent times. Küng emphasises our “post-metaphysical” age, which ignores the meaning of death but relies on questions of clinical death or euthanasia from the aspect of medicine (Küng 1982, 50-51). These questions arise from ethical and biological perspectives rather than from a philosophical and theological approach.

For, whether it is a question of clinical death or reanimation or biological death, of passive or active euthanasia, of death from old age or suicide, of

inhuman or humane death, in all these very momentous problems for man, the basic question arises of the meaning of death-understood in a neutral sense-which in all these questions is closely linked with the meaning of life. (Küng 1982, 50-51)

Hans Küng emphasized in his book, *Eternal Life?* the importance of both theologians and philosophers, discussing the meaning of death, and of regarding the question of death as a significant human concern. In his book, *Approaching the End*, David Jones maintains that the topic of death is fundamental to human existence and Christian theology, therefore it is necessary to discuss the subject of death from a theological perspective. He attempts to introduce a theological account of death from selected theologians of the past and then gives their work his critical consideration (Jones 2007). Jones introduces and interprets four selected theologians for his exploration of the problem of death, because he insists it has been a perennial and universal subject from the past to the contemporary world. He mentions Ambrose of Milan (c. 339-397), Augustine of Hippo (353-430), Thomas Aquinas (1225-74), and Karl Rahner (1904-84). His interpretation and critical work on these four theologians' understanding of death contribute to our understanding of the core theological debate about death in Christian theology. He evaluates Ambrose's approach to death as radical because "he argued that death was, in itself, a positive human good, from the perspective both of philosophy and of theology". He suggests that Ambrose supported the idea of "freedom of soul" and regarded death as good because it liberates the soul from its bodily prison (Jones 2007, 2-3). This is very similar approach to Socrates who articulated death as the process of separating the soul from the body, a dualistic point of view. On the other hand, the Christian theologian, Karl Rahner maintained that "Death is the event in which the very man himself becomes his definitive self" (Rahner 1975, 329). He is a theologian who

concerned himself deeply with the subject of death from a theological perspective which understood a human being as being a whole entity, rather than following a dualistic view of humanity. He asserted that a human being is an incorporation of person and nature rather than a composition of the soul and the body. Therefore, death is simultaneously a personal and a natural happening which affects the whole human being. Moreover, it achieves the self-realisation and self-affirmation of a human, as Rahner states in his book, *On the Theology of Death*:

For, as we shall frequently observe, it is *man* who dies; that is, in death, something happens to him as a whole, something which, consequently, is of essential importance to his soul as well; his free, personal self-affirmation and self-realization achieves in death an absolute determination. This determination should not be conceived as something occurring at the moment of death on, after it, or extrinsic to it; it must be considered as an intrinsic element of death itself. (Rahner 1961, 25-26)

Death is a frequent occurrence in TV shows or movies. People cannot overlook the event of death, even in a fictional or imaginary setting because it reflects on interpretations of death. David Field and Tony Walter, sociologists interested in the sociology of death, argue that the mass media take a religious role as interpreters of death when presenting death and dying in contemporary societies (Field and Walter 2003). The mass media not only take on the religious examination of death but also wear the mantle of religion as the interpreter of death. In addition, a computer game as a popular medium also provides philosophical and theological interpretations of death. If traditional media only provide interpretations or views around death, the computer game provide virtual experiences which can be deeply engaged in by players. Through their virtual characters, players can experience death and resurrection repeatedly, obtaining information about the meaning of death and afterlife.

Therefore, death in computer games<sup>3</sup> is an issue that needs to be studied. However, there are few attempts to examine the subject of death in the virtual world so far. Lisbeth Klastrup focuses on player's experience of death in WoW in terms of game mechanics, the aesthetics and social value, maintaining that death in WoW is "a pivotal design element" (Klastrup 2008). Death in WoW has many functions in relation to players' experiences and game play, influencing players' understanding of the whole virtual world. According to her analysis, death in WoW helps players to learn how to play and engage with the world, teaching the game aspect of the world in a more effective way. For example, death that occurs in combat can give information both about the enemies which attacked the character and the places where it died. Players can evaluate their characters' state and ability in comparison with that of its enemies. Moreover, through observing other players' corpses, they can be informed that the place they are passing is a dangerous place which should be avoided (Klastrup 2008). In this respect, we can raise some significant questions. How do computer games interpret the meaning of death? And where do these interpretations come from? If the meaning of death is related to an existential problem and concern, as theologians have insisted, it is also necessary to illuminate how virtual worlds provide interpretations of death to millions of players. Moreover, it is also significant to illuminate the meaning of death in the virtual world from the game design aspect of computer games, because game designers use death as a device to punish or challenge players, in order to make the game more fun. Therefore, in the next two sections the meaning of death in WoW will

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<sup>3</sup> This includes computer, arcade, console and online games as representing the whole genre of electronic games.

be examined in terms of how the virtual world communicates meanings to players through virtual experience and symbols, considering both the theological and game design aspects.

### **6.3.2 What is Death in Games?**

If death is, according to Biblical interpretation, God's punishment upon human beings, then a character's death is a sort of punishment of the players from the game itself. A character's death occurs when a player makes a mistake or is unable to act in the correct way in a particular circumstance. There are many methods for punishing players in games. For example, in sports games, players experience the loss of the game instead of a character's death. Generally, a character's death is one of the remarkable characteristics of role-playing games. In most role-playing games, a character's death is an inevitable event in the process of playing. Players can experience several character deaths in game-life but resurrect soon after these deaths. Earlier electronic games granted players several life chances at once and players could maintain their progress until they had spent all their life chances. However, if players used their entire life-chances after several experiences of death, they lost their entire progress and experience and had to start the game again from the beginning. Hence, the meaning of each death was different, depending on its sequence. Compared to console or computer games, death in arcade games was regarded more seriously because players had to stop after the last death unless they put another coin in the machine. For this reason, death, especially the last death, had more significance for players, because it reminded them that they

would lose all of their progress without saving. Hence, there was an attempt to produce a sequence of popular games which provided approximately a hundred chances of life. These games had no save-points but they could empower players to make more progress by prolonging the character's life. In the earlier games, inevitable death and restricted life chances affected the enjoyment of the games without losing tension. The meaning of death could be represented as no more than losing progress and opportunity at this stage of game development.

As games became more technologically advanced and the rules more sophisticated, save-points were introduced and became popular, especially in role-playing games. The occurrence of save points dramatically changed the meaning of death in games. Characters can save their progress and state when they finish the game, and they can start again at the same point at which they finished. This means that even the death of a character does not cause a player to lose progress. Death could be regarded as a method of progress and as a necessary occurrence during combat in saved games. Therefore, the impact of death was diminished in saved games, before the development of some later online games. These online games had a system whereby death meant the loss of a character's XP (experience points). XP is a significant source for advancing a character's level and loss of points could result in delayed progress. XP can be gained by hunting monsters and completing quests and it helps achieve higher levels in game-life. Loss of XP is also related to loss of playing time and the player's labour in the virtual world. The meaning of death became more significant again in these online games, because frequent experiences of death could cause a character's level and



abilities to regress. Below is an explanation of death from the official website of the game *Lineage*.

The amount of experience points lost varies depending on your level at death and on which server you're playing, with a maximum possible loss of 10%. If you have less than 10% experience at a level, it is quite possible that you will "level down" if you die. For instance, if you are Level 12 with 8% experience at that level, your death will probably result in your character restarting at Level 11 with about 98% experience . . . This could work for or against you, so if you're happy with your HP and MP increase when you level up, be extra careful not to die until you've cleared over 10% experience in that level. ("Game Guide: Dying" n.d.)

In *Lineage*, losing XP is a destructive penalty for players. XP can only be replaced by the amount of time that players have spent and by the amount of effort that they have expended. Moreover, if a player regresses to a lower level as a consequence of losing XP, they will find themselves in different circumstances and with a different ability, which has been adjusted to a lower level. Players can have a reductive rate of HP (health point) and a MP (mana point) increase in some cases. Retrogression is the most painful penalty for players, because most are seeking to progress their character in relation to in-game goals. At this point, we can raise a significant question in relation to death as a penalty system: why do games need a penalty for characters' deaths?

It is a method to force players to improve their play, whether they are playing the game alone or together with other players. In addition to the geographical displacement, dying is often punished by inflicting damage on the character's equipment or withdrawing a number of the character's experience points. The intended frustration is furthered by the player's experience of wasted time in general, as the player in many MMOGs, including *World of Warcraft*, has to spend some time reclaiming the dead character's body in order to continue playing. (Klastrup 2008, 146)

So what can players learn through an event of death when playing games? Firstly, players learn about the repeatable death and resurrection of characters in games. Most characters are usually not immortal<sup>4</sup> but are allowed another chance to live, through resurrection. Players learn that there is resurrection in the virtual world, and so death, in some cases, does not mean the end of virtual life. Secondly, players can learn about the destructive characteristics of death in games which provide an inevitable penalty as a consequence of death. Losing XP or items results from the death of a character in some games. At the moment of combat, players can encounter death at any time. If death causes any kind of damage to a character, players have to find a way to avoid an event of death and to survive using their own strategies and plans. In this case, experiencing death has a destructive and regressive impact on both the character and the player. Finally, one of the most significant lessons that players can learn from death is that it can reflect a character's ability. In this case, death could be used as a tool to evaluate a character's capability and skills. Death can teach players a lesson about whether they can defeat their enemies. Generally, death can teach players which monsters are dangerous or which places are impossible for their characters to explore. It causes the self-reflection and self-realisation of a character in the virtual life. Through repeated experience of death, players mature and advance, even though their characters regress and suffer destructive loss at the moment of death. In some games, therefore, it cannot be denied that an event of death is a significant part of game play and possesses positive functions for both players and characters. Although it can have consequences of penalty and regression, it can also, at times, have a beneficial impact on overall virtual life.

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<sup>4</sup> There are also some exceptions, as with the game, *Planescape: Torment* (1999) by Black Isle Studios. The protagonist has been described as such an immortal being in this game, hence he tries to seek an answer to the question of why he cannot die.

### 6.3.3 Death in WoW

Death in WoW is an important subject which has absorbed various meanings and interpretations from the real world. Just as in the real world meanings of death are related to concerns about human existence and life, so also in the virtual world, the interpretation of death is also related to the principles of the virtual world and to the overall understanding of a character's existence. In this respect, understanding death is vital if one wants to understand virtual life in WoW. In general games, it is hard to find an after-death process or system like that in WoW. When a character dies, in general games, it is revived automatically after a few seconds. For example, in the popular game *Super Mario*, Mario is reborn automatically in the same spot where he died, or Mario reappears at the beginning of the same level. In *Lineage*, there is no stage between death and resurrection either. However, by creating a stage between death and resurrection, WoW has included significant theological ideas. This is a general description of the death and resurrection process as experienced by players in WoW.

- ✚ A character's death occurs as a consequence of that character having zero health points.
- ✚ After death a character will lose ten percent durability of its equipped items, with some exceptions.
- ✚ As soon as a character dies its player encounters a dialogue box which asks the player to release the spirit from the corpse.
- ✚ That character's spirit is then separated from its body immediately and transformed into a spirit form.
- ✚ The spirit form will encounter a spirit healer (NPC) in the nearest graveyard.
- ✚ A character can be born again, without any penalty, by running to the corpse which remains at the place where it lost its life.
- ✚ If a character dies in a dangerous spot and cannot return or gain access to the corpse, there is another option. A character's spirit can ask the spirit healer (NPC) for resurrection. The character must have Resurrection Sickness (decreasing character's stats) for a maximum of ten minutes and lose twenty-five percent durability of arms.

- ✚ If a character is playing with party members or has friends who have resurrection ability, a player can ask other characters, such as Shamans and Priests, for resurrection, using their spells.

In WoW, players have no additional penalty of XP loss in the process of death. Even though there is a ten percent durability loss in the event of death, this is a less decisive and serious factor than losing XP. WoW has provided a sophisticated and systemic process between death and resurrection, including a separation and reunification of the body and spirit of a character. After the death of a character, a player can watch a black-and-white scene on the computer screen. There is a spirit healer in front of the character and both of them remain in the nearest graveyard to where the character died. The semi-transparent features of the character seems to be describing the shape of the spirit, and this can be explained as OBE<sup>5</sup> in a game. Generally, after death, most players choose to run back to the character's corpse for resurrection. Or players can ask the spirit healer for immediate resurrection in the graveyard. This option brings durability loss and resurrection sickness,<sup>6</sup> but the character does not need to find its corpse and go back to the place where it died. In this case, the spirit healer could be described as a spiritual being with the authority to resurrect dead characters. Its figure is similar to the shape of the typical angel, depicted in Christian culture. It has two wings and rises into the air. Other characters can also resurrect a dead character with their resurrection spells. This is beneficial to dead characters, as it saves time by not having to run back to the corpse and also avoids durability loss and resurrection sickness. For instance, if a player chooses to run to the corpse, it takes some time to get there and also runs the risk of being attacked by monsters after resurrection. Moreover, if a player asks the spirit healer, the character loses durability of items and gets resurrection sickness for a

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<sup>5</sup> Out-of-Body Experience.

<sup>6</sup> This weakens a character's ability and strength.

maximum of ten minutes. However, resurrection by other characters does not bring resurrection sickness and they can be revived without running to the corpse.

There is a noticeable dualistic conception in the process between death and resurrection in WoW. Every player has to directly observe and confirm a dualistic interpretation through experiencing their character's death. WoW emphasises its own dualistic perspective towards death during the process of releasing the spirit from the body. When the player encounters the dialogue box which prompts them to "release the spirit", they know that there is a separation between the body and the spirit at the moment of death. The separation of the spirit from the body is a traditional interpretation of death from a dualistic perspective.

'Now let us discuss the matter between ourselves, forgetting all about those others. Do we think that death is something definite and real?'

'Certainly.' replied Simmias.

'Surely we think of it as separation of the soul from the body?—and of being dead as the independent state of the body in separation from the soul, and the independent state of the soul in separation from the body? Surely death can hardly be anything else?' (Plato 1955, 48)

Socrates asserted that the state of death would prompt the liberation of the soul from the body and that each entity would be independent. This interpretation of death was continued in the Gnostic tradition and repeated by many theologians and philosophers. Gnosticism has an interpretation of death based on a dualistic understanding of being human. The immortal soul only survives after death in order to be ascended to the unknown God and the body is an insignificant substance which should be destroyed after death. If we observe a character's death in WoW, the spirit is separated from the body and located in a new world alienated from the living world. On the other hand, the

body still stays in the living world and gradually disappears. The spirit is invisible to other living creatures and characters. It cannot interact with living creatures and is restricted in every ability and property which it possessed in the previous world.

As we have observed in previous sections, WoW narratives describe the origin of the world from the aspect of dualism, projecting two opposite power sources and groups which have interfered in the history of the world. The struggle and tension between these two sources creates conflict between the Alliance and Horde factions in the game, becoming the main operating principle of the world as battlefield. They also tell the story of the migration of spirits and the eternal life of spiritual beings, implanting the idea that the spirit is a superior entity to the physical body. In fact, a character's death is the chief occurrence which proves dualism in the virtual world because it visualises the dualistic understanding of a character's existence by representing the separation between body and soul through a systematic process. Moreover, WoW not only shows a visualisation of this dualism but also prompts players to participate in the virtual experience of separating a soul from a body. It empowers players to experience the death of a character from a dualistic perspective and makes players experience the character's spiritual state independent from the physical body and the world. An event of death means neither experiencing game-over nor observing the immediate disappearance of their characters, but by placing a stage between death and resurrection, the game provides a virtual OBE based on a dualistic interpretation.

#### 6.4 The World after Death in WoW

After releasing a spirit in death, a player encounters a black-and-white world. It has a similar shape to the living world but different colours. The player sees the spirit healer in front of a dead character in the graveyard, offering it the chance to be resurrected immediately. In this world, most living creatures cannot be seen and cannot be communicated with. Even if a character is in a crowded tavern, living characters cannot see the dead, and vice versa. They are isolated, independent and disconnected from the living world and have different characteristics from their living state. They have black and white, semi-transparent bodies but with a similar shape to their living shape. They can move faster than when they were alive and can even walk on the surface of water. The following is a description of the circumstances of afterlife in WoW.

- ✚ The world appears in black and white to a ghost.
- ✚ Ghosts are ethereal in appearance. Night Elf ghosts are actually wisps, one of the night elf's racial bonuses. Wisps move faster than normal ghosts.
- ✚ Ghosts are unable to interact with most things in the world.
- ✚ Ghosts can neither see nor be seen by living players and most creatures, other than those that are in the immediate area surrounding their corpses.
- ✚ Ghosts can see other ghosts, including spirit healers, who can only be seen in ghost form.
- ✚ Ghosts run faster than their living counterparts, which makes it easier to return to where they died. They can also levitate over water.
- ✚ A few special creatures may be able to see ghosts (these will be apparent to players), and may even attack players in ghost form.
- ✚ If players somehow die in ghost form, they will be transported back to the original graveyard at which they appeared.
- ✚ Public chat channels such as General and Trade are not available to ghosts, but private chat such as /tells, /guild, and /party chat are.
- ✚ If you release your body while you are in an instance you will not get credit for any kills or loot while you are a ghost. ("Death" n.d.)

This official description describes the state of afterlife and a character's spiritual form based on the game rules and system of play. The description includes theological and philosophical belief in an afterlife and it describes the state and characteristics of

spiritual entities. The dead experience a few significant events after the players release the spirit from their own character's body. Four remarkable events are generally experienced in the afterlife.

Firstly, dead characters experience an instantaneous movement from the living world to the world after death. As soon as they die, their spirits are transferred to another world in a few seconds. This world closely resembles the living world, apart from its colour and landscape. Secondly, characters experience isolation from the living world in the afterlife. This is the most significant event among after-life experiences for the dead. Isolation from the living world means that they cannot participate in events and lose the abilities they possessed when alive. They cannot see nor be seen by living creatures and cannot access public chat channels to interact with others. Most of their spells and abilities are forbidden and they are not allowed to eat and drink. These prohibitions and restrictions are also extended to the active play among players. They cannot pursue most quests or advance their own characters. They cannot earn game-money or trade their virtual items. In party-play, as soon as a player releases a spirit after death, the player cannot share any credits from the loot of other party members. It is isolation not only from the living world but also from the essence of game play. This situation prompts players to escape from the after-death world and return to being alive, in order to enjoy their play. Thirdly, characters experience their own transformation during the after-life. Their features and skills are changed from their living state. They can walk and run faster than when they were alive, and can levitate over water. They can recognise other spiritual entities and communicate with the spirit healer in that world. In the after-life characters are transformed into immortal spirits with distinctive capabilities and



characteristics. Life before death, with a mortal body, was more risky and complicated. There were many monsters and enemies which could attack and harm characters. However, the ghost state removes most dangerous risks for the characters. They do not need to concern themselves about attacks or the hazard of death, as they do in mortal life. Sometimes this state can be used on purpose for more effective play. For example, when a player has to explore an unknown land or a dungeon they can use a character's immortal state, because the immortal character can effectively explore land without death and can collect information about unknown places. Finally, dead characters can experience a second death in the after-life. This means they can die in ghost form as well. It does not occur frequently, but it can happen in some cases. A second death has been insisted on by some theologians throughout real-world history. This subject is connected to theological concerns about death and the fate of the soul.

Notice Augustine's starting point: death is a punishment, a result of the fall; it could only have come about through sin. The other components of total death—the death of the soul and the second death of hellfire—are clearly evils, bad in themselves, so also with bodily death: it is part of the punishment for the fall. (Jones 2007, 44)

The death of the soul can be represented as eternal death. Augustine of Hippo separated the death of the body and the death of the soul for his theological explanation about death. He states that the death of the body is bad for the bad, and beneficial for the good. However, he asserts that the death of the soul is bad for everyone, because it is the eternal death of hellfire. In Socrates' opinion, the death of the soul should also be described as a great evil. As he focused on the resurrection of the soul, bodily death, for him, was regarded as a positive event. However, second death, the death of the soul, would be evil, and against the revelation of God. Gnosticism believed that the soul is in

a perfect state to accept divine revelation as it departs from the body (Harris 1999, 12). After death, the soul is unified with God and saved by divine revelation. Hence in Gnosticism, second death has the opposite meaning to redemption, because it forbids the path to receiving divine revelation and unification with God after first death.

As mentioned above there are four remarkable experiences available to players during the after-life in WoW: “instantaneous movement”, “isolation and discontinuation”, “transformation” and “second death”. These experiences reveal theological and philosophical concepts and ideas. As death was depicted as the release of the spirit from the body, after-life is only allowed to the spirit of a character. Only spirits can live in the world after death. Only spirits are visible and recognisable in this world. Most possessions and abilities from the living world are not allowed and most contact and communication is restricted. This is real death in the practical game play for players. Play in the virtual world, for most players, consists of gaining progress and interacting with other players. If characters are restricted from these features in the virtual world, it is regarded as an evil, from the players’ perspective. Unless there is hope of being saved quickly into the living world, the after-life is a kind of prison, not only for the characters’ spirits but also for the players. Hence, the after-life of most characters is regarded as a path to resurrection. They do not want to stay or inhabit this world. It is neither a place for eternal life nor a resting place. In the Old Testament, the word Sheol represents the destination of dead people. When people die, they descend to Sheol, which can only be defined as the place where the dead are dead. The presumption is that the deceased are inert, lifeless, and engage in no activity (Mendenhall 1992, 68). The world after death

also removes players' abilities, possessions and contacts and forbids them to engage in most activities.

In the virtual world it is hard to find any event of judgement or the existence of any divinity in the after-life. There is only the spirit healer who can deliver characters back to the living world. There is no heaven or hell either. However, the significant factor, and the one that needs to be focused on, is the fact that the character achieves immortality after death. Immortality is a subject that has long been studied by theologians and philosophers. It is something mortals have always desired. Socrates wrote on the immortality of the soul and its indestructibility and unchangeability.

‘Then consider, Cebes’ he said, ‘whether this is our conclusion as a result of all that has been said, that soul is very like that which is divine and deathless and intelligible and uniform and indissoluble and always invariable and constant, while body is very like that which is human and mortal and manifold, incomprehensible to the intelligence, always liable to dissolution, never constant. (Plato 1955, 77)

Socrates highlights the immortality of the soul by contrasting it with the mortality of the body. The soul is constant and indissoluble, surviving even after death. It is the whole existence and self-identity of the dead. On the other hand, Christianity believes in the doctrine of resurrection and the whole transformation of the dead. It interprets death as an evil caused by the fall of Adam, the counterpart of God. Hence death is neither the liberation of the soul from the body nor the salvation of the immortal soul. It is the end of our life of the earth and it is a real transformation:

So will it be with the resurrection of the dead. The body that is sown is perishable, it is raised imperishable; it is sown in dishonor, it is raised in glory; it is sown in weakness, it is raised in power; it is sown a natural body, it is

raised a spiritual body. If there is a natural body, there is also a spiritual body. (Corinthians, 15:42-44)

According to Paul, the transformation to a spiritual body is a core consequence of death. Paul believes that we will be dead like seeds are buried. It will be the end of our pilgrimage in this world and our transformation into a spiritual state. He did not agree with people who insisted on the immortality of the soul. For Paul, it is only resurrection that will change the mortal body into an immortal body after death: this is a total transformation of the dead.

Bearing these opinions in mind, how is the state of the dead in the after-life in WoW to be interpreted? Is it an immortal spirit which has been released from the dead, or is it an immortal body which has been transformed by death? After a character's death, players encounter a dialogue box which allows the character's spirit to depart from the body. This is the starting point of the path to resurrection. A character's state after death can be interpreted as following dualistic ideas because it relies on the released spirit from the dead body. The dialogue box clearly confirms that there is a releasing-spirit-after-death event. As soon as the player confirms it, they can encounter the world after death with the character's spirit. It is an immediate event of transformation from a bodily entity to a spiritual one, but it is not a whole transformation, unlike Paul's teaching. The spirit is delivered from the body and throws away its bodily characteristics, rather than being totally transformed. Its similarity in form to its living form reveals its origin. It could be said that the spirit takes off the colourful clothing of the body and survives.

Experiencing repetition of separation and reunification between the soul and the body takes place many times in this virtual life. In this process, the after-life plays a significant role, being used to emphasise events of both separation and reunification, representing the character's soul (departed from the body) and its real presence in the world after death. If there is only instant resurrection of a character after death, the dichotomy between the soul and the body may not be recognised and focused on. If there is no path to find the corpse, it would probably be hard to observe the immortality of the soul during other activities. In this respect, it can be analysed that WoW communicates the meaning of character as being a fusion of the soul and the body by using death as device to separate them. And by providing an afterlife, it further emphasises the dualistic understanding of a character, visualising the actual presence of the soul as an immortal substance.

## **6.5 Resurrection in WoW**

When the souls of characters find their corpse lying on the ground they suddenly encounter a dialogue box. It asks the player, "Resurrect now?" As soon as the player accepts this they find their character is changed to a living state and the screen turns normal. Finally their character resumes their mortal body. Reunification is accomplished through finding the physical body for their soul, the final goal when passing through the world after death. The world after death, where most abilities are restricted, is less interesting than the living world. Resurrection is a final station, allowing them to return to active and meaningful play. The player's only concern is to find the corpse quickly and being about the reunification of the body and spirit. The

clear meaning of resurrection in WoW is a returning to the living world and regaining the mortal state. On the surface, this seems to resemble the doctrine of reincarnation. However, a distinguishing feature is the fact that the soul wears exactly the same physical body. This differs from reincarnation, which states that the soul will be reborn in a new body in the next life. Reincarnation emphasises “a new body”, which is decided according to how people lived their life in the previous world. This does not mean wearing exactly the same body in relation to bodily resurrection: people can take on various bodies of humans or even animals.

In the previous sections, observation and analysis of the game have revealed Socratic ideas in such areas as the interpretation of characters' existence and death. However, how is their reunification at the event of resurrection to be interpreted? The core event of the resurrection process is the reunification of the body and the soul. It is the opposite of the separation of the body and the soul at the moment of death. It is a more active and spontaneous event than the passive event of death. If death occurs through an unexpected and unavoidable attack from the enemy or through a player's mistakes, resurrection is accomplished by the active and subjective effort of the characters, because most resurrection is accomplished by a character running to its own corpse. Even if it chooses to be resurrected by the spirit healer, it has to sacrifice its own durability of arms. By creating the path to resurrection, WoW requires a character to make an effort to attain its own resurrection rather than providing a direct and immediate resurrection.

However from the dualistic aspect, in terms of Socrates and Gnosticism, there is an error in the event of resurrection. Reunification of the soul and the body deviates totally from the Socratic and Gnostic process. A coherent thought and interpretation seems to exist in the virtual world before concerning itself about reunification as a bodily resurrection. However, the reunification of a body and soul would be retrogressive in Socrates' interpretation of liberation and salvation.

The death of Socrates is a beautiful death. Nothing is seen here of death's terror. Socrates cannot fear death, since indeed it sets us free from the body. Whoever fears death proves that he loves the world of the body, that he is thoroughly entangled in the world of sense. Death is the soul's great friend. So he teaches; and so, in wonderful harmony with his teaching, he dies—this man who embodied the Greek world in its noblest form. (Cullmann 1958, 20-21)

Cullmann's description reveals how Socrates regarded death as beneficial for the soul. Socrates was faithful to his own teachings and thoughts, even at the moment of his death. Unless humans obsess about worldly things such as sex and alcohol, death is the most honourable and respectable moment which will lead them into the divine world according to Socrates. Therefore, for Socrates, death is a meaningful event without hesitation. His soul was longing to be liberated from his body. In his theory, reunification has to be regarded as an unnecessary and evil event which should not occur. It is same as a situation where a prisoner has returned to the same prison after being released.

In the resurrection process of WoW the immortal soul is reunited with the mortal body, thereby deviating from the Socratic ideal. The virtual character's immortal spirit seeks its mortal body and mortal life again, in order to re-enter the living world. Then why

does bodily resurrection need to exist in the virtual world at all? Presumably the reason is that game play has to consider the practical methods and rules which operate in the virtual world. In spite of its philosophical and theological ideas and fantastical background, the creators of WoW have to consider practical game design and its role in entertaining and holding the players' interest. Particularly in online games, it is important to ensure that players do not leave the virtual world. If WoW maintained spiritual ascension, there would be no way of continuing active play, because there would be no way to participate in the living world. The immortality of the soul and the absence of risks in the afterlife may be theological and philosophical ideals in the real world, but in the virtual world they are seen to be boring and restrictive, impeding active and dynamic game-play. Players want to enjoy the dynamic resources that virtual life offers and they want to triumph by conquering hazards. They do not seek eternal rest or salvation but prefer to fight with enemies in the virtual world. Players visit this world because of its distinguishing characteristics such as dangerous fights and an unstable existence full of challenges. The elements which make life hazardous in the real world are regarded as necessary conditions in the virtual world. This could be the reason why the immortal spirit re-enters its mortal body. This is real resurrection for players, as they return to an unstable but dynamic life. Hence, mortal life is the principal condition for a character, and also for a player.

As we have discussed in the previous sections, death is a significant device for game play, through providing challenges and punishments, and it reinforces players' desire to keep playing. However, in order to continue the game, it is necessary to make characters be resurrected as keeping their own virtual life. Hence, even though the virtual world



has represented Socratic and Gnostic interpretations of characters' existence and death, it seems to be difficult to apply the interpretation through to the end.

## **6.6 Summary and Conclusion**

In this chapter, we have found that philosophical and theological ideas have penetrated into virtual worlds. Dualism appears in the virtual world through narratives, death and the world after death. Two opposite sources of power are depicted as shadow and light, and they conflict with each other. The Alliance and Horde factions have struggled through constant battles. The virtual character's state is represented by two sources of power, MP and HP, in terms of a dualistic interpretation of a character's existence. This representation shows us that virtual worlds understand characters as being composed of both spiritual and physical elements.

In the processes of death and resurrection, we found more profound theological and philosophical ideas related to death and the afterlife. A dualistic interpretation of virtual being has been observed when we encounter the event of death which promotes the separation of body and spirit. Dualism asserts that our soul will be released from its physical prison when we experience death. This idea emerges when we release our character's spirit from its body. Immortality of the soul is a key idea of Gnosticism, and Socrates also believed that the soul is perpetual and can never be destroyed. We also find immortality of the soul when we move into the world after death in WoW, as we observe the character's soul and explore the spiritual realm without a body. However, at

the end of the process the Gnostic and Socratic ideal seems to be failed, when the character attempts to reunify the two separated entities. The event of resurrection represents how a virtual being comes back to reality through bodily resurrection.

**CHAPTER 7**

**CONCLUSION**

## 7.1 Conclusion

Engaging with virtual reality has become inevitable for those of us who live in an Internet society. Academic research from a range of disciplines will be necessary as more real activities are replaced by virtual experiences. Feeling a virtual presence in the virtual environment is not a particular experience but represents everyday mundane life for online game players. Symbols, artefacts and images are manifested in virtual reality, provoking players to engage with them as they communicate meanings. It is now evident that our life is not only constituted by reality, but also by virtual reality. Researching the virtual worlds of online games has not been a simple task because it has meant studying a variety of academic studies related to media studies, computer science, sociology, psychology and semiology. Research materials relating to the theological aspect of online games are rare, and an interdisciplinary study was clearly necessary in order to define the meanings of virtual reality and online game play. Moreover, in practical game play, it was difficult to participate in the virtual world without any experience of recent MMORPGs. 3D game play caused motion sickness for a while and, as a newcomer to virtual life, I made many mistakes until I became accustomed to the environment. However, participation in the virtual world actually transformed my opinions of game play and has enabled me to understand the true nature of the world more deeply. In fact, our understanding of virtual worlds is sometimes very restricted in relation to the general assumption of that computer games cause violent behaviours and social isolation among players. Therefore, researchers have disdained concerning themselves profoundly with the virtual worlds of online games in most academic areas except psychology and sociology. However, long-term participation in the virtual world

through my character has helped me to understand the true meaning of game play. My existing ideas about playing computer games involved the simple manipulation of a keyboard for entertainment (or winning) rather than conducting a complicated life resembling some parts of real life. What I have been mostly interested in is that many religious symbols, images and terms actually constitute the virtual life of my character (a human priest) and they deliver meanings or ideas related to the stories of the virtual universe and the meanings of real-world symbolism.

The main focus of my thesis has been on the use of religious themes in the virtual world of WoW through empirical observation of the human priest character and the process of death and resurrection. In my thesis, two significant questions have been addressed: “how are religious symbols being used in the virtual life of human priests?” and “how are theological and philosophical ideas or concepts manifested through the process of death and resurrection?” Religious symbolism in relation to the human priest character has been researched through observing and conducting the virtual life of *Hatarina*, analysing its abilities and talents. In fact, its life has religious symbolism and terms in relation to existing religions. The process of death and resurrection has disclosed a dualistic idea which underlies the whole virtual world of WoW, confirming the two different substances which constitute a virtual character. In fact, dualism from the real-world philosophical tradition has impacted on the main interpretations in the virtual universe, emphasising two opposite sources or powers in its game narratives, myths and even practical game play.

In relation to these research questions it is necessary to address questions in terms of “what?” before asking questions about “how?” This means it is important to ask “what is a true nature of virtual reality?” before asking “how does virtual reality display something?” In order to be able to understand issues related to virtual worlds, virtual reality has to be properly and fundamentally understood. In this thesis (particularly Chapter 2) I have examined the obscure border between reality and virtual reality and, through philosophical and theological debate, the idea that virtual reality could be reality and vice versa. The age-old debate on reality and virtual reality is also expanded into a current debate on cyberspace (a new type of virtual reality). Moreover, religious symbolism in terms of virtual reality is discussed. Religious Symbolism by Paul Tillich and New Literacy by James Paul Gee, provided the theoretical framework for examining the religious symbols that occur in virtual reality. Both theories insist that symbols have meanings which are communicated to those who read them. Gee’s work is especially significant because he emphasises the fact that symbols and signs in computer games have deliberate meanings for players and therefore, he insists, we should learn how to read them properly. Tillich investigates the characteristics of symbols and maintains that “innate power” is the most significant feature that defines a genuine symbol. According to his definition, it could be argued that a symbol should be judged, not by its physical appearance but by what it signifies. Therefore, religious symbols in the virtual world should be examined in the light of what they signify, referring to in-game circumstances and narratives.

In Chapters 5 and 6 the case study was undertaken by accumulating religious symbols and themes in the virtual world of WoW through a virtual character, *Haratina*, for more

than five months. I participated in the virtual life of *Hatarina*, including party play, raids and social communication, observing the religious symbols and terms represented in the virtual world. Religious symbols are widely used through the human priest life in engaging with its characteristics and abilities. Through the human priest life, we can observe how a priest encounters religious symbolism and concepts in relation to real-world symbolism. The human priest seems to resemble a Roman Catholic priest with diverse healing abilities, but possesses destructive powers in relation to dark magic. The religious symbols represented by the priest life show that there are two opposite power sources of holy and shadow, with holy spells related to beneficial effects and shadow spells to evil effects. Chapter 6 addressed the idea that theological and philosophical themes have penetrated the process of death and resurrection, delivering meanings about life, death and afterlife in the game. Death is interpreted as releasing the character's spirit from the body, echoing real-world dualistic interpretations of death. The immortality of the soul, as evidenced by the events following the death of a virtual character, refers to the ideas of Socrates. However, during the resurrection process, the released spirit is finally unified with the physical body of the corpse, reminding people of the concept of bodily resurrection. This is distinguished from the doctrine of transmigration of souls because the soul of the virtual character is unified with the same body on the same spot where the character was killed. This seems to be a paradox in terms of the pure, Socratic ideal, but it seems to be a necessary process for practical game-play. Furthermore, in the narratives of WoW there is a dualistic interpretation of the universe as distinguishing a physical dimension from a spiritual dimension and of virtual beings as revealing the free migration of the soul.

Searching religious themes projected by symbolism, images and artefacts in virtual life is not a simple journey to pick apples from trees, because images, symbols and artefacts deliver meanings. As more images are produced by contemporary media, more hidden meanings are disclosed. After the Middle Ages, European culture has been losing the history behind religious symbols and images. Symbolism in terms of superstitions, shamanism and magical performances has largely disappeared in Asian countries influenced by modern thoughts and culture from western countries. However, a revival of religious symbolism and images is being conducted in virtual reality, particularly MMORPGs based on myths, where the medieval background represents a sophisticated religious and magical environment manifested through technological art effects. Religious terms and images are being used to create distinctive religious characters' lives, distinguishing them from other characters such as warriors and farmers. Moreover, the method of engagement with the symbols is distinguished from that of traditional media, providing interactive and immersive virtual experiences. Virtual items that a player (or character) can manipulate and possess may have a different meaning from items that a movie star (a third person) uses in a movie. Virtual items which are the reward for hard labour seem to be valuable to a player. Through long-term virtual life many players become attached to the inventory they have built up. Collected virtual items, nurtured virtual characters and accumulated virtual experiences constitute the virtual life of each player, and all of these are deeply related to symbolism and images. Virtual life is a mixture of virtual experiences and these experiences are accumulated through engaging with virtual reality represented by images, symbols and artefacts. In fact, it is more accurate to say that virtual life involves engaging with the meanings and



ideas reflected by the images, symbols and artefacts. In this respect, researching religious themes in the virtual world is a meaningful way to approach a virtual life.

It is in the nature of human beings to be concerned about their existence. Our lives are not regularly shaped but have a fluid nature as different events and unexpected accidents are experienced and social relationships are formed and broken. Throughout our lives we also construct our identity by interiorising the meanings of what we encounter. However, these days, the expansion of virtual reality means that we can encounter a different dimension of experience. Cyberspace provides people with a diverse range of simulated environments and virtual activities, never previously available. In the past, existential issues usually concerned the real world and real-life physical events, but now virtual reality, based on Internet technology, has broadened our view of ourselves and our existence. Social, economic and political activities, previously confined to the physical sphere, now exist in cyberspace and they also impact on our real lives. Multiple virtual identities are grasped by people who interact with a variety of virtual communities. In addition, through mediating symbols and images, cyberspace communicates meanings to users and enables them to interiorise these meanings.

Many aspects of virtual experiences in WoW are related to religious themes. This is because the virtual world of WoW seems to more rely on religious symbols and images than does the normal environment of the contemporary real world. In this circumstance, engagement with the meanings of religious symbols is an inevitable part of virtual experiences for the players in conducting their virtual life. In particular, players who

have religious characters such as priests and shamans can relate more deeply to religious ideas delivered by symbols existing in their character's life. For the players, theological and philosophical meanings can be communicated while experiencing the process between virtual death and resurrection. The afterlife experienced in the world after death enables players to encounter a spiritual dimension separated from the living world. The idea of the immortality of the soul is naturally experienced by encountering a character's soul which has survived after death, and players are informed by the characteristics (meanings or interpretations) of the spiritual world through engaging with the meaning of symbols and images through embodied experiences. This means that meanings delivered by virtual symbols and images are not limited to a simple experience. For example, if we see symbols in a book, it only needs the process of reading. If we watch an animated image on a movie screen, we only need to see and listen. However, if we encounter animated images in a virtual world (through a computer screen), we can interact with them through watching, listening and manipulating. Moreover, we can possess them as virtual property in some cases (a virtual character is a prime example of this). Therefore, obtaining meanings from symbols and images in the virtual world seems to belong to a process of a different dimension, and it needs a new approach based on this unique characteristic.

In addition, ideas and meanings delivered by virtual experiences can be applicable to both the virtual and real worlds. What is obtained through the use of virtual worlds might not be fictional or virtual, but might be real. My thesis has compared religious symbolism in two different dimensions and examined the idea that the virtual world provides diverse meanings of real-world symbolism. If real-world symbolism projects

an area of reality onto people's consciousnesses, there is also the possibility that symbolism in virtual reality could perform the same function, reflecting a part of reality. Relationships between the symbolisms between the two worlds can be understood through the idea that symbolism in the virtual world not only reflects the meanings created by the game but also refers to the meanings and concepts in real-world symbolism. For example, the death of virtual characters might symbolise isolation from active game play in relation to lost chances to achieve in-game goals. However, the process of a virtual character's death also visualises and symbolises the separation of the body and the soul in terms of the dualistic interpretation. Therefore, symbolism in the game play can be involved deeply both in the situation of the game itself and in its relationship to real-world symbolism.

As technology advances, virtual reality will possess more realistic features and will provide us with more sensational virtual experiences. At this stage, our opinion of virtual reality will be transformed and we will come to rely on virtual experience more than ever. Its impact will grow and future technology will focus on how to create realistic virtual reality through television, cinema and computer media. In this respect, religious symbolism manifested by advanced virtual reality will also cause more sensational and realistic virtual experiences, resembling real-world religious experiences. At this stage, to play or not to play will become a serious problem for players in terms of identity construction and human experiences, and religious symbols will be deeply related to this matter. This thesis has examined religious symbols and images currently being used in online games, delivering religious ideas with virtual experiences. A proper literacy regarding religious symbolism in online games

(including other types of virtual reality) is necessary in order to reveal the meanings of symbols in virtual environments. The relationship between humanity and virtual reality seems to be more intimate than ever, and it has already caused a deeper engagement with the religious symbols and images which constitute a huge part of the virtual universe.

## **7.2 Future Research**

A player's virtual life impacts on the whole development of the virtual world and vice versa. Interactions and networking among players have the power to transform the organic world. Moreover, the creators of the virtual world – not God, but game creators – attempt to keep interest alive by releasing upgrade patches and transforming their worlds by acting on individual players' requests. The worlds change constantly as virtual realities, through the participation of players and through the governance of game creators, are repeatedly generated and disappeared. New virtual territory has brought novel experiences and human interactions to virtual life conducted by artificial characters. Diverse religious and social activities are conducted through virtual characters. Communication in virtual worlds is made by players across geographical boundaries and in a variety of physical conditions. Those communications among players are enriching human relationships and enabling the dimensions of human interactions to become ever wider. Ethical values are respected and promoted by human nature. Many players seek the advancement of their own character with great concern

and elaborate efforts. Collaborative play is highly valued and allows individual players to become close. In fact, online games are significant in that they provide greater opportunities for sharing, collaborating and communicating with other players than do the individual game-play offered by offline games. If offline game play has isolated players and contributed to individualism in modern society, online game play could be said to encourage collaboration by connecting individual players with other players.

Researching this thesis, it became clear there are infinite subjects in this research area. The construction of religious identity by playing games, social interactions in religious guilds and religious experiences through virtual life could become interesting subjects from a theological aspect. Theology has traditionally addressed many issues in terms of humanity, and if humanity starts to engage with a new type of dimension, theology also needs to focus on how they relate to and affect one another. Religious identity construction could be caused by interiorising religious meanings through religious activities or through the long-term virtual life of a player's character. Social activities in religious communities help players to discuss real-world issues in terms of religious ideas and beliefs and to share inner religious experiences with each other. Communications among guild members are less limited by physical conditions and bring about a more easy and comfortable atmosphere where people can talk freely. It seems difficult at present to define whether religious experiences accumulated by playing online games are real or unreal. This is deeply related to the authenticity issue of cyber-churches and cyber-ritual which already exist. Can experience through virtual reality become real experience? Or can one replace another?

Future research could usefully concentrate on four significant subjects, all related to theology and virtual worlds. Firstly, it is necessary to analyse the lives of virtual characters and compare their lives to human life by drawing on theories of social development such as that of psychologist, Erik Erikson. Erikson, in his book *The Life Cycle Completed*, introduces eight stages of psycho-social development in human life: “infancy”, “Early Childhood”, “Play Age”, “School Age”, “Adolescence”, “Young Adulthood”, “Adulthood” and “Old Age” (Erikson and Erikson 1998, 55). Just as humans have life stages, a virtual character has its levels in most MMORPGs. For example, in WoW a virtual character can be advanced through assigned levels, from level one to level seventy. At levels one to five, a player as a beginner struggles to learn game rules and principles; a virtual character possesses little ability and only a few virtual items. The player has to avoid exploring dangerous realms where higher-level monsters dwell. For a beginner the meaning of play differs from that of a higher-level player, because the world is unexplored, unfamiliar and even frightening. At this stage, players usually receive help from other players to adjust and are protected by them. However, when players have level eleven characters their virtual life is very different from that of the beginner. They have got used to the virtual atmosphere and game rules and are more informed. They have learned how to train their characters efficiently and know how to develop their characters’ skills when assigning talent points. At level seventy, virtual characters possess very special armour and advanced skills. They are happy to help lower-level players by giving them information and protecting them. They have matured and progressed in their virtual life. However, through online game play players can also experience personalisation. While communicating with others, individual players develop their own characters and identities. Even when players

choose the same characters with the same class and race, each character will be different and distinct, depending on the individual player's choices and experiences. Each character can be trained with diverse talents and special skills. Players can choose how to develop their characters as they lead them on their own personal journey. This is different from some video games which allow players to follow a fixed computer program which does not change. Players are exposed to diverse and multiple choices and have to make decisions in online games.

It is interesting to concern that players can experience similar development in their real life through progressing their own character while conducting their own peculiar virtual life. Virtual life rather resembles the real life of human beings, which follows a general type of life journey as Erikson examined, but it has the possibility to be distinguished by personalisation. For future study, it would be interesting to compare the virtual life of online games to the nature of human life in order to understand how virtual life resembles real life through theological concerns.

Secondly, it is important to understand Christian virtual communities in virtual worlds and to demonstrate how virtual *koinonia* could be established there. Such a project would concentrate on the religious activities conducted by Christian guilds which currently exist in virtual worlds; how they conduct virtual rituals in the virtual realm; how guild members share their religious experience and beliefs; their major religious activities; how they convert non-Christian players. As the social aspect of virtual worlds becomes more important, virtual communities grow rapidly. Some of them are organised for in-game purposes but some of them are organised with special motives. Some religious groups are actively devoted to sharing religious experience through

participating in virtual rituals, Bible study and missionary work. They have deep inter-relationships and care for other members through online communication. Instead of gathering only on Sunday, they are able to get in touch with others more frequently through the computer network. Social ethnography will help to observe online groups in virtual worlds and this work could challenge churches to create a more practical pastoral plan.

Thirdly, it is necessary to discuss more fundamental issues related to virtual experience. Some research questions related to this project include: When sharing religious meanings and beliefs, do we absolutely need to communicate with others through face-to-face interaction or would cyber relationships be sufficient? Can virtual religious life in computer games be a substitute for real religious organisation, and moreover, should it be expected to be a substitute? How are religious authorities to respond if computer games have already transformed the nature and forms of conventional religions by producing adapted forms of religions? Because virtual religious experiences are available, people can conduct a religious life through virtual worlds. However, people need to examine the authenticity of their virtual experience. In the near future, I predict that this issue will arouse controversy as more virtual practices are performed in virtual churches. Hence, more theological interest needs to be taken in the fundamental issues relating to religious experience.

To conclude, we are living in a transition period when virtual reality is gradually replacing physical reality. Our faith and religious life could be changed by this cultural shift. Just as the invention of the printing press by Gutenberg (1398-1468) transformed



religious history, virtual reality could change our religious practice and faith. If the mass production of the Bible gave people the opportunity for religious experience, the Internet in contemporary society provides a more diverse range of religious experiences as well as providing online scripture, Bible commentary and sermons with audio files. We are able to participate in online services in front of our own computer, without visiting a physical church. We need to be aware of the power of online communication and its impact on people's religious life. Online communication offers a more informal and fluid structure than the linear type of communication provided by television and radio, and enables people to publish and feed back simultaneously. These days an increasing number of scholars of religion are researching online religions, online religious communities and virtual experience. There should be a concentration, however, on the virtual worlds of online games and an investigation of a more diverse range of games and the ways in which players attain religious experiences by engaging with these worlds.

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