

Media, Religion and Culture

Edited by Stewart M. Hoover, Jolyon Mitchell and David Morgan

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Cyber Zen

Imagining Authentic Buddhist Identity, Community, and Practices in the Virtual World of Second Life

Gregory Price Grieve

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Introduction

Digital Dharma: Authenticity, cybernetic entanglement, and silent spiritual media practices

"An unexamined Second Life is not worth living."

Resident Human Riddle (Second Life profile)

Cyber Zen ethnographically studies Zen Buddhist practice in a virtual world. The event that triggered the investigation occurred at 9:30 P.M., on December 23, 2007, when I found myself sitting in full lotus position, meditating next to a bear by the name of BodhiDharma Rosebud (Figure 1.1).¹ Obviously this event did not take place in *real life* but rather in Second Life, a three-dimensional, immersive, interactive virtual world housed in cyberspace and accessed via the Internet.² Through on-screen representations, called *avatars*, millions of Second Life *Residents* explored the virtual world, communicating and socializing with one another, as well as creating, selling, and purchasing virtual goods. During the time of my research in the late 2000s, Second Life differed from other *MMORPGs* (massively multiplayer online role-playing games) because the content – buildings, *objects*, and even bodies – was created by users rather than by game designers. For instance, on June 7, 2010, the resident Fae Eden was asked what she did on Second Life, she explained, "I meet *friends* and interact, *roleplay*, shop, *build*, and tune my avatar."

Unexpectedly, my research team found that religious practices, particularly Buddhism, had a significant presence in this virtual world. In hindsight, finding religion online is actually not surprising. Wherever people go, religion seems to follow, and the spread of digital media corresponded to a growth in online practice. As early as 2004, a Pew survey reported that 64 percent of Americans with Internet access had used the medium for religious reasons.³ Almost a decade earlier, on December 16, 1996, the *Time* magazine article "Finding God on the Web" stated, "Like schools, like businesses, like governments, like nearly everyone, it seems, religious groups are rushing online, setting up church home pages, broadcasting dogma and establishing theological newsgroups, bulletin boards and chat rooms." Intriguingly, digital *Dharma*, more than other religious practices, flourishes online.⁴ As spelled out below, digital Dharma describes Buddhist teachings spread through computer-mediated communication.⁵ There is no doubt that during the time of my research, the vast majority of digital

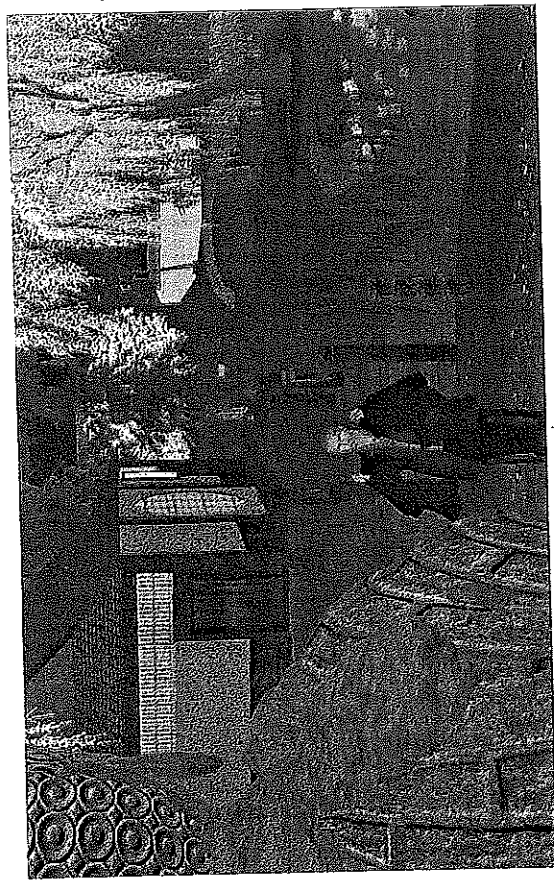


Figure 1.1 Gregory Price Grieve's research avatar Clint Clavenham at convert Zen Buddhist Second Life location.

(Second Life snapshot by G.P. Grieve).

Dharma consisted of websites that merely offered information. Still, there was a sizable presence of Buddhists in Second Life who practiced "online religion," which the Canadian sociologist Chris Helland defines as locations "where people could act with unrestricted freedom and a high level of interactivity."⁶ Second Life's online religion enabled users not only to gather information but also, as epitomized by BodhiDharma's online meditation, to engage in ritual and other types of digitally mediated religious practices.

While at first an informant, BodhiDharma became a guide and eventually a friend whose personal knowledge of people and the community made this book possible. With his and other residents' assistance, *Cyber Zen* analyzes Second Life's Zen Buddhist community from November 2007 to October 2011, concentrating on the year 2008 and the region known as the Hoben Mountain Zen Retreat.⁷ In June of 2008, when my research team engaged in a full-scale survey, the Second Life's Zen community consisted of five groups that had 3,756 members and five regions and held approximately seventy-five events a week. Like the event that BodhiDharma invited me to, and what became the central focus of my research, 87.1 percent of events consisted of silent online meditation. During my research, Hoben was the largest of the Buddhist groups, which had a community of around 1,500 members: approximately 300 who were active, fourteen who were *meditation leaders*, and four who were the *owners*. The Hoben community described themselves on their website "as a nondenominational

Buddhist practice site -dedicated to bringing Buddha-dharma to a virtual world. . . the seeds of Dharma are spreading in Second Life!"

Often labeled Western, rightstand, or "convert Buddhism," as explored in chapter two, such popular forms like those at Hoben focused on several facets of the Buddhist tradition: the therapeutic, the nonhierarchical, the nonviolent, the ecological, and most importantly, the meditative.⁸ For the most part, convert Buddhists live in the West – North America, Europe, and other parts of the developed world – but can also be found in many of the cosmopolitan centers of developing nations.⁹ Hoben was Anglophone and mostly attracted members from North America, England, Australia, and New Zealand. Hoben's central philosophy was that they were not trained teachers but rather guides for practitioners along the path of practice. Most Second Life Zen adherents approached their practice very seriously and were conscious of Buddhism's legacy, and of how Zen had been introduced to the West, and consciously and mindfully strove to translate Buddhist practices into Second Life. As Hoben's founder, Cassius Lawndale, said in a conversation on July 1, 2009, "we are a real Buddhist community in a virtual world."

Screens

Cyber Zen theoretically focuses on how people tactically employ religious media to act upon and transform their everyday life. "Tactically" describes people's agency that operates from outside the bases of established authority, is used by more marginalized individuals, and by necessity is more flexible and innovative. Media practices consist of such activities as reading a book, watching television and film, and listening to the radio, as well as screening a computer, smartphone, or another digital device.¹⁰ Media practices do not merely transmit information but rather perform embodied social activities that users execute with varying degrees of regularity, dexterity, and flair. "Media" here does not mean "the media," as in the diversified communication corporations that influence and even control the dissemination of information, although they obviously influence the message. Instead, media practice indicates "mediation," a term that indicates how different media, such as print, broadcast, and digital, are not neutral conveyers of information but rather play a fundamental role in producing the message. Media practices emerge from a relationship between possible human action, on one hand, and systems of communication, on the other, and describe how social beings, with diverse motives and intentions, tactically use the technologies of communication at hand to make and transform the realities in which they live. This is not a mysterious process. All media practices utilize the material substratum and code that enables communication through the spreading of differences and can be any material object: a word, image, sound, smell, act, object, or even a set of pixels on the screen.¹¹

Cyber Zen focuses on the media practice of "screening," which describes how users engage with their digital devices through a flat digital visual interface. Screening as the main form of digital media practice can be traced at least as far back as the SWAC (Standards Western Automatic Computer) console of 1950

and was very much on the mind of 1970 computer hackers with such monitors as the VT-100. As the American pioneer of digital technology Ted Nelson's 1974 *Computer Lib/Dream Machine* says, "If computers are the wave of the future, Displays are the surfboards."¹² Between 2008 and 2011, when I conducted my research, the screens of digital devices afforded Second Life and other virtual worlds, as well as almost all types of digital media practices. Users rarely pay attention to screens. Screens are such an integral part of contemporary digital media practice it is hard to imagine life without them. Users stare at them so often that they look right through them and hardly see the screen. As the media historian Erkki Huhtamo notes, "How often do users of smartphones think about the curious shifts of perception between nothing less than ontological realms that take place when they move their gaze from the screen to other humans, to the surrounding landscape, to another screen, and back again, in rapid succession?"¹³

As described in the pages that follow, as an integral part of Network Consumer Society, screens do not merely transmit information but generate desire. Network Consumer Society defines late capitalistic forms of consumer-driven corporate free market economy that are intertwined with digital media practices. Here I borrow the Buddhist term *trṣṇā*, often translated as "desire," but which literally means "thirst" and defines an unquenchable craving that is the ultimate cause of suffering, anxiety, and dissatisfaction. Desire immerses users in their screens, but because desires are fleeting and ultimately unsatisfactory, screening never seems to satisfy but leaves users uncertain and anxious.

While on a conventional level Second Life may be imagined as a world that residents create and inhabit, ultimately, like all digital artifacts, Second Life consists of programmable bits displayed across a screen that are used for symbol manipulation. As described in chapter one, because it is a digital media practice, screening differs from analog media practices because it does not merely represent the world but creates simulacra, which are not simply copies but become a truth in their own right. "What is essential" about simulacra, writes the French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, "is that we find in these systems no *prior identity*, no *internal resemblance*."¹⁴ As the French theorist Jean Baudrillard writes, this "inaugurates the era of simulacra and simulation, in which there is no longer a God to recognize his own."¹⁵ The screen marks the boundary between the actual and these digital copies, and through it users emerge from, interface with, and are sutured to digital virtual worlds. In digital communication, suturing refers to the process by which the fabric of the actual world is sewn together with computer worlds.¹⁶ If done well, in virtual world practices users do not even notice the seams. They are invisible.

Why did BodhiDharma go online?

Between 2008 and 2011, I would friend BodhiDharma Rosebud and many other Second Life Buddhist residents. Each had a purpose, a driving need, want, ambition, vulnerability, or goal that drew them inworld. A typical

online silent meditation event attracted around twenty practitioners, who ran the gamut from those dressed in Zen monastic garb to those who looked like they should be out clubbing, elves, *submissives*, and *tinies*, animals that resembled nothing more than animated stuffed toys. On my right was Cassius Lawndale, the founder of Hoben, an Internet designer, talented *builder*, and knowledgeable lay practitioner, whose path inworld had taken the classic route from *grifter* to the leadership position he maintained because of his design skills. Cassius had a passion for spreading the Buddha's Dharma using this virtual new world but often seemed vulnerable because he ruminated about failing. A few rows up sat Human Riddle, who reported to be a famous mindfulness expert in New Zealand and was often at odds with Cassius. Human's ambition was to refine and publicize his practice but keep hidden his own agoraphobia in real life. Behind me was Algamma GossipGirl, a submissive who came to Second Life to explore her sexuality but ended up leading education classes. She felt shame at her *edge play* and would talk about feeling unworthy of love. Leading the meditation was Georgina Florida, who had a stunning avatar. Many suspected her of being a male in real life, a point that would become an issue during a governing crisis. While giving of her time and self, because she seemed afraid to reveal herself, she would never completely open up to the community. In front of me, sitting on one of the cushions made especially for tinies, was Twinkle MoonLight, whose smaller-than-normal avatar was a cute hedgehog. In real life, Twinkle was disabled and used Second Life as her chief form of socializing, and she would become one of the main performers at the Hoben's Friday night campfire concerts. Behind me, smiling at each other, were Tai Buckinghamshire and Venomfangx Bardfield – a pair that had just recently become *partners* and who would rise to leadership positions in the community. They had found romantic love. A few rows distant was the visionary, Mystic Moon; the often angry and *drama*-creating Rasa Vibration; a very classically trained scholar of Theravada Buddhism, Buddha Hat; the Zen pagan, Ashley Lee; the skeptic, Boon Thinker; and the entrepreneurial Zeus Ides.

Cyber Zen may be no substitute for the traditional community, identity, locations, and practices that networked consumerism has dissolved in the actual world. Yet practitioners used Second Life as a social workaroud for creating innovative contemporary spirituality. As I illustrate in chapters three, four, five, and six, Second Life Zen adherents "poach" both popular and canonical Buddhist sources to create innovative groups, fashion residents, build places, and engage in religious events.¹⁷ What congealed this group of residents into a community were spiritual media practices. BodhiDharma was deeply influenced by sixties counterculture, was well read in Eastern philosophy, and in his own playful manner desired an intense and authentic spiritual experience. As he said to me in one of our early conversations on January 10, 2008, "my goal is to wake up. All the rest is extra."

Digital Dharma

Digital Dharma is the Buddhism that users encounter on the screen. Because over the last twenty-five hundred years Buddhism has created techniques to address the suffering caused by desire, as *Cyber Zen* details, it proves particularly apt at resolving user's disease. At Hoben, digital Dharma consisted of mindful media practice, which describes the material systems by which people communicate ultimate reality and thus generate the moral economy of a lived religious world. As detailed in chapter two, derived from the Buddhist notion of *smṛti*, for convert Zen practitioners, mindfulness refers to the nonjudgmental focus on the emotions and thoughts as occurring in the present moment. Mindful media practices were spiritual for adherents, not because they communicated faith in a divine being, but rather because they were techniques for experiencing the empty (*śūnyatā*) nature of existence. For most practitioners, the spiritual goal of Zen practice was ethical. Most adherents stated that because it allowed one to sense the interconnected nature of the world, online Buddhist practice lessened the suffering created by contemporary society by affording personal therapy and generating compassion for others.

In early June 2008, after a late-night online meditation at Hoben, the community leader Georgina Florida privately instant messaged me: "do you wonder why so many Buddhists (Monastics, Dharma teachers) are playing a game called Second Life?" I was taken back for a moment, because while I had attended many meditation sessions that she had led, she had never spoken to me at all and truthfully had all but ignored me. While she had accepted my *friend request* when I first joined the group, I still figured she did not approve of my research. Feeling nervous, like I was being scolded by an elementary school teacher, I answered in public chat, "that is the question that brought me here." Differing from the chaotic communication of most Second Life residents, Georgina's conversation style was slow, as if she was carefully composing and thinking over each line of text. When I was just about to resend the message, Georgina answered, "well there are many reasons but the most obvious one is that most of us Buddhists realized quite quickly that this is a 'great mechanism' for spreading the Dharma."

Dharma is a key concept for many religions – Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism, which originated in South Asia – and is derived from the Sanskrit root *√dhr*, which means "to hold, maintain, and support."¹⁸ For many at Hoben, as a Buddhist practitioner responded on July 20, to my 2010 Second Life Survey (*n*=108), "The Dharma is both the teachings of Buddha and the characteristics of those teachings, i.e. the Four Noble Truths, the Noble Eightfold Path, the Three Marks of Existence, and other guidelines that Buddha gave us." As another practitioner responded to the survey on August 6, Dharma tends to hold three meanings: "the great teaching, the truth, [and] the way the universe functions." Teaching usually described, as another respondent reported on September 4, 2010, "a 'manual' to the path of salvation [which are] Buddha's

words to end suffering." Truth tended to indicate notions of mindfulness. One practitioner responded on July 8 to the question of "what is Dharma?" with "life as it is," and another on July 7 simply said, "Joy." The workings of the universe reflected the concept of the Buddha-nature (*tathāgatagarbha*) and were conceived in two ways: first, as a respondent said on July 7, "that unseen Presence which unifies, guards, directs, and guides all existence and all experience," and, second, as another reported on July 20, "all dharmas are interrelated and spring from matter and time but are ultimately empty."

My study focused on how Second Life practitioners translated Buddhist Dharma into the virtual world. An obviously translated media practice, for instance, is the *gasshō* emoticon, *_/!_*, which reflects the real-life Buddhist gesture of pressing palms together as an act of piety. In one of my first conversations with him, in December 2007, BodhiDharma Rosebud said: "the Dharma is still sorta of evolving. . . India, China, Japan . . . the little 'gasshō' emoticon is used a lot *_/!_* to translate Zen into Second Life." One of the last group messages I received *inworld*, in November 2011, was a group instant message from the resident Human Riddle: "Meditation @ 1 PM SLT, Hoben will be holding 30 minutes of silent meditation. Please join us! *_/!_*." Typed into public chat, or instant messaged, Second Life Buddhist residents used the *_/!_* as a way both of greeting each other, showing thankfulness, and also of marking communications as having particular reverence, such as at the beginning and end of a group meditation.

Digital Dharma consists of material and public media practices. On Second Life, digital Dharma included not just information, such as written texts and videos, but also media practices that communicated objects and events. As described in more detail in chapter five, objects are virtual items created by residents using Second Life's building tools. A few weeks after my encounter with BodhiDharma, my avatar *rezzed* (materialized) and I was standing next to the Buddhist builder Mystic Moon and his partner Fael Eden. In real life, Fael was a Finnish art student whose intricate and hauntingly beautiful avatar played otherworldly music on a flute. On Mystic's back was a spinning *dharmachakra*, or dharma wheel. After I had praised its design, Mystic said in chat, "it was the first thing I built in Second Life. It represents the Eight Fold Path." Fael privately instant messaged me, "and the Buddha's teachings in the world. It's cool isn't it?"

Interdependent with objects were Second Life events. As described in chapter six, events at Hoben included *campfire concerts*, dharma and book discussions, dharma talks and interviews, and more rarely weddings and memorials. By far the most prevalent and significant practice, however, was silent online meditation, which describes a media practice in which users ressed their avatars for twenty to thirty minutes on virtual cushions while they meditated in real life in front of their computer screens. For the vast majority of Hoben community members, silent online meditation was seen as the central focus of their digital Dharma. As a survey respondent wrote on July 8, 2010, "It takes Practice to

understand and engage in Dharma." Dharma was not perceived by practitioners to involve faith in supernatural beings. As another respondent said on July 7, Dharma "doesn't matter who wrote it, or when, or where. The core teachings are what matter and they do serve to improve the quality of life. They are rational, testable and effective."

As investigated in the pages that follow, digital Dharma afforded being mindful of the world and oneself as "empty" (*śūnyatā*). For adherents, emptiness was reported not as a sui generis static void standing behind the veil of the illusion. There was no Great Emptiness out there somewhere to be found. Instead, as the resident Human Riddle stated, "emptiness is right here, right now." Emptiness indicated the mindful perception that reality has no static intrinsic essence and is constituted by networks of codependent human and nonhuman elements. Online practice was significant for practitioners because it relieved the suffering of living in a highly mediated consumer society and offered up alternative possibilities for emergent communities, identities, locations, and spiritual practices.

Spirituality

Dharma is usually translated into English as "religion," a term that undergirds this research but bends under the weight of the topic. As used in *Cyber Zen's* analysis, the category of religion describes the media practices by which Second Life groups engaged with what they perceived as "ultimate reality," those ontological models that included both the content of what is ultimately real and what is not but also the larger cultural matrix that shapes the abstract idea of reality itself. By giving a face to a group's ultimate reality, religious practice engages their authentic desires – those deeper existential needs that arise from the very social condition of being human. My research team's use of the term, however, was often at odds with most Second Life Buddhist practitioners, who often understood "religion" as being opposed to "spirituality." Frequently, Buddhist practitioners used "religion" to indicate oppressive forms of organized institutions that they perceived as having lost their authentic search for divine expression, while "spirituality" was used to designate a deeply personal, existential, unique anti-institutional focus on personal exploration and spontaneity. In what follows, I attempt to stay as close as possible to Second Life Buddhistemic or insider use of the terms. I use "religion" to describe institutions and "spirituality" to describe the media practices by which users report personal engagement with Buddhist Dharma. To be clear, *Cyber Zen* argues for an essential definition neither for religion nor for spirituality. Rather, my aim is to investigate, explain, and analyze how the categories were used and lived in the virtual world. Spirituality and religion did not just happen in people's minds but rather by necessity as observable media practices that played out as a web of communication across the screen.¹⁹

At Hoben, spirituality was not ideological false consciousness. Rather, spiritual media practices screened a user's desire, creating moral economies that

played a part in producing a user's lived reality. Spiritual media practices enabled residents and groups to engage authentically with what they perceived as their ultimate reality, which at Hoben usually engaged notions of suffering. Many residents stressed that the point of Buddhist practice was not to locate a dogmatic "religious truth" but to end suffering. The Buddhist gardener Ashley Lee's profile read, "Pain is inevitable. Suffering arises from grasping and Desire. Follow the path and be free of suffering [capitalization in original]." Adherents reported that suffering was caused by a nonmundful view of the world in which people clung to perceived lacks. The meditation note card "Stillness Speaks" goes on to describe desire as "the need to add something to yourself in order to be yourself more fully. All fear is the fear of losing something and thereby becoming diminished and being less." Many wide-ranging examples, often from outside classical Buddhist sources, were given to support this claim. For instance, the "Stillness Speaks" note card mixed Buddhist thought with quotes by the popular teacher Eckhart Tolle to argue that "most people's lives are run by desire and fear." Third, spirituality at Hoben served as a support for people's everyday life by offering what was felt to be ultimately lacking. From a convert Buddhist perspective, users are always already alienated in the actual world.

As reflected in the account of Gautama Buddha and the "Four Sights," many Buddhist residents saw existential suffering arising not out of any particular lack but out of the very existential human conditions of old age, sickness, and death. As a note card given to me by the resident Dubhshaine Gustafson, titled "The First Noble Truth" and attributed to the Tibetan Buddhist lama Gelek Rimpoche, read, "We have so much dissatisfaction in our lives. We are dissatisfied with our achievements and with everything else. This dissatisfaction really brings pain into our lives, in addition to the usual pain and misery of sickness and aging."²⁰ For many, however, the statement from *The Wheel of Law* (Dharmakapavartana Sūtra) "that all life is suffering" appeared, as the resident Algama GossipGirl declared, "a little too *dharma*-queenish." Rather than some overwhelming anguish, residents described suffering as a subtle, barely discernible, quality of unease. As a meditation note card, handed out on April 9, 2009, titled "The Mind That Suffers" and attributed to the Buddhist author Phillip Moffitt, reads,

How often in your adult life have you experienced the queasiness and unease that come from a sense of meaninglessness in your life? Think of all those occasions when you felt as though you were wasting your life, or sleepwalking through it, or not living from your deepest, most heartfelt sense of yourself.²¹

Silent spiritual media practices

Cyber Zen theorizes Second Life's digital Dharma as a spiritual media practice by which residents communicate their ultimate reality so as to create moral economies that address the suffering in their lives. As the core of Buddhism, "suffering" is usually indicated as *dukkha*, which literally means being stuck but

is usually translated into English as 'anxiety,' 'stress,' 'unsatisfactoriness,' or 'dis-ease.' As I investigate below, the difficulty the study encountered is that Second Life Zen was a silent media practice. How can one analyze what is not there? I contend silence is not simply the absence of information. Silence's significance is produced by media practices that have different connotations, depending on their cultural context and media environment. I asked the Hoben leader Georgina Floridá to expand on how Second Life helped spread the Dharma. She answered, "Many are thirsting for knowledge (contact) and are in isolation; this provides a *sangha* [community] and teachings for them. Also the community here in Second Life accepts people who do not fit the standard mold." After a long pause, she added, "most of all it helps to be aware of silence."

Silence appears at first an extremely obvious form of communication, or lack of communication, but its analysis brings out that it is a very strange thing, abounding in spiritual subtleties and theological niceties. I asked BodhiDharma Rosebud directly the night I first met him and a frustrating number of nights afterwards why he practiced online, but he never actually answered. Kind and wise, BodhiDharma frequently seemed absentminded, because in real life he was a barista and had to be AFK (away from keyboard) so he could pull espresso for his customers. Also, he relished his trickster character and enjoyed nothing more than answering questions with further riddles. On January 15, 2007, I asked him, "Why did you come to Second Life?" to which he answered, "the oak tree in the courtyard. Yesssss?" BodhiDharma's insistence on remaining silent about his practice proved to be a general pattern in the community's communication. For most practitioners, to talk about Zen was to miss the point of practicing it. As a July 7, 2008, meditation note card read, "If you must insist on words, then Zen is an elephant copulating with a flea."

Silence is not simply an absence of sound that somehow exists outside of language, nor does silence have a universal meaning that conveys the same significance in different social settings. Silence in an elevator has different meanings from silence next to a grave. *Cyber Zen* argues that silence is produced from specific media practices that have different connotations depending on their cultural context. Accordingly, to understand silence, researchers cannot simply record a lack of content but need to contextualize it in a media environment. When I asked Georgina what silence meant, I felt like I could feel her sigh, and then she wrote simply "being mindful." When I asked her to describe mindfulness, rather than answering directly, she sent me a note card titled, "Meditation, Simple Breathing," and then logged off. The note card informed me to "follow your breath, in and out."

The problem of unreality

I had met BodhiDharma Rosebud the day before at a *sandbox*, a region in the virtual world where residents can rez virtual objects, unpack boxes filled with purchases, and experiment creating their own inworld content. At the time I

was only six days old, still just a struggling *noobie* concerned mostly with acquiring the basic skills needed to survive my second life. The virtual world was still new to me and dominated by a chaotic mix of perceptions, feelings, and wants. I had not sought him out and had no intention at that time to study Buddhism in Second Life. BodhiDharma had grabbed my attention because his avatar was not the typical, young and beautiful, often highly sexualized, idealized convention common to the virtual world. He was not in bear form but was fashioned as an almost hunched-over, elderly, solemn-looking human, with a bald head and large Gandhi-like spectacles, dressed in full black Zen Buddhist robes. As discussed in chapter four, I asked him about his Buddhist robes, which led to an hour and a half long conversation. I told him that I taught Religion Studies at a North Carolina state university, about my own long but often lagging meditation practice, and that I had been fascinated by computer worlds since I played the digital game *Colossal Cave Adventure* as a child.²² I learned that he had been using Second Life for a just under a year, was in his early sixties, lived in a small town in Alaska, and in real life was the only Buddhist practitioner for hundreds of miles. About forty minutes into the conversation, to prove that he was from Alaska he playfully changed into his bear form.

My conversation with BodhiDharma begged for an interrogation that promised to illuminate the voices and agency of online spiritual practitioners, and the role of religion in contemporary popular culture. When I looked for analysis of digital Dharma, however, I found sources sadly lacking. Rather than approaching Second Life and convert Buddhism as a media practice that many adherents find intellectually pleasurable and spiritually satisfying, digital Dharma and other forms of online spiritual practice seemed to exist in the mass media and academic imagination as a conundrum to be solved, as a phenomenon to be explained away rather than analyzed and understood. The usual way to handle virtual world religious practice is to question its reality. As a May 2007 *NBC Nightly News* segment, "Religion Online and in Second Life," asks, "Is this real religion? Can there be a church if you do not have flesh and blood interaction?"²³ A 2007 *Los Angeles Times* article, "It's Easter: Shall We Gather at the Desktops?" maintained that believers on Second Life should find more enriching ways to spend Easter Sunday than typing out commands to make their avatars pray.²⁴

On the surface, the question of reality seems to address physicality. Yet all religious media practices, except for small groups of cohabiting worshippers, and perhaps even these, are mediated.²⁵ Even face-to-face interaction requires speech and bodily gestures that depend upon systems of communication that require material signs and humanly evolved semiotic code. Moreover, religious mediation is not simply a contemporary phenomenon and can be found in Early Christian use of epistles and in the Buddhist circulation of scripture and images. The difficulty with declaring online religious practice unreal, however, is that whether one likes it or not, people are using Second Life and other digital media for religious practice, religious communities do exist in virtual worlds,

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and residents do perceive the platform as an authentic place of worship. Telling online practitioners that what they practice is unreal is like telling a bumblebee that it cannot fly. Instead, under the guise of "reality," what is being expressed is a moral objection to online religion, spiritual practices that are practiced primarily on digital media.²⁶ The objection is not that these media practices do not exist, but that they should not be happening. One cannot deny that virtual digital media practitioners engage in something they are calling religion, and these practices exist as part of a lived material reality. The screens on which users type, click, and tap are as materially existent as any place of worship or any book of scripture.

Screened religion is often reduced to simulacrum. Yet, like a magician's sleight of hand, the question of reality camouflages the iconoclast's ethical doubt about the proper use of media for religious practice behind an inquiry of physical presence. The problem of unreality arises because popular digital religious media practices often poach for spiritual reasons contemporary popular images and concepts drawn from sources that elites find troubling.²⁷ Scholars of religion would question the authenticity neither of canonical scripture nor of premodern and non-Western groups and in fact often go out of their way to be respectful of the beliefs of others. For many scholars, however, popular religious practices exist in an academic uncanny valley because these popular forms of spirituality look almost, but not quite, legitimate.²⁸ Second, popular spirituality has always been suspect, yet digital media accelerate cultural poaching because, unlike analog forms, their procession of simulacra affords endless copies.²⁹ Screening differs from previous media practices because it does not merely represent the original source but rather displays copies that become a reality in their own right.³⁰ Because they are substitutions that replace the original, these digital simulacra are "hyper-real," to borrow a phrase from the French cultural theorist Jean Baudrillard.³¹ Like Aaron and the Golden Calf, photographs, and margarine, the moral danger is that the unwashed masses will come to prefer the humanly constructed imitation to the genuine original. Yet, there is no natural reason that the original ought to be more authentic than the copy. Questioning the reality of online religious practice is a form of iconoclasm, the rejection or destruction of religious images as heretical.³²

Digital Dharma critics frequently assume that digital religion is inherently alienating because as a simulacrum it robs users of their humanity and connection to reality.³³ As my research illustrates, however, such alienation did not hold for most Second Life residents, who often found the creativity and alternative roles opened up by the virtual world to be liberating.³⁴ Rather than being victims seduced by alienating media practices, many Second Life users found digital media to be empowering and a central part of their spirituality. In an interview from June 23, 2009, the tiny Hoben community member, Twinkle MoonLight, who was often in the shape of a hedgehog, told me, "I thought I was here for fun and games," but my time on Second Life has "turned out to be a spiritual journey which has changed me in ways I could not imagine." I asked

her "how?" "This might be a fantasy world, but fantasy and spirituality can mix together in wonderful ways."

Rather than signifying any content, accusations of unreality are a way of explaining away digital Dharma that marginalizes and trivializes practices religiously significant to the people who actually adhere to them. Scholars of religion need not be caretakers of digital religion, but they should walk in the shoes or at least type on the keyboards of those who practice it. Buddhist practitioners have long journeyed to a wide variety of what they perceived as spiritual destinations. No one can deny that with the onset of digital media, many types of media practices, while only tethered to the actual world, are often coded as Buddhist. Rather than a matter of fact, the question of "reality" asserts a value, or rather, a particular hierarchy of values. By proclaiming online practice as "unreal," critics silence adherents without having to actually engage with them. The proclamation of something as unreal is a rhetorical strategy that protects critics' own view of reality from the abnormal and threatening, which transgresses the cultural hierarchies that critics have a vested interest in maintaining.

Network consumer virtual orientalism

As theorized in chapter one and described in chapter two, often "unreality" hides the accusation that digital Dharma is a form of Network Consumer virtual Orientalism.³⁵ As the English Buddhist Richard King writes in "Spirituality and the Privatization of Asian Wisdom Traditions," often "historically rich and complex traditions are exploited by a selective re-packaging of the tradition, which is then sold as the 'real thing.'"³⁶ In a similar fashion, the Slovenian cultural critic Slavoj Žižek perceives "Western Buddhists" as a threat because they embody the spirit of Network Consumer Society.³⁷ He argues that convert Buddhism is the new opium of the people, "the imaginary supplement to terrestrial misery." Particularly, "the 'Western Buddhist' meditative stance is arguably the most efficient way for us to fully participate in capitalist dynamics while retaining the appearance of mental sanity."³⁸ For better or worse, the critics' rejection of reality is actually a moral objection that accuses online practices of being inauthentic because they are popular simulacra, unsatisfactory consumer digital forgeries. Critics' objections usually include one of two accusations: either digital Dharma is a contemporary orientalist practice or it is a product of Network Consumer Society. Orientalism describes the network of media practices employed by European culture to divide the globe into two unequal halves, "East" and "West," and employs this epistemological framework to dominate non-European people and places.³⁹

Because it untethers Dharma from a referent, digital media often accelerate convert Buddhism's perceived inadequacies. The scholar of religion Jane Iwamura argues, in *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture*, that orientalism did not disappear in the postcolonial period starting after World War II. The new American orientalism just became more covert than

its European predecessors, operating through a network of popular mass media that displays "Asia" in print, broadcast, and now online. In the contemporary American version, which Iwamura describes as "virtual orientalism," actual people and Asian phenomena become even more detached from their representations and "within this hyperreal environment, orientalized stereotypes begin to take on their own reality and justify their own truths."⁴⁰

To be clear, Asian lives matter. *Cyber Zen* denies neither that convert Buddhism is an ideological symptom of Network Consumer Society nor that its practices are a popular form of orientalism. I contend that digital Dharma is both a symptom of and response to the suffering generated by a Network Consumer life and that a romanticized fantasy about Asia plays a key role in these practices. For many convert Buddhists, Asia remains deeply embedded in clichéd and shorthand forms in their practice, which often takes on a manifest destiny that overwrites and dislodges Asian American practices as well as continues racist stereotypes.⁴¹

I do, however, counter the notion that digital Dharma's practices are unreal. Although virtual and mostly performed by middle-class white adherents, these are actual people engaging in actual religious practices that obviously fill a craving for those who use them. Scholars may disagree about digital Dharma on moral grounds, yet such critics should not throw out the baby with the bath water. There is an increasing number of actual human beings behind the keyboards whose religious practices deserve to be fairly investigated and understood. One does not need to be an advocate, yet the investigation does require an alternative approach to Second Life residents, and convert Buddhist practitioners more generally, which does not posit them as isolated social misfits, unknowing orientalist, or mindless consumers. Behind the exotic media stereotypes, which are often uncritically perpetuated by academics, lies a largely unexamined territory of popular forms of authentic spirituality. In fact, I contend that the most effective means to counter convert Buddhist shortcomings is not to posit a transhistorical, self-identical Dharma that has moved from one culture to another, unchanged through the vicissitudes of time.⁴² Rather, I argue that convert Buddhism needs to be decentered and provincialized, illustrating that its form of practice, while real and authentic for those who use it, is just one of the many actors on the world stage.⁴³

Authenticity

To analyze Second Life Buddhist media practices, we need to reframe the problem of "unreality" as a question of "authenticity."⁴⁴ Most in the Hoben community, and this included BodhiDharma Rosebud, saw Second Life Buddhism not as a final remedy but as a contemporary "workaround" and would answer the question of authenticity with a qualified yes. A "workaround" is a computer science term describing a temporary fix and suggests that a final answer is still needed. While often not elegant, frequently workarounds

are creative solutions that rethink the problem in innovative ways. As Cassius Lawndale said in an interview from June 2009, "I am torn in my own feelings about the platform. On the one hand I find I enjoy it and that I've made some good friends, but at some level it also feels destructive and a bit contrived or senseless. Kind of like everything here is fluff!" In an interview from May 21, 2009, I asked the Hoben practitioner Ashley Lee why she practiced in Second Life. She answered, "to be awake, like the Buddha." I asked her if "her understanding changed between real life and Second Life?" There was a long pause, and then she replied, "It's more or less the same. Although it might be harder than in real life." Other adherents actually thought that Second Life intensified their practice. As the practitioner Nanda Westland said in conversation on June 21, 2009, "I think here the limitations of keyboard and screen help by limiting our awareness and help to be mindful. We therefore get to focus on less intense complexities, and sometimes get to know ourselves better as a result."

If authenticity refers to fidelity to an original source, then a meditating online bear has at best only a family resemblance to canonical Asian sources.⁴⁵ A fidelity notion of authenticity models religious communication on a "transmission theory" that reduces media practices to broadcasting content. In such a case, authentic religious communication can only be that which filters out the background noise so as to most accurately reproduce an original informational source.⁴⁶ Formed from a metaphor of transportation, in the transmission model communication imparts, sends, and transmits information to others like water in a pipe or, better yet, like commodities along a factory's conveyor belt. The transmission theory of authenticity was active at Hoben, and one can find that lead-ers, particularly Cassius Lawndale, made numerous attempts to develop official links with real-life Zen centers. As he said in an interview from September 23, 2009, "our goal is to integrate as many aspects of real life teachings and practice into Second Life – including streaming audio talks, live discussions, meditation, temple building (virtual preservation, if you will)." Cassius was concerned that Buddhism on Second Life was "not transparent enough for people who have no real idea about Buddhism." He maintained that the "focus should be more on information that takes away the usual false views, like that Buddha is a god, and whatnot."

The problem with a fidelity model of authenticity is that there has never been an original Buddhist source. Because all traditions are humanly constructed, ultimately the original Buddhism eludes any empirical search. As the Buddhistologist David McMahan reminds us, in *The Making of Buddhist Modernism*, there has never been a "pure" Buddhism; even the canonical Asian traditions are a "hybrid of what were already hybrid."⁴⁷ As is true of all living religions, while its practitioners strive to retain a perceived connection with the origins of a tradition, Buddhism has never been fixed or static but instead has continued to evolve and adapt to changing attitudes and circumstances. Buddhism has been modified and translated into new cultures wherever it has spread, and it is

not surprising that post-World War II America has altered and crafted a unique form of Zen for a specific set of social needs. "Or, put another way," as Bernard Faure writes, in *Unmasking Buddhism*, "Buddhism is not an essence in itself, it is something Buddhists do."⁴⁸

Cybernetic entanglement

Buddhist Dharma's centers are as plural and diverse as its margins, and Buddhist practices emerge differently depending on the historic context and media landscape. Often assumed to be either shallowly postmodern or deeply archaic, the genealogy of convert Buddhism exists in a middle realm, having only constituted a coherent web of practices since the end of World War II. Throughout its history, as Buddhism spread to new lands, it has been shaped by the cultures it encountered, finding indigenous systems to translate its practices to the local desires. In postwar America, I argue that convert Buddhism became entangled with cybernetics, the scientific study of systems, particularly feedback loops. In particular, *Cyber Zen* illustrates how convert Zen has used cybernetic procedures to translate Buddhist concepts into popular culture. In the postwar period, cybernetics viewed the world as systems that contained individuals, societies, and ecosystems and was deeply influential in the creation of computers and digital media. The term "cybernetics" was popularized in 1948 by the American mathematician and philosopher Norbert Wiener in his seminal work *Cybernetics: Or the Control of and Communication of Animal and Machine*. Wiener forged "cybernetics" from the Greek *kybernetes* (steersmen) and defines it as "the entire field of control and communication theory, whether in the machine or animal."⁴⁹ Principally, as I trace in chapter two, convert Zen has a genealogy leading from late 1940s cybernetic thought through Alan Watts, the Beats, California's sixties counterculture, the work of Robert Pirsig and, finally, to the 1980s corporate poaching of the concept of mindfulness.

As America became the postwar consumer nation, cybernetics offered a frame on which Buddhist concepts and practices were hung and offered a way for practitioners to be in the consumer economy but perceive themselves to be outside of it. As hostilities ended in World War II, cybernetics promised not just a new science, but as the American engineer and head of the United States Office of Scientific Research, Vannevar Bush, wrote in *As We May Think*, an entire "new relationship between thinking man and the sum of our knowledge."⁵⁰ In *Cybernetics*, Norbert Wiener argued that cybernetics differed from hard empirical sciences because the focus was not on material form but rather on networks of organization, patterns, and communication made up of users and machines. Such systems can be rain forests, the nervous system, brain and sense organs, and the relationship between mechanical-electrical communication networks such as computers and their users. "In this view," as the postmodern literary critic Katherine

Hayle writes in *How We Became Posthuman*, "a universal informational code underlies the structure of matter, energy, spacetime – indeed, of everything that exists."⁵¹

Key to cybernetics' entanglement with Buddhism is the spiritualization of the Greek concept of *kybernetēs*, "steersman, governor, pilot, or rudder," and its use to translate the concepts of no-self (*anātman*), delusion (*avidyā*), and mindfulness. As I suggest in the pages that follow, the self-aware steersman becomes the model for the mindful Buddhist practitioner sitting on his or her meditation cushion. The contemporary usage of "cybernetics" stems from the mid-twentieth century but can be traced back to Plato's *The Alcibiades*, where it signifies "the study of self-governance."⁵² As the cybernetic theorist Stafford Beer writes in "Cybernetics and the Knowledge of God," "Now a man is himself part of a large system, namely the universe, which is . . . in control."⁵³ Rather than being outside the system, in cybernetic thought the self-aware agent is conceived as an integral part of it and as actually constituted by the system. In *Cybernetics*, Wiener describes how humans are part of a link of information systems, "in what we shall from now on call the chain of feedback."⁵⁴ Cybernetics was not just a scientific theory but comprised an ontological view of how the world worked, a model of reality that pictured the world as a set of self-generating systems governed by a mindful steersman who regulated the operation. The classic example is the heating system of a house. The resident, who feels cold, turns up the thermostat, which then changes the state of the furnace. After a while the steersman may start to feel overly warm and turns the thermostat down, which then again changes the state of the system (Figure 1.2).

To be clear, *Cyber Zen* does not reduce postwar American Buddhism to cybernetic thought (or vice versa for that matter), but rather suggests in a complex feedback loop that cybernetic pragmatic procedural ontology was used to translate Buddhist terms into popular American culture, and this folded back and influenced how cybernetic practices were understood. I call this process "social entanglement." As I argue in chapter two, epistemologically "entanglement"

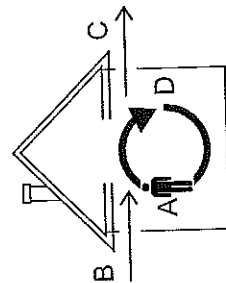


Figure 1.2 Cybernetic system compared with house with thermostat. (A) Steersman sets the temperature, which is (B) affected by input from environment and (C) output to environment but is regulated by (D) the thermostat.

has links to Buddhism and digital media. I poach the concept of entanglement, however, from quantum physics, where it is used to describe pairs of particles that interact in ways such that the state of each particle cannot be described independently – instead, each must be described as part of the system as a whole.⁵⁵ In entangled systems, the behavior of the two is different from the juxtaposition of the behaviors of each considered alone.

An existential approach to spiritual authenticity

As described above, if authenticity is approached as fidelity to canonical Asian sources, then Second Life Zen has at best a family resemblance. On the other hand, however, if authenticity refers to a cultural model of media practices that allow users to existentially explore and create alternative identities and communities in relation to what they perceive as divine, then the virtual world can be considered authentic.⁵⁶ In such a case, much online Buddhist practice, to borrow a phrase from the scholar of comparative religion David Chidester, proves an “authentic fake.”⁵⁷ “Existential” describes media practices that allow the acting, feeling, living person to build meaningful realities.⁵⁸ A cultural theory of communication perceives lived reality as jointly constituted over time by people through media practices and authenticity as how effective media practices are at affording the existential construction and maintenance of these livable worlds.⁵⁹ A cultural model of communication does not filter out change as noise but theorizes authentic religious world construction as a dialectic between tradition and innovation. An existential approach to authenticity explores how adherents frequently adopt, integrate, and adapt media practices in particular ways so that they fit more cohesively with the moral life and expectations of the communities with which they are affiliated.⁶⁰

In Second Life, such pragmatic existential workarounds of authenticity were often coded as “spirituality.” Frequently dressed up in Eastern clothing, Second Life spirituality repeatedly reflected popularized versions of existentialist philosophy, which holds that philosophy begins with the human subject, not just logical thought, but the acting, feeling living person. As the Danish philosopher and theologian Søren Kierkegaard suggests, authenticity lies in the power of each of us to “become what one is.”⁶¹ As the German cultural critic Erich Fromm writes in *Escape from Freedom*, people are authentic when they are “free and not alone,” “critical and yet not filled with doubts.”⁶² In such a case, authenticity arises when people realize their true selves in a spontaneity that counters the compulsive activity of the automaton. It is through authentic lives that people shoulder the burden of being truly and fully human. As Fromm maintains, only if one “has become transparent to [oneself], and only if the different spheres of life have reached fundamental integration, is spontaneous activity possible.”⁶³

The existential approach to authenticity undergirded most of Second Life’s religious media practices and relied on a cultural model of communication.

In a cultural model of communication, media practices do not simply transmit information but communicate through the play between the affordance of material sign systems and the agency of users as well as the historical, social, and cultural context of their use.⁶⁴ From an existential standpoint, authenticity does not just describe received fidelity to tradition but also indicates a morality that results from authentic living. Spiritual existential authenticity describes how people and groups act in accordance with desires, motives, ideals, or beliefs that express, as the resident Ashley Lee said, “who they really are.” For many Buddhist residents, Second Life practice is authentic exactly because it is beneficial to their lives. “The Point” as BodhiDharma Rosebud said in an early interview “is not what some old fart in India said or did not say. It is to wake up and end suffering.” Consider for, instance, a note card handed to me before a meditation event titled “Suicide Solution” and excerpted from the Buddhist author Noah Levine’s *Dharma Punx*: “Nothing I have been doing has worked, and there is nowhere else to turn, so I guess this is my best bet. The meditations do seem to help a little, at least a few seconds here and there; when I am able to focus on my breath I feel better and forget that I’m locked up.”⁶⁵

Scope of the study

In order to understand what digital Dharma is, does, and means in a developed contemporary networked society, *Cyber Zen* uses an ethnographic method to explore the intersection of digital media, Buddhism, and popular culture. As described in the chapter on method, a virtual ethnography’s effectiveness emerges from the everyday nitty-gritty spade work of exploration, which does not just answer known unknowns but uncovers unknown unknowns. The scope of *Cyber Zen* developed not from what I had calculated or hypothesized about before entering the field but emerged out of thickly described emic categories gleaned from participant observation of Second Life’s convert Zen Buddhism. I logged onto Second Life interested in identity and community but ultimately came away with an understanding of the spiritual reasons why Hoben’s residents, such as BodhiDharma Rosebud, found digital Dharma not only possible but also desirable.

The volume’s first two chapters lay out the context of the study. The first chapter explores the media practices that produce the virtual world of Second Life. If one leans back from the keyboard when using Second Life, it is not immediately clear how the pixels on the screen are any different from other types of “digital media” enabled by the culture of Digital Utopianism. To analyze how the flat pixels are transformed into a three-dimensional virtual world, the study refracts an analysis through Second Life’s tag line, “Your World, Your Imagination.” I argue that “World” indicates digital screening practices indebted to the history of the concept of cyberspace. “Imagination” describes the platform’s creative software tools that use digital media affordances to enable resident fantasies. The “your” displays the tension between Network

Consumer Society's promise of unlimited imagination and alienating limitations of its actual media practices. The significance of the chapter is that it demystifies virtual worlds and illustrates that their immersive qualities are the outcome of specific and historically contextualized media practices.

As mentioned above, the volume's second chapter describes convert Zen Buddhism on Second Life as a practice-oriented spirituality. The problem I encountered was that the media practices were silent and thus difficult to analyze. Using a sign titled "Understanding the Path of Practice," which hung in Hoben's meditation hall, the chapter makes two claims. First, I straightforwardly theorize Second Life convert Zen as spiritual practices that enable residents to engage authentically with what they perceive as divine and thereby generate a moral economy that emerges from and engages with what they feel as ultimately significant in their lives. Second, I maintain that convert Zen flourishes on Second Life because, like virtual worlds, it has its historic roots in postwar American cybernetics. I trace convert Zen from the cybernetic thought of the late 1940s through to its poaching by corporate consumerism in the late 1980s. What is at stake is the ability to understand convert Zen as an existentially authentic media practice and not reduce it to Network Consumer ideology or a popular form of orientalism.

The body of this volume, chapters three through six, employs key terms from Second Life's search engine to detail the media practices from which Second Life Zen emerged. Chapter three analyzes "groups," which are the most basic and stable Second Life social unit. The chapter makes two claims. First, it argues that the communal sentiment created by silent online meditation afforded authentic community. Second, it maintains that the groups formed are best understood as "cloud communities," a term that refers to online digital groups that meet primarily online and usually are governed through network authority. Network authority rises from consensual media interactions consisting of peer-to-peer egalitarian social ties that mimic "cybernetic management," a term that describes a networked, entrepreneurial, noncentralized conception of personal interrelationships whose organizational style can be traced back to 1920 and Bell Laboratories.

Chapter four investigates "people," a Second Life search category for residents, a term developed by the virtual world's corporate owners, Linden Lab, to describe users. Frequently, discussions of online identity either frame it as an alienating dystopia or as a utopic place of endless identity play. Focusing on how free virtual monk robes fashion gender, the chapter takes a middle path and argues that residents are cybersocial beings that are activated in the virtual world by the feedback between "user" and "avatar." The chapter contends that the robes at Hoben liberated female avatars both politically and spiritually. On a political level, the robes allowed female avatars to fashion online identities that traversed Second Life's intense heteronormativity, media practices that divide people into complementary genders and assert heterosexuality as normative. On a spiritual level, by affording an experience of the empty nature

of gender, the robes enabled a glimpse of the empty nature of the lived world more generally.

Chapter five studies "place," a term that refers to the regions that constitute Second Life's land. Using building tools that are part of Second Life viewer software, residents can create almost any environment they imagine. I argue that Hoben residents transformed the raw abstract potential of cyberspace into a place because virtual bodies interacted with virtual objects that afforded immersion and social relationships. Understanding how Zen practitioners built an existentially authentic spiritual place is significant because Second Life allowed the screening of convert Buddhist imagination. Many Second Life Buddhist practitioners wanted a virtual place that did not merely copy the actual world, but as the resident Mystic Moon declared, was "better than real life." I argue that Hoben's spiritual *builds* were "third places," which refers to social locations that are liminal alternatives between work and home, which in contemporary society are composed of a hybrid mix of everyday media practices and real-life locations.

The final category, "events," indicates performances and other types of religious practice, such as silent meditation. The chapter contends that Hoben's main spiritual events consisted of online meditation that communicated silence through ritualized procedural media practices that disrupted typical practices and engaged these gaps with the group's perception of the ultimate reality. To make sense of the silence of online meditation events, the chapter makes three arguments. First, the chapter asserts that online silent meditation is a media practice dependent upon both on- and offline bodies that are bridged by virtual meditation cushions. Second, the chapter argues that online silent meditation is a ritualized procedural process, which, by doing "nothing," connotes mindfulness. Finally, the chapter suggests that Hoben's contemporary practice of online silent meditation, while it has a family resemblance to the Buddhist concept of *ānāpānasmṛti* (mindfulness of breathing) and is informed by Protestant rejection of ritual and celebration of inner experience, has since the 1950s been entangled with the cybernetic conception of the "steersman" (*kybernētēs*).

The book's conclusion examines the ontological conditions that made cyber Zen not only possible but desirable. Spiritual screening media practices operate both as a surface onto which to project a group's ultimate concern and also as a filter that polices a group's moral world. Such screening is not only a matter of epistemology but ultimately of ethics. The conclusion argues that to understand Hoben's silence, researchers need to analyze the gaps in the virtual world's media practices. In actuality, Second Life consists of a flat screen of pixels that users manipulate through digital media practices. By making the process conspicuous, Second Life's gaps, its stutters and interruptions, reveal how these media practices employ desire to transmute the screen into something fantasized as both almost and also more real than the actual world. I contend that the ultimate significance of Hoben's silent practice lies neither in the virtual nor in the actual but in the gap produced between the two. To understand what

cyber Zen means to practitioners, I investigate these gaps in Second Life's media practices so as to map Second Life's Zen community's understanding of ultimate reality itself.

Conclusion

At the end of our conversation at the sandbox, BodhiDharma Rosebud invited me to come to sit silent meditation with what he called the other "Zennies." He must have sensed my skepticism, because he added, "some of [Second Life practice] is kinda goofy . . . But it has potential. It is still evolving." There is no doubt that too many online practices such as silent meditation are trivial at best and maybe even harmful because they distract users from real-life practice. As Network Consumer Society simulacra, and having at best only a family resemblance to canonical Asian practices, a nagging suspicion remains that there must be more authentic ways to practice Buddhism than typing on a keyboard sitting in front of a screen. The problem, however, as seen by BodhiDharma's invitation to meditate online, is that whether critics like it or not, people are using digital media for Buddhist practice. As the chapters below describe, Buddhist adherents are forming communities, finding identities, building locations, and holding events online. BodhiDharma *poofed*, or suddenly teleported away. He soon sent me an instant message with a *teleportation* invite. Because I did not know BodhiDharma at the time, and because I had learned that accepting such invites could often lead to weird encounters, I hesitated. Finally, taking a chance, I clicked the invite. I – or really my research avatar Clint Clavenham – materialized at Hoben. By looking at the map I could tell that a number of residents were already at the nearby zendo (meditation hall). In front of me stood a wooden building, through the glass door of which I could see a long wooden altar with incense, candles, flowers, and a large statue of Shakyamuni Buddha. I pushed through the door and found rows of meditation cushions (*zafus*) that were laid out in semicircular lines. BodhiDharma greeted me with a *gasshō*, a gesture of palms together and fingers pointing upwards in prayer position, which is represented both by avatar gesture and also by the emoticon “_/_.”

Cyber Zen investigates my time in Second Life. What is at stake is the radical position that users of digital media do not stop being human when they log on and that in contemporary popular culture religion plays a key role in determining people's humanity.⁶⁶ Often in religious studies, popular everyday human life goes unexamined, and the essence of being human is assumed to exist only in canonical scripture. Yet ignoring digital popular culture camouflages under our collective noses the very contemporary practices that offer the resources to afford our humanity.⁶⁷ Often digital Dharma consists of temporary work-arounds, which are fragile because once they are gone they leave no traces. In real life, lost cultures at least leave archeological remains; in Second Life, when a region is abandoned all that is left is a blank screen. As a type of “salvage

ethnography,” *Cyber Zen* recorded these emerging digital cultures before they were discarded like an unreadable floppy disk.⁶⁸

Salvaging these fragile human creations was significant, because Second Life Zen Buddhist practice expands our understanding of the relationship between religion and what it means to be human in the past, present, and future. *Cyber Zen* illuminates the past because it shows that the creation of virtual worlds has always been a key aspect of religion. Cyberspace is only different in degree from earlier media. In fact, digital media did not create virtual worlds: people and communities have always to some extent been virtual, and religion has been the social arena where people have worked out many of their virtual realities. Indeed, religion in Second Life is only possible because the platform reworks the virtuality of that which has already characterized much of what it means to practice religion.

Because popular digital media practices reveal contemporary religiosity, Second Life also displays what it means to be human in the developed world of the late 2000s. My research team's time in Second Life recorded a moment of transition, in which the old traditions were dissolving into pixels, and it was not clear what types of practice users were going to negotiate to replace it. Just as the print and broadcast communications caused a profound transformation of society, the emergence of virtual worlds and other digital media has brought about profound renovations in everyday life. Yet virtual worlds are not simply reflections, which one sees looking straight on. While often hyped as the coming of brave new worlds, virtual cyberspaces do not imagine future utopias but rather afford slightly askew ways of living in the contemporary actual world. In other words, the forms of religion being practiced online shape religious practice that are not really exotic, or even unique, examples, but very prosaic instances of broader cultural shifts occurring in contemporary religious practice.

While fragile, virtual worlds also allow fascinating glimpses of the future. As almost pure imagination, virtual worlds reflect different groups' desires and allow religious practitioners to project a coherent spiritual fantasy. Whether creating neolithic cave art, a medieval cathedral, or a video game, humans are creatures that have always imagined virtual worlds because they are the animals that imagine alternate futures and arrangements. “Virtual” does not take a position about real or unreal but distinguishes a third thing, something powerful that differs from the ordinary everyday. The word “virtual,” from a Latin word for power (*virtus*), identifies these powerful alternatives. The alternative visions imagined in virtual worlds fascinate users not because they are unreal but because they make users aware of alternative possible identities, of other possible worlds, and of the limitless intersecting stories of the actual world. While often playful and even whimsical, Second Life Zen practitioners were very serious about using the new digital media to explore alternative spiritual templates. Such alternative imaginings are at the heart of American religion, as Laurence Moore argues, in *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans*, while

it is often assumed that the character of American religion was formed from mainstream Protestant unity and dominance, it was actually alternative groups whose dynamic role shaped not only American religious identities but also American identity more generally.⁶⁹

Ultimately beyond what they display about popular spirituality, virtual worlds are fascinating because they call into question reality itself. It is often assumed that a shared reality holds our commonsensical ground. Virtual worlds make one question: To what extent does reality as a phenomenon exist unmediated and to what extent do media practices determine people's experience of it? One strains to imagine a world without reality. Yet what Second Life's spirituality illustrates is that reality does not exist objectively but rather emerges from media practices. By mediating between the "inside" of cyberspace and the "outside" of the actual world for many groups, screens also negotiate between everyday existence and the divine and indicate that the relationship between the virtual and actual often depends on how a group imagines the distinction between the profane and divine. In such a case, scholars should not question the reality of the virtual and actual but rather investigate the ontologies that make possible these realities, the history out of which these realities emerged, and the type of ethical human beings that they produce.

Notes

- 1 Unless stated otherwise, the names of Second Life residents and regions are pseudonyms (see Luciano Paccagnella, "Getting the Seats of Your Pants Dirty: Strategies for Ethnographic Research on Virtual Communities," *Journal of Computer Mediated Communication* 3, no. 1 [1997], 2–17). This choice was difficult because I desired to give credit to the individuals who became not just subjects but friends and without whom the study would have been impossible. However, to err on the side of protecting individuals' privacy, when information was collected through participant observation, interviews, or surveys, or if there was the possibility that public sources could be tied to a conversant, I have used pseudonyms. Also, sometimes to obscure a resident's identity and protect sensitive information, I take the liberty of changing details or of combining details from more than one resident. Taking a Hippocratic oath, I attempted to stay as close to the material as possible without causing harm. In a few cases, if the sources are publicly available, I use actual names so as to give the individual credit. According to the Georgia Institute of Technology's "Ethical Guidelines for Research Online," Second Life fits the definition of "public domain" that is, one may freely quote and analyze online information without consent if it is officially, publicly archived and no password is required for archive access (see Amy Bruckman, "Ethical Guidelines for Research Online," www.cc.gatech.edu/~asb/ethics [2002; accessed August 22, 2013]). Furthermore, "Ethical Decision-Making and Internet Research: Recommendations from the AOIR Ethics Working Committee" defines virtual spaces such as Second Life as chat rooms, which can be treated as public spaces (see Annette Markham and Elizabeth Buchanan, <http://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf> [2012; accessed August 22, 2013]).
- 2 Like any social space, Second Life has many emic terms that I have treated as foreign words by leaving them untranslated. My goal is to convey the meaning of the terms but to leave an aura of foreignness about them so that they convey a sense of being inworld (see Charles L. Briggs, *Learning How to Ask: A Sociolinguistic Appraisal of the Role of the*

- Interview in Social Science Research* [Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986]). All "foreign" words are italicized in their first use in each chapter and are also defined in the book's glossary. *Foreign* refers to emic terms used by the Second Life Hoben community. These include terms that may have "native" meanings in English but that have slightly different meanings from those of the actual world in Second Life. It also includes Japanese and Sanskrit terms used by the community that may not have the same significance as they do in Asian settings. For consistency, I use Sanskrit transliterations for Buddhist technical terms as much as possible.
- 3 Pew Research Center, "64% of Online Americans Have Used the Internet for Religious or Spiritual Purposes," www.pewinternet.org/2004/04/07/64-of-online-americans-have-used-the-internet-for-religious-or-spiritual-purposes/ (accessed November 3, 2015).
 - 4 Daniel Veidlinger, *From India's Net to Internet: Communication, Technology and the Evolution of Buddhism*. Working paper. California State University, Chico (2015).
 - 5 Following the Buddhist community of Hoben's conventions, I capitalize "Dharma" to indicate Buddhist teachings and use lowercase "dharma" to refer to the phenomenological factors that constitute everyday reality (samsāra).
 - 6 Christopher Helland, "Online Religion as Lived Religion: Methodological Issues in the Study of Religious Participation on the Internet," *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 1, no. 1 (2005), www.uni-heidelberg.de/archiv/5823 (accessed November 3, 2015). See also Christopher Helland, "Religion Online/Online Religion and Virtual Communities," in *Religion on the Internet: Research Prospects and Promises*, ed. Jeffrey K. Hadden and Douglas E. Cowan (London: JAI Press/Elsevier, 2000), 205–24.
 - 7 Places as well as practitioners are pseudonyms.
 - 8 See Charles Prebish, *American Buddhism* (North Scituate, MA: Duxbury Press, 1979); Charles Prebish, *Luminous Passage: The Practice of and Study of Buddhism in America* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1999); Thomas Tweed, *The American Encounter with Buddhism: 1844–1912* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1992).
 - 9 It is now very common in Buddhist literature to find the expression "Western Buddhism"; I do not perceive "the West" as a homogeneous whole, which provides similar sociopolitical, cultural, and legal settings in the various countries considered. On the contrary, I use the term in a pragmatic way, to denote non-Asian industrialized nations where Buddhist teachings and practices, Buddhist people and ideas, have become established outside of traditional Asian spaces and locations.
 - 10 Because of the quickly changing media environment of contemporary society, and the work that emergent learning entails, media practices are much more conspicuous now than they were in the recent past. See Espen Aarseth, *Cybertext: Perspectives on Ergodic Literature* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1997); Heidi Campbell, *When Religion Meets New Media* (London: Routledge, 2010).
 - 11 Gregory Price Grieve, *Rethorizing Religion in Nepal* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2006); Gregory Price Grieve, "Studying Religion in Digital Gaming: A Critical Review of an Emerging Field," *Online – Heidelberg Journal of Religions on the Internet* 5, no. 1 (2014), www.online.uni-hd.de/ (accessed November 3, 2015).
 - 12 Theodor Nelson, *Computer Lib: You Can and Must Understand Computers Now/Dream Machines: New Freedoms through Computer Screens – A Minority Report* (Chicago: Hugo Book Service, 1974). The Nelson book has two front covers and can be read forward and backward. See the flipside, *Dream Machine*, 22.
 - 13 Erkki Huhtamo, "Screen Tests: Why Do We Need an Archaeology of the Screen," *Cinema Journal* 51, no. 2 (2012): 144–48.
 - 14 Gilles Deleuze, *Difference and Repetition* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1994), 299.
 - 15 Jean Baudrillard, *Simulacra and Simulation* (Ann Arbor, MI: University of Michigan Press, 1994), 6.

- 16 See Kaja Silverman, *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983). In medical terms, sutures stitch over wounds. In psychoanalytic theory, sutures account for how subjects emerge from discourse. Suture describes that moment when the subject finds herself inserted into a symbolic world because it describes the covering over of the psychic wounding that occurs when individual desires and needs are necessarily repressed by social codes and symbols. As Kaja Silverman explains in relation to cinema, "This sleight-of-hand involves attributing to a character within the fiction qualities which in fact belong to the machinery of enunciation: the ability to generate narrative, the omnipotence and coercive gaze, the castrating authority of the law" (Silverman, 232). In Buddhism a sutra is a collection of teachings. The term literally describes a thread that holds things together and is derived from the verbal root *śvā*, meaning 'to sew.' Sutra probably described texts written on palm leaves and sewn together with a thread.
- 17 Like poachers, Second Life practitioners draw from materials not *vis* completely of their making, media already at hand in their cultural environment, resources that they make work for them. Poaching, as the French theorist Michel de Certeau describes, is a process of reading texts that raids the elite preserve. Poachers "move across lands belonging to someone else, like nomads poaching their way across fields they did not write" (see Michel de Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life* [Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984], 174).
- 18 "Monier-Williams Sanskrit-English Dictionary, 1899," www.sanskrit-lexicon.uni-koeln.de/scans/MWScan/2014/web/webtc/indexcaller.php (accessed November 3, 2015).
- 19 I take a middle path between the historians of religion Mircea Eliade and J.Z. Smith. I argue that "religion" is not an essential, unique category. I also argue that the category of religion does not emerge solely from the scholar's imagining. Instead, while a social construction, it is not totally under the rational theorizing of the academic. Religion emerges from a dialogue between the scholar's outsider etic theorizing and insider etic everyday use. For Eliade's notion of the sacred, see *The Sacred and the Profane: The Nature of Religion* (New York: Harvest/HBJ Publishers, 1957); for his method of comparison see *Patterns in Comparative Religion* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1949); for his concept of history see *Cosmos and History: The Myth of the Eternal Return* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1954). See also J.Z. Smith, *Imaging Religion: From Babylon to Jonestown* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1982). In Smith's seminal work, he argues that religion is solely the creation of the scholar's imagination and posits three conditions for its use: (1) a mastery of both primary and secondary materials; (2) an example that is used to display an important theory or fundamental question; and (3) a method for explicitly relating the theory to the example.
- 20 See Geleek Rimpoché, *The Four Noble Truths* (Jewel Heart Publication), www.jewelheart.org/digital-dharma/four-noble-truths-transcript/ (accessed November 3, 2015); *Tibetan Buddhism 48 First Noble Truth from the Four Points* (Jewel Heart Channel), YouTube Video, 13:27, www.youtube.com/watch?v=PG8LSJmUVGU (accessed November 3, 2015).
- 21 "Recognizing the Suffering in Your Own Life - Chapter 4," Dharma Wisdom, <http://dharma.wisdom.org/books-philip-moffitt/dancing-life/excerpt-dancing-life#tshash> (accessed November 3, 2015).
- 22 "Colossal Cave Adventure: The Original Text-Based Adventure Game," www.amc.com/shows/halt-and-catch-fire/colossal-cave-adventure/landing (accessed November 3, 2015).
- 23 *NBC Nightly News - Religion Online in Second Life*, YouTube Video, 2:26, posted by Zach Gilliam, May 22, 2007, www.youtube.com/watch?v=1-BGQKAKi18 (accessed November 3, 2015).
- 24 Stephanie Simon, "It's Easter: Shall We Gather at the Desktops? Virtual Houses of Worship Await You Online in Second Life," *Los Angeles Times*, April 8, 2007, <http://articles.latimes.com/2007/apr/08/nation/na-virtual8> (accessed August 28, 2008).
- 25 Gregory Price Grieve, "Imagining a Virtual Religious Community: Neo-pagans on the Internet," *Chicago Anthropology Exchange* 7 (1995): 98-132; Benedict Anderson, *Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism* (New York: Verso, 1983).
- 26 Helland, "Online Religion as Lived Religion." See also Helland, "Religion Online/Online Religion and Virtual Communities."
- 27 Henry Jenkins, "Star Trek Remixed, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching," *Critical Studies in Mass Communication* 5, no. 2 (1988): 85-107.
- 28 Masahiro Mori, "The Uncanny Valley," *Energy* 7, no. 4 (1970): 33-35; Norri Kageki, "An Uncanny Mind: Masahiro Mori on the Uncanny Valley and Beyond," *IEEE Spectrum*, June 12, 2012, <http://spectrum.ieee.org/automaton/robotics/humanoids/an-uncanny-mind-masahiro-mori-on-the-uncanny-valley> (accessed November 3, 2015).
- 29 John Frow, "Michel de Certeau and the Practice of Representation," *Cultural Studies* 5, no. 1 (1991): 52-60.
- 30 Deleuze, 87.
- 31 Baudrillard, 256.
- 32 Gregory Price Grieve, "Symbol, Idol and Murti: Hindu God-images and the Politics of Mediation," *Culture, Theory and Critique* 44, no. 3 (2003): 57-72.
- 33 Academics also tend to reduce convert Buddhism to an ideological symptom of Network Consumer Society. The work of the philosopher and cultural critic Slavoj Žižek, for instance, detests both cyberspace and convert Buddhists. In "Cyberspace, or, the Unbearable Closure of Being," Žižek sees virtual worlds as the clearest symptom of Network Consumer Society's transformation from the modernist culture of calculation to the postmodernist culture of simulation. He frets that digital media robs us of our humanity and connection to reality and argues that cybernetic simulation forecloses the difference between reality and artifice because that leads to a decentered self and a plurality of self-identities without a coordinating center (see Slavoj Žižek, "Cyberspace, or, the Unbearable Closure of Being," in *The Plague of Fantasies* [London: Verso, 1997]: 127-59).
- 34 In the mid-2000s as I conducted my research, religious leaders of mainstream groups with a well-built brick and mortar presence tried for the most part to ignore virtual worlds and online religious practice. Yet the growing popularity of digital religious practice, especially among younger users, often forced them to respond. On June 5, 2011, His Holiness Pope Benedict released "Truth, Proclamation and Authenticity of Life in the Digital Age" and argued "new technologies are not only changing the way we communicate, but communication itself." He goes on to proclaim, "the Gospel demands to be incarnated in the real world and linked to the real faces of our brothers and sisters, those with whom we share our daily lives. Direct human relations always remain fundamental for the transmission of the faith!" Pope Benedict XVI, "Truth, Proclamation and Authenticity of Life in the Digital Age" (Vatican: the Holy See), for the 45th World Communications Day, June 5, 2011, http://w2.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/communications/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20110124_45th-world-communications-day.html (accessed November 3, 2015).
- 35 Jane Naomi Iwamura, *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religions and American Popular Culture* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011). Cf. Vincanne Adams, *Tigers of the Snow and Other Virtual Sherpas* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1995).
- 36 Richard King, "Spirituality and the Privatisation of Asian Wisdom Traditions," in *Selling Spirituality the Silent Takeover of Religion*, ed. Jeremy Carrette and Richard King (London: Routledge, 2005), 87-123.
- 37 *The Buddhist Ethic and the Spirit of Global Capitalism*, European Graduate School Video Lectures, YouTube Video, 1:09:56, October 2, 2012, www.youtube.com/watch?v=qkTUQYxUJJs (accessed November 3, 2015).
- 38 *The Buddhist Ethic and the Spirit of Global Capitalism*.

- 39 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage, 1979).
- 40 Iwamura, 8.
- 41 Jane Naomi Iwamura argues, in *Virtual Orientalism: Asian Religion and Popular Culture*, that Eastern traditions have become a convenient symbol for alternative spiritualities and modes of being. She shows that, although there has been an increase in popular engagement with Asian traditions, the virtual form makes stereotypical constructions of the spiritual East obdurate and especially difficult to challenge. As the blogger Justin Chin argues in "Attack of the White Buddhists," while many non-Heritage Buddhists embrace Eastern traditions, they keep at arm's distance the "violence and bigotry directed toward Asian Americans" (*Mongrel: Essays, Diatribes, + Parables* [New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 1999], 113–19). Often American convert Buddhism is envisioned as a type of manifest destiny, in which the old world can only find its full potential in the new world. For instance, in a 1991 editorial by the founder of the convert Buddhist magazine *Tricycle*, Helen Tworok writes, "The spokesperson for Buddhism in America have been, almost exclusively, educated members of the white middle class. Meanwhile, even with varying statistics, Asian-American Buddhists number at least one million, but so far they have not figured prominently in the development of something called American Buddhism." (Helen Tworok, "Many Is More," *Tricycle* 1, no. 2 [1999], www.tricycle.com/new-buddhism/buddhism/many-more [accessed November 3, 2015]). That is, as Charles Prebish writes, "What is often implied, according to Asian American critics, is that Buddhism becomes truly American, only when white Americans become seriously involved" (Prebish, *Luminous Passage*, 57).
- 42 A blanket accusation of Network Consumer virtual orientalism obscures, however, what actually occurs and leads toward the search for a transhistorical, self-identical Dharma that has moved from one culture to another, unchanged through the vicissitudes of time. The search for a real Buddhism leads to the search for an "original," "primitive," or "pure" form of Buddhism that cannot help but be orientalist, because the location of any universal conception of Buddhism always seems to be the libraries of Europe and in all cases its truth is contrasted over and against the many ways contemporary cultures actually manifest everyday lived practice (see David Lopez, *Curators of the Buddha: The Study of Buddhism under Colonialism* [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995a], 6–7).
- 43 Dipesh Chakrabarty, *Provincializing Europe: Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2000).
- 44 See Theodor Adorno, *The Jargon of Authenticity* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1973).
- 45 Stephen Addiss, Stanley Lombardo, and Judith Roitman, eds., *Zen: Traditional Documents from China, Korea, and Japan* (Cambridge, MA: Hackett Publishing Company, 2008); Carl Bielefeldt, trans., *Dōgen's Manuals of Zen Meditation* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 1988); Robert E. Buswell, Jr., *The Zen Monastic Experience* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1992); Morten Schlüter, *How Zen Became Zen: The Dispute over Enlightenment and the Formation of Chan Buddhism during the Song Dynasty China* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2008); Philip Yam, trans., *The Platform Sutra of the Sixth Patriarch* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996); Jason Ananda Josephson, "When Buddhism Became a 'Religion': Religion and Superstition in the Writings of Inoue Enryō," *Japanese Journal of Religious Studies* 33, no. 1 (2006): 143–68.
- 46 Claude Shannon, "A Mathematical Theory of Communication. Part I," *Bell Systems Technical Journal* 27 (1948): 379–423; Claude Shannon and Warren Weaver, *A Mathematical Model of Communication* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 1949).
- 47 David McMahan, *The Making of Buddhist Modernism* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), 19.
- 48 Bernard Faure, *Unmasking Buddhism* (New York: Blackwell, 2007); cf. Bernard Faure, *The Rhetoric of Immediacy: A Cultural Critique of Chan/Zen Buddhism* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1991); Bernard Faure, *Chan Insights and Oversights: An Epistemological Critique of the Chan Tradition* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993); Bernard Faure, *Double Exposure: Cutting across Buddhist and Western Discourses*, trans. Janet Lloyd (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 2004).
- 49 Norbert Wiener, *Cybernetics, or Control and Communication in the Animal and the Machine* (New York: Technology Press, 1948).
- 50 Vannevar Bush, "As We May Think," *Atlantic* (1945), www.theatlantic.com/magazine/print/1969/12/as-we-may-think/3881/ (accessed January 24, 2014).
- 51 Katherine Hayles, *How We Became Posthuman: Virtual Bodies in Cybernetics, Literature, and Informatics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1999), 11.
- 52 Nicholas Denyer, "Introduction," in *Alcibiades*, by Plato, ed. Nicholas Denyer (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2001), 1–26; Charles Young, "Plato and Computer Dating," in *Plato: Critical Assessments, Volume 1: General Issues of Interpretation*, ed. Nicholas D. Smith (London: Routledge, 1998), 29–49.
- 53 Stafford Beer, "Cybernetics and the Knowledge of God," *The Month* 34 (1965): 292.
- 54 Wiener, 96.
- 55 Erwin Schrödinger and M. Born, "Discussion of Probability Relations between Separated Systems," *Mathematical Proceedings of the Cambridge Philosophical Society* 31, no. 4 (1935): 555–63.
- 56 David Smith, "The Authenticity of Alan Watts," in *American Buddhism as a Way of Life*, eds. Gary Storch and John Whalen-Bridge (Albany: SUNY Press, 2010), 13–39.
- 57 David Chidester, *Authentic Fakes: Religion and American Popular Culture* (Berkeley, CA: University of California Press, 2005).
- 58 Søren Kierkegaard, *Concluding Unscientific Postscript to the Philosophical Crumbs* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009); Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception* (New York: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1962).
- 59 Peter Berger and I. Luckmann, *The Social Construction of Reality: A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1966).
- 60 Campbell, 49. Stewart Hoover, "The Cultural Construction of Religion and Media," in *Practicing Religion in the Age of the Media: Explorations in Media, Religion and Culture*, eds. Stewart Hoover and Lynn Schofield Clark (New York: Columbia University Press, 2002), 1–6.
- 61 Kierkegaard, 131.
- 62 Erich Fromm, *Escape from Freedom* (New York: Farrar and Rinehart, 1941), 256.
- 63 Fromm, 257.
- 64 Stewart Hoover and Knut Lundby, *Rethinking Media, Religion and Culture* (London: Sage, 1997).
- 65 Noah Levine, *Dharma Punk* (New York: Harper Collins, 2009), 4.
- 66 I define "human" as the totality of living, conscious beings who are involved with the immediate world in which they live, able to become aware of the contingent element of that involvement and the evolving nature of the self and capable of imagining alternative ways of being. My understanding is based on two trains of thought: first, the existential philosophy of Martin Heidegger, "This entity which each of us is himself . . . we shall denote by the term 'Dasein'" (Martin Heidegger, *Being and Time* [London: SCM Press, 1962], 27). "[Dasein is] that entity which in its Being has this very Being as an issue . . ." (Heidegger, 68); second, the Buddhist concept of sentient being. In Buddhism, sentient beings are composed of the five aggregates – matter, sensation, perception, mental formations, and consciousness – and are characteristically not enlightened and are thus confined to the death, rebirth, and suffering characteristic of *samsara*. Kiyotaka Kimura, "The Self in Medieval Japanese Buddhism: Focusing on Dōgen," *Philosophy East and West* 41, no. 3 (1991): 327–40.
- 67 In the pivotal article, "Popular Culture as the New Humanities," Ray B. Browne writes, "The so-called 'elite' or 'minority' culture may have some influence according to the

degree it is brought to the people and made applicable to their everyday lives. But the popular culture is already with the people, a part of their everyday lives, speaking their language. It is therefore irresistibly influential." Ray Browne, "Popular Culture as the New Humanities," *Journal of Popular Culture* 17, no. 4 (1984): 1.

68 Jacob Gruber, "Ethnographic Salvage and the Shaping of Anthropology," *American Anthropologist, New Series* 72, no. 6 (1970): 1289-99.

69 Laurence Moore, *Religious Outsiders and the Making of Americans* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1986); Sean McCloud, *Making the American Religious Fringe: Exotics, Subversives, and Journalists, 1955-1993* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 2004).

Method

Empty your cup: Exploring conventional ethnography in a virtual world

Nan-in, a Japanese master during the Meiji era received a university professor who came to inquire about Zen. Nan-in served tea. He poured his visitor's cup full, and then kept on pouring. The professor watched the overflow until he no longer could restrain himself. "It is overfull. No more will go in!" "Like this cup," Nan-in said, "you are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"

"Empty Your Cup" (Second Life note card)¹

To collect the data for the investigation that follows, this chapter describes *Cyber Zen's* team-based ethnographic method. As students of religion and media, my research team's onus was to create a method the purpose of which was to understand silent online meditation by making its implicit nature explicit.² In early January 2008, after a meditation session, Human Riddle, Rasa Vibration, and a few other community members invited me to tea.³ Reflecting an informal Japanese tea gathering (*chakai*), "tea" was held in a teahouse just outside the main meditation hall and was an *event* that consisted of sitting around a brazier on which rested a small iron teapot.⁴ Clicking the teapot gave me a tea bowl (*chawan*), which my avatar cuddled in its hands as if gaining warmth on a cold winter morning. The scene was cozy, intimate, with many threads of conversation simultaneously flying around in public and private chat – the opposite of the structured silence of online meditation. Human asked me about my research, and I began to explain my study, mostly copying from prewritten texts on my computer's desktop and pasting them into public chat. After I had gone on for quite a while, Rasa shared a note card on which was written, "You are full of your own opinions and speculations. How can I show you Zen unless you first empty your cup?"

Method describes how *Cyber Zen's* data was collected by systematically dividing my research team's observations into categories that could be rationally explained and reliably applied. We could study virtual spirituality not only because it occurred in users' minds but also because it consisted of observable media practices that played across the screen. While an empirical study,