Chapter 19

Finding Liquid Salvation: Using the Cardean Ethnographic Method to Document Second Life Residents and Religious Cloud Communities

Gregory Price Grieve
University of North Carolina at Greensboro, USA

Kevin Heston
Wake Forest University, USA

ABSTRACT

The Cardean Ethnographic Method was developed between 2007 and 2010 to study religious communities in the virtual world of Second Life. In our research, we faced a two-sided methodological problem. We had to theorize the virtual and its relation to the actual, while simultaneously creating practices for an effective ethnographic method. Our solution, named after the Roman goddess of the hinge, Cardea, theorizes the “virtual” as desubstantialized and nondualistic; “residents” as fluid, multiple, and distributed cyborg-bodies; and “cloud communities” as temporary, outsourced groups of emotionally bonded residents. These three qualities enable a classic form of ethnography based on participant observation, which is possible on Second Life because the platform enables immersion, a prolonged time in the field, as well as the bodily practices necessary for thick description. The Cardean method unveils online religion operating as “Liquid Salvation”—which is defined by consumerism, radical individualism, and pragmatic religious practice.

INTRODUCTION

On January 31, 2009, I logged onto the metaverse platform Second Life (SL) and teleported to a Christian dance club to talk with resident Deborah Devine.1 Deborah had only been using SL for a few months, but she had considerable experience in other 3-D and 2-D multiuser environments, including World of Warcraft and email listserves. Over the past weeks, I had been keeping in touch with her and occasionally stopped by her virtual jewelry shop. After a few minutes of small talk, I asked Deborah about her Christian practice on SL. She explained to me that SL made spending...
Finding Liquid Salvation

time with the Christian community easier because “they are very visible, [and] there are scheduled activities like Sunday services, prayer meetings, and Bible studies.” I asked her if the online community differed from that of her actual world. There was a pause: “Where in my RL [real life] could I go to a dance and meet people from around the globe and listen to a French man sing and play a mean guitar?”

Deborah is not alone in practicing religion in metaverse platforms. More and more people spend more and more of their lives online. As the Pew Internet and American Life Project notes, “cyberfaith” is the fastest growing form of religious practice (2000-2010). The Cardean method analyzes religious practices on 3-D metaverse platforms by documenting what Bronislaw Malinowski calls the “imponderabilia of actual life” (1961 [1922]). Imponderabilia are social phenomena of great importance that cannot possibly be recorded by interviews, recording devices, or quantitative methods, but must be interpreted in the full actuality of their cultural context.

Ethnography is the tried and tested approach for documenting the imponderabilia of life, virtual or otherwise. The main objective of this chapter is to sketch out the Cardean Ethnographic Method and the underlying theory and practice necessary to conduct research of religious groups on 3-D metaverse platforms such as SL. The Cardean Method was formulated by The Cardean Virtual Research Team (CVRT), which in its final form consisted of the principal investigator, one graduate, and four advanced undergraduates from the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, and which conducted research between September 2007 and September 2010 (Figure 1).

Our methodology was driven by three fundamental questions. What is the relation between the virtual and the actual? How can one transfer and adapt traditional ethnographic methods, chiefly participant observation, to the cyberspace of 3-D metaverse platforms? And last, do the religious identities and communities found reflect their virtual environment, or are they representa-