

Entertaining Spirituality

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ABSTRACT

In this paper we draw from findings found in a larger study examining how churches use technology to inform the design of home entertainment technologies. We discuss three entertainment technologies developed to recreate church worship services at home. We suggest that grounding their design in an understanding of American, Christian worship practices could open new space for design. A set of design strategies and suggestion for future research examining how to support worship at home are presented.

KEYWORDS

Domestic technology, spirituality, entertainment, design

INTRODUCTION

In her book, *Performing the Word*, Jana Childers acknowledges that “preaching and theater share a great deal of ground, whether we care to admit it or not” [6]. This is generally true of the relationship between spirituality and entertainment. Virtually every technology developed for entertainment has been adopted into the exercise of human spirituality [7]. Over the past 100 years, advances in telecommunication technology (radio, television, and internet) have opened up new spaces for religious practice around the world. Many applications of these technologies have focused on the public consumption of spiritual content, and consequently tended to make parishioners passive observers of worship rather than active participants. However, for a number of religious denominations, physically coming together to worship is central. As the Internet evolves, and the general ubiquity of computing in the home increases, another generation of entertainment technologies is emerging. We hypothesize that these technologies offer opportunities for interaction that can better replicate church worship in physical sanctuaries by allowing users to interact with fellow parishioners.

Ongoing Study

This paper grew out of a larger study examining how senior pastors use technology for spiritual support and pastoral care. Over a four month period senior pastors at 16 churches in the Atlanta-area were interviewed. Our participants came from Protestant Christian churches often associated with the Southern Baptist Church, United Methodist Church, evangelical Lutheran Church in American and Presbyterian Church. This sub-group was chosen for the following reasons: 1) they were most predominant in the metro-Atlanta area we studied and 2) some members of the research team were knowledgeable about these denominations. Interviews were paired with visits to Sunday services at five Christian megachurches in the area. Our initial findings reveal pastors’ concerns about technology imposing on the sense of reverence, custom to traditional church services [16]. In this paper we use findings from our interviews and church visits to suggest how future home technologies can support worship outside of traditional houses of worship.

Perceiving worship as entertainment

In an effort to make Christianity more appealing to the young religiously active demographic, many US churches are adopting new styles of worship. For many Protestants, the traditional image of church worship is one that is stoic, formal, and even boring. In order to remain relevant to younger people, churches are distancing themselves from this image by creating more entertaining worship. Like worship, entertainment is meant to be engaging, but in addition those involved in the design of worship services desire it to be inspiring, edifying and transforming. More importantly, while entertainment can be perceived an act of diversion, worship is intended as an act of devotion. There are many interesting questions about the relationship between entertainment and spirituality. In this paper, we concentrate on two perspectives—taken from out study data—the expressed intent of those providing the experience, and the perception of the individuals involved in that interaction. The latter distinction is especially important from the design perspective.

The blurred boundary between worship and entertainment is most evident in megachurches. In addition to having at least 2000 parishioners during a Sunday service these churches share a common set of characteristics including:

being located in the suburbs of large cities, often lacking a denominational affiliation, and having a conservative theological orientation [15]. The popularity of these churches implies that this new style of congregational life has a particular resonance to and fits with modern actively religious American society. Another common feature of the megachurch services we attended was the entertaining styles of worship. Indeed, we heard from pastors of traditional churches that the megachurch service style was encouraging them to update their services.

Entertainment metaphors are evident in megachurches' appearance and worship services. All the megachurches we visited shared several striking features. Architecturally, they resembled suburban movie theaters more than the gothic and classical styles generally associated with traditional houses of worship. Inside, projection screens replaced stained glass windows and theater-style seats took the place of wooden pews. From the ceiling hung complex lighting technologies that rose and ebbed with the service, dim for prayer, bright for singing.

The distinctions between entertainment and worship were further blurred by use of secular media in worship. Pastors routinely drew from popular sitcoms, movies, and music videos to supplement their preaching. There are even online services available to help pastors find biblical messages in popular media to use their sermons (i.e. Imagevine, SermonCentral and MovieMinistry¹). If a pastor is preparing a sermon on Christ's birth these MovieMinistry suggests clips from films like *The Passion of the Christ* and *A Charlie Brown Christmas* to supplement their spoken message.

Supporting worship outside of church

Unsurprisingly, as technology has changed some churches worship practices, other entertainment systems have begun to support religious practice at home (for example, podcasted and televised services). A key difference afforded by these technologies is that they allow individuals to worship *alone* as well as *together*. Yet, in our study pastors overwhelmingly described the importance of *corporate worship* or coming together with other believers, as fundamental to the worship experience. For example, one pastors told us that:

“We need to be together, we need a sense of community, a sense of connecting and you do that when you are in worship together.”

This mismatch between traditional worship practices and emerging uses of technology raises a question for home entertainment technology: how can aspects of corporate worship be integrated into home technologies?

¹ See online sites: imagevine.com, sermoncentral.com, and moviministry.com.

Using home entertainment technologies to support worship is not new, but new digital systems could potentially support a greater degree of interaction. Rather than observing a sermon alone, new technologies could provide a more interactive worship experience. Further, it appears that technologically-enhanced forms of worship will be more common in the future. For example, the Barna Group, a market research firm specializing in studying Christian groups, predicts that a growing number of people will use the internet for their primary religious experiences and they foresee growing acceptance of cyberchurches [3, 10]. The convergence of more entertaining worship styles and the increased using of computing for religious practice, suggests that the time is right to explore new design opportunities that distinguish but leverage entertainment for worship.

Designing with spirituality in mind

For the purpose of example, in this section we will briefly describe three instances of entertainment technology currently being used to support religious practice outside of physical churches: SermonAudio, Virtual Churches, and iBelieve. Each one poses unique questions about how people should design technology to support religious practice outside of physical churches.

SermonAudio Internet Radio: For those religious Americans with limited mobility, worship at home is likely to be important. SermonAudio Internet Radio was developed for those who are confined to home due to illness or age [14]. The device allows users to browse and listen to archived audio sermons on the Internet (Figure 1). However, in its current form the device's aesthetics are not very evocative of its spiritual purpose. Although the device meets the functional need, the potential to provide a more enhanced worship experience might be diminished by a design that reflects entertainment rather than worship.

The device's black and silver box is identical to generic DVD players, TiVo'sTM, and VCR's found in many entertainment centers. If it is to distinguish itself from other entertainment technologies and potentially facilitate the intended devotional experience, perhaps it should adopt an aesthetic that enhances the user's intended experience. For example, instead of black plastic, perhaps for those Christian users who once went to a traditional church, a dark wood cover, reminiscent of a familiar sanctuary, could be used to house the device.

This poses an additional question as to where the device should be placed in a home. Do devices designed to support worship at home reside near big screen televisions, underneath VCR's and TiVo'sTM or do they demand alternative spaces in the home? Further, what are the implications of its placement on the other technologies that it might be connected too—such as speakers.

The SermonAudio's interface is provides another opportunity for it to differentiate itself from other devices.

The interface resembles one found on a TiVo™. Users have the option to search sermons based on topic, favorite pastor, time, and geographical location. The device stores sermons so people can listen to them at any time. However, at least for Protestant Christian users there are no features that support the sense of community pastors described as being essential to the church experience:

“Because the Bible says, that part of community is us coming together and . . . there is something about a corporate gathering of people together, where we are together with a common heart and common voice”

Similar to online community researchers, pastors in the study doubted whether technology could ever fully replicate the sense of community found in church [12]. Adding features to support an online community to the interface could potentially create as sense of community SermonAudio listeners.



Figure 1: SermonAudio Internet Radio

Virtual Churches: A variety of christian individuals and groups are using online gaming to interact with those who might not consider attending a physical church. Individual players come together for a variety of regularly-held church services in Second Life, the popular massively multiplayer online game (MMPOG). Further, mainstream churches are beginning to develop their own virtual environments; for example, Great Britain’s Methodist Church sponsors an online church called “Church of Fools” [8]. Other denominations are discussing how online gaming can support worship outside of brick and mortar churches [4].

The aesthetics and affordances of physical services could provide a powerful design aid in designing the spiritual experience of the virtual church. For example explicit recognition of the visual context in which worship takes place, could allow developers to design interfaces that allow virtual attendees to recall powerful memories of physical services. In addition to “setting the mood” this would also likely facilitate the smooth transition between the various elements of the service, by simply providing a shared context for virtual collaborative action. This might be especially important if the person is experiencing the service through their computer at home, perhaps in a site

more typically associated with work (telecommuting, schoolwork) or play (the basement recreation room).

MMOG’s allow designers to capture some aspects of the church; for instance avatars can kneel to pray, give an offering online, reflect, and engage in basic interactions with other avatars, but key elements of worship interactions are missing. In some cases they are not supported by current technology. For instance, singing, greeting church members with touch, and sharing communion are still difficult, if not impossible, to recreate online.

An example of how virtual churches are replicating behavior in physical churches is found in Second Life. During virtual services, idle avatars are sent to the back pew and appear to be sleeping. This communicates to virtual congregants that the avatar is not *engaged* with the current activity in the worship space; a behavior assumed when attending a physical church [1]. Although the modification of the avatar behavior is simple, the positive impact on the public worship environment is important.

There is also a sense of “feltness” lacking in virtual churches. Feltness encompasses the difficult to quantify aspects, such as the emotional and sensual qualities that create an experience [13]. A pastor describing why he prefers using his physical Bible rather than an online version illustrates this:

“I still read my Bible . . . you know there is an intimacy in reading the Bible, the Book, yeah, its, there is nothing like just holding a Bible and reading and meditating, I guess its like sort of you and God alone. Whereas with the computer there are a lot of voices, you are in dialogue with and in discussions with, engaging with, but when you just have the Bible itself it is more intimate one-on-one dialogue.”

The intimacy he describes is missing in current virtual churches. Similarly, qualities are reflected in wooden pews. The wood’s discoloration and patina serve as reminders of others that have previously worshiped in the church. Recognizing and designing for these sensual and emotional qualities will be essential in next generation virtual churches.

iBelieve: Another example of blending an old aesthetic with the new is the “iBelieve” an attachment that turns an iPod shuffle into a cross that can be worn around the neck (Figure 2). Originally conceived of as a speculative design to make “a social commentary on the fastest-growing religion on the planet,” [11], it ultimately became a manufactured product due to Christians’ interest in purchasing them. In this case, the design modification is purely aesthetic, changing the form but not the function. It is an example of using *branding* to make a product more appealing to a specific demographic. Issues of branding in relation to spirituality are not new and continue to raise

complicated questions about the appropriate use of religious iconography in design. However, the use of these icons of faith in systems can help to support a sense of communal identity and familiarity.



Figure 2: iBelieve iPod Accessory

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE WORK

In this workshop paper we have used results from an empirical study of the Protestant-Christian religious uses of technology to examine a series of systems designed to support protestant religious practice outside of the physical church setting. We drew on two sources of data, an interview-based study of ministers uses of technology in their spiritual formation and pastoral care practices, and an observational study of the use of technologies in services in megachurches, where the use of computing and audio-visual systems in service is common.

Drawing on these results, we critically examined three technologies designed to support worship in the home: SermonAudio, Virtual Churches, and iBelieve. The iBelieve, originally a design statement, ultimately became a product and illustrates the power of aesthetic design in helping people create an experience that is meaningful. Some virtual churches also seem to find that recreating practices from physical church services an important way of organising worship online. An open question remaining is whether recreating the service is a means to organize collective action, or whether it plays a more deeply spiritual role (we suspect the latter given the spiritual importance of physical service rituals). By contrast to the iBelieve and Virtual Churches, the SermonAudio seems almost impoverished as device. In and of itself, it does not project or evoke experiences of worship. Indeed, it presents a potential opportunity to explore what it would mean for religious individuals to make the device more spiritual. This could be one way to explore how to design for spiritual feltness.

More generally, beyond organised religious practices, questions of spiritually broadly interpreted (ie: both within and away from religious domination and practice), present

an interesting design lens for home entertainment. We use spirituality as a lens through which to reconsider the “work” of the home and the role of office place technology in that place.

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