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Prayground.tv: Penultimate Written Statement

David McDonald

George Fox University, dmcDonald@georgefox.edu

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DAVID MCDONALD
GEORGE FOX UNIVERSITY, DOCTOR OF MINISTRY PROGRAM: LEADERSHIP
IN THE EMERGING CULTURE
LEC3, TRACK 2

PRAYGROUND.TV
PENULTIMATE WRITTEN STATEMENT

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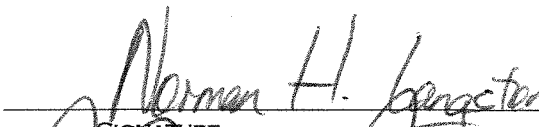

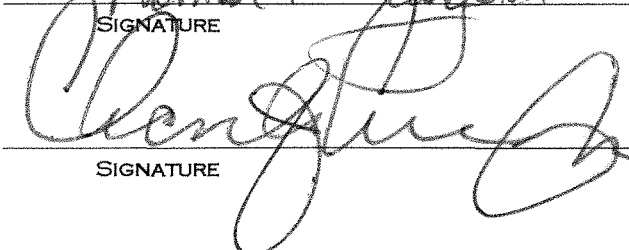

DAVID MICHAEL McDONALD

DATE: NOVEMBER 8, 2006

TITLE:

**PLAYGROUND.TV:
AN ONLINE EXPERIENTIAL PRAYER EXERCISE**

***WE THE UNDERSIGNED CERTIFY THAT WE HAVE READ THIS
PROJECT AND APPROVE IT AS ADEQUATE IN SCOPE AND
QUALITY TO COMPLETE THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE
DOCTOR OF MINISTRY IN
LEADERSHIP IN THE EMERGING CULTURE DEGREE***

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**GEORGE FOX
EVANGELICAL SEMINARY**

CONTENTS

Section One: Abstract.....	page 1
Section Two: The Problem.....	page 3
Section Three: Other Proposed Solutions.....	page 10
Introduction.....	page 10
Subsection One: Websites on Spirituality and Information.....	page 11
Subsection Two: Experiential Websites.....	page 15
Subsection Three: Community Websites.....	page 19
Conclusion.....	page 24
Section Four: The Thesis.....	page 25
Introduction.....	page 25
Engagement.....	page 26
Spirituality.....	page 30
Community.....	page 33
Conclusion.....	page 37
Section Five: The Project.....	page 38
Introduction: Show Me Heaven.....	page 38
The Spiritual Web.....	page 39
Prayground.tv.....	page 41
Product Description.....	page 41
Application.....	page 43
Conclusion.....	page 44
Section Six: Multi-Media Spec Sheet.....	page 46
Goals and Strategies.....	page 46
Audience.....	page 47
Project Scope and Content	page 48
Budget.....	page 49
Promotion.....	page 49
Standards of Publication.....	page 50
Action Plan.....	page 51
Section Seven: Postscript.....	page 53
Introduction.....	page 53
Before Heading to Prayground.tv.....	page 53
The Development Process.....	page 55
Triumphs and Shortcomings.....	page 57
Conclusion.....	page 59
Works Cited.....	page 60

Bibliography.....	page 62
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SECTION ONE: ABSTRACT

Prayground.tv is an online experiential prayer exercise. It is designed to facilitate personal expression and creativity, high user interactivity, and conversation among peers in order to help postmoderns engage spirituality that is both individual and communal. The Internet has quickly become the voice for virtual community and personal expression and prayground.tv is a helpful tool in exploring the tension between the community-oriented teachings of Jesus while helping each user internalize those teachings.

Section Two will show that, based on external data and outside sources, this dichotomy is especially real in a postmodern context and needs to be addressed. Here I will demonstrate the validity of the Internet as a medium for navigating the tension between community and individuality.

In Section Three I will explore other websites that offer potential responses to this tension of individuality and community. I will evaluate other websites providing online spiritual experiences, as well as social networking sites purporting to produce community on the web.

In Section Four I will substantiate my claims by presenting materials from computing sciences and multiple-intelligence theory, along with thoughts on Christian spirituality in a postmodern world. There are legitimate forms of community occurring online, many of which have not been recognized by the church, and I will show that an online experience of faith simultaneously values individual preferences while drawing people together in prayer and conversation.

In Section Five I will present testimonials and some observations from a working prototype of prayground.tv. These will show how prayground.tv provides a practical

solution to the ministry problem and facilitates a sense of community and personal encounter.

The Church must find a way to avoid deteriorating into a completely isolationist experience of faith. Too often, I hear Christians express their belief that faith is primarily—if not exclusively—individual, and we must bring that sense of individuality back into harmony with biblical community in order to be healthy, in order to be whole. Likewise, we cannot simply assign community as a remedy to personal crisis and faith. There must remain a tension, wherein the community and the individuality of every believer hold us together as *ourselves*. In the new world, Church *can* string us together without becoming a noose.

SECTION TWO: THE PROBLEM

In an era of intense spiritual interest, I have begun to ask *how we might help postmoderns engage spirituality both individually and in community?* How can we help spiritual seekers respond to God and to one another in a manner that is personal, honest, and can be shared with their peers? I became a pastor, first and foremost, because I want to connect people meaningfully with Jesus Christ—I want spirituality to mean something in the lives of ordinary people. I want to help people have personal encounters with God, to see and taste and touch and feel his magnificent presence, and to entertain a life that makes him proud.

I also want this for myself. Yet it seems that the traditions and disciplines of our Christian forebears sometimes betray this simple desire to know God. Tales of fantastic men and women of faith, those who carved spiritual paths out of sacred practice, abound in local bookstores. Unfortunately, they create a paradigm for spiritual formation that is neither entirely represented in Scripture nor entirely resonant with life in the twenty-first century.

For example, let us think of the recent fascination among EmergentYS publishing and authors like Tony Jones and Gary Thomas¹ who contemporize ancient disciplines like walking the prayer labyrinth or invoking bodily prayer as a means of centering oneself upon God. While there is much good that has been done both by this approach and by these books, there is an inherent supposition that we grow spiritually through the practice of spiritual disciplines. While this is true in part, it is also true that we grow in innumerable other ways. Life takes us through twists and turns, and the Spirit of God

¹ Cf. Tony Jones, *Sacred Way* (Grand Rapids, Youth Specialties, 2004) and Gary Thomas, *Sacred Pathways: Discovering Your Soul's Path to God* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1996).

uses the very ordinary, often mundane, experiences of our lives to educate and form us into something more like himself.

Similarly, there are presently many examples of cool ministry models that claim to make church “relevant to the culture,” but not a lot of examples that claim a re-orientation towards spirituality as a way of life, which is what I believe our culture is calling out for. Many that appear “spiritual,” often turn out to be more focused on rules, doctrine, and dogma, or woven into a code-word subculture that spiritual seekers find difficult to understand. Take this conversation, for example, loosely based on an exchange my best friend and I shared about a year ago after he spent time trying to find a home church after returning from the mission field.

“So, I go to this church and the guy up front . . .”

“Fat guy? Skinny guy?”

“No. Regular.”

“Tattoos?”

“On his ankle. Anyways, he says we have got to be part of the community of hermeneutical architecture, or something.”

“Are you serious?”

“Oh, yeah”

“What does that mean?”

“I do not know. Anyways . . .”

“No—seriously. I went to this Pentecostal church last week and they had all kinds of weird rules about how we were supposed to hear from the Holy Spirit.”

“Right! Rules like, ‘test it against the community bylaws for charismatic gifts in operation’ and ‘make sure you have the unction’?”

“Yeah! Like, what is unction? I think I had unction last week, but how are you supposed to tell?”

“So, no connection with the Spirit for you?”

“None.”

“Me neither.”

“Zero. Have you ever?”

“Connected? Of course!”

“In church?”

“Yeah, we were at youth camp . . .”

“No, not youth camp. Church. Regular church. Old people, young people, songs, uncomfortable clothes, cool kids and rock songs, KJV, NIV, PowerPoint, Media Shout, Sunday morning coffee, toilet, sermon, offering, bulletin church?”

“Have you?”

“Once. I went forward for an altar call.”

“Did you have the unction?”

“It was to get rid of the unction. But my point is that for once, for real, I felt God.”

“Okay. I went to Notre Dame when I was backpacking across Europe, and I felt God’s presence there. It was . . . humid.”

“Like Kentucky in the summer.”

“Remember Cuba? It was like that.”

“The church part or the humidity?”

“Yes.”

For postmoderns, models of ministry are quickly being exhausted.² The experience of God, however, which I will refer to here as *transcendence*, never gets tired because it never feels repetitive. In contrast to ministry models which manage and seek to regulate our spiritual formation, transcendence elevates us into personal encounter with God.³ Because of the remarkable increase in online interactivity in recent years, and the popularity of online spirituality in particular,⁴ one avenue in which we might further explore transcendence is through online experiential prayer exercises.

These online exercises are one example of the changes occurring on the World Wide Web. There is an increasing realization that the Internet has to be utilized to facilitate interactivity, conversation, and relationships because these associations are the roots of our shared existence. “We long for more connection,” says Doc Searles in *The Cluetrain Manifesto*, “between what we do for a living and what we genuinely care about, for work that’s more than clock-watching drudgery. We long for release from

² To substantiate this claim, one might take into account the recent popularity of books and ministry initiatives by postmodern groups or by ministries heralding the malcontent of postmoderns. For example, George Barna’s book *Revolution* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 2005), Dave Tomlinson’s *The Post-Evangelical* (Grand Rapids: EmergentYS, 1995), Tom Beaudoin’s *Virtual Faith* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 1998) or the recent sermon series by Evergreen Community Church in Portland, OR entitled “40 Days of Meaninglessness: a study on Ecclesiastes” which is meant to lampoon the very popular book by Rick Warren, *The Purpose Driven Life* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2002) and its counterpart church initiative entitled “40 Days of Purpose”.

³ “Transcendence,” of course, is very hard to quantify; however, it is common among particularly Charismatic groups to assign a peculiarity to the experience of God in worship that they understand to be an experience of transcendence which, no matter how often it is repeated, never loses its sense of rapture or enchantment. Edgar Winter, famed blues and jazz musician, perhaps put it best when he said “I used to go to these old tent revivals and listen to the gospel singers. If you think rock and roll is energetic, it pales in comparison to a Pentecostal tent revival.” Winter, Edgar. *Edgar Winter Quotes*, accessed 11 October 2006; available from <http://www.brainyquote.com/quotes/quotes/e/edgarwinte214358.html>; Internet.

⁴ The Pew Internet and American Life Project has reported that 21% of Internet users search the web for cyber spirituality. This will be discussed in more detail in SECTION FIVE: The Project.

anonymity, to be seen as who we feel ourselves to be rather than as the sum of abstract metrics and parameters.”⁵ This “release from anonymity,” which is often facilitated online through the use of avatars and constructed identities,⁶ may help us experience moments of transcendence. Through online interaction, users can learn how to “be” in such a way that their online identities help them in their interactions with their larger community. This community can then help narrate that “self,” even a constructed “self,” as a method of spiritual formation—by exchanging feedback, offering insights, and being in relationship. That formation can give us a glimpse of experiencing the true community of God’s kingdom, and possibly an experience of God himself.

With this in mind, there are a few pathways we might explore—images, metaphors, music, and fashion—in our efforts to create more of these kinds of experiences. Take the following conversation, again between my friend and me, as evidence of how these symbols evoke a torrent of meaningful connection to spirituality.

“Cool pants.”

“I know. The *Brahma* bull in sequins. I have another pair with some Haida art on the pocket.”

“Animism?”

⁵ Christopher Locke Rick Levine, Doc Searles, and David Weinberger. *The Cluetrain Manifesto: The End of Business as Usual*, (New York: Perseus, 2001), xv.

⁶ It should be noted that playground.tv also has the potential for users to construct alternate identities, a fact inherent in online interaction. The creation of an avatar, while a constructed identity, is still something other than anonymity. It may be considered an escape, or even a mask, but it does supply the user with an identity that allows them to be a person.

“Well, you have a t-shirt of Jesus looking like Che Guevara. My tattoo is Jesus as a conquered First Nations chief. We used it for that outreach to the Indians in northern BC.”

“Okay. What does your church think about it?”

“Yeah, they do not like anything. I brought out some of the sketches done of Jesus by other cultures I found on the Internet and they got mad. They couldn’t get into it. It went badly.”

“They do not have to get it. They do not like your music either. You can still reference that stuff. ”

“I told them music was our *torah* and they called me a heretic.”

“You are a heretic.”

“I know you are but what am I?”

Images, music, metaphors, and fashion are examples of things that touch us inside. They stir us emotionally and press us beyond cognition into volition and relationship. As art, they are often understood as windows into a more perfect world, a world where things are as God intends them. But such a world is not always visible, so the quality of making the “invisible become visible”⁷ makes art crucial to life. It causes us to see differently, and to experience a different knowledge. As Walter Brueggemann put it, “knowing consists not in settled certitudes but in the actual work of imagination.”⁸ St. Paul said something similar: “Look not to the things that are seen but to the things that are unseen; for the things that are seen are transient, but the things that are unseen are

⁷ Len Sweet, *Summoned to Lead*. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 57.

⁸ Walter Brueggemann, *Texts Under Negotiation: The Bible and Postmodern Imagination*. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993), 12.

by the larger church community. This disconnection is a spiritual disconnection, painful while broken, but holy when remade. "Our lives are set between expulsion and anticipation," says Brueggemann, "of being uprooted and rerooted . . . dislocated because of impertinence and relocated in trust."¹⁰

It is this sense of uprootedness that leads us to keep asking the question: *how do we facilitate the individual experience of God through community, while still valuing the communal dimension of experience?* In other words, *how do we simultaneously get the experience and community of Christianity in a postmodern world?*

I believe one answer may be the prayground. Prayground.tv allows for a personal experience of prayer, a personal experience of creativity and art, and online community connection. It allows people to connect meaningfully with one another and provides access to the rich artistic and contemplative history of Christianity. It is the best of both worlds.

⁹ 2 Corinthians 4.18, KJV.

¹⁰ Walter Brueggemann. *The Land: Place As Gift, Promise, and Challenge in Biblical Faith* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Fortress, 2002), 15-16.

SECTION THREE: OTHER PROPOSED SOLUTIONS

Introduction

Cyber spirituality is a hot topic right now, both in the church world and in the secular marketplace. There are new ventures, tools, interfaces and websites that seem to spring up almost daily, each one trying to find a new angle on how to navigate the tension between individualism and online community.¹

Because community is such an important component of Christianity there have been some heated discussions among Christians about whether or not online community can be, or even *should* be, as meaningful as face-to-face interaction. Ironically, some of the most vehement voices in this conversation spring from the younger church leaders who feel that the online community is a counterfeit attempt at being cool or trendy, and seem to prefer being together in person.²

I find this to be sad. While I understand and even sympathize with this perspective at times, I also believe that newer generations will find online interactions increasingly less “counterfeit” as they are born into a world that has always had new media to provide community. For those who have never known anything different, it begins to feel confusing, or even contrived, to talk about the “falsehood” or “lack of authenticity” inherent within virtual community because they have grown up using their

¹ One has only to perform a quick search on Google or Yahoo! to be quickly admitted to this arena of interest. Websites like double-mirrors.com, cybersociology.com, cybercommune.com, and quantumspirit.com are all easily accessible examples of the secular world grappling with the sacred ramifications of the Internet.

² I make this statement as an informal claim based upon my own personal experience. While there is little in print, and even less available in online documentation, these opinions are regularly presented to me in conversation by peers in vocational ministry and local church life.

technologies as basic service providers (particularly instant messaging, text messaging, and sites like myspace.com).

For the church to be present in a world of increasing technological dependence we must continue to thrust relevance upon ourselves in technological and communicative methodology. This means we must find a way to make the Internet spiritual, to make consistent attempts to facilitate human-divine-human interaction that is enjoyable and meaningful. I like to call this Human Transcendence Technology,³ and I believe that websites like the playground.tv are only the beginning to what could be accomplished when we allocate resources to similar ventures.

Listed below are some of the other websites currently online that are being touted as spiritual or experiential. I have grouped them into three categories in order to plot the trends and developmental thoughts or objectives accordingly.

Subsection One: Websites on Spirituality and Information

These are the kinds of websites that have been designed as tools for congregations, pastors, and individual believers to know more about the various expressions of faith and the rich traditions of Christianity. These sites do not focus on users actually experiencing these practices and, as such, read and function almost like “how-to” guides. Typically these sites are loaded with content and sharp ideas by practitioners who have made these things work in real life but have not yet ventured into the development of such practices specifically for online use.

³ Human Transcendence Technology is a term I have coined. I have begun to use it as a way to compare its significance to Human Performance Technology, which is the standard reference for PDA's, iPods, and other electronic handheld devices.

Description

Echurchessentials.com is a website designed to help pastors and churches move forward into the often intimidating world of electronic culture. Because this medium of communication has developed so quickly, many pastors and churches have missed some key opportunities afforded by electronic culture and echurchessentials.com tries to make the usability of the site and the customer service very high.

One of their primary services is a web-site builder, which offers users a series of templates to choose from ranging from highly customized and specific websites with special functionality (like sermon archiving or streaming video), or stock websites that will look identical to the website of another church with only minor differences (such as the actual information within each text window and the church logo). These websites are designed so that users can easily upload .jpg graphics, Flash content, or Microsoft PowerPoint without a large amount of technical expertise.

Echurchessentials.com also offers advanced courses and templates for developing curriculum for Sunday School and adult classes. Under the heading “E-learning,” users will find access to virtual classrooms, aids on course creation, and examples of the various ways in which online communication can be managed and led.

Assessments and personality profiles are also a big part of e-learning, and several stock assessment profiles can be taken by users with results delivered in minutes. These assessments can be stored within a church-specific database (as well as a larger, echurchessentials.com database for job-placement purposes) so that pastors and leaders

can look for lay leaders to fill volunteer positions that match up to their personality and giftedness.

Response

This is a wonderful resource that can be easily used by pastors and leaders from a variety of backgrounds to help their churches connect better to themselves. This is a great interface for people to learn and understand how they fit together in their local congregation, and will continue to be effective in making churches healthier and more whole on levels of administration and mobilization.

Echurchessentials is not designed to be a “vertical” experience or to encourage any contact with God specifically. The focus of the site is the practical and organizational components of church life and church leadership, rather than the intersection of the human spirit in communion with the divine.

The prayground.tv will serve as a counterpoint to a site like echurchessentials.com. Whereas the latter may serve as a cyber manual for local community, the former may serve as a cyber community with local, manual customization and control.

<http://jesuit.org.sg/>

Description

The Jesuit Singapore Website is designed to give users access to the basic doctrine, tenets, government, and practices of the Order. The opening screenshot shows the menu of the site as well as a succinct devotional thought for each day and a link to an

e-newsletter. In each of the four sections of the main menu, users are invited into a deeper understanding of what it means to be a Jesuit and provided with suggestions that will assist the curious in finding out more about living in this way.

Section One, “companions,” talks about the history of the Order and how to contact members and clergy in order to have face-to-face meetings or prayer. Included in this section is information on the various youth groups and youth resources, a list of Jesuit saints and martyrs and a note about Jesuits being “called to action.”

The “choices” section is all about how to become a Jesuit, including vocation narratives and FAQs offering insights into transformations new initiates can expect to undergo. It is significant that these transformations are told as narratives, as stories, and not listed in bullet form or supported only with ancient texts. The site has taken special care to preserve the storyline component so important to postmodern youth culture.

Section Three, the section on “prayer,” is what first drew me to the site as I began to investigate online spirituality and expression. The prayer component allows users to view other people’s prayer requests and prayer offerings, read liturgical prayers throughout history, and offer their own prayers as part of a discussion board. Daily prayers and daily “*shaloms*” (encouraging anecdotes and sermons) are supplied that focus on social justice and personal betterment issues, and resources are listed to encourage users to engage in these practices offline as well.

The last section, “happenings,” is primarily calendrical, though it does include some inspiring art projects and media pieces that serve to make surfing the site more enjoyable.

Response

When I first discovered this site I loved it, but was very disappointed to find that very few other people shared my enthusiasm. Upon my asking, I began to learn that most people's response to the site was that it was boring and that the interactive components were far too limited to be engaging.

When I probed further I realized that the key components that seemed to be missing here were primarily audio and visual components (there is no audio component to the site, and the graphics are minimal); however, what people missed most of all was the ability to customize and interact with other people. The prayer board proved too insignificant a component to give the site a community feel. Instead, the board felt like a guest book at a wedding—only meaningful for the host, but not really of any significance for the visitor.

Still, I liked the sense of sacred space that I encountered within the site—that this was a place dedicated to spiritual conversations and mentoring—and when I pressed respondents about this aspect of the site there was general agreement that that experience was shared by all, but overshadowed by the aforementioned shortcomings of the personal customization, community aspect, and media components.

Subsection Two: Experiential Websites

These are the kinds of websites that have been designed as online experiences in-and-of-themselves, rather than as tools or portals to help visitors understand how to reproduce innovative liturgies or strategies in their local contexts. They are sites that

tend to focus on prayer and reflection and have little online community expectation. Furthermore, these sites tend to offer very little in the way of customization (apart from text entry) and tend to be more contemplative than interactive (meaning there is a lot of content to read and see and think over and far less content to control, interact with, or manipulate).

<http://vurch.com/>

Description

Vurch.com, short for “virtual church,” is designed to be an online spiritual community that replaces church attendance for Christ-followers. This is made plain by the slogan “do not go to church, go to vurch” that is displayed on the welcome screen and on the t-shirts and merchandise for sale on the “patronize us” page. The site is focused on convenience, promoting itself as “five-minute spirituality” full of “thirty-second prayers,” “thirty-second thoughts,” and “thirty-second notices.” These brief interactives are available to be viewed online, shared online, or just kept private to each user and between “God and the heavenly host.”

Vurch.com does the best job of facilitating an online spiritual experience so far, incorporating minimal (but effective) elements of discussion and prayer, art and thought, and spiritual readings. While not customizable in terms of media components, vurch.com does supply new content frequently enough that each visit seems a little bit different and new enough that the site does not feel repetitive.

Each of the three segments of the site incorporate interactive elements and reading/reflection elements so that users are free to participate or simply act as spectators

according to their leisure. Writers like Anne Lamott and Mike Riddell have left narrative offerings on the site so that the content of the readings is similar in tone to the rest of the design, simultaneously irreverent and spiritual.

The “thanks” section of the site points users to the websites for places like DroptheDebt.org, christian-aid.org.uk, and jubilee2000.uk in an effort to compel awareness of the larger responsibilities of truly spiritual people. Because of the site’s flippant tone, this direct approach works really well in getting people selecting and browsing those links.

Response

I like this site a lot, and my vision for the playground.tv is to take a site like vurch.com to a different level. Where vurch is limited in its customization, and therefore limited in its enjoyment, I have designed playground.tv to be more engaging for younger and more casual users. Where vurch is very low on community, I have designed playground.tv to incorporate more conversational elements that will make it feel like users are part of a larger family.

I am a little disappointed, though not necessarily surprised, by the anti-institutional message of vurch.com, and feel like some of its energy is wasted by being directed against the church. It seems to me that the site might be more effective in fostering spiritual conversation and redirecting Christ-followers into social justice if it didn’t have such a negative counter-Church message to it. Then again, the counter-culture ethos may be what gives vurch.com its charm and allows it to speak to the

often makes a labyrinth experience special. Once that is lost, the online labyrinth could feel like it deteriorates into more of a spectator viewing than an interactive environment.

Response

There is nothing either communal or customizable about the online labyrinth and the site itself never changes. This means that repeat visits to the site diminish one's enjoyment and impact every time. The site could become more like an artifact than an apparatus to a frequent user.

What I do love about the site is that the developers really made efforts to make the site look great and function at a fast pace. What they lack in new content they make up for in navigation and design, both of which have been significant challenges in the development of prayground.tv.

My one remaining criticism of the online labyrinth is that the hosts have buried the site in an obscure URL, making it very hard to find unless you know the exact address (<http://www.yfc.co.uk/labyrinth/online.html#>). Recently, the hosts have upgraded their search criteria, making it easier for sites like Google and Yahoo! to locate the labyrinth if you enter "online labyrinth" into the search engine, but if you never knew it was there it is unlikely you would happen across it.

Subsection Three: Community Websites

These are the kinds of websites I have tried to emulate in my development of the prayground.tv because of their unique online community components. Typically, the

sites that are doing this well are very user-friendly, highly customizable, and continually add features and upgrades to facilitate greater interactivity among users.

Their weakness, in terms of cyber-spirituality, is the ease in which the dialogues of their communities drift quickly away from spiritual matters into almost purely natural or secular matters entirely. This is not to say that non-spirituality-specific issues such as gadgets, pop culture, and romance are evil; just that in the midst of those conversations the centrality of an online spiritual experience is diminished quickly and rarely—if ever—resurfaces.

<http://flickr.com/>

Description

Flickr.com is a digital photo-sharing website that allows users to store, search, sort and share their personal photographs. The site allows user to upload 20MB of material each month for free, and archives all previous photographs in a variety of easy-to-use folders and menus that are quick and simple to use.

The primary draw is the ability to share photographs quickly and easily with friends and family. Photos are easy to upload and users can restrict viewership to select lists or make photos available for “public” viewing by simply checking or unchecking a tab next to the user profile window. Each photograph can be accompanied by a short tag (label) or a few brief lines of commentary, both of which are employed to aid in the sorting/archiving process and so that viewers understand what they’re looking at (date/time/subject, etc . . .). The camera settings (including aperture, shutter speed, resolution, and model of digital camera) can all be observed through the “details” tab on

the right hand side of each page so that fellow photographers eager to learn some tricks-of-the-trade can replicate effects and tone.

In addition, photos can be viewed in slideshows, sets, or contact sheets through a very simple navigation tool. Likewise, prints can be ordered of specific photos from online developers who offer a wide range of services and prices, including delivery and postage fees.

These features, impressive as they are, are actually fairly standard in most online photography websites. It is the additional community components of Flickr.com that set it apart from the rest, whereby users can send a photo to other users for feedback or perusal and talk about the photo in an online discussion board or live chat. Also, groups of friends/viewers can be established so that photography clubs can be formed around similar areas of interest (such as black and white, edited in Photoshop for effect, animal photography, etc . . .). These groups also frequently begin group blogs (also available through Flickr.com), or frequent the blogs of users in their contacts list, in order to critically engage the artwork itself or simply just to have fun and get to know one another a little better.

Flickr.com is also highly customizable. Each user is given a profile page within the larger Flickr.com site where users can share information about themselves (including offline contact info) and other users can troll the site looking for people who share similar interests. Users are given substantial control over the appearance of their profile page including the use of colors, templates, and layouts and the choice of an icon with which to represent themselves. These features are easily changed, so users often add or swap out contents and templates in an effort to keep their profile page looking fresh.

Response

Ultimately I do not see a site based upon the Flickr.com model to be inherently spiritual. Certainly there are spiritual takeaways from any kind of image replication and manipulation,⁴ but my aim is to create a spiritual experience online that is designed to be a spiritual experience, not just inherently spiritual,⁵ or accidentally spiritual.

That said, I do believe that Flickr.com presents more mystery, invites more interpretation, and allows for more personal contribution than other community sites that operate without an arts component such as myspace.com (see below). It is these components that I have tried to import into the playground.tv without neglecting the purposeful inclusion of other Christ-centered elements as well.

<http://myspace.com/>

Description

Myspace.com is designed to be a virtual community where users can sign on for primarily social purposes. New users begin by creating a profile, similar to the Flickr.com profile, which acts as a homepage for all of the online interaction through the site and has email, instant messaging, and blogging components built in.

⁴ Christians can understand photography as a metaphor for perspective and focus, for example, where we have control over the things we choose to look at as well as how we choose to frame them, etc... In addition, we might consider that our use of images is modeled after Christ as the image of God; or, we might understand ourselves to be creators emulating the creative capacity of the Father, turning the mundane or ordinary into works of art with some basic skills and equipment.

⁵ The Incarnation, in my understanding, tends to shy away from distinctions between the secular and the sacred as they're commonly understood in western Christianity today and instead holds our entire lives as something sacred provided we are willing to surrender each part of our lives to God.

Particularly popular among teenagers, myspace.com is loaded with advertisements and paparazzi headers complete with the latest celebrity gossip, sports news, and new music and movies. Music videos and comedic pieces can be seen within the myspace.com site, as well as music shared simply and in high quality audio via a built-in media player.

Independent artists, especially local bands, use myspace.com as a way of gathering new fans and bolstering their popularity, often adding interesting thoughts about the rationale or emotional consciousness behind their lyrics and music. Christian musicians have a special online enclave on myspace.com, as do Christian singles and recovering addicts who are looking for a support network of fellow-believers.

In this way, myspace.com does an incredible job of facilitating community and the spiritual formation components of the Christian life; however, the advertising can be invasive and woefully inappropriate to spiritual conversation—somewhat like trying to pray at a speed dating event—and this often affects the environment negatively.

Furthermore, unlike the prayground.tv, myspace.com has no interface for personal reflection and offering something to God other than the canned blog engines. While prayground.tv employs a similar engine, the orientation of the prayground.tv is specific to God and God-thoughts among friends. Myspace.com is a tool that could be used for anything; the creators of myspace.com have little intention of focusing on a deliberately spiritual experience.

Response

There have been many attempts to create a Christian version of myspace.com, and for good reason. The site allows deeply personal communication among peers, high customization, and multiple avenues for entertainment. Were such a site to be free of the heavy advertising component for singles' bars and online gambling, Christian peer-to-peer contact could be facilitated easily.

What I am trying to achieve with the playground.tv, however, is not just online community but also an online spiritual experience of prayer, reflection, and worship which the myspace.com design does not readily permit.

Conclusion

In my readings and conversations with web developers, graphic designers, and Internet programmers, I have returned again and again to the features that playground.tv must have in order to solicit repeat visits: customization by the user, clean navigation, high usability and functionality, and community conversation. To be fair, it is very difficult to accomplish these criteria on a limited budget, but I believe that the playground.tv brings these elements together effectively to create a uniquely spiritual experience online.

SECTION FOUR: THESIS

Introduction

This section proposes and substantiates my belief that *an online experiential prayer exercise can be used effectively to encourage postmoderns to engage spirituality individually and in community*, providing the online experience allows for personal expression and creativity, high user interactivity, and conversation among peers. This will ensure that each session/response is a genuine offering of the user and can be shared among friends and associates.

I have chosen to address the problem of online spirituality because of my personal background. In Western Canada, where I lived for twenty-eight years, the hunger for authentic spirituality is so strong that anyone who spends ten minutes on the street in downtown Vancouver will be assaulted by every brand of “spirituality” peddled by bus-boy gurus and business-lunch witches. Yet despite the prevalence of spiritual interest, church attendance remains depressingly low, and we are forced to conclude that churches are not meeting the demand for spiritual encounters. I believe that the church’s inability to help postmoderns engage God is a result of not providing the “right kind of opportunities and environments” for people to actually connect with the spiritual dimension of their lives.¹ After all, people are not typically changed through adherence to a set of ideals or propositions, but changed through encounter with God himself, and it is our task to ensure those opportunities abound. We are to be “experience architects”²

¹ Reginald Bibby, *Restless Churches: How Canada’s Churches Can Contribute to the Emerging Religious Renaissance*. (Kelowna: Wood Lake, 2004), 90.

² Len Sweet, *Soulsunami* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 1999), 215.

mediating “deeply moving experiences of the divine”³ through “feelings, moods, music, and energy.”⁴ I believe one way we can make these experiences available is through the Internet.

Engagement

Spiritual expression in the new millennium has to be more about what people do as opposed to what they observe.⁵ The inherent value of a website, particularly the playground.tv website, is that it allows users to creatively and critically engage with the materials readily available, unlike church attendance where they are typically spectators. Postmoderns want to feel like they are an active part of what is going on in this new economy of shared experiences. Such is the need for highly interactive practices like the ones afforded by Internet websites, and—in our case—an online experiential prayer exercise like the playground.tv.

This level of interactivity has a way of redeeming the audience. It elevates the everyman to a position of artist and entrepreneur, and makes viewers worthy of attention, not disdain, suggesting that there is an individuality to each *audience* as well as to each person. It therefore becomes necessary for us to imagine a better educated audience that

³ Ibid. p. 208.

⁴ Ibid. p. 215.

⁵ I realize this claim is unsubstantiated at this point. The *Engagement* section will unfold the worth of this claim based upon the Theory of Multiple Intelligences, Schlossberg’s study of interactivity, and several other pertinent considerations.

has developed its own standard for excellence, that takes responsibility for evaluating truth, and that works hard to find voices worthy of trust.⁶

Edwin Schlossberg notes that “excellence exists only in the variety and quality of our interactions”⁷ and suggests that we begin to consider the audience as an integral part of composition design.⁸ This can create opportunities for awe, delight, truthfulness and hope⁹ wherever the experience of an event happens both in front of its members and in between them. Schlossberg contends that this kind of “necessary first step” is also an entry into a whole new paradigm of interactive experience¹⁰ that takes us away from merely reading the story and, instead, places us with a sword in our hand atop a white horse chasing dragons.

Our audience, even our world, is getting smarter,¹¹ and the belief that everyone has something to offer filters into all aspects of life. My experiences in collegiate ministry have taught me that the most vital tool I can employ to remove antagonism is to invite participation. The more discussion I allow, the more tactics I employ to probe social issues and invite debate, the less aggression I receive from my would-be attackers. People have something to contribute, and participation promotes healthy dialogue and counsel between both parishioners and seekers.

⁶ This description of the new audience is a synthesis of several sections of Edwin Schlossberg, *Interactive Excellence* (New York, Ballantine, 1998), cf. esp. 29, 49.

⁷ Edwin Schlossberg, *Interactive Excellence* (New York, Ballantine, 1998), 98.

⁸ Ibid, p.5.

⁹ Cf. Quentin Schultz, who proposes these four characteristics as essential qualities in Christian worship. Quentin Schultz, *High Tech Worship* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 30.

¹⁰ Edwin Schlossberg, *Interactive Excellence* (New York, Ballantine, 1998), 26.

¹¹ Cf. Edwin Schlossberg, *Interactive Excellence* (New York, Ballantine, 1998), 29 and 49.

Even in corporate management theory, participation is recognized as an ethic. This was demonstrated by Rosabeth Moss Kanter's citation of the prominence of customer focus, employee involvement, and partnerships with other companies¹² as the biggest developments of the last fifteen years. This trend is now also reflected in church growth analysis. Easum and Bandy, leading consultants, tell us that "the transition from congregations dependant upon clergy for pastoral care and leadership, to congregations that rely on gifted, called, and equipped laity for pastoral care and leadership, is the greater paradigm shift that lies behind the growth of cell groups."¹³

The online audience is becoming more connected to itself every day. As such, there is actually less true performance online and much more community performance and participation. Advertisers are having a hard time responding to this shift, due to the audience understanding entertainment less as broadcast and more as environment, and advocates of a "smart audience" are growing increasingly bold in their disregard for advertiser's perceptions. "We are not seats or eyeballs" says Doc Searles to the Evil Advertiser "or end users or consumers . . . we are human beings and our reach exceeds your grasp."¹⁴

The Great Commission was never to bring everyone to church, but to bring the church to the people. We are to "be these unique kinds of people (transforming) the places (we) live and work and play because (we) understand the whole earth is filled with

¹² Originally listed in Leonard Sweet, *Soulsunami* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999), 216.

¹³ Easum and Bandy, *Growing Spiritual Redwoods* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2002), 122.

¹⁴ Christopher Locke Rick Levine, Doc Searles, and David Weinberger. *The Cluetrain Manifesto: The End of Business as Usual*, (New York: Perseus, 2001), xv.

the *kavod*¹⁵ of God.”¹⁶ Our theology gives us a choice about who we are and a choice about what to look at. It gives us the “livelihood, craft, connection, and community”¹⁷ offered by the Internet in practical spirituality. It reminds us that we are connected to one another in love, not as representatives of church or organization, but simply as ourselves.

Our challenge in the postmodern world is to supply highly interactive opportunities for postmoderns to connect to Jesus and one another. Churches, however, are typically presented only in visual or auditory manners. Howard Gardner, in his groundbreaking book *Frames of Mind*, informs us that in addition to there being visual or auditory learning styles there are also at least seven different intelligences¹⁸ which facilitate learning and interaction in completely different ways. The reality of Multiple Intelligence Theory means that—because we are typically only engaging visual and auditory intelligences—there are entire groups of people who are not even wired to “get” what we are trying to give.

In an effort to better facilitate individual people connecting with Jesus Christ, we are moving away from a front-and-center model of theatrical liturgy to a decentralized mapping of prayer stations, labyrinths, media interaction, personal and corporate prayer, individual study in the midst of conversation, and laughter alongside remorse. The prayground.tv is an online manifestation of this approach to spirituality and gives users

¹⁵ Hebrew, *lit.* “glory.” Strong’s Number: 03519, accessed September 21 2006; available from <http://www.biblestudytools.net/Lexicons/Hebrew/hebrew.cgi?number=03519&version=kjv>; Internet.

¹⁶ Rob Bell. *Velvet Elvis: Repainting the Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005), 85.

¹⁷ Christopher Locke Rick Levine, Doc Searles, and David Weinberger *The Cluetrain Manifesto: The End of Business as Usual*, (New York: Perseus, 2001), 22.

¹⁸ The different intelligences are: verbal/spatial, verbal/linguistic, logical/mathematical, bodily/kinesthetic, musical/rhythmic, interpersonal, and intrapersonal. See also, *Intelligence Reframed: Multiple Intelligences for the 21st Century*. (New York, Basic Books, 2000).

the freedom to create their own expression of prayer and share it with their online community.

In a sense, the playground.tv is a kind of *diistemi*, or “space apart.” It is an online dimension set aside for worship. It becomes a worship space, a worship environment, and is mapped out virtually as well as emotionally as users experience God through a new medium. If, as Marshall MacLuhan once proclaimed, the medium is the message, then the playground.tv sends us a message that what we have to offer matters. Our choices about what to look at matter, our decisions about how to express ourselves and talk about it matter, and they allow us to feel like we are doing it instead of watching someone else do it in front of us.

Spirituality

Cyber spirituality is as much of a red herring as broadcast spirituality or telecommunication Christianity—there is just no way to set aside an entire market for specifically spiritual purposes; and yet, the playground.tv is an attempt to take this medium and sanctify some corner of it so that spiritually hungry people can connect with God and their peers in an honest quest and conversation to make themselves open to God.

Brother Lawrence, in his celebrated *Practice of the Presence of God*, remarks that there is neither skill nor knowledge needed to go to God, but only a “heart dedicated entirely and solely to him out of love for him above all others.”¹⁹ It was Lawrence’s belief that the disciplines themselves were but a means to an end—the end being greater

¹⁹ Brother Lawrence, *The Practice of the Presence of God* (New Kensington, Whitaker House, 1982), 22.

union with Christ—for he found no satisfaction in a methodology of spiritual formation.²⁰ For Lawrence, the spiritual life “consists of practicing God’s presence”²¹ and the most effective way he knew how to do that was to simply do his ordinary work.²²

Eugene Peterson echoes this kind of approach when he remarks that the “God-breathed life is common”²³ and totally accessible across the whole spectrum of the human condition “. . . not a body of secret lore (for it has) nothing to do with aptitude or temperament.”²⁴ Instead, Peterson asserts that “spirituality is the insistence that everything that God reveals of himself and his works is capable of being lived by ordinary men and women in their homes and workplaces.”²⁵ In fact, we might hypothesize that spiritual exercises are only “a pretext for something that could just as well happen without them,”²⁶ and that we must get beyond the *technique* so as to truly engage the spirit out of our growing unconscious.

This may be precisely the kind of approach Trappist monk Thomas Merton had in mind when he stated that all “good meditative prayer is a conversion of our entire self to God,”²⁷ which we can use as a springboard to ask ourselves what it means to engage in a holistic approach to spirituality. It is hard to escape the fragmentation of the popular

²⁰ Cf. *Ibid.*, 39.

²¹ *Ibid.*, 33.

²² Cf. *Ibid.*, 24.

²³ Eugene Peterson, *Christ Plays in Ten Thousand Places* (Grand Rapids, Eerdmans, 2005), 17.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 19.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 5.

²⁶ Eugene Herrigel, *Zen in the Art of Archery* (London, Penguin Books, 1953), 18. A fascinating read, we may consider this to be much more about a Westerner’s comprehension of spirituality than archery and Buddhism.

²⁷ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1999), 40.

approach, which seems to prescribe spiritual disciplines like workout regimens and treats spirituality as something we *do*—another activity in which we are involved—instead of something that permeates our whole existence and fosters wholeness in that existence. “A life is either all spiritual” says Merton, “or not spiritual at all. No man can serve two masters. Your life is shaped by what you live for. You are made in the image of what you desire.”²⁸

The playground.tv was created—in part—as a defiance of reductionist spirituality, challenging the notion that there are rules to follow that will ensure our individual and communal growth. The playground.tv is an expression of the belief that God takes the everyday occurrences of our lives and teaches us to see them as sacrosanct, as teachable moments of the divine, and to accept that our entire lives are lived before God as either offering or ignorance. There is real worth in spiritual disciplines and ancient sacred practices—in fact, the playground.tv is an attempt at the creation of a new discipline—but that worth is not in the practices themselves but in the attitudes and divine proximity that result from those practices.

Perhaps the playground.tv is most like a pilgrimage. If truly a pilgrimage is marked by purpose and by wandering/distance,²⁹ then certainly the playground.tv qualifies; for, our meanderings online are intensely marked by both qualities.³⁰ Furthermore, when we approach any medium—particularly this one—we are given the

²⁸ Ibid., 49.

²⁹ The word pilgrim comes from the Latin word meaning ‘resident alien’ and it can also mean “to wander over a great distance. Cf. Tony Jones, *The Sacred Way* (Grand Rapids, Zondervan, 2004), 151.

³⁰ In other words, we go online with the purpose to find a website, an address, etc. . and we go online to wander through a myriad of hyperlinks and banner ads that we click on a whim.

opportunity to make spiritual and mental preparation and, in doing so, create a spiritual paradigm for understanding this quest as divinely oriented.

Like the desert to which the Fathers ran long ago, the Internet is not an entirely safe place. Full of pitfalls and snares for the unwary and the tempted, the Internet has become the “country of madness”³¹ and the “refuge of the devil.”³² Yet sites like vurch.com, the playground.tv, and labyrinth.co.uk give us a glimmer of what things may be like in the future for those who would reorient the world of technological vice to one of hyperlinked virtue. These are sites where you can explore the motif of journeying inwards towards yourself and upwards and *throughwards* into God, and they are decidedly and deliberately spiritual.

Community

The playground.tv is designed to connect people to each other, as well as to God, in the midst of a shared spiritual experience (essentially, we have made it okay to talk during church). It is this component that sets the playground.tv apart from other cyber spirituality sites—it is relational.

Relationships are everything. We are born because of a relationship between our parents, we breathe because of a relationship between oxygen, nitrogen, argon and carbon dioxide, we stay on the ground because of the relationship between our bodies and the magnetism of the earth, and we are saved because of our relationship with Jesus Christ.³³

³¹ Thomas Merton, *Thoughts in Solitude* (New York, Farrar Straus Giroux, 1999), 6.

³² Ibid.

³³ Len Sweet first walked me through this “relational understanding” in a conversation in Portland in 2004. His contribution here deserves to be mentioned.

In fact, ninety-four times in the New Testament we are given instructions as to how we are to deal with one another,³⁴ and there are consistent threads running between the reflection of God's love in our hearts and the manner in which we interact.³⁵

The importance of relationships is even underscored for us on a scientific level, through the study of quantum physics and the theory of non-local connectedness. Living systems, for example, exist as organisms on a sub-microscopic level that “maintain a clear sense of individual identity within a larger network of relationships.”³⁶ If a system gets in trouble, it can be “restored to health by connecting it to more of itself,”³⁷ in other words—even sub-microscopic organisms need good friends and the occasional atomic baseball game. The principle of relationship exists on molecular, scientific, and interpersonal levels and should not be written off or dismissed by the church as anything less than part of how we were made.

Too often we have de-prioritized relationships in favor of adherence to propositions or goals, but “truth is right relationships.”³⁸ In the modern world, we have been so intent on proving the validity of our religion that we lost out on some of its mystery. Once we reduced the wonder and awe of God to scientific formulae, we lost something—we lost spiritual ardor and traded it for integers and fractions.

³⁴ *biblegateway.com* (search feature), accessed September 2 2006; available from <http://www.biblegateway.com/keyword/>; Internet.

³⁵ cf. John 13.35.

³⁶ Margaret Wheatley, *Leadership and the New Science* (San Francisco, Barrett-Koehler, 1999), 20.

³⁷ *Ibid*, p.145.

³⁸ Len Sweet, *Out of the Question into the Mystery* (Grand Rapids, Waterbrook Press, 2004), 33.

Communities of any ilk are simply networks of relationships. The earliest churches were simply communities gathering together to celebrate Jesus and foster relationships. In order to establish positive community, Paul tells us to “work for the benefit of all, starting with those in the community of faith”³⁹ and to develop a “healthy and robust community” that does the “hard work of getting along . . . and treating each other with dignity and honor.”⁴⁰ So one of our first tasks must reflect one of the first key premonitions of Christ, that “all men will know you are (his) disciples if you love one another.”⁴¹ One practical way to do this in a postmodern world is through the medium of the Internet, where our relationships define who we are, and our relationship with God enables us to find “the fullness of our identity.”⁴²

One way of understanding the prayground.tv community is the African concept of *Ubuntu*. *Ubuntu* is a Zulu word meaning “humanity to others”⁴³ or, more strictly, “I am what I am because of who we all are.” It is the belief in a universal bond of sharing that “connects all humanity”⁴⁴ and a person with *ubuntu* is one who is “open and available to others, affirming of others (and) does not feel threatened that others are able and good.”⁴⁵

³⁹ Galatians 6.10.

⁴⁰ James 3.18, *The Message*.

⁴¹ John 13.35.

⁴² Len Sweet, *Out of the Question into the Mystery* (Grand Rapids, Waterbrook Press, 2004), 60.

⁴³ *Ubuntu: Linux for Human Beings*, accessed 1 November 2006; available from <http://www.ubuntulinux.org/>; Internet.

⁴⁴ Tutu, Desmond. *Ubuntu (ideology)*, accessed 1 November 2006; available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubuntu_%28ideology%29; Internet.

⁴⁵ Tutu, Desmond. *Ubuntu (ideology)*, accessed 1 November 2006; available from http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ubuntu_%28ideology%29; Internet.

Recently the concept of *ubuntu* has received a lot of press in the West because of its use by the open source programming community known as Linux.⁴⁶ In their words, “the *ubuntu* Linux distribution brings the spirit of ubuntu to the software world.”⁴⁷ *Ubuntu* typifies the unique nature of open source programming, allowing anyone with the necessary skill set to remotely recode the software from any computer with Internet access.⁴⁸ Open source software has provided most of the base code for the playground.tv interface and menus.

What I find so compelling about *ubuntu* is the way in which this online community is rapidly succeeding at a time when the world seems bankrupt in cooperation. Everything about our modern world has emphasized individuality, from commercials selling exclusive toys and encounters, to high priced education that isolates persons from one another in a competitive race for a capital edge. *Ubuntu*, on the other hand, teaches us to stay connected. And it’s working.

Playground.tv is a place that inherently welcomes a spirit of *ubuntu*. Through the media which it displays, and the interpersonal and nonlocal communication facilitated by the blogs and chat room, playground.tv will be a primary source of community for postmoderns today.

⁴⁶ Linux has, incidentally, registered the domain www.ubuntu.com as their homepage.

⁴⁷ *Ubuntu: Linux for Human Beings*, accessed 1 November 2006; available from <http://www.ubuntulinux.org/>; Internet.

⁴⁸ Contrast this to “closed” software like Microsoft Windows which requires Microsoft to make all changes.

Conclusion

Thinking about online community and cyber spirituality is a new mental journey for some people; and yet, it is precisely the journey our culture has taken over the last several decades. Transportation into this future requires a shift, whether from modernity to postmodernity, or propositional truth to storytelling, or personal piety to community devotion. Our world is shifting quickly to a new version of itself and we had better keep up, because it's not going to stop.

“Immobility,” says Zygmund Bauman, “is not a realistic option in a world of permanent change”⁴⁹ and we must learn how to manage that change, how to survive in order to avoid “massive adaptational breakdown.”⁵⁰ We are not just transporting mere ideas, but people. People are carriers of consciousness, ethics and aesthetic, and deserve to survive their uprooting. It is our task to put the gospel into their pathways and to create meaningful experiences in the new *koine* of the twenty-first Century.

⁴⁹ Zygmund Bauman. *Globalization* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998), 2.

⁵⁰ Alvin Toffler. *Futureshock* (New York: Bantam, 1970), 2.

SECTION FIVE: PROJECT

Introduction: Show Me Heaven

Consider Jesus' decision to compare his ministry to that of a Shepherd watching over sheep.¹ This was an agrarian metaphor designed to reach people immersed in a society of farming and agriculture. Today, however, we live *after* the Agrarian Age, *after* the Industrial Age, *after* the Information Age, and in the Age of Creativity.² If Jesus were to have lived throughout these epochs as a man, his genius would undoubtedly have reframed itself to best fit the current context. In the Industrial Age he may have referred to himself as the Good Factory Manager, or in the Information Age as the Good Web Master. Everything we see of Jesus Christ in the New Testament tells us he was a masterful communicator, gifted in supplying new ways to see, so *our* question must be “How would Jesus choose to represent himself in a culture with no sheep?”

Poet Margaret Wertherim suggests that the Internet may hold the answer. She claims the World Wide Web is the place on earth most like heaven, the most like the Kingdom of God that Jesus was talking about, and it is a place in which we long to land. Others seem to agree. “The spiritual lure of the web is the promise of the return of our voice,”³ says *The Cluetrain Manifesto*, in accord with Wertherim's notion and noting that “however much we long for the web is how much we hate our job.”⁴

Says Wertherim:

¹ John 10.11.

² John Kao, *Jamming*. (New York: Harper Collins, 1996), 4.

³ Christopher Locke Rick Levine, Doc Searles, and David Weinberger. *The Cluetrain Manifesto: The End of Business as Usual*, (New York: Perseus, 2001), 39.

⁴ Ibid, 42.

Just as early Christians envisaged heaven as an idealized realm beyond the chaos and decay of the material world—a disintegration all too palpable as the empire crumbled around them - so too, in this time of social and environmental disintegration, today's proselytizers of cyberspace proffer their domain as an ideal 'above' and 'beyond' the problems of the material world. While early Christians promulgated heaven as a realm in which the human soul would be freed from the frailties and failings of the flesh, so today's champions of cyberspace hail it as the place where the self will be freed from the limitations of physical embodiment.⁵

The Internet is the discovery of a temporary home, a *chez soi*,⁶ where we can let down our proverbial hair and speak as ourselves, with our own voice (albeit sometimes a cleverly constructed voice, as in the case of screen-names or avatars). It is the waypoint of our transfer and a distraction from our dislocation.

The Spiritual Web

In light of the fact that more than one billion users are presently online worldwide,⁷ and that the use of audio and video applications on the Internet (such as telephone calls and playing of music) is expected to triple in the next two years, *and* that the cost of data transfer has dropped from \$80 thousand⁸ per terabyte to under \$100 per terabyte, we have strong reason to believe that the Internet will continue to assimilate the varied components of our lives—including spirituality—in increasingly valid and

⁵ Margaret Wertheim. "The Pearly Gates of Cyberspace" in *Architecture of Fear*, ed. N. Elin (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1997), 296.

⁶ *Lit.* French for "at home"; a space in which one seldom, if at all, finds oneself at a loss, feels lost for words or uncertain how to act. Cf. Appendix A: Rejected Terms.

⁷ World Total: **1,022,863,307**, from World Internet Stats. *World Internet Users and Population Stats*, accessed 1 November 2006; available from <http://www.Internetworldstats.com/stats.htm>; Internet.

⁸ All dollar amounts included within this document are U.S. Dollar amounts.

meaningful ways. Europe (35.5%), Oceania (48.6%), and North America (67.4%) are the world leaders in Internet penetration usage and are most likely to be the prime users for the playground.tv module, though due to the estimated two billion Christians beyond these countries⁹ (and an additional 51% of the world's population recognized as being religious or spiritually affiliated and prone to prayer)¹⁰ it is possible that the playground.tv will be employed outside their boundaries as well.

Currently, web-based technology boasts an impressive three million workers worldwide, with global revenue of over \$1 trillion annually. The fastest growing Internet industrials, as listed by Forbes, are information technology solutions (such as Cognizant Technology Solutions, Inc.) and human performance technology (such as International Society for Performance Institute), and in the arena of Evangelical religion in North America groups such as the Emerging Church and Youth Specialties are increasingly identifying the Internet as a valid medium for new forms of legitimate community and spiritual formation.

The Pew Internet and American Life Project¹¹ have reported that 21 percent of Internet users search the web for cyber spiritual connection. This makes online spirituality more popular than online banking (18%) or online auction (15%) and acts as a signal to churches and parachurch organizations that the Internet has potential as medium for community inreach as well as global evangelization.

⁹ Adherents.com. *Major Religions of the World Ranked by Number of Adherents*, accessed 1 November 2006; available from http://www.adherents.com/Religions_By_Adherents.html; Internet.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Pew Internet and American Life Project. *Wired Churches, Wired Temples: Taking congregations and missions into cyberspace*, accessed 20 December 2005; available from http://www.pewInternet.org/report_display.asp?r=28; Internet.

Prayground.tv

The prayground.tv is a first in the field of Human Transcendence Technology. It is a web-based experiential prayer module. It places users in contact with images and environments of spiritual discipline and formation. The basic design idea is a blend of chat rooms, online game play, and VJ software.

Prayground.tv offers a new form of prayer consistent with the five thousand year history of prayer articulated over time and culture.¹² While prayers are ultimately expressed to God, prayers also find their voice in the midst of community, and prayground.tv allows people of faith to connect with one another in the unifying language of art and expression.

As such, prayground.tv will continuously evolve as a global worshipping community independent of denomination or government through the shared experience of spiritual seekers and Internet pilgrims. It is an unrepeatable expression of a single moment's honest reflection before God.

Product Description

Prayground.tv utilizes a totally original interface and has created a new spiritual discipline for the digital culture, tantamount to the practice of *lectio divina* and walking the prayer labyrinth popular in the middle ages.

A 3D cube, the prayground.tv module itself, will fill 60% of the screen.¹³ On each "face" of the cube is a photograph related to a particular theme, such as repentance

¹² Wikipedia.org. *Prayer*, accessed 20 October 2006; available from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Prayer>; Internet.

or grace, and as the cube flips on its axis, at a variable speed related to pressure upon the mouse, the images will change. Additional image-banks can be accessed through a side menu that allows user to go back-and-forth between image banks, or through one bank at varying speeds, without boundary. This ensures that repeat usage generates original response every time.

Users will be able to DJ their own music using sound bytes queued through a small mixing console on the bottom left right-hand side of the screen. These sound bytes will include prayers being offered, Scripture being read, break beats and synthesized loops, and samples from arenas of spiritual significance (i.e. wind through a canyon, or cathedral lights humming with electricity). The user will layer multiple sounds on top of one another, arranged musically to fit in the key and tempo of the music.

As each session with the prayground.tv is completed the user can archive their experience for later viewing.¹⁴ These archives can be viewed through a hyperlink sent to others via email, as per e-cards, or browsed via time-date stamp on the prayground.tv website. Prayground.tv content will be updated in the earliest versions by the administrator, but in later version by the user. We will continue to upgrade the prayground.tv module to allow for greater archive and file sharing capabilities, and to facilitate further user individualization.

¹³ Currently, the prayground opens in a “pop up” window so the 60% refers to 60% of the new window, not the main browser page.

¹⁴ Because of budgetary limitations this feature of the prayground.tv will not be included in the LEC3 Track 2 project. This project has a limit of \$1300, whereas archival functionality quotes begin at approximately \$25,000.

Application

Through the playground.tv I hope to facilitate the individual, honest reflections of spiritual seekers who are looking to connect with one another and with God. I believe that this website can contribute to the global church community in a shared experience of prayer. Through the site, users will participate in conversation with one another, forming a virtual community facilitated by photography and digital imaging, remixing music, sacred text, and the conversational interface.

While the playground.tv may function well as part of an existing community of believers, the main clientele will be the youth and young adults of Evangelical churches in North America, Great Britain, and Oceania who find themselves unable to connect in traditional church settings. Typically, young adults aged eighteen through twenty-five are noted to have increased spiritual interest but a simultaneous decrease in church satisfaction.¹⁵ Playground.tv gives them the opportunity to connect with other believers through prayer, but without the construct of modern churches and the related stresses and discomforts they commonly associate with those venues. More specifically, the segment of youth leaders and church planters who have collected themselves under the label of the "emerging church" are a high opportunity market for web-based resources that are specifically oriented towards community and spiritual formation.

The other main market for the playground.tv will be Evangelical churches and church leaders looking to make cultural connections with a postmodern world. These leaders share a growing concern that established church methods and modalities are increasingly ineffective in reaching new generations, and are aware of the growing worth of the Internet and web-based community.

¹⁵ George Barna, *Revolution* (Wheaton, Tyndale House, 2005), 11-13.

Conclusion

The biggest competition for playground.tv is not so much another web interface of Human Transcendence Technology, but technology itself in the form of Internet habits and patterns. Internet time and space are hot commodities, and much research has been done on how to improve the number of "hits" a web site may receive. Currently, Amazon.com is receiving over ten million page views per day.¹⁶ Compare that to the average church website that is clocking only between one thousand to three thousand hits per day. The average "view" time is forty-eight seconds per page,¹⁷ and the likelihood of a casual browser returning to any site is a little better than "one thousand to one" according to Colin Brown at Neilson Ratings.

Despite the recent use of the Internet by many churches and parachurch organizations to bring information and theology to their constituents, there are relatively few sites and programs facilitating prayer or community. Among those with an orientation towards spiritual dialogue and discipline through mixed media and Human Transcendence Technology are vurch.com, churchoffools.com, and i-church.org.

Wired magazine, in its June 2005 issue, notes the continual "rise and success of the digital lifestyle," showing that the Internet will continue to be a powerful, prevalent, and dominant force in the lives of people in the western world. In the coming years, people will continue to revalue their meaningful relationships, including spiritual relationships, and look for increasingly convenient ways to make significant connections.

¹⁶ MLM Survivor.com. *Quixtar's Rankings as an E-Commerce Site*, accessed 12 August 2006; available from <http://www.mlmsurvivor.com/quixstats.htm>; Internet.

¹⁷ Neilson/NetRatings, *United States User Statistics*, accessed 11 March 2006; available from http://www.netratings.com/news.jsp?section=dat_to&country=us; Internet.

As a conduit of both spiritual community and experience, the playground.tv looks to facilitate such needs.

SECTION SIX: MEDIA SPECIFICATIONS SHEET

Goals and Strategies

My main goal for the playground.tv is to create spiritual experiences online, in a venue that is both intensely personal and interactive. I want users to have the control to customize their experiences. I want to allow for experiences that are uniquely personalized and provide opportunity for multiple sessions. Theoretically, one user could have limitless “new” experiences based on the choices they make about when they customize the experience and to what extent (i.e. music, photography, ethos, text, and conversation via blog and chat module).

I also want users to be able to interact with other users, both synchronously and asynchronously, so that the experience is not relegated to isolationist expression but can also serve as a virtual community. To this end, I have included the blogger and chat module components. I plan to also include an archive section,¹ and a file sharing node,² although this exceeds my resources for the LEC3 Track2 Project. I also envision a component where users can upload their own content for the viewing of their friends list.

I believe that using the medium of the Internet will negate some of the inherent isolation of church attendees and the oft-accompanying frustration of being a spectator. I began beta-testing early versions of the playground.tv in September 2004, and have since signed on with Gabe Cooper, a software designer in Arizona, and completed over a dozen prototypes of the site. My key concerns have always been with the level of customizable

¹ An archive section will allow users to revisit sessions they previously recorded in a database and file viewer.

² A file sharing node will allow users to email one another with hyperlinks to their archive and experience one another's sessions as they were originally logged.

material, the interactive and conversational readiness of the tool, and basic functionality and design. While repeat visits are the aspiration of every web developer, I am confident that user-friendly chat and blog modules are the key to ensuring that visitors return. Despite the enjoyment of high-customization, the personal expression piece loses some of its luster after only a few sessions.

At this point, I have logged over five thousand visitors to the various manifestations of the site, almost completely through personal referral. Given the time span of the previous two years, this hardly seems like success. However, I will ultimately measure success through the total number of hits to the site, the number of repeat visits to the site, the ongoing growth of the number of hits to the site over time, and the electronic feedback I receive from users (i.e. e-mails, postings, etc).

The good news is that, once the basic site is completed and uploaded, the costs for upkeep and maintenance are minimal. New content can easily be loaded via a web interface that is password protected by an administrator and the site will be hosted with dreamhost.com for \$8.99 per year.

The bad news is that development of a meta-version of the playground.tv would require a complete redesign totaling over \$50 thousand and likely involve some annual maintenance and administrative costs; so, for now, I continue to use the present version as a lure for investors.

Audience

I believe users will primarily be high-end web users and gamers, as well as clergy and laypeople with an interest in the development of spirituality in cyberspace. The former group I anticipate to make use of the site for their personal spiritual and

communal development, while the latter I anticipate using the site as a kind-of perpetual illustration about technological development and the bearing it has upon every aspect of society and culture, particularly religion and mysticism.

Initially I hope that all users find the site meaningful, fun, easy-to-navigate, user-friendly, and are left with a feeling that they have just engaged something completely “other” than what they typically come across on the Internet. I hope that they recognize that there is a new experience waiting for them each time they choose to participate in a session, and that they become evangelists-of-sorts, telling their peers and acquaintances about the experience they have had online.

Particularly once the interactivity and advanced customization components are completed (i.e. the archives, file sharing and viewing, and the ability of the user to upload their own content) I hope that each user comes to make use of the playground.tv as a new spiritual discipline, one that is as meaningful and life changing to them as *lectio divina* or the walking of a prayer labyrinth is to another.

Project Scope and Content

For the purposes of the LEC3 Track 2 Project I am limiting the playground.tv to a website that can be developed in Macromedia Flash MX. The site uses almost no outside coding. This allows many developers to easily upgrade the site without having a command of more advanced code-writing skills, yet also limits the overall functionality of the site thereby rendering the higher levels of customization and interaction all but impossible for the present.

I will also be limiting the playground.tv to three different ethos³ (urban, sun, beach) and to six images per image bank, ten audio clips, and ten different text samples per ethos. This ensures a wide variety of content and experiences can be accessed in the sessions, without having so much variety as to seem overbearing by virtue of having too much choice at the outset.

However, I would like to note that additional ethos' and content can easily be created, uploaded, and subsequently accessed from the splash/welcome screen with approximately eight hours of labor by anyone with a basic working knowledge of the Macromedia suite or Flash MX.

Budget

The present budget for this level of development (versus the meta-site) is \$1300. Additional fees are paid annually to dreamhost.com for both hosting and domain name registration at \$8.99 and \$34.99 respectively.

The site can be updated using my personal computer, or any web-ready terminal with the Macromedia Suite pre-loaded into the program directory. To edit the site and test it, developers will need a web browser utility and Flash MX.

Promotion

I plan to do most of my promotion electronically. Due to the nature of the project, I believe that most of those who are interested in the playground.tv will be already be familiar with the Internet and, possibly with Westwinds Community Church where I serve as the main teaching pastor.

³ An "ethos" is the name given to each of the three sub-sites within the playground module [urban, beach, sun]. The sub-sites are all the same basic engine, with differing content for each of the multi-media components of the playground module itself.

The varied forms of electronic promotion include a direct link from the church homepage to the playground.tv, a direct link from the church podcasting website to the playground.tv, a direct link to the playground.tv on a side panel in our church's weekly e-newsletter, a direct link to the playground.tv on a side panel in our church's weekly leadership e-newsletter, and a direct link to the playground.tv from my personal blog (which is also linked to the aforementioned media).

In addition, I plan to host several international conversations on the site (Canada, USA, UK, and Australia) as a way to stimulate group creative thought and response. I also plan to draw attention to the site when it is finally in its basic form during our weekly sermons which are podcast to over two thousand people weekly in over twelve countries around the world.

Despite all of this, I still believe that the main way in which the playground.tv will be promoted will be through word-of-mouth, from peer-to-peer, and by my own efforts to have it recognized.

Standards of Publication

The standards of publication for interactive Flash websites are as follows:

1. should fit within an 800x600 pixel window
2. text should be clear and easy to read
3. instructions should be clear and easily comprehended within six to eight seconds
4. transitions between pages and graphics or movies should be swift and flawless (i.e. no crashes or bugs)

4. completion of the splash screen and introductory menu
5. completion of the blog component
6. completion of the chat module
7. launch of the site under its own URL

Two years ago I quickly discovered that, while I am not without certain skills in programming and graphic design, it would be far more effective for me to hire a programmer to help me design a working basic model of the prayground.tv. To this effect, I have secured Gabe Cooper, whose technical skills as a professional designer more than adequately meet the needs of what I am asking here, provided we do not stray beyond the boundaries of Macromedia Flash MX or my limited budget.

As of October 2006, the prayground.tv is fully functional. It receives about twenty-five hits per day and is the hosting URL for the Westwinds Community Church sermon review team.

SECTION SEVEN: POSTSCRIPT

Introduction

This section reflects upon and evaluates the execution of the playground.tv and offers suggestions for further research, notes new problems that have come to light, and proposes what remains to be addressed in future projects.

Before Heading to the Playground.tv

One of my great frustrations as a pastor is the absence of an authentic, personal response from so many of the people that attend church. They come, sit, listen, and perhaps even intellectually engage while present, but they give no outward sign of interaction or application and rarely do we hear stories about them participating in these kinds of reflective activities after the fact. I had begun to notice, however, that the level of interaction among church attendees increased when the elements of liturgical design were changed away from merely preaching, prayer, and musical worship; and, given a more interactive, multi-sensory, environment. I found that people—particularly younger and more postmodern-oriented people—were delighted to become part of what was happening.

I began to think about how I might ensure that everyone could participate. I began to dream about mediums and interactives that would not only make space and invitation for people to respond, but deny them the opportunity not to respond even if that meant that their response was dismissive or hostile or apathetic.

Naturally, I began by thinking in terms of liturgics and environments, but these methods never resulted in more than about 50 percent involvement and often felt like

they were being forced upon the people. Dissatisfied with these findings, I took stock of my own interactions with venues and experiences and discovered that the one medium that absolutely required I participate fully was video games.

In a video game, if you refuse to participate your character dies and the game is over. No one who plays video games wants their character to die—or else they would never play—so it stands to reason that everyone who plays video games wants to interact and respond to the environment of the game. The quickest, cheapest, way to create a video game experience is through an interactive website like the ones commonly built by Macromedia Flash and Dreamweaver, so I began to troll online sites looking for templates about how such a game might work.

As I did so, I reflected upon what I thought makes an experience truly spiritual. I thought about the Desert Fathers and the recent enthusiasm about reclaiming ancient spiritual disciplines; I thought about my own Pentecostal-Charismatic upbringing and the sensations I experienced while caught up in prayer or worship; and, most of all, I thought about how different people experience community while online and how ironic it is that so many churches and church leaders have decried the Internet while simultaneously working themselves to death trying to foster community within their local congregations. It's like the answer was staring me in the face—the Internet requires users to interact with the medium, and through those interactions and the communication afforded by those interactions, people become emotionally connected to each other and look for further contact.

I began to try and make a website spiritual . . . and fun . . . and highly interactive, allowing for creative control on the part of the user . . . and I wanted to make sure it could be an experience shared in community, not just practiced in isolation. Around this time, someone gave me a copy of the Arkaos Video Jockey (VJ) software. This program allows users to project a multi-media show onto an LCD screen by allocating video clips, still images, text, and effects to hotkeys¹ on the keyboard. Once the hotkeys are selected, the VJ can “mix” images like a DJ mixes music.

I took the software home and loaded it with content of spiritual writings, iconic images, and time lapse video clips and began to experiment using this software to express myself in an attitude of prayer much like a poet expresses their prayers through verse. The experience was very moving, but had some specific limitations—namely, Arkaos doesn’t incorporate audio into most of its programming (thus the VJ needs a DJ as a kind of dancing partner), and there was no community component to the software engine. I thought perhaps I could encourage some community expression by using Arkaos on a large screen and inviting friends into the venue. This proved to be no different—and oddly more disengaging—than the spectator experiences I was trying to get away from, as everyone in the room got bored watching me VJ within the first ten minutes. Similarly, I tried hooking up several screen and several Arkaos terminals in one room thinking we could all VJ simultaneously; but, once we got everything up and running, no one cared about anyone else’s experience—it was totally isolationist.

¹ “Hotkey” is the term used to describe how a particular action can be mapped to a key on the computer keyboard. For example, you could “hotkey” the space bar so that whenever you hit the space bar while navigating the website it would play a particular song, or rotate the prayground 3D cube.

Recognizing that Macromedia Flash had some of the same built-in functionality that Arkaos uses, and that I could probably build a clone of Arkaos with some additional features, I began to investigate some developing estimates and quotes. As I began to share with programmers and developers what I was trying to create they prompted me to think of something that left out the hotkey element and instead had everything controlled by the mouse.

With this new limitation, and the realization that I would need upwards of four different menus to control the differing function of the playground.tv, I began to think about how I might do that in such a way as to keep the design elements clean and compelling. The 3D cube, which is the mainstay of the site, was one of my earliest conceptualizations. I imagined that the y-axis would control the differing banks of images, and that the x-axis would display images from within a particular bank. Each “face” of the cube would be dynamically loaded with upwards of four hundred stills so that, while each bank remained thematically coherent, the images themselves would rarely repeat—if at all—in a single session. The cheapest quote I received from a developer to build that cube was \$37 thousand.

The next design involved a 3D cube available from Flashkit.com, an open-source content site where flash nodes are distributed freely and without the protection of copyright, which limited each face of the cube to one image and required a separate menu to control which bank of images the user would see.

I now had plenty of images, but the menus were starting to look a little cluttered. Gabe Cooper, my programmer, and Colin Brown, my expert advisor for George Fox University, suggested that I come up with different templates for users to select so that

the whole look and feel of the site would change, and I could specify a smaller amount of content to be spread over three different backgrounds. This proved to be an excellent solution that allowed for lots of fresh content to be loaded, another level of customization and interactivity for the user, and a more clean navigation menu on each of the templates.

Once the basic site was built, I still had the problem of developing the online community portion. Currently, my budget has limited the conversational aspects of the site to a live chat and a running blog that open in separate windows. While this functions well, these components are fairly basic because they are freely distributed by developers as “teasers” for commercial products.

Triumphs and Shortcomings

Overall, I am very pleased with the site. It has high functionality, clean design, lots of user interaction, customization and control, and makes it very easy for users to experience community. I have created all of the content myself and had Gabe Cooper load it for me, and now am being trained by Gabe to be able to upload the content myself so it can be changed regularly. In my quest for feedback I have been consistently pleased with the enjoyment people get from the site, and the fact that they seem to find at least the basic functionality of the site obvious and easy to use on their first visit (typically the audio mixer and image bank chooser are overlooked, while the ethos chooser, text display, 3D cube, and conversational elements get quick recognition).

I am, however, disappointed with a few small things.

First, the archiving of sessions and the ability to share those sessions via email is far beyond my budget. I had originally conceived that users could “record” up to ninety

seconds of their online prayer, which would make a .mpg² file of what happened on their screen (including what the cube displayed, the audio mixer played, and which text was shown). Users could then go back and view previous sessions almost like going back to old journal entries.

These archived sessions were to then be shared via email in a manner similar to a Hallmark e-card. Recipients of the email would be able to watch the session of the friends and then respond with an online session of their own, blog about the session, or enter the chat module and discuss what they just experienced.

Unfortunately, this would cost approximately \$50 thousand.

The second disappointment I have experienced is the present inability for users to upload their own content. While not nearly as costly as the first disappointment, this too was cost prohibitive as it would require a separate interface for users to login, manage their content, and have tech-support available should things go awry. There are ways to do this very cheaply, but provide no guarantees as to how the playground.tv might be misappropriated. Specifically, Colin Brown has warned me that the playground.tv may look very appealing to some Adult programmers, thereby significantly altering the intentions of my design. Nevertheless, password protected, user-controlled content is the next step for the playground.tv.

My final disappointment is that the domain names of almost everything to do with prayer and ending in .com, .org, or .net (the three most popular domains) have been secured long ago by persons unwilling to sell the rites to them, despite the fact that many

² An .mpg file is a standard digital video file. The acronym stands for Motion Picture Experts Group.

of them remain unoccupied. Thus the various name changes of the site, from praystation to praymobile to prayboy and now to prayground.tv.

Conclusion

I have set out some limitations to the LEC3 Track2 project, but intend to continue developing the prayground.tv after my graduation. I will use the present design as a means of garnering some investment funds and seek to develop the meta-version of the prayground.tv that will include the archive and file-sharing, the fully-functional 3D cube (using x and y axis as built-in menus), occupy prayground.tv.com, and feature user-controlled content.

It has been an excellent achievement to come this far, but I now realize I have only begun. There is a world of my friends and peers that needs new opportunity for engaging spirituality and I believe I can help them.

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