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Building the Narrow Gate: Digital Decisions for Christ and the Draw of Rhetorical Space

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Abstract: For evangelicals, the allure of mass media evangelism has always been the potential to reach ever-more-distant “unsaved” populations across the globe. However, as the print and broadcast revolutions quickly revealed, targeting individuals’ needs and developing a sense of personal intimacy between evangelists and audience via these media proved a perpetual challenge. The digital revolution transformed this relationship: the interactive capabilities of the Internet and the ability to inexpensively target niche audiences re-shaped mass media evangelism. However, a close examination of evangelistic practices online reveals that, in fact, this latest “revolution”—rather than representing entirely novel ground—actually more closely approximates the type of evangelism that has taken place in brick and mortar churches and non-virtual environments since Christianity’s origins.

The concept of “rhetorical space”—drawn from rhetorician Roxanne Mountford’s work on how the design of pulpits and church buildings directly impacts the types of pastoral and congregational behaviors promoted—helps us to see why. Using Global Media Outreach’s Jesus2020.com and The Billy Graham Evangelistic Association’s PeacewithGod.net websites as exemplars, I explore how, by conceptualizing evangelistic websites as rhetorical spaces with architectural features functioning persuasively in a manner similar to physical spaces, scholars of digital religion gain a theoretical framework for effectively describing the unique draw of these sites. Three elements of design in particular reveal how web design works imperceptibly to create a personalized, intimate, and interactive experience, while quickly moving users to make the decision to convert: the rhetorics of interface, navigation, and virtual relationship design. Understanding evangelistic websites as rhetorical spaces thus allows scholars of digital religion to see ways in which Internet evangelism has many similarities with evangelism in non-virtual spaces, pushing us to view it as a more familiar and historical strategy than is commonly recognized.

About the Author

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Introduction

The issue of space is central to mass media evangelism. Christian evangelists and their ministries are deeply concerned with how to expand geographic reach and bring the Gospel to more and more distant communities across the globe; how to condense space and make a technologically-mediated experience appear intimate, relational, and personal; how to target an audience within a space, avoiding the “Gospel ghetto” to find the “unsaved”; and how to shape experiences within myriad spaces to promote conversion. With each new media revolution, evangelists have jumped at the opportunity to occupy new geographical and cultural spaces.

The most recent of revolutions—the digital—has proved no different. Indeed, according to a study conducted by the PEW Internet and American Life project, “Evangelicals are among the most fervent Internet users for religious and spiritual purposes” (Hoover et al. 2004). In the online context, social anthropologist Maura McCarthy (2000) and theologian David Lochhead (1997) have observed that Christian evangelists were among the earliest adopters. Their first forays online were in the use of bulletin board systems in the mid-1980s to reach out to non-Christians, and by the mid-1990s, their presence online was so noteworthy that *TIME* magazine published the article “Finding God on the Web,” in which Joshua Ramo wrote: “The signs of online religious activity are everywhere....Look for Christ on the Web, and you’ll find him—

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some 146,000 times” (Ramo 1996). As a point of comparison, in 2013, a comparable Google search for “Jesus” yields over 800 million results.

In 1996, Mark Kellner published the book *God on the Internet*, one of the earliest studies of how the Internet could be used for evangelism, and a year later, Tony Whittaker, an online evangelist himself, released his widely-referenced *Web Evangelism Guide* (1997). A primary focus of this manual and subsequent similar works—including Andrew Careaga’s popular *E-vangelism: Sharing the Gospel in Cyberspace* (1999) and Vernon Blackmore’s *God on the Net* (1999)—was to present ways for evangelists to use adaptive or bridge strategies to reach seekers online. Campus Crusade for Christ International popularized the “bridge strategy” of evangelism: their evangelistic websites copied the designs of popular secular web magazines like *Salon.com*, but with content and interactive options leading to the presentation of the Gospel. Currently there are bridge websites available on any number of topics from sports (*The Goal*) to movies (*Hollywood Jesus*) to science (*Life’s Big Questions*) to health and personal needs (*Priority Associates*) to body modification/fetish (*The Ultimate Love Page*) to teen and college issues (*iamnext*, *Every Student*) to apologetics (*Apologetics 315*) to recovery aid from addictions or help with relationships and sexuality (*Real Love Now*).

Internet evangelism became such a priority for the church in the 1990s that in April of 1999, the Billy Graham Institute held the first Internet Evangelism Conference, an event that continues to be celebrated every April. The terms “digital evangelism”, “internet evangelism” or “web evangelism” have come to refer to any method of using the internet to share the Christian Gospel, whether through websites, email, discussion boards, chat rooms, virtual churches, social networks, blogs, vlogs, or any other digital means. Evangelicals have effectively sought to occupy every available platform in cyberspace.

In the past few years, two ministries especially have come to the fore in Internet evangelism news for their claims to having attracted and converted literally millions of web surfers across the globe. Global Media Outreach, a partner of Cru (formerly Campus Crusade for Christ), which names *Jesus2020.com* as their “top evangelistic site,” reported that in 2010, over 15 million people indicated a “decision for Christ” via their online ministry, and in 2011, they announced that in one day alone, their ministry reached over one million visitors online (Lehua 2011). Similarly, the Billy Graham Evangelistic Association’s online ministry—operators of the *PeacewithGod.net* site—documented that in 2012, “nearly 8 million people around the world heard the message of Jesus Christ” via their online ministry, and “nearly 1.5 million of them said they prayed a salvation prayer” (Kumar 2013). The ministry further noted that these statistics average out to over 4,100 people responding to their message per day and that, since the *Peace with God* ministry was created in May of 2011, the Gospel has been shared with over 9.27 million people globally, 1.67 million of whom have indicated that they have “made a commitment to Jesus Christ.”

Both ministries additionally have live-updating global maps posted on their websites that track conversions recorded, conversations started, and Gospel presentations made by the second, reinforcing the activity occurring on these pages and encouraging even the most committed skeptic of digital evangelism to pause (Figures 1 and 2). While the standards for how a “decision” is calculated on these sites is arguably low—if a user clicks “Yes” to having prayed a salvation prayer, their click is recorded as a conversion—the sheer number of people who do engage in this way with these sites is compelling. What these statistics reveal is that not only are these ministries reaching an incredibly large audience, but they are connecting with and

potentially influencing the lives of these people in a dramatic way on a daily basis, an influence that appears to be consistently on the rise.

Statistics like these, as well as evangelical efforts to persistently press their ministries into each new technological frontier, encourage scholars of digital religion to think about evangelism's relationship to space on a macro-level. In this paper, however, I am interested in shrinking this global scope down to the micro-space of the websites in which these individual moments of conversion occur. In particular, what about the design of these web spaces proves compelling? And, by extension, what about the message conveyed on these pages fits so attractively into the web medium? The greater theoretical issues which these questions imply will encourage us to speculate about how digital space shapes relationships online and how ideology is promoted, adopted, and practiced online as well.

Fig. 1 BGEA Live Interaction Map

Fig. 2 GMO Live Interaction Map

To attempt to describe the myriad factors that may be involved in a moment of religious conversion, online or otherwise, is certainly a Sisyphean task and perhaps beyond the scope of any scholarly project. However, one very particular aspect of this moment is possible to analyze more closely: the critical role that web design—the interface, navigational, and spatial features of a website—may play in leading a seeker to engage with a particular evangelistic website and

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choose to “click yes” to Christianity. While the majority of studies in religious conversion focus on the nature of the individuals involved or the persuasive power of the message promoted by the organizations responsible for evangelism, I am interested in a more concrete issue: the way a space in which a conversion takes place can contribute to decision making. In other words, I am interested in the rhetoric of space. Using GMO’s *Jesus 2020* website and BGEA’s *Peace with God* pages as case studies, I will argue that an analysis of the features of the web design on these pages is one method in which we might understand why these sites prove attractive and how the application of theories of “rhetorical space” prove fruitful in these contexts.

There are two specific bodies of scholarship that inform this work in particular: one theoretical, one practical. The first is scholarship that has been done by rhetoricians on rhetorical space; the second is studies in persuasive web design. Rhetoricians utilize the concept of rhetorical space to describe how our environments shape our behavior as well as how ideologies can be encoded in the way a space is designed, answering questions like: “How does the architecture of a space direct our actions within the space?” and “How does the design of a space promote or reflect the values of its designer?”

Early discussions of rhetorical space were in reference to exclusively physical spaces. Roxanne Mountford (2003) popularized the term “rhetorical space” in her discussions of Protestant pulpit and church spaces, and rhetoricians have subsequently examined how spatial design expresses ideology and effects persuasion in spaces as diverse as prisons, hunting lodges, cemeteries, writing labs, and suburban neighborhoods. Richard Marbeck, for example, examined the Robben Island prison in South Africa as a rhetorical space in his 2004 article “The Rhetorical Space of Robben Island.” Analyzing the space both during the era of apartheid (when it was used as a site for political prisoners) and post-apartheid (when it became a site of memorial), Marbeck

conceptualizes the space itself as a “communicative event,” a location of discourse imbued with “cultural, historical, and material geographies” and symbolism (2004, p. 7). In 2007, in “Rhetorical Space—The Hunting Lodge at Venaria Reale,” Hugh Cullum analyzed a 17th century Italian estate in terms of what its design indicates about courtly values and accepted courtly behaviors in the period. In the same tradition, in her 2009 article “Rhetorical Spaces in Memorial Places: The Cemetery as a Rhetorical Memory Place/Space,” Elizabeth A. Wright considered two spaces—an African American cemetery in New Hampshire and the particular grave of a white woman in a Massachusetts cemetery—as rhetorical spaces, analyzing the ways in which cemetery designs both shape and are shaped by cultural conceptions of mourning and memory. Even more recently, in his 2012 article “Resisting the Fixity of Suburban Space: The Walker as Rhetorician,” Robert Topinka has examined how the street plans of suburban neighborhoods promote consumerism, suggesting that walking rather than driving is a way in which citizens might challenge the ideological implications of the space. Indeed, as Mountford has suggested, the consideration of rhetorical space can prove fruitful for nearly any physical or geographical component of a discourse event. She offers, for example, “rooms, lecterns, auditoriums, platforms, confession booths, MOOS, [and] classrooms” as rhetorical spaces ripe for analysis (Mountford 2001).

As Mountford’s tantalizing reference to the “rhetorical space” of MOOs (multi-user virtual worlds) suggests, rhetoricians have also delved into explorations of non-physical, theoretical, and virtual spaces. In *Postcomposition* (2011), Sidney I. Dobrin has argued that this is a natural move for scholars of rhetorical space, explaining that the origins of the term “space” itself suggest that it need not apply to purely physical environments. For instance, the Hebrew *makom* (literally translated “place”) “denotes a larger concept than just a physical location; it

alludes to the manner in which space is politically arranged in province, is occupied by subjects, is occupied and arranged by placement of objects, and is defined by its subjects” (2011, p. 38). In addition, the Greek word for space, as expressed in Plato’s *Timaeus*, refers to an entity that exists before the creation of physical space, “a preexisting space, space as *a priori*” and later “space as a receptacle, which ‘provides a position for everything that comes to be’” (p. 38).

Rhetoricians have also narrowed their focus on the rhetoric of non-physical spaces to deal more directly with the virtual spaces online that will be central to the project of studying evangelistic websites. The conceptualization of the internet as space or as a medium consisting of many diverse spaces is hardly radical. This association is already encoded in the way we choose to describe our experiences online. Indeed, web users have constructed an extensive linguistic geography to capture our lived existences on the web. We have the places we visit: websites, chat rooms, home pages. We have means of transportation: navigation, searching, linking. We have interpersonal relationships: friends, followers, fans. We can play games in online game rooms, shop in online marketplaces, and take virtual tours of libraries and monuments across the globe. Perhaps the most telling term of all though is “cyberspace,” the word we use to describe the complete environment in which we interact and move online.

Both the language we use and the experiences we have on the Internet are commonly understood in terms of space. While surfing the Web, navigating search engine results, browsing through blogs, and shopping with Internet merchants may only be metaphorically similar to the ways we navigate, browse, or shop in the physical world, I will argue that the way website design seeks to direct our behavior is in fact very similar to the way physical spaces are constructed to control our movements and is a key factor as to why evangelistic websites prove so attractive to potential converts. The case of evangelistic websites—one manifestation of the

latest digital wave of evangelical mass media adoption—suggests some of the ways in which scholars might begin to examine popular conceptions of the Internet as more than metaphorical spaces.

A look at the practical approach of web designers demonstrates the value of viewing websites as rhetorical spaces. This perspective offers insights into why users behave in certain ways within the borders of these spaces, as well as a framework and the terminology for how this concept might be applied. Certainly web designers understand websites as rhetorical spaces; minimizing the role of content, form is king in terms of persuasion. In Mark Pearrow's design text *Web Site Usability*, for example, he states that website design is a "science" as clear cut as the scientific method and that regardless of content or message, good principles of persuasion through design are consistently applicable (Pearrow 2000). Popular design texts *Envisioning Information* by Edward R. Tufte (1990) and *The Non-Designer's Design Book* by Robin Williams (2004) make similar claims. Tufte, an information designer, argues that "principles of information design are universal—like mathematics—and are not tied to unique features of a particular language or culture"; nor, by extension, need they be altered according to the "content" or "message" a designer hopes to convey (Tufte 1990). Williams bases her principles on a set of four key design points—contrast, repetition, alignment, and proximity—which she argues are of universal applicability in creating persuasion, regardless of the message (Williams 2004).ⁱ And yet, one must wonder, in the case of a fundamental ideological shift—as in the case of religious conversion—where the nature of the change is so basically dependent on the content of the message, how do space and message intertwine and become compelling and significant sources of motivation for users?

Understanding the evangelistic websites *Jesus 2020* and *Peace with God* as rhetorical spaces allows me to begin to explore this issue. To ground this discussion, I will propose and examine three key aspects of design architecture that I believe feature prominently in why these websites are able to attract users to “Click ‘yes’ for Jesus.” The three features at hand are the rhetorics of interface geography, navigation, and interactive relationship design.

Spatial Feature #1: Geography and the Rhetoric of the Interface

In *Writing for the Internet*, Craig Baehr and Bob Schaller define “interface design” as “what you see on the screen, including the overall layout as well as any content, tools, or styles found on the page” (Baehr and Schaller 2010). The interface is the user’s first introduction to the website and the first moment in which the web designer has the opportunity to “teach” and begin to train the user in how the space is to be employed. To make a physical world comparison, experiencing a website’s main page interface is akin to the moment in which we walk into a café or library or home and must make immediate decisions about how to behave. If you are in a café, you may first observe the rope line set up in front of a display of pastries and beside a counter with registers and baristas taking orders, which indicates to you that you should direct yourself between the two ropes if you plan to place an order. If your purpose at the café is, instead, to meet a friend, the presence of the rope line will cause you to direct yourself away from the area where orders are taken and towards the cluster of tables and arm chairs where people are socializing, studying, and relaxing. By extension, the designers of the café space can construct certain attractional or aversional elements to intervene in or redirect a visitor’s intended behavior: for example, a display of brightly-colored knickknacks or an area cordoned off with

yellow tape could easily redirect intended movement. The architectural features of the space indicate to us how the space is to be used. In addition, our familiarity with certain types of spaces helps us to know what to look for.

A similar experience takes place as we encounter web interfaces. Baehr and Schaller, for example, point out four particular aspects of interface that impact how long a user chooses to stay in the space and how they are aided in orienting themselves: contrast, grouping, consistency, and usability. Contrast is the way a color scheme helps a user know which elements are being prioritized. Grouping is how objects are paired or clustered to denote an association between elements. Consistency refers to how repeated design pattern within the various internal pages of a website creates a sense of order or suggests how internal pages relate more or less to the main ideas or goals expressed on the primary interface. Usability is the functionality of the site, the indicators that tell us particularly how to behave. Should we scroll down? Select a menu? Perform a search? Which first? (Baehr and Schaller 2010). In Johndan Johnson-Eilola's 2005 *Datacloud*, Johnson-Eilola extends this theory into practice, exploring the concept of interface as a component of digital space in which rather than "merely us[ing] information" we might instead "inhabit it," being trained by the interface's "suggestions and hints about how to work" within the space (Johnson-Eilola 2005).

Geography: Jesus 2020

Jesus2020.com (Figure 3) is a good starting point for analyzing how evangelistic websites might be viewed as rhetorical spaces and how interface design can be seen as a feature employed to control the behavior of potential converts, because the structure of the site is not elaborate and the directives given are readily apparent. A first glance reveals a grey and white

color scheme. The most primary visual attraction is in the header, where a blue sky with clouds radiating white sunbeams at the upper-left of the page draws the reader's eyes to the large white text spelling out "Jesus."

The screenshot shows the top portion of a website titled "Jesus 2020". The header features a blue sky with white clouds and sunbeams. Below the header, there are three navigation buttons: "4 Steps to God", "New Life Video", and "About Jesus". The main content area is divided into three numbered steps:

- ### 1 God Loves You!

The Bible says, "God so loved the world that He gave His one and only Son, that whoever believes in Him shall not perish, but have eternal life"

The problem is that . . .
- ### 2 All of us have done, said or thought things that are **wrong**. This is called **sin**, and our sins have **separated us** from God.

The Bible says "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." God is perfect and holy, and our sins separate us from God forever. The Bible says "The wages of sin is death."

The good news is that, about 2,000 years ago,
- ### 3 God sent His **only Son Jesus Christ** to die for **our sins**.

Jesus is the Son of God. He lived a sinless life and then died on the cross to pay the penalty for our sins. "God demonstrates His own love for us in that while we were yet sinners Christ died for us."

Jesus rose from the dead and now He lives in heaven with God His Father. He offers us the gift of eternal life — of living forever with Him in heaven if we accept Him as our Lord and Savior. Jesus said "I am the way, the truth, and the life. No one comes to the Father except by Me."

God reaches out in love to you and wants you to be His child. "As many as received Him, to them He gave the right to become children of God, even to those who believe on His name." You can choose to ask Jesus Christ to forgive your sins and come in to your life as your Lord and Savior.

Fig. 3 Homepage of Jesus2020.com

The second feature to which the user's eyes are drawn is the large, bold sequence of numbered steps, which a smaller heading indicates are the "4 Steps to God." The steps are listed vertically, drawing the reader's vision down the page. Key words are in boldface. The steps read as follows:

1. God Loves **You**!
2. All of us have done, said or thought things that are **wrong**. This is called **sin**, and our sins have **separated** us from God.
3. God sent His **only Son** Jesus Christ to die for **our sins**.
4. If you want to **accept Christ as your Savior** and turn from your sins, you can ask Him to be your Savior and Lord by praying a prayer like this

Step 4 is then followed by a sample prayer, modeling what a prayer of salvation might look like. According to eye-tracking studies in the field of Human Computer Interaction, the design of this interface is ideally compatible with the way internet users tend to read websites: instead of reading word for word, users tend to scan, drawing on bold words or headings for meaning (Nielsen and Loranger 2006). In addition, web users read in an F-shaped pattern, scanning left to right for main headings, and then running their eyes down the left margin for navigational clues (Nielsen and Pernice 2010). Thus, although beneath each of the "4 Steps"

there are Bible verses further explicating the steps, the small font, the light gray font color, and

the fact that these scriptural justifications consist of a minimum of three lines of text make it unlikely that this material will be read unless the user does not get the content they need from the main steps.

Indeed, the way the designers have implemented boldface text allows the reader to avoid reading the full text entirely while still grasping the meaning. Consider the bold words: **You!; Wrong; sin; separated; only Son; our sins; accept Christ as your Savior**. At the very least, a reader skimming these words will grasp the central point that they personally, as a result of things they have done wrong, are cut off from something, that this state necessitates a Savior, and that this Savior is also known as Christ. The way text has been used and categorized with the four numbered steps and the layers of prioritization (bold and large suggesting most important) allows the reader to move rapidly through the Gospel presentation.

It would take an average-paced reader no more than thirty seconds to read the four steps and to scroll to the bottom of the page. Even if one is only reading the bold words, in the time it takes to click for the page to scroll down, the Gospel has been presented. From an evangelist's point of view, this is incredibly efficient. Moreover, it is tightly controlled. The numbering immediately causes the user to want to scroll down; the bold large font immediately attracts their eyes; and, within seconds, they have been exposed to the Gospel. The strong directives this design effects are even further exemplified by the question posed below Step Four. At the very bottom of the main page, the user is asked, "Did you pray this prayer?" Below the question, the user has the option to click "Yes" or "No." Just as simplified and straightforward as the Gospel presentation are the implications: the user is asked to consider two options only.

The main page of *Jesus 2020* uses design to direct users to a clear path of navigation, but if the user hesitates at the top of this page they might notice that the "4 steps to God" is not the

only page available within the site. There are two others, labeled "New Life Video" and "About Jesus." The "New Life Video" page is a video version of the four steps. The moment the user clicks on this tab, a video starts playing. Just as with the bold, large font in the "4 Steps to God," the Gospel is foregrounded. In this case, unless the user has the volume off on their computer or is able to click pause quickly, the video will begin and the Gospel will be presented. As with the "4 Steps to God," below the video, the user is again asked: "Did you pray this prayer?" and is again given the same options: "Yes" or "No." For a second time, we find that the website structure is highly directive of the user's behavior. If the user wants to be within the space of the website, their options for sitting back, relaxing, and absorbing the material are limited. The design foregrounds the Gospel and aggressively directs the user's eyes/ears to it. If the user is not interested in reading or seeing this information, their only option is to close the site.

The simplicity of structure on the *Jesus 2020* website reveals how design attempts to control the behavior of users. Of course, users always have the freedom to leave a website, and some users who are conscious of how the website is attempting to direct them might choose to resist the design's draw and act counter to the design's intent (for example, beginning with the "About Jesus" link, muting the "New Life Video," or disengaging from all content and scanning the margins of the page where, upon close exploration, they might find the small link to information about the Global Media Outreach ministry). However, even a cursory examination of this website reveals that any of these behaviors would not be intuitive and that the layout of the interface on all three internal web pages is directed towards quickly moving the user to a decision by encouraging them to scroll rapidly through a succinct, simple Gospel presentation to the central question: did you pray this prayer? In other words, did you just commit to be a

Christian? "Maybe" or "I am still thinking" are not options. The large "Yes" or "No" alternatives repeatedly construct a virtual fork in the road.

Geography: Peace with God

Peace with God (Figure 4) serves as an interesting point of comparison to *Jesus 2020* because, content-wise, it uses a similar approach (varied from "4 Steps to God" to "4 Steps to Peace"). However, the design of the site encourages the user to behave in an entirely different manner while ultimately arriving at a similar point of decision. The primary structural similarity between *Peace with God* and *Jesus 2020* is that both websites cater to the design principle of organizing material in an F-shape to best target the way web users absorb information. However, whereas *Jesus 2020* encouraged vertical motion and only provided three entry points to the website's internal content, *Peace with God* is organized horizontally, with two rows of menu options, offering five and three entry points respectively. These two rows are divided by a vivid, colorful banner with a picture of a woman, sun shining on her face, looking up and out, as if towards the heavens. Beside her, to the user's left, is the text "4 Steps to Peace."

Fig. 4 Homepage of PeacewithGod.net

Left-to-right movement on the website is encouraged by the top menu via the titles of the various links: "God so loved the world," "That He gave His only Son," "That whoever believes in Him," "Should not perish," "But have eternal life." The user may or may not make the connection that these headings derive from the Bible verse John 3:16, but they will easily grasp that, syntactically and because of the horizontal layout, the phrases of the verse are meant to be read in a certain order. The way these links are clustered promotes this reading as well. Though they are separate links to separate web pages, they are packed side by side with only thin dividing lines inside a horizontal oval figure (Figure 5). This design encourages the user to feel that the links are all individual parts of one unified whole, suggesting they should not be dealt with independently and should be approached in the suggested order.

Fig. 5 Detail from homepage of Peace with God

By contrast, the second series of links are spread out across the length of the page. Besides basic similarities in font style and size, the user behavior these links encourage differs from those in the top menu: they are presented as independent entities, three separate entry-points for the user to choose from. They are entitled "4 Steps to Peace," "Who is Jesus?" and "God changed her life." Because the image and text of the "4 Steps to Peace" link mirrors the central banner with the young woman's face, it will draw the user's attention first. However, the blank space between each of these links breaks the seamless flow of left-to-right motion exemplified by the top menu. In fact, because of human attraction to personal interest stories, the final link—"God changed her life"—which (accurately) suggests a testimony, might be the most

appealing. Though the image does not overtly appear as a video feature to be clicked on (no "play" button superimposed on the image, for example), the woman in the image has been captured while speaking; the way her mouth is parted as if mid-speech suggests that this link will direct us to a video (Figure 6).

Fig. 6 Detail from homepage of Peace with God

Finally, though the row of image-based links is the most visually-appealing of all options on the main page, if the user does bother to scroll past them, they will see three further options: "PRAY NOW," "I'VE GOT A QUESTION," and "NEXT STEP." From a design standpoint, this series works effectively because it promotes *action* on the part of the reader. The commands to *pray*, *ask*, or *take* continue the trend of moving the user to make a selection and enter into the second layer of pages.

Interestingly, despite the main page's appearance of providing the reader with a variety of diverse options for moving through the site's contents, all but one of the links ("I'VE GOT A QUESTION") leads users to one of only five options, each centered around the "4 Steps to Peace" which, as the user will discover, ultimately means "4 Steps to Becoming a Christian." The apparent freedom of choice indicated by the main page is in fact very limited: each link leads to a

fixed series of steps that progress the user through a Gospel presentation in a strikingly similar manner to that of the *Jesus 2020* website (Figure 7).

Fig. 7 Sitemap of Peace with God

Once the user has entered the second level of pages, the rigidity of the design, the limitations of the space, and the explicit promotion of certain types of behavior become more apparent. No matter which of the four steps the user enters through, four options are available: watch a video presenting the Gospel, read a text version of the video, proceed to the "Next Step," or "Pray Now." The videos differ stylistically, but each consists of music and either audio clips from a sermon or clips of the testimonies of Christians. Their goal, no matter the "step," is to present the Gospel. If a user starts at Step One, they will experience four different Gospel presentations. While the numbering of the steps and the clearly demarcated "NEXT STEP" button that appears both to the right of and beneath the video with a right-pointing arrow suggest to the user that the desired movement is "forward" through the steps, the direction to "PRAY NOW" is just as assertive and present an option. As with "NEXT STEP," the "PRAY NOW" link

is posted both to the right of and beneath the video. Literally, the Gospel presentation is surrounded by these two choices.

The effect is that, having watched the video, there are only two available choices: to learn more or make a decision. However, while the former option suggests choice or a willingness to encourage lingering over or taking time to consider the content, the reality is that once a user has proceeded through the fourth step and clicks "NEXT STEP" one more time, they are taken to what amounts to a mandatory moment of decision. Having delayed the option to "PRAY NOW" through the four steps, the options which now frame the fifth and final (text-based) presentation of the Gospel are altered. The user's final options are "Yes, I prayed the prayer" or "No, but I have a question." Making a decision is encouraged by an image of a crowd of people holding hands and praying together, modeling the desired behavior. Interestingly, despite the apparent stark opposition of "Yes" or "No," both links take the user to a contact form to put them in touch with a mentor.

It is important to note that the wording of the two choices emphasizes a level of control over the user's behavior as well. There are a variety of alternative options that could have been included: while it seems that "Yes" or "No" encompasses the full range of choices, the reality is that "No" is not an option because the "No" provided is qualified with "I have a question." "No, I am not interested" is not presented as a choice. The assumption encoded here is that if the user has not decided to become a Christian, it must certainly be because they need more information. The website is effectively constructed as a funnel. As the user enters, they are provided with the appearance of many choices which quickly narrow down to the one choice.

Spatial Feature #2: Navigation and the Rhetoric of Hyperlinks, Search, and Content Speed

In "The Web as a Rhetorical Place," Nicholas C. Burbules argues for an understanding of hyperlinks as "both semantic and navigational elements," "avenues of movement and occasions for meaning-making" on the internet (Burbules 2002). He points out that hyperlinks serve as roads for the user to travel down or ignore as they choose. The options available to a user to link to external or internal websites are direct reflections of a designer's hand in attempting to manipulate the user's motion within the space. To provide a physical comparison, we might liken websites with no links, websites with internal links only, and websites with external links to being in physical spaces with, respectively, no doors, connected rooms with no exit, and rooms with many exits. Obviously, at any moment, a user has the option to close their browser; however, within the space of that website, the available options for how to move within the space are limited exclusively to those avenues the designer has provided. In addition, web designers have at their disposal rhetorical tools to encourage users towards preferring certain hyperlinks over others or towards choosing first one hyperlink and then another. Burbules calls these design features "issues of access, issues of implicit encouragement of movement along certain paths and discouragement of others" (Burbules 2002).

Search engines are another navigational feature: does the designer provide a search option? Are search results limited to hits found only within the website, or does the search access the greater internet? The ability or absence of the ability to search the content of a website, as well as limitations in what search results appear, decrease or expand the available options for movement at the user's disposal, creating what Burbules has called "strategies of channeling and directing navigation" effected as the search results "shape and constrain the range of possible meanings users can derive from their investigations" (Burbules 2002).

Finally, I will use the term "content speed" to assess how the type of content available to the user attempts to control the pace at which they move through the website. A website heavy in text-based content with few indicators of how this content might be scanned quickly—as in the case of boldfaced terms, section headings, or bullet points—encourages the reader to move slowly through the material. Websites with little text, easily-scannable text, or simple images encourage quicker movement. Websites with many menu options, links to external websites, video content, chat features, or discussion boards encourage slower movement by prioritizing exploration.

Navigation: Jesus 2020

Consistent with the limited number of internal pages, brief content, and heavily-directive geographic features of the *Jesus 2020* interface, the options for navigation between and within these pages are extremely restricted as well. Because of the limited content, there is no "search" feature. If the design of *Jesus 2020* were to be likened to a physical space, it would certainly be a transitional one: a train station, a bus stop, or an airport, perhaps. The design highly encourages the reader to scan the text quickly, scroll down rapidly, and make a decision: Yes or No. The information on the website is brief and limits itself to the essentials of the Gospel only. The site is not intended to be a place to which the user is likely to return after they have made their decision. Indeed, the longest the user might dwell at any point on the website is exactly sixty seconds: the duration of the brief "New Life" video.

Once a user has made a decision, however (which then prompts them to fill out a contact form and provide GMO with a minimum of their email address and last name), they are taken to a new website, representing a different sort of spatial experience: *GodLife* (Figure 8). *GodLife*

represents the desired culmination of GMO's purpose with the *Jesus 2020* page and is an environment in which new Christians or seekers can continue to learn and grow through educational resources. The arrival at this point is important in terms of space because it represents a change in dynamic between GMO and web users: Up to this point, the GMO designers have worked through the design to encourage the user to behave in a certain way; however, gaining access to the user's email address allows GMO to shift the dynamic from a pull medium to a push medium, in which at any moment they are able to send a message that will pop up in the user's inbox. Even if the user chooses to ignore the message or delete it, this change in relationship allows GMO to more actively pursue the user.

Fig. 8 Homepage of *GodLife*

Navigation: Peace with God

The aspect of navigation most worth noting in regards to *Peace with God* is the way in which the format of the site and the navigational options differ according to whether the user accesses the website on a desktop or mobile device. On both tablets and cell phones, the page is redesigned from the version that appears on a desktop (Figure 9). Instead of the vivid banner, the

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option to progress through the various steps via individual links, and the opportunities to watch either video or read text, the website is transformed into an entirely textual document. Even more limiting in navigational features than the *Jesus 2020* website, the mobile version of *Peace with God* simply lists the four steps, with each step highlighted in blue and followed up with short explanatory notes and Bible verses. The short list culminates in a sample prayer and the question "Did you pray this prayer?" with the options "Yes, I prayed this prayer" or "No, but I have a question," both of which take the user to the same contact form as provided on the desktop site. These are the only links on the entire page, and there is no option to switch from the mobile site to the full version.

Fig. 9 Mobile version of *Peace with God*

Similar to the *Jesus 2020* website, *Peace with God* consists of almost entirely internal links, limiting the user to only the various Gospel presentations available on the page. There are two exceptions, however, both located at the very bottom of the page beside the "About" and "Contact Us" links. These two external links connect the user to the BGEA and Jesus.net Facebook pages. While the BGEA homepage functions similarly to the GMO homepage in that it is designed to describe the ministry's project and raise money, the Jesus.net page offers interesting opportunities for connectivity and community that will be discussed in an examination of the *Inhabitant* features of this space. Besides these two links, however, the only way provided for the user to get beyond the space of the *Peace with God* website is to follow through with a "Yes" or "No" answer and provide contact information. Subsequently, regardless of the user's response, they are directed to the *Going Farther* website, designed (similarly to *GodLife*) for answering questions about Christianity and helping new Christians know what to do next. In both cases, there is a tight and committed focus to honing in on the moment of decision.

Spatial Feature #3: Interactivity and the Rhetoric of Relationship Design

Web 2.0 is characterized by its capacity for interactivity and social networking. Central to an understanding of web design as a controlling force over user behavior are issues of how web designers attempt to direct who dwells in the space of their website: who enters, what voices are heard, and what voices are silenced. Scholars in online communities have made it a priority to argue for online communities as equally "real" as face-to-face communities. In *Cyberspace and Virtual Places*, for example, Paul C. Adams explains the intensity of relationships forged on the

web, writing that the internet is a space "defined by interaction" and that "People ostensibly come together much more completely in cyberspace than in real space...transcending a lonely individuality and the tragic contradictions of sameness and difference that are inherent in real communities" (Adams 1997). James E. Porter additionally explores how bodies are represented as both static (as in the case of photos on websites) and dynamic (as in SecondLife avatars) online and notes the importance of "understand[ing] the nature of the rhetorical dynamic in those [online] worlds" (Porter 2008). The general consensus regarding the availability or absence of possibilities for interaction online can be summed up in Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca's concept of "presence": the more "real," three-dimensional, or sensory an experience is online, the more persuasive. As a result, a static image is more persuasive than text, and a video or live chat with a person is more persuasive than a static image (Perelman and Olbrechts-Tyteca 1971).

In evangelistic spaces, the "faces" that are provided matter and are carefully planned. An evangelistic website promoting exclusively one-on-one contact between the user and a mentor, for example, creates a persuasive space allowing for an extreme amount of control in terms of what information might be shared and what type of feedback the user receives. It also establishes a clear hierarchy in which the mentor becomes the prime source of information and teacher, and the user is positioned as student. By contrast, evangelistic websites that have open discussion boards appear more welcoming of a variety of opinions, perspectives, and viewpoints, and control is effected through the subtle hands of moderators. The extent to which dialogue is controlled and the perspectives that are allowed has implications for the ability of users to exist and behave in certain ways within the space.

Inhabitants: Jesus 2020

As we have seen, the geographic and navigational features of the *Jesus 2020* website are restrictive. The user's experience on *Jesus 2020* is largely one of isolation. However, the "New Life Video" does create a scene of interpersonal interaction between the user and the man speaking. The fact that the video begins playing the second the user clicks on the "New Life Video" tab without requiring the user to push "Play" creates the effect of being directly addressed. The man speaking is sitting on a couch, appears close to the camera, and is at face-level with the user, all creating the appearance of being in direct conversation (Figure 10). He speaks directly to the "you" who is watching, and the moment in which he prays, inviting the user to pray along with him, is an attempt to draw the user into a feeling of intimacy or closeness. There is no indication as to who this person might be: his name is not listed, and he does not state whether he is a pastor or a layman. The decision to leave this individual anonymous, however, is compelling in that it allows GMO to foreground the message and limit any unnecessary attention that might be drawn to the messenger, preventing the speaker's identity from detracting from the message and allowing the anonymity of the speaker to make him relatable to a larger audience.

New Life Video

Fig. 10 New Life Video, *Jesus 2020*

The limitation of a video, of course, is that it is a one-way dialogue. GMO pushes beyond this limitation, however, by offering to put all users in touch with "one of our trained volunteers" who "will respond to your email and help you grow as a Christian." Interestingly, this strategy works by offering relationship and human interaction *post-decision*, encouraging a decision by offering human interaction and support as a benefit.

Inhabitants: Peace with God

A comparison between *Jesus 2020* and *Peace with God* reveals both how design can encourage interpersonal interaction and how the nature of the space can change according to how this interpersonal interaction is enacted. When a user arrives on the *Peace with God* website, the second their cursor crosses the screen, a bright orange conversation bubble appears in the bottom right corner. Inside the bubble, there are two smaller conversation bubbles: the top one says "Click here," and the bottom says "to chat" (Figure 11). This aspect of the design is significant for two reasons: the first is that because the option to chat appears the second the user expresses interest in the site (via moving their mouse on the page), it seems that there is someone aware of the user's presence who is ready if the user has questions. This experience can be likened to the way we might walk into a clothing store and be immediately approached by an employee who tells us about sales, helps us shop, or even just says that if we have any questions to please ask. The second reason this design feature is important is that the actual way in which the icon to chat is designed suggests that conversation is welcomed: the designers could have chosen any shape to pop up; however, the trio of conversation bubbles all connected together visually suggests a dialogue, and the way the two internal conversation bubbles are fitted together—one upright, one

inverted so that they link together side by side—suggests a relationship that is comfortable, intimate, and one-on-one.

Fig. 11: First chat bubble

Fig. 12 Second chat bubble

If the user missed or ignored the first option to chat, a few seconds later, a larger blue conversation bubble appears in the upper left-hand corner of the page (Figure 12). In this case, the top bubble says, "Need to talk?" and the second says, "We are here." The location within the F-shaped pattern and the large size of the bubble make it unlikely that the user could miss seeing the opportunity. In addition, the phrasing of the chat invitation on its second appearance is already beginning to initiate and enact a conversation: the user is directly addressed in a colloquial manner (the bubble does not say: "Do you need to talk?" but, just as a friend might say, "Need to talk?"), and it is implied that there is a support system ready and waiting whenever the user is ready (the second bubble says "We are here" rather than "I am here" or "There is someone here").

Not only do two opportunities to chat appear within seconds of the user's arrival, but as the user scrolls down the page, the chat bubbles follow them. Furthermore, as the user navigates through the various internal pages, the smaller chat bubble appears in the bottom left of every page. The chat option is constantly available. There is, at any given moment, the opportunity available for immediate, live contact. In testing the live chat, within two seconds of clicking on the orange chat bubble (a timer that appears to keep track of how long you have waited), I received a reply from a mentor named "Barry." I asked him about the requirements for becoming

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a mentor, and again, within seconds, he responded to me with two different links to provide me with more information. The design and function are compatible: the design suggests that a mentor is not just available but is ready and willing to answer questions and provide help, and this promise plays out in function as well.

The individuals involved in mentoring users online are not the only figures within this space, however. The four videos included as part of each of the "4 Steps to Peace" include a variety of clips of sermons, testimonies, and images of individuals that attempt to create a sense of community and a feeling of welcome within the space. Over the course of the four videos, a viewer encounters audio clips from sermons given by Billy and Franklin Graham in videos #1 and #4, but the majority of the individuals who appear throughout these texts are not readily-recognizable faces. The people who appear represent incredible diversity: there are Hispanic, African, Asian, Caucasian, and Indian men, women, teenagers, and children; fathers, mothers, businessmen, farmers, musicians, poets, and visual artists are represented; there are elderly men, women, and couples. The music that serves as background to the videos ranges from rock to hip hop. In the third video, which centers on testimonies, the viewer follows the stories of a teenage Hispanic boy who was addicted to drugs, a young woman who was suicidal, a teenage girl who graphically describes her history of cutting (mentioning even the pages in her journal that she "dribbled in blood"), and an African American woman who struggled with depression. Each explains how they came to be Christians and how their lives were changed.

The one exception to the almost universal anonymity is the appearance in Video #3 of Brian "Head" Welch, former guitarist for the new metal band Korn, who might be recognizable to some viewers. His tattooed body, long black hair and eye makeup might (if one were to anticipate the type of individual whose testimony would appear on an evangelistic site) appear

shocking; however, in the context of the other startling testimonies of drug abuse, depression, and self-mutilation, it is not surprising. The designers of the videos have made a clear effort to address as broad an audience as possible and to suggest that no matter an individual's past or present troubles, no matter their race, gender, or age, the Gospel applies to them. In fact, the stereotypical white Anglo Saxon Protestant male that one might expect to encounter in this space (and who—in the figures of Billy and Franklin Graham—has historically been the figurehead of this ministry) is the minority. In direct contrast to *Jesus 2020*'s strategy, the potential for relationship is available immediately: the welcome of automatic community involvement and encouragement is promoted as a reason *for* clicking “yes” to conversion rather than an outcome of doing so.

Evangelistic Websites as Rhetorical Spaces: Implications

Evangelicals have historically understood the act of conversion as a moment of intersection between God's calling and human decision. In evangelicals' commitment to adopting mass media as a tool of evangelism, scholars have the opportunity to examine what conversions look like in mediated contexts and to analyze how media functions in relation to conversion. Exploring websites as rhetorical spaces helps reveal how, as in physical space, these websites are designed to limit options for navigation, direct users towards certain types of activity, lead them to make decisions, and create a controlled experience delineating with whom visitors interact, what type of encounters they might have, and how they can respond to the site. Unlike with evangelistic print texts or radio or broadcast evangelistic programs, website evangelism—when seen as evangelism within designed rhetorical spaces—appears strikingly

similar to the type of face-to-face evangelism that has taken place for over two millennia in the Christian church.

Studies in material Christianity and the purposeful design of church and revival spaces reveal this likeness. Great Awakening revivalists—who often did not have the luxury of church spaces in which to preach—developed methods of selecting and maximizing natural space to promote the conveyance of their message. Some itinerant preachers positioned themselves in valleys among hills so that their voices would project broadly and their listeners could sit amphitheater-style on the slopes, providing maximum visibility (Kilde 2002). Such a location selection also inverted the traditional hierarchical positioning of the preacher above his congregation, suggesting an allowance of greater audience response, participation, and equality. Similarly, during the Second Great Awakening, camp meetings were often planned on flat ground to protect the passionately-responding listeners (who were known to roll, faint, and writhe on the ground) from harm and, by extension, to encourage such passions (Kilde 2002). The later revivals of evangelicals like Billy Sunday and Billy Graham were even more directly centered on space design to create ideal environments for evangelism. To encourage focus on the message, Sunday coated the floor of his temporary tabernacle constructions with sawdust to dampen the noise made by his many listeners, and both he and Graham became famous for the pre-planning and meticulous crafting of the revival experience. From the music to the speakers sharing testimonies to the construction of tabernacles and stages to the number and strategic positioning of volunteers ready to pray with and collect follow-up information from new converts, there was no detail about the experiences left undesigned (McLoughlin 1995).

Even in the more permanent spaces of evangelical churches, the potential of what one church design company has called “evangelistic architecture” has been central. Contemporary

evangelical church architecture is often characterized by the stripping of ornamentation and traditional Christian symbolism in an effort to make church more accessible to outsiders, the Willow Creek Community Church—which might easily be mistaken for a shopping mall or corporate building—serving as an exemplar. Contemporary megachurches often also encourage visitors to come and stay by making their church spaces about more than church: the inclusion of coffee shops, basketball courts, and bookstores are all efforts to direct visitors to dwell for extended periods in the church space and to consider church as an integral, incorporated part of their daily lives (Nelson 2007).

By mapping out how the concept of rhetorical space might be theorized and applied to digital texts and supplying the case study of evangelistic websites to depict how this theory is exemplified in practice, I have shown how these websites function as rhetorical spaces. More particularly, I have shown that that the medium of the website and the design features of interface, navigation, and interaction allow for the evangelistic encounter within these spaces to be directed, promoting the evangelical dualistic worldview of saved/unsaved.

Though clearly the sensory experience of navigating a website differs from the sensory experience of navigating physical spaces, the rhetorical impact is strikingly similar. When, for example, we walk into a church and sit down to listen to a sermon, there are design features that attempt to control us: pews or rowed seating might make it awkward for visitors to depart in the middle of a sermon; many aisles leading to the altar make responding to an altar call more comfortable; and dimmed lighting might create a mood of intimacy, holiness, or mystery. Both our familiarity with how to use space and the space's design itself shape our behavior. When seen through the lens of rhetorical space, websites function similarly, teaching users how to behave in the space (click here first; scroll down now; this word is available as a hyperlink; this

one is not) and moving them towards the types of behavior and judgments desired by the designers (you have four menus, three sub-menus, two choices).

The attention to designing spaces of positive encounter has historically mattered deeply to evangelicals, and the Internet serves as only the most recent manifestation (and the first within a mass medium) of this mission. Conceptualizing evangelistic online spaces in this way helps us better understand the relationship between form and function, how the medium reflects the message, and why these particular sites prove so attractive, melding features of both digital and non-virtual elements of evangelism into individualized evangelistic encounters.

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ⁱ As a quick caveat, I want to clarify that my goal is not in the least to challenge the common Christian belief that a moment of conversion involves both the will of God and the will of the individual involved, nor is it to challenge the sincerity of these online conversions documented by GMO and BGEA. My goal is to merely add to the discourse surrounding media and evangelism and to better understand how the Internet as a medium may effectively mediate the conversion process. Indeed, as we will see, the Internet works particularly well for the conveyance and promotion of such a dualistic worldview (humans are either "saved" or "unsaved") as is central to Christianity.