



Distributed Rituals: Web3 as an Emergent Field of Digital Religion

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Web3 ecosystems represent an emergent field of digital religion where decentralized infrastructures—spanning smart contracts, token economies, and symbolic interfaces—actively generate novel forms of ritual life. These rituals, deeply embedded in algorithmic processes and economic incentives, cultivate collective identities, symbolic hierarchies, and affective economies marked by hope and betrayal. To interpret these dynamics, this article proposes distributed rituals analysis (DRA), a comprehensive framework synthesizing lived religion, ritualization theory, and actor-network theory. Drawing on eighteen months of ethnographic engagement across diverse Web3 communities—including non-fungible tokens, decentralized autonomous organizations, and staking protocols—I illustrate how decentralized practices become ritualized through temporal orchestration, symbolic differentiation, and distributed agency. Reflexive participation further reveals the researcher's complex positionality as both observer and participant. DRA provides conceptual and methodological clarity for exploring emergent rituals in decentralized environments, illuminating how digital infrastructures reconfigure sacredness and collective meaning-making. This framework also lays the groundwork for future comparative inquiries into ritual forms across decentralized and hybrid spaces.



Introduction

The emergence of Web3—a decentralized ecosystem of blockchains, token economies, and autonomous communities—marks a profound shift in how digital participation is organized and experienced. In this article, Web3 is understood as a distributed socio-technical field characterized by wallet-based identities, ledgered states, programmable incentives, and composable on-/off-chain interfaces. Unlike Web2 platforms, governed by centralized authorities and database-centered content curation, Web3 infrastructures distribute agency across cryptographic protocols, smart contracts, and collective governance. This distribution unsettles conventional boundaries of sacredness and meaning-making, shifting attention from institutional centers to interface-mediated circulation. These very shifts locate Web3 squarely within the evolving purview of digital religion, extending its long-standing concerns—sacred space, ritual, and belief—into the distinct lens of decentralization.

While scholars of digital religion have explored how established traditions adapt to digital environments (Campbell 2013; Grieve 2013), little systematic attention has been paid to how decentralized systems cultivate ritual forms. This article asks how distributed infrastructures mediate and stage emergent rituals, affective economies, and symbolic hierarchies.

The purpose is not to pathologize these practices as speculative mania or romanticize them as utopian liberation but to examine how decentralized systems afford new possibilities for ritual life. To address this question, I propose distributed rituals analysis (DRA)—a conceptual framework integrating lived religion, ritualization theory, and actor-network theory (ANT).

Drawing on eighteen months of ethnographic immersion across diverse Web3 communities—including non-fungible tokens (NFTs), decentralized autonomous organizations (DAOs), and staking protocols—I show how decentralized practices become ritualized through temporal orchestration, symbolic differentiation, and distributed agency. Practices such as daily check-ins, staking cycles, Discord initiations, and collective airdrop anticipation are not merely transactional; they enact shared cosmologies of time, hierarchy, and affect.

DRA offers theoretical clarity and methodological tools for examining how rituals emerge in decentralized contexts—and how infrastructures participate as nonhuman actants in sacred world-making. The following sections outline the relevant literature, present the theoretical foundations of DRA, and analyze five ritual dimensions of Web3: time, space, agency, hierarchy, and affect. A reflexive note concludes the analysis, highlighting the researcher's situated role in coproducing the ritual field.

Literature Review

Digital Religion

Over the past three decades, the study of digital religion has matured into an interdisciplinary field examining transformations in religious authority, ritual

practices, and symbolic boundaries within online spaces. Early scholarship framed cyberspace as potentially sacred (O’Leary 1996), moving beyond conceptions of the internet as merely a neutral medium. Christopher Helland (2000) introduced a pivotal distinction between “religion online”—the digital dissemination of religious content—and “online religion,” emphasizing digital spaces as active sites of ritual and community formation. Heidi A. Campbell (2013) further refined this typology, highlighting hybrid forms of religious practice that transcend simple online/offline binaries. Subsequent research has coalesced around key analytic clusters, including the reconfiguration of identity and embodiment (Lövheim 2013), the dynamics of agency and authority (Hoover 2016; Campbell 2021), and the formation of sacred space and ritual practice (Hutchings 2017; Evolvi 2022). More recent contributions by Campbell and Gregory Price Grieve (2014) and Campbell and Ruth Tsuria (2022) have extended these analyses across diverse digital platforms, such as gaming environments and mobile apps, while Campbell (2024) has advocated greater theoretical flexibility to accommodate emerging technologies.

Despite these advancements, the field remains predominantly anchored in Web2 contexts—centralized, institutionally governed environments. The rise of blockchain-based Web3 systems, marked by decentralization, collective governance, and protocol-driven interaction, invites a reassessment of assumptions about centralized mediation. Few scholars have systematically explored how Web3’s decentralized architectures—cryptographic protocols, token economies, and autonomous governance structures—reconfigure religious and symbolic dynamics. Meng Yoe Tan’s (2016) innovative application of ANT—a framework that foregrounds interactions among human and nonhuman actants—to question online authenticity hints at methodological potentials for analyzing protocol-mediated settings. Nevertheless, decentralized digital religion remains underexamined, a gap that the present article’s DRA is designed to address.

Ritual in Digital Environments

Parallel to digital religion scholarship, ritual studies have investigated how digital technologies reshape the temporal, spatial, and affective dimensions of symbolic actions. Catherine Bell’s (2009) influential theory of ritualization—defining ritual as strategically differentiated practices achieved through repetition and symbolic framing—remains foundational. Subsequent research demonstrates digital platforms’ capacities to embed ritualization directly into interface affordances (design features enabling specific user interactions), fostering practices such as daily check-ins, hashtag activism, and livestream ceremonies (Campbell and Bellar 2023; Knott 2005). Suzanne Van der Beek and Martin Hoondert (2019) further document diverse digital rituals, including online storytelling and virtual memorials, underscoring how new media actively co-construct symbolic worlds.

Significantly, scholarship increasingly recognizes digital ritual as not merely the digitization of existing practices but an emergent phenomenon deeply shaped by technological affordances. Yet, most studies remain confined to explicitly religious or spiritual platforms. In contrast, decentralized Web3 environments—characterized by smart contracts (self-executing digital contracts), tokenized interactions, and distributed temporal rhythms—represent novel contexts where rich ritual dynamics emerge independently of explicit religious doctrines. The absence of robust analytical tools capable of identifying rituals beyond doctrinal cues represents an epistemological limitation that the DRA framework specifically addresses.

Web3 as a Ritual Field

Web3 infrastructures—including blockchains, NFTs, DAOs, and staking protocols—extend far beyond mere technical innovation. These infrastructures function as symbolic architectures actively mediating social belonging, collective memory, hierarchical differentiation, and repetitive action. Preliminary ethnographic research has begun exploring how cycles of scarcity, status roles, and participation rituals evoke quasi-religious affective intensities (Swartz 2017). Nonetheless, comprehensive theoretical engagement remains sparse. Even foundational accounts, such as Finn Brunton’s (2019) history of digital cash and Lana Swartz’s (2020) exploration of payment systems, predominantly interpret symbolic behaviors economically or communicatively rather than ritualistically.

Some emerging public discourse analogizes cryptocurrency behaviors, such as Bitcoin “hodling,” to religious devotion (Laycock 2022). However, these discussions have not yet been systematically explored in scholarly literature. To date, no systematic theoretical framework exists for rigorously analyzing ritual dynamics specific to decentralized digital environments. The proposed DRA addresses this gap by integrating insights from lived religion, ritualization theory, and ANT to analyze how decentralized networks coproduce ritualized agency, emotional economies, and symbolic orders. In doing so, DRA explicitly extends classic digital-religion concerns with negotiated authority and agency (Campbell 2021; Hoover 2016) from the centralized platform logic of Web 2 to the decentralized protocol logic of Web3, where authority and agency—once negotiated mainly among users, leaders, and platforms—are now redistributed across smart contracts, validator nodes, and algorithmic protocols, introducing nonhuman actants into the sacred negotiation itself. This shift specifies how infrastructural mediation (contracts, wallets, bots) reshapes participation and ritual efficacy. By positioning Web3 as a distinctive ritual field, the DRA framework thus opens new avenues for comparative research across religious studies, anthropology, and the philosophy of technology. In this light, the ritual dynamics of Web3 appear as a consequential intensification and redistribution of digital religion’s core concerns across the novel sociotechnical terrain.

Theoretical Framework

This article builds on three interrelated theoretical traditions—lived religion, ritualization theory, and ANT—to formulate a robust framework for analyzing how emergent ritual forms take shape in Web3 and how code-based infrastructures co-perform and mediate affective economies. The integration of these particular theories is specifically chosen for their complementary capacity to illuminate embodied practices, symbolic differentiations, and distributed technological agencies central to decentralized digital environments. Each tradition contributes a distinct analytical lens, while their synthesis grounds what I describe as DRA.

Lived Religion

Lived religion provides a foundation for understanding how everyday practices acquire sacred significance beyond institutional settings (Ammerman 2014; McGuire 2008). Nancy Ammerman argues that religion is often experienced through everyday actions and negotiations within social and material contexts rather than strictly through formal doctrines. This perspective is particularly valuable for examining Web3, where sacredness emerges through iterative behaviors like staking tokens, minting NFTs, and maintaining interaction streaks rather than through explicit religious teachings or authorities. While most lived religion scholarship has focused on embodied practices within everyday physical environments, decentralized digital infrastructures like Web3 represent novel sites for extending its analytical scope. Building on Ammerman and Meredith B. McGuire, lived-religion analysis foregrounds patterned practice, material mediation, and situated negotiation of meaning; in decentralized settings, this lens travels well: wallet-based selves, signatures, and everyday schedulers become mundane sites where sacrality is iteratively made legible—through repetition, minor sacrifice (e.g., gas), and ethical calls in gray zones. We use “ritual” analytically (Bell 2009; Ammerman 2014), without presuming emic religious labeling by participants.

Ritualization

Ritualization theory emphasizes how specific actions become symbolically differentiated through repetition, strategic framing, and embodied competence (Bell 2009). Catherine Bell’s framework highlights that ritualization is not merely symbolic; it actively constructs and reinforces communal identities, hierarchies, and social distinctions. Bell’s insight that ritualization is a strategy of power and distinction is particularly relevant, as Web3 interfaces and token economies ritualize participation in ways that reinforce social stratifications. In Web3, ritualization appears through practices such as daily check-ins, token snapshot events, and gamified leaderboards, all of which strategically differentiate participation from routine activities, generating symbolic and affective resonance within decentralized communities.

Actor-Network Theory

ANT, particularly as advanced in recent scholarship (Couldry and Hepp 2017; Latour 2005), underscores how agency is distributed across networks of human and technological actors, often described as associations (and, in some contexts, assemblages). Assemblages refer to networks composed of heterogeneous elements—human, technological, and symbolic—that collectively produce distinct social and cultural effects. ANT clarifies that ritual practices in Web3 spaces are coproduced through dynamic interactions involving not only human actors but also smart contracts, bots, wallets, and cryptographic protocols. Crucially, ANT names the mechanisms of distribution: nonhuman actants are enrolled, scripts translate intentions, and mediations carry action across links. In Web3, contracts inscribe temporal hinges (resets/snapshots), bots gate spaces and render status legible (roles/leaderboards), and wallets carry trajectories across interfaces. Treating these artifacts as actants clarifies why ritual efficacy here rests on associations—constantly renegotiated ties among people, code, and interfaces—rather than any single institutional center. Through this lens, ritualization itself becomes a distributed accomplishment—an emergent effect of translations among heterogeneous actants rather than a scripted sequence performed by human agents alone.

Towards Distributed Rituals Analysis

These theoretical perspectives collectively form DRA, a comprehensive analytical approach designed explicitly for exploring ritual dynamics in decentralized digital environments. DRA does not assume rituals to be merely symbolic or purely instrumental but identifies them as emergent phenomena that blend technological affordances, symbolic significance, and economic motivations. Furthermore, DRA remains methodologically flexible, applicable across diverse research contexts, including participant observation, computational ethnography, and archival analysis. By situating decentralized rituals within distributed associations of human and nonhuman actants, DRA enables comparative inquiry across digital and hybrid contexts without collapsing analytic distinctions between mediation and performance.

Methodology

This article adopts a qualitative design—digital ethnography with participant observation and reflexive co-inhabitation—to trace and describe emergent ritual dynamics in Web3. For the purposes of this article, “Web3” is operationalized as a distributed socio-technical field marked by wallet-based identities, ledgered states, programmable token incentives, and composable on-/off-chain interfaces that render participation observable. Over eighteen months—November 2023–May 2025—I embedded across decentralized ecosystems, tracing participation through testnet/mainnet phases and both incentivized/non-incentivized

settings. The focus was not on isolated forums but on moving with people across the interfaces (e.g., cross-project dashboards, campaign tools like Galxe or Zealy) and social channels (Discord, Telegram, X, Farcaster) that collectively make a community legible to itself. This design supports a processual account of how ritual forms stabilize and circulate across distributed infrastructures.

Rather than preselecting isolated platforms, I followed the field as it moved—with people, across interfaces, and along recurrent ritual rhythms. Inclusion was salience led and event driven: scenes entered the archive when participation visibly condensed (e.g., onboarding waves, quest cycles, claim/reveal windows) and could be documented across the five analytic dimensions. Initial exclusion applied where access hinged on private direct messages or where documentation would compromise community or legal norms. Midstream exit was recorded when campaigns or testnets ended, when eligibility shifted (e.g., airdrops newly conditioned on staking), when credible scam signals emerged, or when access newly required unverifiable credentials.

The corpus spans fifty to sixty projects across diverse functional domains—DAOs, decentralized social platforms, NFT markets, AI/agent ecosystems, DeFi, DeSci, DePin, and L1/L2 networks—sampled over an eighteen-month window. Materials include more than 500 screenshots, chat transcripts, participation logs, and thick fieldnotes. Critically, the archive was indexed not only by project and ritual/interaction type (e.g., onboarding, quests, airdrops, claims) but also by the five analytic dimensions central to this article: time, space, agency, hierarchy, and affect. This multidimensional indexing enables iterative, cross-case analysis of how these elements are co-performed within ritual sequences. Primary interactions were conducted in English, with sustained, direct participation in Persian and Turkish communities; additional episodic engagements in Malay, Indonesian, Filipino, Urdu, Hindi, and other languages were supported by translation tools.

Public chat transcripts and comment threads were treated as situated participant accounts. Short anonymized verbatim snippets (or close paraphrases) are included in the findings to reflect how participants themselves framed obligation, thresholds, timing, status, and feeling—regardless of whether they named these practices “religious.” These emic traces were read through an analytic distinction central to DRA: ritualization is examined as a process emergent from practice and infrastructure. The stance is interpretive rather than confessional—aimed at tracing how meaning is organized, not how it is professed.

Analytically, I used a structured thematic approach guided by the five core dimensions. Rather than fixing static codes, I traced how time, space, agency, hierarchy, and affect co-appeared and shifted across the lifecycle—from onboarding through to routine participation and to peak events (e.g., airdrops) that recalibrate status and intensify feeling. Reading scenes in relation to phase/regime (testnet versus mainnet, incentivized versus non-incentivized) and interface/channel (campaign or on-chain dashboards versus social chat) kept the

account processual and infrastructural: decentralized systems stage and mediate ritual action. Given volatility and context dependence, manual, context-sensitive structuring—supplemented by brief, reflexive memoing—was preferable in this field to software-driven coding.

Positionality and Reflexive Co-inhabitation

My stance—developed in a later section as “the Researcher as Pilgrim”—moved between observer, participant, and at times co-participant/facilitator. This reflexive co-inhabitation was not a limitation but an epistemic commitment: in fluid, pseudonymous publics, embodied experience is a primary lens for analysis (Pink et al. 2016; Boellstorff 2008). As I navigated countdowns and epoch resets (time), token-gated rooms and role colors (space/hierarchy), strategic choices of participation and restraint (agency), and the pull of gains and disappointments (affect), these frictions became integral to inquiry. The stance acknowledges knowledge in Web3 as situated and coproduced.

Ethical Considerations

Decisions concerning consent, anonymity, and data security were guided by the ethical principles outlined in the Association of Internet Researchers guidelines (AoIR 2019). Data were drawn from public channels; limited semi-public or token-gated access occurred via ordinary community participation. No private communications were accessed or quoted. Publications include no personally identifying information; analytic screenshots were curated or masked to remove handles and user-generated content. All materials are stored in encrypted form. References concern project names, public rituals, and platform-level features only.

Credibility rests on cross-case comparison and triangulation across platforms and languages; claims aim for analytic generalization, not statistical inference. The design was calibrated to trace how time, space, agency, hierarchy, and affect interlock across heterogeneous Web3 projects.

Discussion

Web3 as a Ritual Field: Conditions of Ritualization in Distributed Environments

The emergence of Web3 represents not merely a technical innovation but the crystallization of a new cultural and social milieu—a ritual field constituted by decentralized infrastructures, symbolic economies, and affective participation. Core concerns in digital religion—identity, authority, mediation, and sacred time/space—have long preoccupied the field. In this respect, digital religion has already theorized how online mediation and material infrastructures ritualize practice and contour sacred boundaries (Evolvi 2022), and the present account extends that line of work into decentralized architectures. Yet Web3, best read as the distributed outgrowth of the social web, brings a different technical grammar: wallet-based identities, ledgered states, programmable token

incentives, and composable on-/off-chain interfaces. These affordances do not merely add another channel; they reconfigure the conditions under which symbolic value, trust, and communal recognition are produced.

The notion of Web3 as a ritual field requires theoretical justification. Bell (2009) defines ritualization as a strategic mode of action, differentiating particular behaviors from ordinary practices through repetition, spatial-temporal framing, and embodied competence. Drawing on Bell, Web3 communities strategically ritualize participation by building repetition, spatial-temporal framing, and embodied competence into protocols and interfaces. Daily check-ins, token-staking rituals, periodic snapshots, epochal events, and governance cycles all exemplify these ritual dynamics embedded within decentralized protocols.

Crucially, Web3 ritualization diverges markedly from centralized Web2 platforms where meaning-making was platform centered and curator driven. Decentralization introduces a tension between authority and agency: authority becomes algorithmic, fragmented across nodes and consensus mechanisms, while individual agency is enacted through participation in distributed networks rather than submission to hierarchical governance. The result is a ritual environment where participants become subjects of algorithmic pacing/gating and agents of distributed enactment.

Moreover, this ritualization occurs without the explicit theological or cosmological frameworks traditionally associated with organized religion. Instead, meaning emerges through the interplay of infrastructural affordances, economic incentives, and affective investments—what I term an emergent economic cosmology. This concept captures how shared imaginaries around value, participation, and future potentialities imbue activities like staking tokens, claiming NFTs, or participating in governance with symbolic resonance that exceeds instrumental rationality. While these rituals may appear secular, they mobilize forms of belonging, temporality, and commitment akin to religious practice. Should traditional religious institutions engage with these environments in the future, their ritual logics may intersect with—rather than replace—the emergent sacred grammars of decentralized culture.

Victor Turner's (1977) concept of liminality further clarifies how decentralized spaces facilitate this mode of ritual participation. Web3 communities frequently occupy liminal states—periods between token snapshots, pre-airdrop intervals, waiting times for token unlocks—characterized by heightened anticipation, uncertainty, and communal solidarity. These intervals serve as temporal thresholds, constructing spaces of ritualized suspense and collective expectation. Such liminal episodes are neither purely technical nor merely economic; rather, they become charged with symbolic resonance and emotional intensity. They embody Turner's notion of "communitas," a spontaneous and unstructured sense of collective solidarity that emerges in liminal intervals (see also van Gennep [1909] 1960).

Drawing on Bruno Latour's (2005) ANT, we can further recognize that the ritual dimensions of Web3 extend beyond human actors alone. Following ANT, nonhuman actants—smart contracts (self-executing digital contracts with predefined rules executed automatically), wallets, bots, and dashboards—take part in ritual formation: contracts inscribe temporal hinges (snapshots/resets), bots gate access and render status legible (roles/leaderboards), and wallets carry trajectories across interfaces. For instance, the distribution of roles within Discord servers, governed by bots that track user activity and participation streaks, exemplifies how nonhuman actors enact and sustain ritual hierarchies. ANT's insight—that agency is distributed across human and nonhuman actants—illuminates how technological infrastructures participate in ritual formation.

In summary, Web3 as a ritual field operates through conditions of decentralization, ritualized repetition, symbolic differentiation, liminality, distributed agency, and emergent affective communities. It constitutes an ecology of participation where economic, technical, and symbolic layers merge seamlessly, producing forms of collective experience that resonate with traditional religious and ritual practices. Understanding Web3 as ritual thus necessitates a theoretical and analytical framework capable of capturing these distinctive configurations. This article introduces DRA precisely to articulate and analyze this novel ritual ecology, foregrounding the interplay between lived religious experience, ritualization processes, and actor–network entanglements.

Time: The Architecture of Sacred Temporality

In Web3, time is never simply linear or incidental; rather, it functions as an orchestrated choreography that delineates sacred intervals, ritualized durations, and collective cycles of anticipation. Decentralized environments encode time through precise computational rhythms, embedding it deeply into their technological infrastructure. These temporal cycles are not mere scheduling conveniences—they are affectively charged intervals that shape collective participation and communal identities.

One prevalent temporal structure is the “daily check-in,” a seemingly simple action that carries significant symbolic weight. Daily claims, recurring precisely at the UTC reset (midnight UTC, the field's common temporal hinge), epitomize the kind of temporal discipline Bell (2009) characterizes as ritualization—a strategic differentiation of activities from the ordinary flow of life. Throughout my fieldwork, I observed and participated in numerous daily rituals, each punctuated by the collective urgency to validate presence, maintain streaks, and secure future rewards: “Don't miss your daily tasks today!” In many projects, missing even a single day risked forfeiting hard-earned progress across multiple days. For instance, in many Web3 projects, participants were encouraged to complete daily check-ins over a seven-day cycle, where uninterrupted sequences led to increasingly valuable symbolic and economic

rewards. The anxiety of potentially “breaking the streak” was widespread—on Telegram, community members would routinely remind one another with urgency, emojis, and countdowns: “Don’t break your streak—UTC reset got me yesterday.” In some communities, curated task lists were even shared to help ensure ritual continuity.

These daily rituals echo traditional religious temporalities, which similarly divide time into profane and sacred intervals, requiring sustained vigilance and punctual observance. While religious traditions often anchor such observances within cosmological narratives or divine commandments, Web3 infrastructures situate them within algorithmic mechanisms. The code itself becomes a secular oracle, determining participation eligibility, reward distribution, and even community status. For instance, Mint Blockchain integrates visual and symbolic markers—such as a virtual “tree” that requires daily watering—to materialize temporal fidelity. A visible streak escalation attaches urgency to routine, the narrow claim window concentrates presence, and the small but persistent gas spend folds a minor sacrifice into keeping time. Participants not only compete to preserve personal streaks but engage in symbolic acts of “stealing water” from others. This introduces a morally charged dimension to temporal participation, where actions become symbolically meaningful and socially consequential. Debates within community chats reflected genuine moral deliberations about fairness, obligation, and symbolic transgression: “Is stealing water from others okay? Or is it morally wrong?” Such conversations reveal how deeply participants internalized the ethical implications of temporally structured practices.

Beyond daily rituals, Web3 temporalities extend into longer and more dramatic cycles, such as seasonal events, epochal snapshots (defined intervals in blockchain systems when specific events, such as reward distributions, occur), and token unlock schedules. These are not merely technological events; they serve as liminal thresholds—times of heightened collective anticipation, uncertainty, and communal solidarity. Turner’s (1977) notion of liminality is particularly instructive here: these temporal moments suspend participants in a state of ambiguous expectation, fostering profound emotional engagement. In many decentralized projects, such epochal or phase-based transitions are accompanied by community countdowns, collective speculations, and strategic positioning. When such key moments arrive—whether marking the end of an epoch or the culmination of an airdrop cycle—communities often respond with heightened emotional expression, including messages of congratulations for those who qualified or succeeded. Such snapshots are not merely database updates; they function as communal rites of passage, marking collective transitions from uncertainty to fulfillment, or occasionally disillusionment. In Mocaverse, many tasks run on a replenishing points pool—functionally first-come, first-served: once the pool empties, participants wait for an uncertain recharge; scarcity disciplines timing as much as desire.

Additionally, time in Web3 is intricately connected to economic outcomes, producing an “economic cosmology” in which future rewards sanctify present actions. Actions undertaken in the present are primarily justified and valorized through anticipated future returns, transforming the concept of delayed gratification into a quasi-religious ethos. Practices such as holding tokens (“Hodling”), staking assets, and committing to long-term engagements become morally significant acts akin to traditional religious practices of sacrifice and abstention. Read through lived religion (Ammerman 2014; McGuire 2008), these routinized disciplines and minor sacrifices render sacrality ordinarily legible, weaving it into the daily fabric of waiting, maintaining, and investing.

Furthermore, the technical architecture of blockchains materializes temporality in the stack: Ethereum’s block time (average interval between block production), Cosmos-style epoch timers (e.g., the x/epochs module), and tokenomics schedules together operate as what I term a “distributed calendar” that schedules eligibility, windows, and resets with algorithmic precision. Read through ANT (Latour 2005) this entanglement becomes legible, time is not merely observed by humans; it is co-organized through associations of human and nonhuman actants. Smart contracts write temporal hinges (snapshots, claim cut-offs); bots and schedulers automate vigilance around resets; gas fees (transaction fees users pay for executing transactions and smart contracts on the blockchain) introduce micro-frictions that thicken or thin the pace of action; and wallets carry participation across interfaces. My own engagement explored the temporal affordances and automated dynamics of these environments. On select occasions, I used lightweight timing automation to randomize participation windows and subtly jitter the spacing between actions. These actions ritualized my participation into a complex dance between human intention and machinic precision.

In sum, sacred temporality in Web3 emerges as a complex interplay between infrastructural affordances, collective affective engagement, economic motivations, and symbolic differentiation. Time becomes a shared sacred resource, continuously renewed and contested, structuring belonging through rhythmic precision and emotional intensity. The distinctive temporal architecture of Web3 thus reveals how ritualization processes in decentralized spaces engender emergent forms of sacredness not reliant on theological frameworks but rather produced through algorithmic mediation and collective practice.

Space: Interface as Ritual Habitat

In decentralized environments, space is neither neutral nor simply digital; rather, it manifests as an intricately layered ritual habitat, a symbolic terrain where ordinary interactions transcend functional transactions, transforming into deeply meaningful acts of symbolic engagement. Building on the established understanding that digital platforms can constitute sacred space (Hutchings 2017), we see that in Web3, interfaces—project dashboards,

Discord servers, staking platforms, token-gated channels—function as liminal sites, simultaneously material and imagined, technical yet ritualized, where participants collectively navigate between everyday digital interactions and heightened symbolic experiences.

Throughout my ethnographic engagements, I observed how decentralized spaces have been carefully crafted to cultivate ritualistic engagement, embedding symbolic dimensions directly into their interface designs. For example, the Mint Blockchain project, previously discussed in relation to temporality, exemplifies how interfaces became ritual habitats. The visual representation of a virtual tree and the moral dimensions of actions like “stealing water” endowed the dashboard with symbolic depth, transforming routine participation into meaningful spatial engagement. A different spatial grammar appears in Mocaverse, which renders “habitat” through a points-pool logic. Tasks appear with a visible pool bar for Realm Points (RP); once the pool drains, latecomers risk missing the claim until the pool is unpredictably refilled. Formally, tasks carry generous deadlines (e.g., “open until 9 April”), but practically, the space feels FCFS-like because the pool can empty at any moment. Participants attune to the interface as a moralized map: move now or lose your share. This calculus was voiced in community chats, with users noting “Pool’s empty—my grind to level-100 takes ~4–5 days; now what?” and urging others, “Start today so when tasks end the pool hasn’t dried.”

The concept of “ritual habitat” draws on Knott’s (2005) spatial analysis of religious practice, which emphasizes how sacred space is continuously constituted and reconstituted through symbolic differentiation and ritual engagement. Applying this framework to Web3, we see interfaces as sites of ongoing differentiation, where ordinary spaces become ritually significant through symbolic boundary-making. Participants enter a dashboard or Discord channel not by simply clicking a link but by crossing a threshold—connecting a wallet, verifying identity, or holding specific tokens—each act constituting a digital rite of passage. Hutchings (2017) further emphasizes the interplay of digital spaces, community formation, and ritual practice, underscoring how online environments actively produce sacredness through structured interactions. Read through lived religion (Ammerman 2014; McGuire 2008), it is in these routine acts of crossing—of authenticating, holding tokens, and gaining entry—that the sacred is produced and negotiated, one access gate at a time.

In several projects, tiered rooms and restricted channels partitioned an otherwise flat network; doors opened as roles accrued or assets were linked, teaching users to read the interface as interior topography. The point here is spatial: thresholds actively draw rooms, even before any explicit hierarchy is named.

Moreover, the technical affordances of blockchain ecosystems and their graphical user interfaces actively shape and structure ritual participation. For instance, in the Portal project, Twitter itself became a ritualized interface, with hashtags serving as tokens of participation and posts becoming markers of

ritual engagement. Users strategically employed hashtags (#Portalcoin) as digital amulets aimed at maximizing visibility and symbolic capital within the ritual economy of attention and influence. Observations of participants intensely negotiating interactions highlighted how interface affordances—visibility metrics, engagement algorithms—structure symbolic interactions into rituals of reciprocal obligation. “gm [good morning] with #Portalcoin so it counts.”

Furthermore, these digital habitats are inherently ephemeral and precarious, constantly vulnerable to disruptions—server shutdowns, project rug pulls (crypto scams in which founders abandon a project after collecting user investments), account suspensions, or the sudden banning of participants who breach norms. This precarity enhances rather than diminishes their ritual significance, resonating with Turner’s (1977) analysis of liminal spaces. Discord servers and token-gated channels exist as liminal realms—suspended between permanence and dissolution, fostering communal solidarity through shared uncertainty. “spoke up and got kicked—doors shut instantly.”

Latour’s (2005) ANT further illuminates how interfaces in Web3 operate as co-constitutive networks, entangling human participants and technological actants into ritual formations. Smart contracts, wallet signatures, role-assignment bots, and visual indicators of status within interfaces are not passive tools but active mediators of ritual interaction. For instance, role-assignment bots within Discord automatically grant symbolic titles—such as “Verified,” “Ambassador,” or “Booster”—based on user interactions, time spent, and contributions made. Such automated rituals profoundly shape communal experience and hierarchy, indicating how nonhuman actors participate directly in symbolic space-making.

These interfaces thus become more than technical mediums; they embody ritual architectures that structure participation, delineate hierarchies, and generate symbolic meaning and affective investment akin to traditional ritual sites such as temples, churches, and pilgrimage destinations. However, unlike traditional religious spaces, decentralized interfaces rarely appeal to cosmological or metaphysical narratives. This emergence of sacredness through distributed technology reveals an entirely new mode of ritual habitation—one characterized by immediacy, algorithmic mediation, and collective imagination.

In sum, Web3 interfaces do not merely support ritual behavior—they actively constitute ritual space. Participants navigate these digital habitats as symbolic terrains charged with moral, affective, and hierarchical significance. Such spatial rituals reveal how decentralized environments enable emergent forms of sacredness that are distinctly digital yet resonant with enduring human practices of symbolic differentiation, boundary-making, and communal transcendence.

Agency: Multitudes of the Self

Agency within Web3 environments emerges as inherently plural and fragmented, transcending conventional notions of singular, unified identity. While digital religion scholarship has long established that identity is constructed, performed,

and mediated online (Lövheim 2013), Web3 architectures reconfigure this process. Decentralized platforms offer unique affordances that enable—and even encourage—participants to engage through multiple identities, wallets, and strategies, producing an environment in which agency is constantly negotiated, enacted, and multiplied. This multiplicity aligns closely with insights from ANT (Latour 2005), conceptualizing agency as distributed across human and nonhuman actants, effectively destabilizing conventional assumptions about individual intentionality and control.

During fieldwork, I experienced this fragmented agency firsthand. As part of immersive participant observation, I adopted diverse participation modes, including at times parallel digital identities. This was not mere duplicity but a methodologically grounded response to the algorithmically governed incentive structures. On select occasions, I used lightweight timing automation to randomize participation windows and subtly jitter the spacing between actions to mimic human cadence. I ritualistically enacted distributed agency across interwoven digital selves. This experience underscored how what looked like routine transactions became a choreography of selves: agency distributed across interfaces, addresses, and timed prompts then braided back into a single researcher-participant.

Such distributed multiplicity, however, is not universally celebrated. Within Web3 communities, ethical debates surround multi-accounting (one individual using multiple accounts on digital platforms) and automation strategies. Discord conversations frequently erupted into moral arguments, reflecting collective ambivalence about ethical boundaries of agency. Comments like “This is haram and absolutely forbidden—you are just exploiting the system” contrasted with defenses such as “We are stress-testing their systems and exposing design flaws. This is part of helping them grow—testnets are meant for this. Better now than after launch.” These frictions signal a moral economy of agency: communities negotiate where disciplined participation ends and gaming the system begins.

Decentralized agency further unsettles conventional notions of selfhood, enabling identity to operate as a modular and programmable construct. Within networked assemblages, each wallet, account, or pseudonymous persona acts as a semi-autonomous node—connected not through continuity of self, but through converging strategies and intentionalities. In certain project ecosystems, particularly during gamified testnet phases, maintaining multiple accounts or identities becomes a strategic response to algorithmically tiered reward systems. Roles such as “Testnet user” or “OG” are not merely functional but status-bearing signifiers—markers of symbolic capital within community hierarchies. In this context, identity is not fragmented by accident or deception, but ritualistically dispersed across interfaces, wallets, and behavioral patterns. Multiplicity thus emerges not as ethical breach but as structured participation: an enacted mode of being shaped by the logic of the system itself.

The “mining campaign” in *Mocaverse*—where participants farmed shards for a lottery-based token presale—made this logic starkly visible. Fieldnotes and community discussions repeatedly underscored a widespread participant strategy. As one user advised others in a public Telegram channel, “You should join with other wallets too and become your own referrer. This way you get more shards from the referral system, and with more accounts, you have a better chance.” In such incentive-driven environments, the practice of multi-accounting becomes a rational calculus, ritualistically reframing distributed agency not as deviance but as disciplined participation. From a systems perspective, this user-generated multiplicity—regardless of individual intent—functions as both a measure of commitment and a key metric of growth for the projects themselves.

In ANT terms (Latour 2005), agency is co-composed; Ritual participation emerges through dynamic interactions among multiple actors, where non-human agents—bot scripts, wallet software, automated role-assignment mechanisms—actively shape and discipline human behavior. Employing bots to execute repetitive tasks like daily claims or token transfers ritualizes interactions, integrating machinic precision with human intentionality. In effect, automation can serve as disciplined devotion.

This multiplicity parallels religious traditions, where participants adopt ritual personas aligned with distinct functions and roles. Multiplicity demands constant reflexive navigation between sincerity and strategy. Operating multiple accounts involves navigating shifting identity markers—such as linguistic style and interaction patterns—within a system that simultaneously enables and scrutinizes multiplicity.

Moreover, agency in decentralized environments is profoundly shaped by infrastructural affordances and algorithmic structures. Blockchain networks enable, incentivize, and discipline participation through coded rituals—daily staking requirements, snapshot participation thresholds (specific blockchain moments capturing account statuses for reward allocation), or mandatory governance votes. These algorithmic mechanisms exert agency over participants, defining and constraining possibilities for meaningful action. The ritual dimension of agency extends beyond human intention, distributed across computational protocols, symbolic artifacts, and collective imaginaries.

In summary, agency in Web3 is fundamentally plural and fragmented, shaped by interactions among human participants, technical infrastructures, and symbolic economies. This ritualized multiplicity highlights how decentralized environments facilitate new configurations of agency—complex, contested, and inherently symbolic.

Hierarchy: Stratification in a Flat Cosmos

While Web3 promises decentralization, freedom from traditional authorities, and a flat organizational structure, decentralized communities in practice

are profoundly hierarchical. Far from eliminating distinctions, decentralized platforms actively produce and reinforce complex symbolic hierarchies—manifested through visual markers, status roles, token allocations (distribution of tokens to users as rewards or incentives for participation), and exclusive access privileges. This reconfiguration of authority into new, platform-driven forms resonates with central findings in digital religion, which document how media environments do not dissolve authority but rather necessitate its recalibration (Campbell 2021; Hoover 2016). This apparent contradiction—egalitarian ideals versus hierarchical practice—reveals deep insights into the symbolic logic and ritual dynamics of Web3 environments.

My ethnographic engagements provided ample evidence of how decentralized communities systematically embed hierarchies into their symbolic and technical infrastructures. Roles such as “OG” (Original Gangster), “Pioneer,” “Testnet User,” “Developer,” and “Ambassador” were omnipresent, carefully codified within Discord servers, project dashboards, and community rituals. These hierarchies are not merely symbolic; they structure access to privileged channels, insider information, and tangible economic rewards like preferential token distributions and exclusive NFTs (non-fungible tokens, unique digital tokens proving ownership of specific assets on blockchain).

The proliferation of hierarchical roles aligns closely with Bell’s (2009) theoretical insight into ritualization as a strategy of differentiation. Within Web3, symbolic differentiation emerges through visual badges, leaderboards, role assignments, and selective channel access, effectively distinguishing certain participants from the general community. Unlike centralized platforms where hierarchies are typically formalized through explicit organizational structures, decentralized environments embed distinctions into interfaces, automated role-assignment bots, and symbolic artifacts such as limited-edition NFTs. Hierarchy thus emerges as an algorithmically mediated ritual phenomenon, continuously reproduced through repeated interactions and sustained participation.

Over time, repetition and public recognition transmute mundane participation into affective capital—confidence, esteem, and attachment that bind. Roles formalize stratification; bots script graduated belonging; praise rituals and visible badges adhere pride to names. In Randall Collins’s (2004) terms, these are interaction ritual chains that generate durable emotional energy and emblems that motivate return; in Bell’s (2009), a continuous ritualization that sets this labor apart from ordinary chat—the slow accumulation of standing, enacted in small acts and seen in public mirrors.

In ANT terms (Latour 2005), hierarchy is co-composed: bots assign titles, contracts/checkers gate rooms, dashboards render status legible. In *Joltify*, earning Vanguard required sustained chat presence and helping newcomers (answering “how to activate X,” “how to do tasks,” etc.); metrics tallied activity, while moderators flagged “helpful” exchanges. A small circle of us decided

to pursue Vanguard together because the role carried higher airdrop weight; I was the last in our group to get it, and when it finally landed the channels lit up—congrats in the TR–FA local and the global rooms. “Bravo—Vanguard at last.” “Happy for you—take us with you.” The screen did the ceremony: color changed, door opened, and standing became visible.

These hierarchies actively shape social relations, community dynamics, and symbolic economies. For instance, in the *Mint Blockchain* project, leaderboards publicly displayed users’ cumulative scores derived from streaks, referrals, and completed tasks, fostering intense competition for symbolic visibility. Users meticulously monitored rankings, interpreting shifts in standings as reflections of personal dedication or moral failures. “Down 14 today—have to catch up before reset.”

Furthermore, Web3 hierarchies operate within an economic cosmology that imbues symbolic distinctions with direct financial implications. High-ranking community members gain preferential access to exclusive investment opportunities, private token sales, and insider information—benefits that translate symbolic status into concrete economic value. Across multiple projects, high rank or verified holdings routinely map to higher allocations and preferential access. In Mocaverse, holding the Moca NFT (rather than RP) conferred larger distributions and eligibility for select private token sales, while points signaled activity but did not govern those entitlements. Communities like Carv Protocol used token allocations as ritualized economic initiations, with higher-ranked members receiving larger distributions, reinforcing hierarchical status. Such rituals closely parallel traditional religious hierarchies where elders gain preferential access to sacred resources and knowledge.

Yet these symbolic hierarchies coexist paradoxically with the ongoing promise of decentralization, creating a state of symbolic tension. Turner’s (1977) notion of liminality clarifies this paradox: decentralized spaces sustain a liminal state where participants oscillate between egalitarian ideals and hierarchical aspirations. This tension generates powerful affective engagements: admiration, envy, competition, and occasional resentment. Discord interactions frequently showcased ambivalent sentiments—participants expressed both admiration and subtle jealousy towards privileged members. “Bro, take our hand too.”

Moreover, hierarchical rituals in Web3 continuously negotiate boundaries of inclusion and exclusion, symbolic purity, and transgression. Projects occasionally conducted ritualized removals of inactive or nonconforming members, reaffirming symbolic boundaries. Such exclusionary rituals resonated deeply with religious practices of excommunication or purification rites, underscoring the ritual potency embedded in symbolic hierarchies.

In conclusion, Web3 actively ritualizes hierarchy through technical affordances, symbolic artifacts, economic incentives, and collective practices. Despite promises of decentralization, symbolic distinctions remain embedded,

continuously reinforced through ritual engagement. This dynamic reveals how decentralized environments generate new forms of hierarchical sacredness, blending technology, economic value, and ritual practice.

Affect: Economies of Hope and Betrayal

Affect in Web3 communities is not merely a byproduct of interaction but a fundamental currency—deeply embedded into infrastructures, ritual performances, and economic incentives. Decentralized environments construct intricate affective economies where emotional engagements—hope, fear, anticipation, triumph, and betrayal—are ritualized, intensified, and systematically orchestrated. These emotional economies reveal how Web3 spaces transform technical interactions and economic transactions into profoundly ritualized affective experiences.

My findings render Sara Ahmed's (2004) "affective economies" concretely technical: which emotions adhere to which signs is not incidental but infrastructured—a function of eligibility scripts, pacing algorithms, and visibility metrics that time and rank participation. In this register, affect does not merely circulate between bodies and signs; it is routed through architectures that calibrate anticipation, legibility, and access—making attachment and detachment empirically traceable in interfaces and code.

Throughout my fieldwork, affective intensity was a pervasive reality. Communities repeatedly navigated emotional extremes—euphoric celebration following successful airdrops (the free distribution of tokens to users), communal despair over failed investments, and intense anticipation during project launches or NFT minting events (the creation and registration of unique digital assets on the blockchain). In one project, the announcement of a snapshot triggered waves of speculation and emotionally charged reactions. Expressions of triumph mingled with collective disappointment. Such moments illustrate how affective states are not spontaneous reactions but ritualized outcomes shaped by temporal orchestration, infrastructural affordances, and collective anticipation.

Collins's (2004) concept of interaction ritual chains is instructive here, highlighting how emotional energy is collectively generated and sustained through ritual participation. In Web3, such affective rituals are mediated by technological interfaces—project dashboards, countdown clocks, visual progress bars—and economic mechanisms like staking rewards, token distributions, and airdrops. These infrastructures do more than enable participation; they actively cultivate emotional cycles, embedding anticipation, anxiety, and hope into participants' everyday digital practices.

This cultivation of emotional energy can undergo a violent inversion when the rules of reward are abruptly reconfigured. In one lending-protocol testnet, after months of ritualized daily engagement—swapping test tokens, delegating to

validators, and claiming simulated interest—the community’s anticipation reached its peak at the airdrop checker’s release. The interface, which we had loaded with hope, now delivered a gutting formula: our “level,” a badge of honor earned through countless tasks, now dictated a mandatory monetary stake to claim rewards. In the main Discord, a performative calm was enforced; critical questions were deleted and dissenting voices, including my own, were swiftly banned. This silencing ritual fractured the community. In private Telegram channels and on X, the collective hope we had nurtured for months shattered into a shared lexicon of outrage. The affective arc—from collective anticipation to fractured outrage—demonstrated how platforms actively mediate emotional energy, converting the participatory rituals of hope into the segregating rituals of exclusion and forging negative affective capital that long outlives the immediate crisis.

Such crises render the politics of code legible: scripts that once conferred eligibility now enact expulsion, translating entitlement into injury. The rupture is liminal (Turner 1977): participants suspended between having belonged and being denied, often coalescing into counter-publics of “we, the wronged.” From these intervals circulates negative affective capital—warning, caution, cold anger—that travels into subsequent cycles, disciplining participation and sharpening boundary work.

The emotional economy of hope and betrayal is perhaps most vividly experienced during high-stakes minting events. Participants often prepared meticulously—setting alarms, preloading wallets with the necessary gas fee, and engaging in symbolic rituals of good fortune (“Good vibes for y’all 🙏”). Yet technical failures, high gas fees, or rapid sell-outs frequently transformed anticipation into frustration, disillusionment, or accusations of manipulation. Discord chats echoed with emotional intensity: “Completely devastated,” “Worked months and got nothing,” or “Devs manipulated the drop!”

This affective volatility parallels traditional religious experiences, where ritual participation evokes states of ecstatic joy, collective vulnerability, and existential anxiety. However, unlike traditional rituals anchored in theological narratives, Web3 rituals offer no transcendental guarantees. Economic incentives and algorithmic contingencies structure emotional investment, embedding uncertainty directly into the ritual fabric. Turner’s (1977) notion of liminality is again relevant—airdrop moments, project launches, and token unlocks suspend participants in states of ambiguity and heightened emotional charge, fostering communal experiences of shared uncertainty, anticipation, and disappointment.

Affect in Web3 is also distinctly economic. Tokens, NFTs, and staking rewards serve both as symbolic artifacts and financial instruments, binding emotional and economic value into a single ritual system. Participants do not merely hope abstractly—they project financial potential into emotional engagements, measured in token prices, staking yields, and NFT valuations. This affective-economic nexus transforms ritual participation into emotionally

charged economic performance. Across diverse communities, slogans like “HODL, price will pump! 🚀” reinforce the fusion of belief and speculation, reflecting how economic conviction becomes a mode of emotional attachment.

Furthermore, decentralized affective economies are mediated by nonhuman actants—bots, smart contracts, wallets, and algorithms. Latour’s (2005) ANT clarifies how these technological agents coproduce affective states. Smart contracts distribute tokens, wallet interfaces display balances, bots announce events—each shaping emotional rhythms. My own participation revealed how algorithmic unpredictability—snapshot timing, fluctuating gas prices—transformed routine actions into emotionally charged rituals of suspense and collective anticipation.

In Web3, affect is endogenous to valuation, not an epiphenomenal residue. Design choices that distribute eligibility and pace anticipation (threshold scripts, allocation formulas, countdown mechanics) convert directly into pricing and liquidity conditions at launch: transparent or generous allocations tend to generate affirmative word-of-mouth, thicker demand, and reputational lift; opaque or retroactive gates catalyze grievance that depresses enthusiasm and shadows reputation. Put differently, affective capital and economic capital are convertible currencies: pride in OG status buys early access; outrage at “not eligible” converts into reputational drag and sell pressure; post-crisis residues travel as negative affective capital that disciplines future participation. To analyze belonging in decentralized systems is therefore to analyze how infrastructures simultaneously script attachment and price discovery—the ritual economy and the token economy are coproduced.

In sum, affect in Web3 is ritualized and infrastructured—through affordances that pace attention, scripts that gate eligibility, and economic mechanisms that reward or deny—such that emotions adhere to signs (Ahmed 2004) and circulate through interaction ritual chains (Collins 2004) with material consequence. As these circuits move across dashboards, drops, and governance events, affective capital proves convertible—into access, price dynamics, reputational lift or drag—embedding symbolic intensities directly within technical and economic practice.

Reflexivity: The Researcher as Pilgrim

Reflexivity, far from being merely methodological self-awareness, emerged as a central ritual stance throughout my ethnographic journey into Web3. My positionality shifted continuously between observer, participant, and, at times, accomplice in the very phenomena I sought to understand. Navigating decentralized communities, staking tokens, minting NFTs, running nodes (network participants that validate and store blockchain data), and engaging deeply in community rituals transformed my role from a detached ethnographer into an emotionally invested pilgrim traversing the symbolic and economic landscapes of Web3.

This reflexive stance aligns with Donna Haraway's (1988) concept of situated knowledge—the idea that all knowledge emerges from specific embodied locations and partial perspectives. My situatedness was shaped by constant engagement in decentralized practices: managing multiple participation roles across wallets, participating in airdrops, navigating token-staking cycles, and contributing to Discord communities.

The pilgrimage metaphor captures this reflexive experience effectively—a journey through anticipation, anxiety, euphoria, and disillusionment. Moments of communal celebration—such as successful airdrops or the acquisition of high-status NFTs—evoked sensations of arrival and symbolic fulfillment. Conversely, episodes of exclusion or economic betrayal prompted ethical reflection on my complicity within these economies. Was I merely observing, or also reinforcing the very structures I sought to analyze?

My participation in the Mint Blockchain community exemplifies this complexity. Engaging daily in the virtual tree-watering ritual—designed to reward streaks of consistent engagement—I confronted tensions between symbolic commitment and instrumental action. Ethical boundaries blurred around behaviors such as “stealing water,” with my own choices fluctuating day to day. Fieldnotes captured these ambiguities: “Today I deliberately chose not to steal—felt morally uneasy . . . yesterday I did it without hesitation.” Such moments crystallized the fluidity of ethical reasoning under ritual pressure.

Managing multiple accounts in other communities introduced further layers of reflexivity. Each persona enacted distinct strategies and navigated moral boundaries differently. This fragmentation raised persistent questions: How did these selves influence my research integrity? Was I a participant, a strategist, or both? Fieldnotes voiced this ambivalence: “Running multiple accounts today felt ethically ambiguous—effective economically, yet problematic morally. Am I researcher, speculator, or both simultaneously?”

Turner's (1977) notion of pilgrimage as a liminal journey further clarifies this experience. Decentralized spaces constantly positioned me between participant and observer, sincerity and strategy, economic interest and symbolic devotion. These thresholds intensified reflexivity, compelling ongoing self-examination regarding motivations, roles, and responsibilities. At times, this reflexivity crystallized in my own internal questioning: “Am I really here for the community or just the gains? Sometimes even I don't know.”

Reflexivity also carried methodological implications. My embedded presence inevitably influenced community dynamics and ritual outcomes. By advising new members, sharing tactics, and participating in debates, I became not just an observer but a ritual facilitator. This complicity was ethically significant. Haraway's concept of situated knowledge requires acknowledging how embodied presence co-constitutes the field itself. Rather than seeing reflexivity as a limitation, I embraced it as an epistemic commitment—one that recognizes knowledge as emerging through entangled relations between researcher and researched.

In conclusion, reflexivity in Web3 ethnography demands recognizing the researcher as a pilgrim: navigating symbolic terrains, negotiating ethical boundaries, and engaging emotionally, economically, and ritually. My journey demonstrates that ethnographic knowledge arises not from distance but from immersion—marked by liminality, complicity, and situatedness. Far from compromising validity, such reflexivity deepens ethnographic insight into how decentralized rituals are lived, enacted, and coproduced.

Integrative Note on Theory and Data

This article proposes the DRA framework not as a detached theoretical abstraction but as a direct outcome of sustained ethnographic immersion in decentralized Web3 communities. At its core, DRA synthesizes three complementary theoretical lenses—lived religion, ritualization, and ANT—into an integrative analytical framework uniquely suited to unpack the symbolic complexity and emergent ritual forms of decentralized environments. Traditional approaches have proven inadequate for addressing the complex interplay of human, technological, symbolic, and economic dimensions in these environments.

To clarify the practical power of DRA, let me return briefly to the empirical example of the Mint Blockchain project. As detailed, this decentralized community, organized around daily digital actions—such as watering a symbolic digital tree, engaging in leaderboard competitions, and completing periodic tasks—offers an exemplary case for demonstrating how DRA’s theoretical components converge in practice. Far from a niche case, Mint Blockchain provides a model of how mundane actions in Web3 can evolve into ritualized performances infused with moral intensity, symbolic meaning, and collective emotional investment.

From the perspective of lived religion (Ammerman 2014; McGuire 2008), participants in Mint Blockchain did not enact ritual competence through adherence to formal doctrines but through repeated embodied practices—daily watering rituals, maintaining participation streaks, and making ethical decisions about symbolic behaviors like “stealing water.” These embodied engagements reflect the lived negotiation of meaning and sacrality.

Ritualization theory (Bell 2009) adds further analytical precision, emphasizing how practices are differentiated from ordinary actions through repetition, framing, and boundary-making. In Mint Blockchain, these processes materialized through orchestrated daily cycles, symbolic progressions (e.g., the growing digital tree), and task-based hierarchies that inscribed sacredness into the infrastructure of participation.

ANT (Latour 2005) deepens the analysis by foregrounding the agency of nonhuman actants. Smart contracts enforce participation rules, Discord bots assign roles, and wallets embody user progression, making interactions symbolically legible. These technological entities do not merely support ritual performance—they coproduce it. ANT thus reveals how decentralized rituals are enacted through dynamic interactions between human and nonhuman actors.

The strength of DRA lies in its integrative capacity. Neither lived religion, ritualization theory, nor ANT alone can account for the layered complexity of ritual life in decentralized systems. Together, however, they provide a comprehensive analytical apparatus capable of interpreting the ethical, symbolic, and infrastructural dimensions of Web3 participation.

More than a synthesis, DRA represents a theoretical innovation. It challenges inherited divisions between technology and spirituality, individual experience and collective ritual, symbolic meaning and economic logic. Instead, it highlights how decentralized infrastructures generate ritual formations that are simultaneously technical, affective, symbolic, and sacred.

Looking forward, DRA offers a robust analytical framework for future comparative research—across decentralized systems, platform-mediated communities, and institutional religious contexts—as faith communities increasingly engage Web3 infrastructures. The emergent paradigm of “distributed digital religion,” which I develop further in a forthcoming monograph, signals a promising trajectory for digital religion studies. It invites new inquiries into how sacrality, ritual authority, and collective imagination are reconfigured within algorithmically mediated systems.

In sum, DRA—empirically grounded, theoretically integrative, and analytically robust—provides a necessary intervention in the evolving field of digital religion. By bringing together lived experience, ritual differentiation, and technological agency, it clarifies how decentralized rituals emerge and why their study demands conceptual tools attuned to the realities of distributed environments.

Conclusion

This article has established Web3 as an emergent field of digital religion—a novel terrain where decentralized infrastructures, comprising smart contracts, token economies, blockchain algorithms, and symbolic interactions, generate unprecedented forms of ritual life. Far from occupying the margins, these rituals serve as vital mechanisms by which decentralized communities shape identity, cultivate social cohesion, construct symbolic hierarchies, orchestrate affective economies, and co-create collective meaning.

Understanding the ritual dynamics of Web3 thus demands analytical frameworks able to grapple simultaneously with technological, economic, symbolic, and affective complexities. Traditional approaches—whether overly institutional or narrowly subjectivist—have proven insufficient for capturing the multilayered character of these phenomena. In response, this article has articulated DRA: a rigorous yet flexible framework purpose-built to illuminate the intricate workings of decentralized rituals.

DRA embodies a deliberate synthesis of three complementary theoretical lineages: lived religion, ritualization, and ANT. The lived religion perspective foregrounds participants’ embodied and ethical engagements, ritualization theory elucidates the strategic construction of symbolic boundaries through

repeated actions, and ANT clarifies the mediating and coproductive roles of technological actants. Together, these approaches offer an integrative lens for understanding how rituals emerge at the intersections of technology, symbolism, economic logic, and collective affect.

The analysis presented here demonstrates that Web3 rituals are distinguished from their traditional counterparts by several defining features: the algorithmic mediation of sacred temporality, the formation of digital interfaces as ritual habitats, the multiplicity and fragmentation of agency, the constitution of symbolic hierarchies, and the orchestration of affective economies marked by hope and betrayal. My reflexive position as an engaged participant-observer has further underscored how researchers are inevitably implicated in—and co-constitutive of—these ritual dynamics, thus highlighting the necessity of reflexive ethnography for the study of emergent ritual fields.

Beyond synthesizing these insights, DRA marks a conceptual intervention in digital religion studies. It challenges the habitual separations of technology and spirituality, individual and collective ritual, and economic motivation and symbolic meaning. Instead, DRA reveals how decentralized infrastructures braid these elements into hybrid ritual formations: technical, symbolic, economic, and sacred at once.

The theoretical architecture of DRA invites broad comparative application. While this article has focused on emergent Web3 communities, its analytical principles are robust enough to guide future research across digital, hybrid, and even traditional ritual contexts. Researchers may deploy DRA to trace how established religious traditions adapt within decentralized infrastructures or to interrogate how other technologically mediated collectives negotiate sacredness, authority, and communal identity in digital environments.

Ultimately, this article positions DRA not as a terminus but as a conceptual threshold—an invitation to further exploration. The rapidly evolving landscape of decentralized digital technologies demands perpetual theoretical refinement and empirical engagement. The emerging paradigm of distributed digital religion, which I will elaborate in my forthcoming monograph, signals a new trajectory for comparative inquiry in the study of religion and ritual. By tracing how decentralized infrastructures continually refigure rituals, sacredness, and collective meaning-making, future scholarship will be better equipped to grasp—and articulate—the profound transformations unfolding within contemporary religious life.

In sum, DRA provides a critical conceptual toolset for the field of digital religion. It addresses a significant theoretical gap while opening new horizons for comparative inquiry. Far from disappearing, ritual life in the age of decentralization is being reconstituted—reconfigured, reenchanting, and redistributed within the vibrant nexus of technology, symbolic imagination, and economic incentive.

Competing interests

The author declares that they have no competing interests.

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