Going Virtual

Evangelia Baralou
University of Sterling, Scotland

Jill Shepherd
Simon Fraser University, Canada

WHAT IS VIRTUALITY AND WHY DOES IT MATTER?

Virtuality is a socially constructed reality mediated by electronic media (Morse, 1998). Characterized by the dimension of time-space distantiation (Giddens, 1991), virtuality has an impact on the nature and dynamics of knowledge creation (Thompson, 1995). The relentless advancement of Information and Communication Technology (ICT) in terms both of new technology and the convergence of technology (e.g., multimedia) is making virtual networking the norm rather than the exception. Socially, virtual communities are more dispersed, have different power dynamics, are less hierarchical, tend to be shaped around special interests, and are open to multiple interpretations, when compared to face-to-face equivalents. To successfully manage virtual communities these differences need firstly to be understood, secondly the understanding related to varying organizational aims and thirdly, the contextualised understanding needs to be translated into appropriate managerial implications.

In business terms, virtuality exists in the form of life style choices (home-working), ways of working (global product development teams), new products (virtual themeparks), and new business models (e.g., Internet dating agencies). Socially, virtuality can take the form of talking to intelligent agents, combining reality and virtuality in surgery (e.g., using 3D imaging before and during an operation), or in policy making (e.g., combining research and engineering reports with real satellite images of a landscape with digital animations of being within that landscape, to aid environmental policy decisions).

Defining virtuality today is easy in comparison with defining, understanding and managing it on an ongoing basis. As the title "going virtual" suggests, virtuality is a matter of a phenomenon in the making, as we enter into it during our everyday lives, as the technology develops and as society changes as a result of virtual existences. The relentless advances in the technical complexity which underlies virtual functionality and the speeding up and broadening of our lives as a consequence of virtuality, make for little time and inclination to reflect upon the exact nature and effect of going virtual. As it pervades the way we live, work and play at such a fast rate, we rarely have the time to stop and think about the implications of the phenomenon.

The aim of what follows is therefore to reflexively generate an understanding of the techno-social nature of virtuality on the basis that such an understanding is a prerequisite to becoming more responsible for its nature and effects. Ways of looking at virtuality are followed by some thoughts on the managerial implications of "going virtual".

A TECHNO-SOCIAL VIEW OF VIRTUALITY

Marx foresaw how the power of technological innovation would drive social change and how it would influence and become influenced by the social structure of society and human behaviour (Wallace, 1999). This interrelationship means that an understanding of virtuality needs to start from the theoretical acceptance of virtuality as a social reality; considering it involves human interaction associated with digital media and language in a socially constructed world (Morse, 1998). More specifically, Van Dijk (1999) suggests that going virtual, in comparison with face to face interaction, is characterised by:

• A less stable and concrete reality without time, place and physical ties

- More abstract interaction which affects knowledge creation
- A networked reality which both disperses and concentrates power, offering new ways of exercising power
- Diffused and less hierarchical communities and interaction due to the more dynamic flow of knowledge and greater equality in participation
- A reality often shaped around special interests

Each of these areas is explored below, with the aim of drawing out the issues such that the managerial implications can be discussed in the following section. The emphasis is not on the technology, but on the socio-managerial implications of how the technology promotes and moulds social existence within virtual situations.

A REALITY WHICH IS LESS STABLE AND CONCRETE

Arguably, the most fundamental characteristic of virtuality is the first on this list, namely time-space distantiation (Giddens, 1991). Prior to the development of ICTs, the main mode of communication between individuals was face-to-face interaction in a shared place and time. The presence of a shared context during face to face contact provides a richness, allowing for the capacity to interrupt, repair, feedback and learn, which some see as an advantage (Nohria & Eccles, 1992, cited by Metiu & Kogut, 2001). In a virtual context, individuals interact at a distance and can interact asynchronously in cyberspace through the mediation of ICTs. The absence of shared context and time has an impact on communication (Metiu & Kogut, 2001; Thompson, 1995).

A MORE ABSTRACT REALITY

In virtuality, a narrowed range of nonverbal symbolic cues can be transmitted to distant others (Foster & Meech, 1995; Sapsed, Bessant, Partington, Tranfield, & Young, 2002; Wallace, 1999), albeit technology advancement is broadening the spectrum. Social cues associated with face-to-face co-presence are deprived, while other symbolic cues (i.e., those linked to writing) are accentuated (Thompson, 1995). The additional meaning found in direct auditory and visual communication, carried by inflections in the voice tone, gestures, dress, posture, as well as the reflexive monitoring of others' responses, is missing. Human senses such as touch, smell, taste cannot be stimulated (Christou & Parker, 1995). Virtuality is a more abstract form of reality. These symbolic cues convey information regarding the meaning individuals assign to the language they use, as well as the image they want to project while expressing themselves. In this sense man first went virtual when language evolved, given language was arguably the first abstract space man inhabited.

Understanding the social impact of mediated interaction is helped by thinking in terms of the spaces within which individuals interact (Goffman 1959, cited by Thompson, 1995). A distinction is made between individuals interacting within and between easily accessible front regions, separated in space and perhaps in time from their respective back regions into which it is difficult, if not impossible, to intrude.

In a face-to-face context, social interaction takes place in a shared front region, a setting that stays put geographically speaking (e.g., an office, a class), which can be directly observed by others and is related to the image the individual wants to project. Actions that seem to be inappropriate or contradictory, for that image, are suppressed and reserved in the back region, for future use. It is not always easy to identify the distinction between the front region and the back region, as there can be regions which function at one time and in one sense as a front region and at another time and in another sense as a back region. For example, a manager in his office with clients or other employees can be considered as acting in a front region, whereas the same geographical setting can be thought of as the back region before or after the meeting.

In virtuality, the separation of back and front regions can lead to a loss of the sense of normal social presence as individuals become disembodied beings that can potentially be anywhere in the universe without the actual embodied presence (Dreyfus, 2001). Reality appears anonymous, opaque and inaccessible, without the sociability, warmth, stability and sensitivity of face-to-face communication (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976; van Dijk, 1999). The dichotomy between appearance and reality set up by Plato is intensified. People operating virtually spend

Related Content

Client-Side Relevance Feedback Approach for Image Retrieval in Mobile Environment
Ning Yu, Kien A. Huaand Danzhou Liu (2011). *International Journal of Multimedia Data Engineering and Management (pp. 42-53).*
www.irma-international.org/article/client-side-relevance-feedback-approach/54461

A Risk-Control Framework for E-Marketplace Participation
Pauline Ratnasingam (2005). *Encyclopedia of Multimedia Technology and Networking (pp. 887-894).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/risk-control-framework-marketplace-participation/17344

Biometric Technologies
Mayank Vatsa, Richa Singh, P. Guptaand A. K. Kaushik (2005). *Encyclopedia of Multimedia Technology and Networking (pp. 56-62).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/biometric-technologies/17227

HyperReality
Nobuyoshi Terashima (2005). *Encyclopedia of Multimedia Technology and Networking (pp. 368-374).*
www.irma-international.org/chapter/hyperreality/17271

Efficient Imbalanced Multimedia Concept Retrieval by Deep Learning on Spark Clusters
Yilin Yan, Min Chen, Saad Sadiqand Mei-Ling Shyu (2017). *International Journal of Multimedia Data Engineering and Management (pp. 1-20).*
www.irma-international.org/article/efficient-imbalanced-multimedia-concept-retrieval-by-deep-learning-on-spark-clusters/176638