Chapter 8

Communication Genres for Dispersed Real-Time Collaboration (RTC):
The Role of Presence and Awareness

Frank Frößler
University College Dublin, Ireland

ABSTRACT

In this paper, the author examines RTC and its implications on people's lives. This paper analyzes the production and reproduction of presence and awareness through (RTC-mediated) communication genres. Specifically, the author argues that presence and awareness are two interrelated concepts. Four communication genres are presented, which people intentionally or unintentionally draw on in dispersed settings to create awareness. Furthermore, presence, understood as a person's sensation of being perceived by others in whatever he or she is doing, is influenced by the information imparted through communication genres. The author argues that the sensation of presence shapes the characteristics of communication genres and that RTC technology modifies existing or enables new communicative practices. Consequently, emerging RTC technologies may affect the sensation of presence in dispersed settings. The line of argument is developed by presenting the working conditions and communication practices of a university professor, working on several projects with both dispersed and co-located colleagues.

INTRODUCTION

Real-time collaboration (RTC) technology stands for a newly emerging class of communication and collaboration systems which resulted from market convergence of the telecommunications and

groupware market (Riemer & Frößler, 2007). The business press and technology evangelists alike are bullish about both the future growth of the RTC market and the impact the technology will have in organisations. They say that the "era of unified communications is here" (Rybczynski & Shetty, 2005) and argue that RTC and instant messaging

(IM) already are or at least will prove to be equally successful in organisations than e-mail was in the 90s (cf. Caton, 2006; Hutton, 2001). Gartner, the technology research and advisory company, predicts that by 2011, IM "will be the de facto tool for voice, video and text chat with 95 percent of workers in leading global organisations using it as their primary interface for real-time communications by 2013" (Gartner, 2007). In line with these positive claims, RTC is regarded as a remedy for a suite of social, organisational, and technological issues, such as unmanageable communication volumes, a myriad of communication devices in a disintegrated communication landscape, or challenges related to mobile/virtual collaboration (cf. Brodsky, 1999; Gilbertson, 2007; Hutton, 2001; Lazar, 2007). Moreover, the application of RTC is associated with the re-design of existing business processes and service portfolios (Brodsky, 1999; Burton, Parker, Pleasant, & Van Doren, 2007; Lazar, 2007; Oliva, 2003). RTC promises to function as the driver for increasing productivity, improving communication, and saving costs (cf. Gilbertson, 2007; Hutton, 2001; Rybczynski & Shetty, 2005).

So far, the discourse on RTC has been dominated by such rather undifferentiated discussions in the business press. In this article, I attempt to develop an empirically grounded understanding of RTC and the factors which influence its use. The main objective of the article is to develop a sophisticated understanding of how Skype – one prominent example of RTC technology – affects the way people go about doing their work. More specifically, the article draws upon literature of presence and awareness to elucidate the implications RTC has on people's (computer-mediated) life world. While it is argued that staying aware of people's activities comes almost naturally in collocated environments, maintaining efficient working relationships is a much more difficult endeavour in virtual settings where people rely on computer-mediated communication (cf. Gutwin & Greenberg, 1996, 2002). Therefore, the researcher

examines how RTC affects the production of awareness and the sensation of presence.

In this paper I divert from generally held assumptions which distinguish between concepts of presence and awareness for the real world and those for virtual environments. Rather, I suggest that presence is a person's perception and awareness is actively produced and reproduced by human agents in both 'virtual' and 'real' settings. Genre analysis is suggested as theoretical lens for identifying communicative practices[1] – defined here as socially recognised types of communicative actions (cf. Yates, Orlikowski, & Okamura, 1999) – which facilitate the production and reproduction of awareness in dispersed settings and affect the perception of presence. The conceptual argument developed in this paper is informed through an empirical study of Jack White, a university professor who was affiliated with two universities and was working on several projects at the same time. Four communication genres are presented which Jack and his colleagues drew on during their everyday activities to develop a perception of presence and awareness for their dispersed counterparts' activities. However, RTC and information and communication technology (ICT) in general are not marginalized within this discussion rather it is shown that emerging technologies such as RTC may modify the enactment of existing communication genres and thereby affect people's perception of presence and the production of awareness.

To develop an understanding of presence and awareness as social products and to explain the implications of the two concepts for structuring collaboration with RTC in dispersed settings, the paper is structured as follows. In the next section, I shall give a brief overview of Skype and RTC systems in general. Thereafter, three different ontologies – that is the Cartesian worldview, phenomenology, and practice theory – which inform research on presence and awareness are presented and discussed. I then sketch out prior research on genre analysis which forms the backdrop of my

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