Virtual Personality: A Search for New Identity

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Abstract

Background/Objectives: The study is aimed at analyzing the phenomenon of virtual personality being of current concern in the context of the information revolution in the new century, its distinctive features and characteristics. **Methods:** The authors use the methods of theoretical research (including methods of analysis of documents, relevant scientific literature, monitoring online media). To get the most relevant and useful scientific information, the above methods were applied comprehensively. **Findings:** The analysis of recent developmental trends in the community showed an increase in new forms of social interaction within the virtual communication on the Internet. It was found that the transfer of communication in the virtual environment, the communicant's immersion in a variety of network communities, forming in the global information space, creates a problem with the allocation of a virtual personality carrier. Alongside with this, the boundaries between the real and the unreal are being blurred, which in turn leads to the problem of self-identification and identification of an individual in the new social and cultural reality, the construction of identity. The article analyzes the peculiarities of the process of finding a new identity in the information environment and carries out systemic understanding of the status of the personality in the cyberspace. Different approaches to defining a new communication environment and the factors influencing its development are compared in the article. The authors have analyzed the main modes of virtual personality, distinguished by various researchers and their semantic content. The most relevant problem areas for the researchers involved in the study of virtual personality have been identified. In the course of theoretical and sociological analysis the key characteristics of virtual personality and the conditions of its emergence and existence on the Internet were considered. **Applications/Improvements:** The obtained results allow clarifying further the definition of 'virtual personality' and form a single, holistic understanding of this phenomenon, implementing its multivariate analysis and considering the results of human activities on the Internet in isolation from their creator.

Keywords: Cyberspace, Representation, Identity, Information and Communications Technologies, Information, Virtual Community, Virtual Personality

1. Introduction

Modern science pays special attention to the analysis of the influence of the rapidly developing information and communications technologies and innovations in the turn of the century on the individual and society as a whole. Researchers are studying the impact of new technologies on the construction of new social and cultural reality and peculiarities of human stay in it. Thus the special role of technologies in the transformation processes was noted by[1–9] and others. Appearance of a new phenomenon, virtual personality, aroused great research interest and attention to such aspects of social activity on the web as a role playing games, teleconferences, discussion forums, guest books, social networks, personal pages, etc.[9–13]. In the context of the new virtual community the identity is analyzed and constructed in the cyberspace[13–19].

2. Concept Headings

Universal informatization and scientization of everyday life and social practices make it necessary to study the process of searching for a new personality in the information environment and holistic vision and systemic understanding of the personality's status in the cyberspace in the long term requires a complete theoretical and

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sociological analysis. The authors address the problem of personality's self-identification and representation of personality in the virtual social field.

Advanced technologies seem to be able to promote overcoming the global crisis of modern civilization and solving numerous global problems. But in the end a range of threats and challenges is noted concerning the implementation of transformations in various fields using information and scientific knowledge, such as the radical break-up of the existing (formerly stable) social institutions, forms of worldviews and beliefs, value systems, behavior patterns, which are incorporated into the new social fabric. The civilization 'experiences' and understands new (never seen before) trends, as well as other cultural interpretation of the social context, those oppositely directed processes that take place in the society today – strengthening the regionalization, downsizing, individualization, etc.

Prominent sociologist Manuel Castells notes that in a rapidly changing world there is "a transformation of our 'material culture' by the works of a new technological paradigm organized around information technology"[5]. 'Revolutionary' transformations implement informatization and scientization of various spheres (family, education, labor relations, etc.) as well as everyday life and social practices at the deepest level. Technologies are beginning to be implemented at all levels of social organization, where the "living standards, patterns of work and leisure, the education system and the market place are all influenced markedly by advances in information and knowledge"[6]. This trend suggests a different formulation and understanding of existential issues, different from the previous approach to the perception of its 'existentialism' in the new realia. These new problems (challenges) include primarily the personality's 'selfhood', self-identification and representation in various social fields, including in the virtual ones, the reconstruction of a new 'self' and 'gamerization' of social practices.

Research of features presenting individual 'self' in the new communication space formed by electronic means began almost simultaneously with the emergence and spread of this new environment. However, this range of problems has become particularly acute in connection with the updating of research of identity[7] issues in European science, though these issues had also other grounds (secularization, migration, etc). Actually, the first 'wave' of studying individual 'self' in other social fields ("anonymity of messages") appear as far back as in the 19th century at the era of the telegraph[20]. However, a surge of research

interest in this subject arose, undoubtedly, with the massive spread of the Internet and the formation of a 'new' virtual social reality. This reality, according to[2], having a "liquid" ontological status and "instant history" was not fundamentally amenable to study in the framework of classical methods and paradigms of the modern era. By virtue of this the virtual personality phenomenon did not get a holistic, systematic research, but was described (and only) for variational fields of electronic communications such as, Massive Multiplayer Online Role-Playing Games (MMORGs), Multi-User Dungeons (MUDs)[9], virtual worlds[10,21], personal home pages[11], teleconferencing (Usenet)[14], IRC, discussion forums, guest books, social networks, etc.

In this study, the authors uphold the position according to which the concept of virtual personality is necessarily linked to the concept of virtual community (electronically mediated active social environment) in which there is constant interaction virtual personalities[14]. In the broad spectrum of discussions relating to the online media and the status of man therein, modern European thought, as a rule, uses the theoretical apparatus of post-structuralism and postmodernism, where the personality is described in the concept of 'mask theory' (as opposed to the 'old' modernist or essentialist view). In this case the personality (and its new attributes) in the infosphere is defined as a decentralized, multiple, liquid one, whose fragmented nature consists of mediated practices provided by the society and culture, rather than the inherent personal qualities. The study of the "personality in cyberspace"[1] includes consideration of similar discourses, which are thought of as "stable axes" or structural principles of the virtual personality creation. These include, in particular, class[15], nationality[16], gender[18,22,23], sexuality[19,24] and a number of other "axial" structures.

3. Results

In spite of the wide range of research interest and diversity of opinions on this issue in the theoretical understanding of Internet space special attention is paid to a number of characteristic modes of virtual personality:

- Reduction of the personality to the symbolic activity and its result, i.e. to the text (narrative) in the broadest sense. Thereby, its immateriality and ontological uncertainty (incompleteness of the project) is emphasized; ("Two souls, alas, are dwelling in my breast and one is striving to forsake its brother")[25],

- Striving for anonymity or conscious choice of inauthenticity, readiness to reject (renunciate) the real 'self' and the use of variability of "presentation shells". In general, the anonymity here appears not only as forgetting one's own name, but as the conscious (for various reasons) concealing of the real status or creating a random relationship between the "real" and "online" personalities ("The Man in a Case")[26],
- Enhancing the identification potency and spectrum, the freedom of designing and empowering virtual personality with an unlimited set of arbitrary characteristics (removal of the cultural framework), constant fitting and testing of new social "masks" – the diversity and discontinuity of 'Self', the coexistence of a number of different virtual personalities (often incompatible) simultaneously or sequentially ("The Box Man")[27],
- Absence of non-verbal part of communication, which involves the focus of attention on the content of verbal communication, while compensation of emotions is achieved through the use of 'emoticons' or any other images, with emotions. This leads to the fact that people cease to express their feelings and begin to hide them. A virtual language is an important aspect here; this language is characterized by instability and volatility, as well as the abundant presence of slang and jargon.
- Use of computer programs to simulate the activity of the individual in the virtual space. Here one can talk about the implementation and independent existence of artificial intelligence, appearance of robotics[28], the extension and transfer of decisions and responsibility to the other, respectively, conversion of the subject in the observer.

Alongside with this, the researchers identify areas of concern in studying the phenomenon of virtual personality[13]. Certain reflection and obtaining a holistic view of the status of the personality in the cyberspace and implementation of the systemic analysis of the new form of human existence in the cyber civilization requires a theoretical-sociological approach, conceptual analysis, suggesting including a broader range of areas of study as an introduction to the theme.

- The personality is an object that reflects, for a variety of reasons, a lot of a subject's sociality qualities, but the very status of existence is not updated ontologically and is not defined. That, in turn, allows speaking about the neutralization between the real and virtual existence.

There is a "deframing" of the personality's living space. The interest in Indra Sinha's novel *Cybergypsies*[29] where these trends are considered is non-casual in the West.

- In the classical scientific discourse, the 'virtual' is opposed to the 'material'. Virtual personality, as opposed to the actual (physical or 'traditional' one), has no physical, material body and consists entirely of symbols (hieroglyph) and actions. In a narrow sense, it can be defined as a set of signs, symbols that exists in the online media, which acts as a substrate carrier of these signs. However, as noted above, the realization of sign meanings occurs primarily in the head (consciousness). Similarly as the real personality, the virtual personality can cause response in other participants of the communication in the form of feelings, images and thoughts. This message defines the fundamental difference between the media and the essence, which was previously stated by us.
- Along with the electronic device, quite real and tangible material objects – paper, stone, canvas, film strip, etc. as well as the persons themselves, their bodies can act as a substrate (carrier) of the virtual personality. Here, the very form of existence and implementation has sooner just a functional (derivative) meaning, unlike that reflection which is produced in the mind by the relevant set of signs. This understanding allows defining the virtual personality not through the properties of the medium, but in a more systemic way as a metaphorical extension of the concept of virtual personality in the narrow sense, occurring during perception of reality by analogy with virtual reality (so literature is easily moving closer to the cyberspace)[30].
- The basic qualities of the virtual personality include the availability of own name (in its infinite variations), as well as the ability of such a personality for an unlimited autonomous action. Absence of proper name, a unique (determining) notation of oneself makes it difficult, almost impossible to distinguish one subject of interaction from the other. In fact, there is no defining social labeling of the personality. For this reason, anonymous comments in the online discussions are seen as impersonal, even though they contain original ideas, have features of individual style and are subjectively oriented.

In the absence of action on behalf the object it is difficult to determine whether the object is a subject, i.e., whether it is a personality as such. To eliminate this kind of

uncertainty, not only the semantic component of the virtual personality, but also the result of its activity – different ideas (their embeddedness) in the minds of others should be taken into account. Then the content already existing in the cyberspace and its author may be perceived as real subjects of interaction. These include the creators of virtual personality and subjects perceiving it and in some cases, intermediaries in the face of publishers, critics, experts, etc. can act as participants in the communication process.

In the case when external forces act and direct or even predetermine the communicant's actions, we can speak of it only as of an object, rather than the subject of the interaction. This can be exemplified by the noted posted in forums or online diaries. For us, if we believe in the existence of the person who had written them, these signs are perceived rather as the actions of a real person than as a manifestation of a virtual personality. However, 'cheating' is also possible when in the course of communication with the program or robot, we estimate them as the spontaneous interaction and the illusion of personal communication occurs (the case of "Robot Datsuk"[31]). Stereotypical character of a man's actions (reproduction of the same-type set of responses, texts, ideas) is considered as actions of the robot. A kind of 'cyber convergence' of systems occurs.

- In the virtual environment the actual (old) border between the real and the unreal erodes. As a rule, we deal with the results of the individual's actions, products of his/her creative work, his 'not-self', which allows referring each virtual personality to the work of art, created by the author's "image and likeness".
- One of the major characteristics of the virtual personality is an active poetic strategy of self-invention[13] (invention and its implementation). Thus, the Western researcher[17] in analyzing autobiography genre (from Augustine to Kafka) identified three modes of self-description: *The historical, philosophical and poetic* ones. A certain procedure corresponds to each mode: *Self-explanation* refers to the historical mode, *self-examination* is attributable to the philosophical mode, *self-expression* and *self-invention* correspond to the poetic mode. Precisely these strategies are typically used for the presentation of the personality online. Thus, Curriculum vitae which is almost a mandatory element of home pages, generally refers to the historical modus and represents a compendium of axial stages of development. Reflexive self-examination is characteristic of experimental or game network

projects, studying the relationship between online and offline 'self' and the problem of 'self' as a whole. The expression strategy dominates mostly in the online diaries. As a rule, talking about creating a virtual personality, we can state a significant role and dominance of rather the creativity actualization, creative self-invention than the fact and its correlation with a given reality.

- Virtual environment with a certain assumption may be compared by its properties to the human mind. Immateriality, unbodiliness, flexibility and mysteries of creativity enable to create a broad palette of various images, hieroglyphs, forms and meanings. And in this the properties of the new social reality are identical to the imagination (and in this case – to the unlimited one). However, definitely there is also a systemic difference between the creative act in an environment of electronic communications and other creative media (literature, music and painting). In the virtual space imaginative creations of different people can interact with each other, creating their own world.
- A character – creature of a particular creator's imagination being labeled by a certain name (symbol) and capable of autonomous 'swimming' in an imaginary environment can be an analogue (with some reservations) of a virtual personality in the narrow sense. During surveys the authors often point out that virtual characters created by them have autonomy and begin to exist independently of the will of their creator.
- Another feature of the character (virtual personality) created by the author is a partial or complete identification with the virtual personality's creator in the virtual space. This kind of ambiguity[32] in the relationship (the desire to unite the creator and his "work, as well as the move towards separation from the creator, conducting an independent existence) can act as a background of a perfect virtual personality.

If we observe a complete, absolute dependence of the virtual personality on its author, its actions are determined by an external force and therefore, it cannot be regarded as a personality, even if it has an individual name. But in case of a complete separation from the author, the virtual personality typically loses the ability to develop in time, irrespective of whether it is a literary structure, a computer program, a specific project, etc.

As stated by[13], this kind of relationship between the author and his characters seem to contradict each other only at first glance. This contradiction is resolved if we take

into account the argument that "most of us know ourselves rather approximately". In the process of creating imaginary worlds or participating in the virtual world, a person can achieve self-cognition through the objectification of the individual 'self' (or some of its sides) in the character created himself or played (gamerization of new practices). Therefore, the creation of the virtual personality can be considered both as a creative act and as a way to self-knowledge, self-fulfillment. In this case, several actors can often take part in the creation (Imadaddin Nasimi: "Both worlds can fit within me, but in this world I cannot fit; I am the placeless essence, but into existence I cannot fit"[33]).

- An aliased name (a nickname, a username) is a compulsory element in the relations between the virtual personality and its creator. It is not exactly unknown literary (cultural) phenomenon, which is a feigned or a fictitious name used instead of a real person's name, enabling both to identify the personality and to hide the author's identity (it was actively used by various revolutionaries, artists, writers and others). A username is also considered by us as an attempt to transfer the blame on something other, not associated with a particular actor (for example, revolutionaries in Russia)[34].

On the Internet, the use of such name as a key component of identification is mandatory and usually applied in the form of 'username' to connect to the services or log on to sites with restricted access. These forms of personalization are obligatory in online forums, conversational media (chats), instant text messaging services, etc. When designing a virtual personality, it is often required to create a biography of the 'character', an extensive system of connections, to distinguish characteristic personality traits along with the user name[35,36].

Termination of the virtual personality's existence is due to the lack of adaptation mechanism enabling to adjust to the changing environment. In fact, this refers to the absence of the ability to develop by reason of the peculiarities of occurrence of this kind of the personality as such. In the online space this is expressed either in real destruction of the image, a construct that represents the personality (the loss of computer data, destruction of the database, personal files, etc.) or in the loss or blocking of the access to the information components of the virtual personality (absence of a book in the library, an incorrect username or password, etc.). Continuous increment of various data in the virtual space often leads to information deactualization, the appearance of unclaimed texts, irrelevant accounts, etc.

4. Conclusion

Consideration and analysis of the basic key parameters in the virtual personality formation showed that to date there is no common understanding and definition of the phenomenon of 'virtual personality'. The existing dichotomies of 'author' and 'virtual personality', the real and the unreal, the objective and the subjective suggest multidimensional perception of this phenomenon and the consideration of human activities on the Internet in isolation from their 'creator'. This division adds another step, which should go up in the study of this phenomenon, namely the level of moral and aesthetic reality.

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