

## Virtual Experience is Real but not Actual

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### Introduction

Recent decades have witnessed the rapid enhancement of digital technologies and their proliferation; from their beginnings as the obscure and arcane province of an elite few, they have become central to the lives of millions. Not surprisingly, scholars and experts are increasingly interested in evaluating the social, cultural and political aspects of digital technologies, and ranges of approaches are being employed to investigate the subject. The question of whether or not the virtual experience is real has been much discussed by leading scholars. This paper argues that the virtual experience is indeed real. It analyses the ways in which citizen participation in cyberspace contributes to cyber politics, demonstrates how identities constructed in cyberspace affect the cultural dimension, and how the digital transformation of currency affects the economy.

The paper has been divided into three parts. The first part defines the terms virtual, real, and virtual reality in order to clarify exactly what is meant by 'virtual experience'. The second section draws upon a number of empirical studies in the fields of identity theory, gender study, ethnographic psychology and philosophy to discuss the question. An overview is taken of the political and economic aspects of virtual experience in order to show the real effect it has upon cyber politics and the digital virtual economy. The study shed further lights on analyzing the cultural dimension of virtual experience in terms its effect upon identity construction (positions, personalization, and self-expression) and gender-switching. The evaluations focus on two typical virtual applications: virtual communities and role-play games. The final section briefly summarizes the core content to answer the question. The aim of this paper is to critically evaluate whether virtual experiences can be described as real by looking at both sides of the arguments with references to specific examples.

### Definitions of Virtual, Real and Virtual Reality

Scholars have defined the term 'virtual' in a number of ways. Shields [1] defined virtual as signifying 'an absence, unreality or non-existence'. The definition adopted here is that of the OED:

The virtual: anything, 'that is so in essence or effect, although not formally or actually, admitting of being called by the name so far as the effect or result is concerned' (Oxford English Dictionary).

As Shields has demonstrated: 'Entire fields of philosophy' have developed out of mankind's attempts to define reality [1]. This paper adopts an epistemological rather than an ontological perspective to define 'real', which refers to a study of 'how can certain about what exists' (ibid) rather than the actual. In order to discuss the virtual experience in the digital age, it is imperative initial to look closely at the nature of virtual reality. Digital, computer-mediated virtual reality has developed over the last 30 years. Virtual reality is generally defined as a computer-based simulation which attempts to transfer information from the physical world to the 'information world' [1]. The user can then physically or mentally engage with this information world [2]. Virtual reality has four basic characteristics: it is multi-sensory and interactive, it offers immersion, and it is imaginative. Virtual reality applications have proliferated; this paper focuses on their use in cyber

politics and their economic and social aspects to argue that virtual experiences are real.

### The Virtual Experience is Real but not Actual

This paper builds upon the view already expressed in one empirical study that 'while the virtual may not be actual, it is none the less real... virtualities are always real (in the past, in memory) and may become actualized in the present' [3].

### Cyber Politics and the Digital Virtual Economy

Even a brief examination of how digital technologies have been applied in cyber politics and the digital virtual economy demonstrates the close relationship between online and offline life. Online communities have grown up out of offline ones, and in turn strengthened these offline communities [2], illustrating the real effect of virtual experience.

Citizens are able to participate in political debate and even influence policy via blogs and micro-blogs, while simulation technologies are beneficial for governments to engage the public's interest and help them better understand the issues. An example of the latter was the California Transportation Department's employment of 'visualization techniques' in 1997 to successfully persuade San Francisco residents to accept the cost of the new Bay Bridge, nevertheless, it meant a rise in taxes [4]. Another example was the use by Tunisians in 2010 of social networking tools such as Twitter during the revolution that led to the reshuffling of the government. These examples demonstrate that the virtual experiences which make up cyber politics are real; not only have they helped develop cyber democracy; they have also had a tangible effect on life offline. As far as the digital virtual economy is concerned, the collapse of Enron provides evidence to support the argument that virtual experiences are very real in terms of their effect on offline business activity [1]. When the company's risky e-business practices were exposed and collapsed later, it severely undermined shareholders' trust and triggered the company's sudden bankruptcy. It has been suggested that 'digital-virtual is a negative development for most businesses' [1]. Whether this is true or not, Enron's case amply demonstrates that the virtual experiences which make up the digital virtual economy are real because of the interconnectedness of the online and offline financial worlds.

The examples above illustrate that virtual experience is real in terms of its impact upon cyber politics and the digital virtual economy. The

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Received January 25, 2014; Accepted February 25, 2014; Published March 12, 2014

Citation: Zhao Y (2014) Virtual Experience is Real but not Actual. J Pol Sci Pub Aff 2: 117. doi:10.4172/2332-0761.1000117

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next section highlights some of the controversies surrounding this topic by concentrating largely upon issues of philosophy and epistemology.

## Cultural Dimension in Virtual Communities and Role Play Games

Believing that 'physical contact is the determining factor of reality', Argyle and Shields argued that it is necessary to check physical identity in order to ascertain whether participants are real or not [5]. The philosopher Laclau, on the other hand, maintained that 'tangible' and 'actually real' are outmoded ways of judging whether or not virtual experience is real, arguing that the 'logical identity of the real with these phenomena is broken apart' [6]. This paper aims to examine these two views by drawing on identity theory [7,8], gender studies [9,10], and ethnographic psychology. It focuses on two typical virtual experiences: virtual communities and role-play games.

### Virtual Communities

Virtual communities offer a new form of community in which social activities can take place. Virtual communities are 'real' in the sense that individuals still 'meet face-to-face', but what we mean by 'meet' and 'face' has shifted in the digital age [11]. Here, it is worth exploring how online identities are shaped by the technical setting, whether virtual communities mean the end of 'real' communities, and whether these communities can be called 'real' if their members use pseudonyms and identity deception.

The identity of users is marked by symbols [7], which function as signifiers representing the self. Other words and icons imply 'physical contact with another user' such as would be experienced in real life. More precisely, words such as squeeze, hug and nibble represent affection; smile or smirk are directly relevant to facial expressions; while cry or snicker give clues to how the writer would say the words they type. Shields (ibid.) cite one subject, who describes her experience of BBS thus: 'online I was myself...people trusted me and revealed parts of themselves to me in turn. What we exchanged was real'. This is consistent with Rheingold's [2] notion: 'Virtual communities carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form personal relationships in cyberspace'. The evidence illustrates that virtual communities are an extension of 'real' communities, the experiences that take place there are real, individuals achieve 'face-to-face' interaction through symbols (words and figures), and they share precise, valuable details of their real daily life.

As the ontological approach is inadequate for addressing the differences and similarities that arise between individual behavior in virtual communities and that in actual life, this paper will adopt an epistemological approach. Richards [12] claimed that Rheingold's view of virtual communities is a utopian view of cyberspace. However, the virtual community can mimic and even transcend physical architectures, freeing its members from the restrictions of actual life. As ICTs develop and Internet usage spreads the scope for interactivity increases, enabling individuals to transcend class and social boundaries; individuals from outside the ruling class can become opinion leaders and play a crucial role in a virtual community [7]. Virtual communities allow individuals to transcend the limitations of their actual lives and adopt dynamic roles in different places for various purposes and in different conditions; they help individuals make sense of who they are and what they could be. In this regard, there is no doubt that virtual experience is real.

Some scholars argue that virtual life cannot be considered real, given the widespread adoption of pseudonyms and practicing of

identity deception (this is best exemplified by the fact that a 46-year-old man plays the role of a child in Bebo). However, there are three answers to this. Individuals join virtual communities in order to pursue their personal interests and the name or role they choose to adopt online reflects their desire for self-expression [8]. As Stone [11] suggested, cyberspace offers individuals the opportunity to abandon the limitations of the actual world and enables them to reconfigure their personal identity within the virtual community. Consequently, an increasing number of individuals are going to the virtual world to find happiness and satisfaction. Secondly, some individuals reveal a side to their characters in virtual communities which they are obliged to hide in actual life. Turkle [10] demonstrated that 'life on the screen' and 'life in reality' are simultaneous and mutually complementary, and highlighted that 'the self becomes a decentered self that exists in many worlds and plays many roles at the same time'. According to Woodward [7], subjectivity comprises both conscious and unconscious thoughts and feelings, and individuals may take up multiple roles and dynamic positions in the process of identification. The Bebo man's unconscious desire to remain young forever is a part of himself which can only be represented in the virtual community. Finally, Kiley's book, *The Peter Pan Syndrome: Men Who Have Never Grown Up* demonstrates that 'kidulthood' is a kind of psychological satisfaction which can only be achieved in cyberspace. To sum up, whatever names or roles individuals adopt, virtual experiences in virtual communities are real on the ground that they arise from the conscious and unconscious thoughts and emotions of 'real' people.

It is significant to distinguish between the real and the actual. 'The invented and intrinsically plural identities' that are expressed in virtual communities relate to 'physical as well as social and cultural realities' [12]. But identity is dynamic and contradictory, identification is an ongoing process as well, therefore, what is real in the virtual world may not be real in the actual world.

### Role Play Games

This section considers how virtual characters and gendered identities are formed in role-play games and how this result in shifted subjectivities—further evidence of the real effect of virtual experience.

It has been suggested that, as virtual characters such as avatars are generally not personalized but take the form of generic human figures or 'universal digital identities' [9], role-play games cannot be called real. However, this is not the case in two popular games: *Dactyl Nightmare* and *Legend Quest*. Participants in *Legend Quest* take up the role of warrior or dwarf to fight creatures such as wolves and skeletons. Throughout the character selection process, the decisions made by players reflect their thinking and wishes and highlight their shifted subjectivities. Unlike conventional avatars, which are culturally coded, the characters in *Legend Quest* are customized digital figures. Significantly, exactly which characters are chosen depends on the game strategy being adopted by the participant; in other words, they are personalized [8]. In the case of *Dactyl Nightmare*, the player wins by shooting others down, his emotions created in games can be treated as one of elements to justify virtual experience is real in role-play games. This argument is approved by Green [9]: 'what is sold and consumed in virtual reality sites are not tangible objects, but rather a series of effects: pleasure, entertainment and spectacle.' To recapitulate, no one could deny that the intense interaction and competition available in these games is real.

Much attention has been paid to the doubt of whether virtual experiences are real or not in terms of gender identity; the issue of

gender-switching in role-play games has been analyzed by Rheingold, Turkle and Stone. Some scholars continue to oppose the perspective that virtual experiences in role-play games are real on the grounds that players can choose to play as a character of the opposite gender. However, gender is a process rather than a product [9]. Thus, whichever gender players choose, the virtual character is real because the 'embodiment is signaled entirely through the construction of a point of view' [9]. It can be argued that gender-switching is simply a natural and comfortable extension of individuals' freedom of choice [10]. Modern technology has given individuals ever more control over their body and even gender. In actual life, this is best exemplified by the increase in the number of people opting for plastic surgery; online, it manifests itself in a growing interest in gender-switching in role play games. The process of choosing a gender entirely reflects the conscious and unconscious emotions and thoughts of participants, which is real indeed.

The virtual experience is also real in terms of the interconnections between virtual communities and role-play games; participants in role-play games communicate with each other in group chats in both virtual and actual communities. According to Turkle, the interaction which takes place in the virtual world is real in the sense that it mirrors the 'intrinsic diversity and flux in human identity' found in the actual world [10]. To sum up, there is no need to deny that virtual experiences are real.

## Conclusion

This paper starts by defining the terms virtual, real and virtual reality in order to clearly differentiate between them and arrive at a clear understanding of what is meant by virtual experience. Additionally, it argues that 'the virtual is real but not actual' with reference to the use of virtual technology in cyber politics, and the use of digital technologies in the economy. Finally, the last section highlights the cultural dimension of virtual technology by reference to virtual communities and role-play games. This section argues that virtual experiences are real by:

- Discussing how online identities are shaped by the technical setting;
- Suggesting that virtual communities are an extension of actual social communities;
- Arguing that virtual can still be 'real' even if participants use pseudonyms and identity deception;

- Analyzing how the construction of virtual bodies and gendered identities in role play games result in shifted subjectivities. Most significantly, the most effective way to argue that the virtual experience should be regarded as real is to utilize a range of approaches (psychology, philosophy and epistemology) rather than a single approach, thereby providing a wealth of insights into the topic.

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