

Identity and Virtual Reality: A Uchronic Approach

Colin T. Schmidt¹ Olivier Nannipieri² & Simon Richir³

¹Le Mans University & Arts et Metiers ParisTech.

²Université de Toulon et du Var

³Presence and Innovation, Arts et Metiers ParisTech.

Ingénierium - 4 rue de l'Ermitage, 53000 Laval, France

Colin.Schmidt@univ-lemans.fr, fk.olivier@mac.com, Simon.Richir@angers.ensam.fr

And what if the only reality in existence was virtual reality? The individual identity in virtual reality has always been studied with regards to individual identity in reality. Indeed, the individual in virtual reality is considered as a real individual to whom we removed fundamental features: spatial unity (Leibniz) and temporal identity or sameness (Ricoeur, 1990). In other words, a virtual individual seems to be less than a real individual: it has neither spatial unity, nor temporal identity (Nannipieri, 2009).

The purpose of our work is to try to understand virtual identity itself, as a stand alone entity, a concept and possibly an experience, thus not considering virtual identity to be a lack of real identity. That is the reason why it seems interesting to study individual identity on the basis of a uchronic approach.

A uchrony is an alternate history. It is a narrative process which consists in proposing a hypothesis: “and what if such an event had not taken place?” or “if it had taken place in some specific way” and deduce the consequences (social, political, economical, psychological, etc.) from the hypothesis. For example, in *The Man in the High Castle*, Philip K. Dick proposes a uchrony: the German and the Japanese people won World War II.

The hypothesis of the current work is the following: reality does not exist (Baudrillard, 1981) and the only reality which exists is virtual reality. What would the consequences be on the identity of the individual?

Consequently, it is necessary to study the identity of the individual in virtual reality according to the features of the space and of the time in a virtual environment. In down-to-earth terms, the virtual space can be multiple, can have two or three dimensions and can be perceived from several perspectives at the same time. Concerning virtual time, it can be multiple, intermittent, reversible, and it can go by at different speeds (cf. Figure 1).

If the spacio-temporal aspects of reality are withdrawn from our world because of a strong thrust of virtual reality

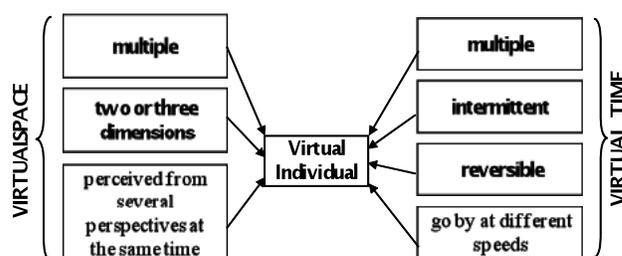


Figure 1. Space, time and the virtual individual

technology in our everyday lives, we as members of society will see our use of language evolve, our perceptual perspectives on things, problem-solving and other people will be either combined or confused; if properly combined, the notion of perspective itself will be devaluated (and perhaps simply fall out of our vocabulary).

Analogously, the problem of suspended beliefs about images was not an issue before. Simply consider the value given to a digital image today, we can no longer be certain that it is a precise representation of reality (as a traditional print tends to be), whether it has been ‘enhanced’ or totally synthetic. The notion of truthfulness suffers here, becoming less important to the eye of the beholder.

We will also notice that as super- or multiple individuals we could be faced with a situation requiring Ethical analysis (though it would be *a posteriori*): our traditional separation from other individuals of society will be challenged. The difference we have with others is just as important to establishing friendship as our sameness is. The lack of difference would have to be dealt with in order to anticipate on or correct the way we communicate with each other in order to see eye-to-eye, cooperate, etc. In fact, simply identifying one’s interlocutor would become a nightmare if the Social Sciences and Humanities were not associated in the general Virtual Reality Project for the reasons discussed here. Virtual Reality should specifically address this last point –inter-subjective identity– in order to achieve success among the users of its technology.