

Exploring the Nature of Virtuality

An Interplay of Global and Local Interactions

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1 Panel Theme

There has been considerable interest in the topic of virtuality over the last few years among both academics and practitioners. The focus of attention has generally been on how to improve collaboration and knowledge sharing, how to develop trust and cohesiveness within virtual organizations, virtual teams and virtual communities, and how to best support virtual interactions. Underlying this research area is the assumption that we possess sufficient understanding about the nature of virtuality and that we know how to distinguish ‘what is virtual’ to ‘what is not virtual’. Even though several of us have attempted on various occasions to make a contribution in this field, we increasingly recognize that the nature of virtuality has not been well conceptualized in the literature. Part of the reason for this is that researchers, including us, often have the tendency to compare the virtual (distributed and CMC-based) to the traditional (collocated, and face-to-face) environment. We question this purely technological distinction, but recognize that virtuality, as an IT-enabled phenomenon, is increasingly extending its reach, becoming more global and more pervasive across all spheres of society. The theme of this panel is to examine, appreciate, and debate the multi-dimensional nature of what virtuality has been, is, and may become—specifically, its global and local dimensions, including the different interpretations that are and should be given to these dimensions.

Virtuality enables us to expand our global reach and to lay the foundations for a fundamental shift in the way knowledge is shared, created, and disseminated as well

as transform our basic notion of boundaries and space. Nevertheless, virtuality regardless of its reach centers around human cooperation and flows of information that bring together and separate, at the same time, their dispersed segments [3]. Therefore, discontinuity, temporality, but also locality still remain key characteristics of the virtual space. As Woolgar [8] has argued, successful virtual interactions at the global level require attention to the local setting, because it is expected to influence the local ways for managing and using the technology as well as virtual behavioral patterns. The local and the global can be interpreted in different ways including but not limited to geographical, cultural, and political. Accordingly, in this panel, we argue that as the study of and interest in virtuality grows, an analysis of the interplay between its global and local aspects offers an insightful way to reflect on and unearth the multi-level, multi-dimensional, and transdisciplinary character of virtuality, and how it can be used to explore the individual, organizational, and community struggles in developing and maintaining collaborative virtual interactions.

The aim of the panel is to examine, to appreciate, and to debate the nature of virtuality, exploring its pervasiveness at both the global and local levels and examining their co-existence. In order to best capture this co-existence, we will adopt the ‘intertwine’ concept. This concept was first used as a metaphor by Robey et al [5] to explore the synergy between the virtual and material world. Thus, our panel focuses on how the intertwining of the global and the local aspects of virtuality can be used to illuminate understanding of the multiplex character of virtuality. We believe that this issue is of direct relevance to the theme of the IFIP W.G. 8.2. All panelists have extensive research experience in the virtuality field and have all made a commitment to attend the conference and serve on the panel.

1.1 Panel Format

The Panel Chair, Niki Panteli, will frame the issues to be discussed with a short introduction. This will be followed by a presentation by each panelist. All panelists will aim to examine the interplay between the global and local aspects of virtuality and how this generates value to our understanding of virtuality and to our research agenda. After the presentations, the Chair will summarize the key points and the audience will have the opportunity to discuss these and other relevant issues with the panel discussants.

2 Panel Presentations

Mike Chiasson will draw upon Shield's [6] definition of the virtual in order to present virtual dynamics in a number of traditional (virtual teams) and non-traditional areas (viewing a painting in an art museum). In doing so, he will highlight different possibilities of the virtual, and its interaction with various notions of the real, and consider how information technology is both an extension and a transformation of these other real-virtual moments. He will conclude that IT is increasingly obscuring the need for a real, and that virtual representations are

themselves guiding and perhaps becoming the real. To demonstrate this, he will draw upon some of his work examining e-commerce fraud and courtroom discussions to highlight the increasing complexity between the real and the virtual.

Lin Yan will adopt a cultural perspective in an attempt to explore the local and global dimensions of virtuality and subsequently discuss the 'Cultures' Consequences' (if any) in Virtual Collaborations. The construct of culture, from Hofstede's thesis [1] has traditionally been used to illustrate the differences between the 'local' and the 'global'. How do these established theories on Cross-Cultural Management inform, or indeed limit, our understanding of virtual collaborations? This contribution is an attempt to revisit culture in the context of virtuality. Through a longitudinal case study in a Born Global organization, findings indicated that professional culture overtook national culture in individuals' grouping and identification over distance. Lin will suggest that this is not only a reflection of the 'inefficiency' of current cross-cultural analysis, but it also highlights the issue of level of analysis, particularly for virtual collaborations.

Angeliki Poulymenakou & Anthony Papargyris will jointly present the notion of 'collectiveness' in virtual environments and in particular what they call massive virtual communities. They will argue that while most contemporary research on virtual communities is carried out in organizational and other work-related contexts, beyond such boundaries there is an abundance of massive, multinational virtual communities that practice communication, learning, business, and entertainment online [4] and have remained unexplored. Their members find value in their membership and meaning in their virtual spaces of socialization. A case of such communities is that of Massively Multiplayer Online Games (MMOGs). These games present to their users an alternate persistent world, where they can cooperate or compete, trade and consume virtual goods, practice new modes of expressions, and participate in joint activities. Previous research in such communities emphasized the phenomenon of the players' identity transformation [2, 7]. Indeed, anonymity and lack of physical contact encourages individuals to become less inhibited and provides ample room for individuals to express unexplored parts of themselves. Their fieldwork further suggests that inside such virtual spaces, players seek a deeper understanding of the virtual worlds meaningful structure and they are continuously experiment with different forms of social organization and interaction. In their presentation, they will discuss the key findings of their research on virtual communities of MMOGs, by focusing on the collective practices of meaning construction and negotiation.

References

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6. R. Shields, *The Virtual* (Routledge: Taylor & Francis Group, London, 2003)
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8. S. Woolgar, *Virtual Society? Technology, Cyberbole, Reality* (Oxford University Press Inc., NY, 2002).

About the Panelists

Mike Chiasson is a Senior Lecturer at Lancaster University, in the Department of Management Science. His work examines the implementation and use of information technology in healthcare, professional work, virtual organisations, and crime. To examine these topics, his work draws upon various social theories which touch on various aspects of virtuality: communicative action, structuration theory, deconstruction, potentialities, ethnomethodology, identity formation, and postmodernism.

Niki Panteli is a Senior Lecturer in Information Systems, University of Bath School of Management. She holds a PhD in Information Systems from Warwick Business School (1996). Broadly defined, her research lies in the field of information and communication technologies and emergent organizational arrangements. During the last 6 years her research has taken a specific focus on virtuality, virtual teams and computer-mediated communication systems. Within this field, she has studied issues of trust, conflict and collaborations in virtual, geographically-dispersed environments. She is the Chair of the IFIP- International Federation of Information Processing- W.G. 9.5 on Virtuality & Society.

Anthony Papargyris is a PhD candidate in the Department of Management Science & Technology of Athens University of Economics and Business (AUEB). He holds a first degree in Business Computing (Teesside, UK), and an MSc degree in Information Systems (AUEB). His current research is focusing on collective action and meaning construction, virtual communities, and learning. His general research interests are in online interactive learning games, philosophy of science and Information Systems, and Knowledge Management.

Angeliki Poulymenakou is an Assistant Professor in Information Systems Management. She holds a PhD degree in Information Systems from the London School of Economics. Her current research interests focus information technology enabled change and particularly on the study of technological intervention in the areas of organisational learning and knowledge management, and on the study of dynamic organisational networks from an Information Systems perspective. She is currently the scientific coordinator of European funded projects in socio-economic research within the IST programme in the areas of organisational networks and learning. She has served as a member of the scientific committee of four international conferences in information systems (ICIS, ECIS, IFIP) and has acted as a referee in several

international journals in the field. In 2003 she chaired the organisation of the IFIP joint WG8.2 and 9.4 Conference on Information Systems and Globalisation, in Athens.

Lin Yan is a Lecturer at the Department of Management and Information Technology and Centre for Chinese Studies, at the University of Wales Lampeter, UK. She holds an MPhil and a PhD in Management Studies from the Judge Business School, University of Cambridge, after a career in consultancy on Cross-Cultural Management. Lin's current research is in the areas of virtuality, international management, and Chinese Management. She is a member of the Academy of Management, European Group for Organizational Studies (EGOS), International Federation for Information Processing (IFIP), the British Association for Chinese Studies, and a reviewer for Leverhulm Trust and Palgrave Publishing.