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Value Immersion and Value Regression: on Moral Aggregation of Virtual Communities

Narcisa Loredana POSTEUCĂ¹

Abstract

The scope of this research paper is to analyze the value integrative-models that can be applied to the virtual interactive constructs, but also to delineate the correspondences established between identity, self and value representation. Concerning the social acquirements that can be distinguished at the level of virtual communities, it is necessary to follow the immersion/ regression processes through which a value layout is settled.

Concerning the User's ability to mediate this value progression in various networking sequences, an analysis of the content transfer modalities between the social agents and occurrences is required. Along with the axiological functions that a virtual interactive project can sustain, a new issue arises: does the social cyberspace actually support a moral layer?

Between projection and representation, virtual identities merge specific patterns of valuation and assessment that reflect different virtual scenarios. Therefore, the finalities of this study are oriented towards the interpretation that value criteria and ethical standards attain within a viable/feasible virtual community. Questioning the value transfer regularities, the moral imaginaries and the metaethical subject predicaments involves a clear delineation of the virtual cultural elements in a new, (post)modern perspective.

Keywords: *Values, Interactive constructs, Integrative model, Metaethics, Virtuality, Moral values, Agent, User, Avatar, Virtual discourse.*

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Introduction

The concept of virtual reality is generally linked to the idea of interface that enables a distinct form interaction and even transmutation, usually involving one user (or multiple-users schemes) and adapted media devices. Therefore, the main scope of the virtual interactive projects is focused on the immersion in a virtual environment in a more intuitive and naturalistic fashion (Rizzo, Rothbaum, 2002). This kind of immersion cannot be analyzed without taking into account the User - Avatar correlations or the nature of the discourse that this type of linear relation generates.

Also, it must be brought into question the fact that the virtual discourse cannot be subtracted from the *extended self-concept* (Belk, 1988) that restores the importance of identities conjunctions within interactive virtual projects. It is therefore required to distinguish between the user's functional state and its designed representations, considering that, on these specifications, the value projections can be understand, entitled and validated.

These backgrounds being settled, the current research proposes to identify the value or value-oriented representations in the virtual sequences that enable a social layout. Moreover, processing value becomes a new axiological challenge at the virtual discourse level, challenge that demands a clear denomination of the contents and instances where the idea of value representation acquire a specific meaning for the virtual culture.

1. Value representation principles in interactive virtual constructs

A first premise that we should take into consideration is that we can talk about value representations only within virtual projects that are based on the active participation of the human users. Considering that the value and the potential of every *knowledge-based virtual community* are conditioned by the quality of interaction and the user's profile and expertise (Rheingold, 1993) and that, within virtual communities, social interaction is directed to a *well-understood focus, such as a common aim, shared identity, common belongings, or shared interest* (Abfalter, Zaglia, Mueller, 2012). we can argue that artificial or simulated agencies are not excluded from the virtual discourse, but only the human-based role avatars can emerge from social realities towards virtual cultures. In addition, neither a

directed (constructive) format of an axiological representation, nor a contextual delineated (deconstructive) one, could be a subject of insufficiency in significance and reasoning.

Admitting that *the culture of simulation challenges the traditional notion of identity* (Kiesler, 2004), it is clear that the constant changes and the large amount of variables identified in every virtual community state the need for reinterpreting the functions of the social environment and, concurrently, for a reconfiguration of value criteria and principles. This transfer endeavor entails, as we will further debate, the compulsory adequacy of value categories, especially the moral ones, to the inter-/intra- social movements that the virtual constructs can acquire through cultural aggregation.

Meeting the value-integration patterns involves, in our opinion, a priori formal concession that enlists two presumptive clauses:

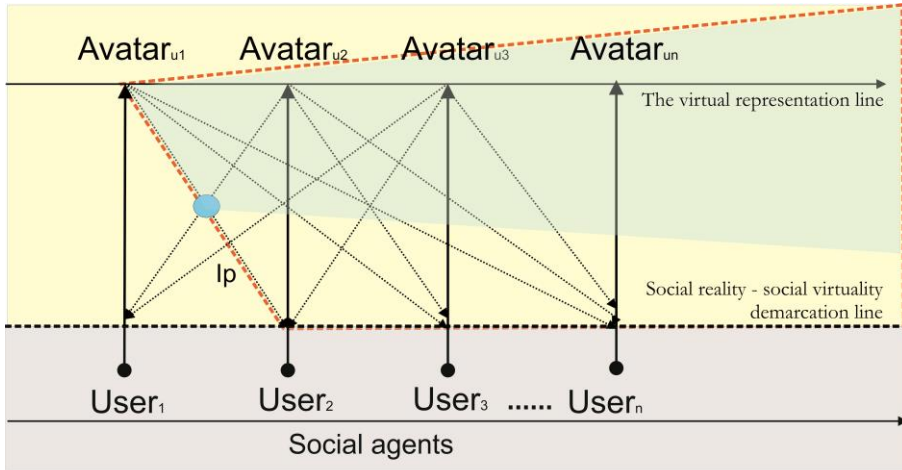
- Any action that takes place in a virtual interactive project is, actually, a (trans)action that encloses explicit or implicit value contents;
- Any operator/ agent can process value contents through representations within the virtual interactive constructs.

This clauses are based on the fact that, in the Cyber era, a community is defined by its shared culture, language and beliefs (Jones, 1997). Nevertheless, we consider that the guided or contingent models of value integration must comply with some grounding principles of the virtual communities' dynamics like selectivity, mutation, fluctuation, fragmentation or responsiveness. For this purpose, it becomes mandatory to assign this value immersion/ regression outlining to linear transition structures, like the User- Avatar relation - where the avatar can be seen as *a virtual, surrogate self* (Wilson 2003), but also to non-linear pursuits, like the Avatar – Avatar interferences. In discursive terms, the value aggregates appears in the virtual interactive constructions as cultural ensembles that develop at the very point of agreements and congruities that appear in the sharing and interpreting processes.

2. Value integration models based on focused or incidental sharing

Simplifying the value transfer model, based on an operational implication –replication cover, we can conceptually devise the value immersion scheme, along with the regression phenomena that will finally

draw the outline of the cultural amplitude of socially-based virtual projects (Fig.1).



- Virtual culture field;
- Virtual community field;
- Virtual environment;
- Social reality environment;
- First interaction point of virtual profiles (identities).

Source: Author's elaboration

Fig. 1. Pattern of social values transfer within real –virtual agents

To logically validate this sharing pattern, some observations are required:

- The incertitude of User – Avatar connections is a fact that should be inserted in this analysis, taking into account the *ability of postmodern technologies to construct a plurality of shifting selves* (Wilson 2003). As few personal data are actually shared, the value progression can be systemized only at a conceptual level.
- The Avatar should be previewed as a dynamic, operative image, influenced not by the other Users, but by their self – representations. For example, the moral features that are

displayed through a virtual profile gain consistence through a sustained interaction with the rest of the community/ network in which it is enabled.

- The series of avatars does not juxtapose to the users' group, as extensions of the self in its different hypostasis. Therefore, the value aggregation will be also challenged by the fragmentation and variation factor.

The focused/ directed sharing constructs will be identified on the virtual representation line, along with the virtual identities that are concretized through avatars. On the other hand, cultural and social projections are present in the entire virtual community field, but the first molecular (co-dependent) values appear at the very first point of cultural agreement. The first interaction point of virtual profiles is the foundation for the future value aggregates, immersed or regressed from human agency's social movements.

3. Methaethical considerations within virtual interactive projects

The value projections visible in the virtual environments are not necessarily sustained by responsibility, but by a specific reactivity that ultimately labels the whole virtual environment. Therefore, one can admit that, from a metaethic point of view, attitudes and perspectives are more often visible in the virtual interface than ethical principles or assessment criteria. Approaching *reality as a social project* (Searle, J.R., 1995) generates a new hypothesis in the epistemological endeavour that we propose for the virtual community: could a new metaethical approach explain the ethical foundations and the moral-based behavioural models as interactive constructions?

The inter-subjective discourse is mostly centered on attitudes and judgements, bearers of moral contents, while the User- Avatar discourse often offers an image on the ethical proprieties and statements that are transferred from the social reality towards the social virtuality. Meanwhile, the inconsistency of operative images and, by default, of the noticeable types of behaviour require the research of the metaethical considerations that derive from the semantic – representative module. As long as, within virtual environments, information can mediate both, identity and social interaction, an epistemological endeavour is justified.

Following the proposal of a social construction of ethics (Caras, Sandu, 2014), this search for moral determinants should also consider the integration instruments, the mediation and codification modalities that are used to project the social agents' identities in different virtual, but socially representative sceneries. Identity construction environments (Umaschi, 2001) can be engaged in identity and moral debates as a main driver of social sharing and community design. The participation to the virtual society includes the acceptance of this *open source culture* that also implies *the mutual control* (De Notaris, 2011) and the rules-based membership. From a metaethical point of view, the manner in which moral values are configured within a virtual community is conditioned by the sense that these acquire within social sequences. If the moral presuppositions and engagements are actually subjective predicaments can be argued through an analysis of the projections that the virtual social reflects at the level of the discourse.

In other words, the Self and the Other hypostasis (or projections), along with the social structures are *constituted through interaction, negotiated in concert with others* (Hahn, 2008). Extending this principle to the moral discernment theme, we can conclude that ethical regulations and standardization can be achieved through a new kind of social construct, more flexible and adaptable to various contexts (without submerging the subjectivity into moral skepticism).

The concept of *shared symbolic order* (Riva, 2002, p. 589) describes the virtual communities by reference to the conjunction of values and behavioral expectations. Considering that the expectancies of a social group cannot be concretized without motivation (Esi, 2010), we can realize this three-points baseline for the ethical prospects in virtual interactive constructs: value- expectation – motivation. This model can be applied to explain the ethical judgments and attitudes that can be identified in a multi-user community frame. Concurrently, *answers to the ethical problems can be found in the common morality as an automatism related to the standards of the society* (Terec- Vlad, Trifu, Terec-Vlad, 2015).

For example, a cultural- active Avatar, socially integrated, whose capability to assume and incorporate values can be confronted often with the User's ability to apply values in various networking sequences, can be considered a starting point for a new kind of metaethical discourse. It was already stated that, in the same networking project, the User – Avatar relation follows, apparently, a linear – but not distortion

free – model. *The attachment of Avatar to Self* certifies it as morally significant, an actual subject, *morally legitimate* to the extent that *attacks on avatars as genuine moral wrongs* (Wolfendale, 2007). But an exclusive ethical acknowledgment can only be accessed through a clear delineation of the main responsibilities or prescriptions that an active member should follow in a socially managed environment.

Generally, a community's sustainability may depend on the number of its members, their social background and the interest they share, but the homogeneity of its discourse is strongly linked to the density of similarity points. This principle can easily be applied to another issue that a metaethical system should not ignore due to the easily-adaptive character of the virtual value and informational contents: the moral self-regulation within a virtual interactive project.

4. Virtual identities and valuation in a postmodern perspective

Stating that generally *users tend to see their avatar as having an idealized version of their own personality* (Ducheneaut et al., 2009), the moral status of a virtual agent can be more easily linked to the interactive sequences in which his extended self are operated. For example, in gaming scenarios - without relapsing into sensitive/ reactive screenplays - the user's value profile results from a narrative context. As *creation of narrative is sustained, in the postmodern view, by the (de)construction of origins, while the virtuality seems to be grounded on (De)construction of chaos* (Hayles, 1999), a new issue is featured: escaping the value standards and criteria and surpassing the structural aggregation of the social in general, can we still consider virtual identity a contextual projection?

Seeing deconstruction as a “continuous attempt to question the boundary between right and wrong” (Feldman, 1998), the postmodern view on cyberspace also challenge moral terms, moral reasoning and moral standards, along with their metaethical layout. This premise obliges to a reconsideration of the humanity frontiers within this the real – virtual conceptualization. Therefore, virtual reality can be seen as *postmodern technology* because *it blurs and fragments boundaries and senses of self and place and functions as a virtual microcosm for cultural, economic and identity recombination* (Hillis, 1999). In fact, the cyberspace sequences are actually designed as *social laboratories* that explore the value – identity correlation; in this case, *experimenting with the constructions and reconstructions of self that*

characterize postmodern life (Turkle, 1995) and reanimate the concept of valuation into a wide spectrum of possible interpretations.

In conclusion, Escaping the Aristotelian structure, the result of this User- Avatar relation is not only a dynamic feature, but it actually demonstrates the eviction of the virtual world from the open-closed binary structures. As in a postmodern view of cyberspace construction and reality are concurrent, interchangeable entities, it can be stated that the value aggregation cannot be separated from the identity (de)construction. Various hypostasis of Self seem to be concretize in cyberprojects *based on the construction of postmodern, blended spaces and bodies* (Jones, 2006).

Conclusions

The finalities of this research confirm the fact that value aggregates are not an User's residual information from his social background, but a driver for the Avatars' dynamic representations. Also, the valuation criteria can be validated only within virtual projects that are based on the active participation of the human users. The extended self-concept is attached to multiple instances of Self, idea that supports the value variation and the flexible axiological contents identified in a virtual culture.

The identity conjunctions and the implications of User- Avatar or inter-avatars relations (re)design the contents interactive virtual projects. Within a reactive, multi-user construct, we also meet ethical arrangements, based on directed management and regulation or achieved through a natural, non-mediated, self-adjusting process. In conclusion, the easily-adaptive character of the virtual culture challenge the informational and value contents through a new self-oriented paradigm whose appliance in cyberspace becomes an instrument of new moral and axiological acknowledgements.

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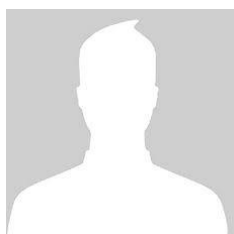
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Biodata



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