The Virtual Self and Possible Immersive Consequences of Uncharacteristic Self-Presentation in the Virtual Environment

Eugene Y. Kukshinov, Independent Researcher, National Research University Higher School of Economics, Moscow, Russia

ABSTRACT

The author employs a theoretic construct based on Goffman’s (1956) self-presentation approach and a self-concept which is taken as a complex structure of self-schema and possible selves. Within the framework of this model (or “self-matrix”), self-presentation is observed under the conditions of virtual reality, in which the usual ties between various aspects of one’s self may be lost, producing uncharacteristic performance. The author claims that immersive interaction within the simulated environment of virtual reality may be experienced to such an extent that new properties of the self are obtained, bringing a change in real behavior. The resultant performance might contradict existing social circumstances and vice versa.

Keywords: Immersion, Online Disinhibition Effect, Self-Concept, Self-Presentation, Virtual Self

INTRODUCTION

There are various avenues of research inspecting the presentation of our self in the virtual environment, and which I will take into account to introduce a theoretical model based on Goffman’s (1956) self-presentation approach and a self-concept as a complex structure of self-schema and possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Stein, 1995). This model will help us to understand the state of virtual self or, specifically, to understand how we present and construct ourselves in the virtual environment, thereby changing the state of our actual self in real life. This model will also involve a view of the self as being formed independent of any unity with the self-concept.

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The virtual environment makes “possible a sensorimotor and cognitive activity for a person (or persons) in a digitally created artificial world, which can be symbolic or a simulation of certain aspects of the real world” (Fuchs, Moreau & Guitton, 2011, p.6). It is created to simulate social activity, through which identity appears. Since there is no self without the Other (Evans, 2012), the virtual self is a result of simulated social, or sometimes parasocial (Giles, 2002) interaction within the virtual environment. I insist on the fact that all virtual situations must be observed including offline videogames or, in other words, any virtually represented narratives. The virtual environment is determined in equal measure by the narrative of the videogame and our self-presentation, as encouraged by the properties of the protagonists. I should acknowledge, however, that the virtual self is more often a product of self-presentation online.

The virtual environment sets certain limitations on those properties of our self that can be presented therein. Disembodiment and anonymity are the end points of the spectrum of properties which are capable of being presented. Since virtual conditions weaken the ties to our self-concept, uncharacteristic self-presentation might be produced. Immersive interaction with simulated environments causes the experiencing of virtual performance, generating self-construction. We have to determine how this happens in order to understand the nature of possible contradictions within the self-concept that may arise, as well as predict the unusual ways we might then behave.

THE “SELF-MATRIX”

In order to properly define the place of the virtual self within the wider field of the self-concept, I found it necessary to combine several different theories of the self into a “self-matrix”. As a preliminary, I use Goffman’s (1956) self-presentation approach, selectively marking out the dualistic understanding of self, divided into “real” and “social” selves. The real self is supposed to be that which cannot be seen by others, “since no one is in quite as good an observational position to see through the act as the person who puts it on” (p.10). The social self is the product of performance or presentation in everyday life; it is an inseparable part of the social environment. It is likely that the two could never be similar to each other yet, despite the fact that many different social roles can be played, there is usually a nominal distance between them. Our properties or aspects of self are sufficiently connected to protect self-presentation from dramatic modification.

Another component of the theoretical construct introduced here involves a form of the self-concept as a complex mental structure of the self, consisting of two main types of interrelated modules: self-schemas and possible selves (Markus & Nurius, 1986; Martinez, 2014; Stein, 1995). The Self-schema is made up of cognitive generalizations about the self-derived from past experience (Markus & Nurius, 1986), which organize and guide the processing of the self-related information contained in an individuals’ social experience. Possible selves function as incentives for future behavior, and are not confirmed by experience. Possible selves are considered to guide behavior most effectively when linked to an existing self-schema, which helps to arrange the desired future-oriented state (Stein, 1995). Although possible selves might be totally imagined (i.e. differing totally from the self-schema), due to their frequently hidden nature, protected from external scrutiny (Markus & Nurius, 1986), they are simultaneously bound up with the self-schema (1986). They are connected by means of the process of self-presentation, for any new aspect of self must be accepted by the social environment to become real (McKenna & Bargh, 2000), or, in other words, it must be experienced (Burns, 1991).

Figure 1 represents the aforementioned tie symbolically, along with the “self-matrix”. The real self-schema (1) should be understood as the actual or “true” condition of our self which is unknown to others – it is who we are. Real possible selves (2) are supposed to be all the desired,
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