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Rethinking virtuality

Niki Panteli and Mike Chiasson

Why a study on the nature of virtuality?

Over the last few years, there has been considerable interest in the “virtual” – teams, organizations, groups, and communities – in management research and practice. The focus of attention has generally been on how to improve collaboration and knowledge sharing, how to develop trust and cohesiveness within virtual teams and communities, and how best to support virtual interactions. Underlying this research is the assumption that we possess sufficient understanding about the nature of virtuality and the ability to distinguish what is virtual, and what is not. Even though several researchers have attempted on various occasions to make a contribution in this field, we increasingly recognize that the nature of virtuality has neither been well conceptualized nor fully explored.

Part of the reason for this is that researchers often compare the virtual (i.e., global, geographically dispersed, and electronically linked) to the traditional (i.e., local, collocated, and face-to-face) environment. While a useful starting point, we question this primarily technological distinction, while recognizing that virtuality, through an IT-enabled system, is increasingly extending its reach, and becoming more global, more dispersed, and more pervasive across all spheres of society. Schultze and Orlikowski (2001) explain that “global, electronic workspaces or information devices ... together make up the unseen and sprawling empires of virtual organizations” (p. 57). The advancement of information and communication technologies (ICTs) has been related not only to the emergence of the virtual society, but also to the development of the virtual empire, which is purported to have an enormous impact on how people work, communicate and share their knowledge. Fulk and DeSanctis (1995) have identified several features of communication technologies, which “offer important advancements in organizations” (p. 338). These include the speed of communication, the dramatic reduction in the costs of communication, the increase in communication bandwidth, the vastly expanded connectivity

with people and machines throughout the world, and the integration of communication with computing technologies. These effects include more reach, fluidity, and flexibility in everything we do as individuals, organizations, communities, and societies. The location of work and our coworkers is now considered irrelevant. It is not surprising therefore that virtuality has been linked to globalization, which “is quintessentially about the death of distance” (Woolgar, 2002 p. 19). However, as van Binsbergen (1998) puts it: “globalization is not about the absence or dissolution of boundaries, but about ... the opening up of new spaces and new times within new boundaries that were hitherto inconceivable” (p. 875).

Globalization as a condition of the social world today revolves around the interplay between unbounded world-wide flow, and the selective framing of such flow within localizing contexts; such framing organizes not only flow (of people, ideas and objects) and individual experience, but also the people involved in them, creating more or less enduring social categories and groups whose collective identity as supported by their members' interaction creates an eddy of particularism, of social localization, within the unbounded global flow. (van Binsbergen, 1998, p. 875/6)

It follows that to view virtuality as being merely a global phenomenon provides us with only a partial understanding of its impact and pervasiveness. Virtuality is also a local phenomenon that needs to be examined from a micro-level analysis as well as a macro-level analysis. Therefore, despite the distance-*less* and boundary-*less* new world of virtuality, Woolgar (2002) suggests that virtual interactions are still realized in the particular local settings of individuals, which influences the way they manage and use virtual systems. For example, individuals live, think, and breathe in their local physical, psychological, and sociological circumstances, and this affects and shapes their virtual work, interactions, and interpretations. Woolgar has argued that “instantiations of global communication and identity depend critically on attention to the local setting It is not just that local context affects uptake and use. Instead, the very effort to escape local context, to promote one's transcendent global (and/or virtual) identity, actually depend on specifically local ways of managing the technology” (p. 19).

As virtuality and our experiences with it changes and expands, the local and the global are intertwined (Panteli et al., 2007). Increasingly, there are clear instances, such as the Accoplir case, where the local and global meet both in the virtual and real – where an idea and a project

emerge in a computer-mediated and virtual space, but the implications are realized and affect a local context. Accoplir is the Paris Resident Association that has used the virtual world of Second Life to get ideas for a new garden in the city centre. It did this in order to put pressure on the officials to speed up the redevelopment process, which had started in 2004 but had failed to produce new designs because of limited consultation with residents. The competition was announced in April 2007 and the decision was made at the end of June. People in China, Canada, and Germany took part and came up with ideas for a new garden. The winner was a French citizen who received 275,000 linden dollars (785 Euros, £530, ~US\$ 1, 000). Apart from the main prize, smaller prizes were also awarded, including 40,000 linden dollars to a six-year-old in the children's play area category. The winning prize included ambitious water features and an ice-rink (BBC News, June 2007).

It follows from this example that increasingly we live and breathe virtual possibilities on a day-to-day basis. Some of us may be more reluctant, skeptical, and critical in spending much time in virtual spaces such as Second Life, but we have to acknowledge that many today are growing up with the virtual world and swimming in virtual waters as a natural part of their lives. This new generation is what Rymaszewski and his colleagues (2007) have called the "digital natives". Therefore what may be considered global to us, is for these digital natives, their local. This is one of the reasons why we should examine the different varieties and experiences of virtuality; because we feel that our interpretations and realizations of it in local contexts are changing and increasing. As technology and social practices change, we have more opportunities to "enter" and experience different forms of virtuality, and, in the process, our understanding and conception of virtuality changes. We believe therefore that other varieties of virtuality research and practice are important and necessary for both understanding and extending the future possibilities for the "virtual" in managerial and information systems research and practice. These changes and possibilities are what we explore in this book.

With this edited collection, we argue that there has been a limited conceptualization of virtuality and its implications on the management of organizations. Our aim is to go beyond the comparison between the virtual and the real-traditional-concrete, to explore the different types, dimensions and perspectives of virtuality. We posit that almost all organizations are virtual, but that they differ theoretically and substantively in their virtuality. It is by exploring and understanding these differences that researchers and practitioners will be able to develop a deeper understanding of the past, present, and future possibilities of virtuality. We need to rethink,

therefore, what virtuality is and the roles it plays in managing and theorizing contemporary organizations. The aim of the book is to examine, to appreciate, and to debate the nature of virtuality in organizations, exploring a range of virtuality topics that challenge traditional social and technical imperatives in our research.

This book provides illustrative cases, empirical studies, and theories of virtuality, with individual, group, organizational, and interorganizational examples, drawn from a wide range of settings. Theories of virtuality are applied and developed, and the implications for the management of virtuality are discussed. The collection is designed to be indicative of current thinking and approaches, and to provide a rich basis for further research and reflection in this important area of management and information systems research and practice. The complex and dynamic nature of virtuality requires collective and collaborative efforts toward a better appreciation of the broader social, cultural, geographical and technological characteristics that surround it (Webster, 2005). In what follows, we will explore the different conceptualizations of virtuality provided in the general management, information systems (IS) and other literatures. Different varieties of virtuality will then be identified and discussed. Reference will be made to variations of virtuality that exist *within* organizations (e.g., virtual individual members and virtual teams) but also *beyond* organizations (e.g., interorganizational and online communities, markets). It is upon these different variations of virtuality that the book chapters are presented. Chapters 2–7 will present virtuality as it appears and is conceptualized within organizations and Chapters 8–12 will present and conceptualize virtuality as it appears in studies beyond organizations.

Developing our understanding of virtuality is of significant importance for managers and organizations wishing to seek and use both their human and technological resources to explore virtual work and working. The book achieves this objective by asking each author to discuss the practical implications of their study.

Finally, we would like to note that the idea for this edited book was born following a workshop that was organized in June 2006 at the London School of Economics. The theme of the workshop was to survey the globality of virtuality, the complex, emergent, and changing nature of this field, and to act as a location for transdisciplinary work on virtuality. The workshop was under the auspices of the International Federation of Information Processing (IFIP) Working Group 9.5 (Virtuality and Society), which explores virtuality, through information and communication technologies and other means, and its intertwining relationship with individuals, groups, organizations, and society. It brought together

researchers and practitioners of virtuality to sketch out a joint agenda on virtuality research. The present edited collection captures some of these interests, while also making a general call for new approaches to the subject.

Virtuality or virtualities

Although there has been an overwhelming interest in virtual environments within the management, organizational and information systems literatures, the terms “virtual” and “virtuality” have received diverse attention (Woolgar, 2002). The *Oxford English Dictionary* lists three possible definitions for virtuality. The first defines virtuality as “the possession of force or power” or “something endowed with virtue or power.” The second possible definition is “essential nature of being, apart from external form or embodiment.” The third definition, which also corresponds to the common usage of the word, is “a virtual (as opposed to an actual) thing, capacity, etc; a potentiality.” Based on this latter understanding, Turoff (1997) has defined virtuality as “the potential for a virtual system to become part of the real world” (p. 42).

Overall, definitions of virtuality vary, with some adopting a philosophical view (e.g., Nelson, 1980) and others seeing virtuality as a computer representation. For example, the philosopher Michael Heim (1993) defines “virtual” as “A philosophical term meaning ‘not actually but just as if’.” Drawing upon Heim, Sotto (1998) posits that “the term ‘virtual’ can be said to mean: not actually existing but as if actually existing. In this sense, a virtual artefact is an event or entity that is real in effect but not in fact” (p. 79).

Within the general management and organizational literature, it is more difficult to find clearly stated definitions of virtuality. Instead, a prevailing assumption is that virtuality is harnessed by traditional organizations in order to take advantage of advances in information and communication technologies (see Rockart, 1995; Wiesenfeld et al., 1998). Virtual organizations are often seen as extensions of the traditional physical and structural bounded groups, enabled by technological advancements. This conceptualization, however, does not embrace the full articulation of virtuality that is possible (Panteli and Dibben, 2001). Virtuality is not simply an extension of the traditional physical and structural, such as something that already exists, but it could also be a new and emergent entity. Due to its emergence, it is difficult to put a singular definition around it because this may constrain what virtuality is, has been, and may become.

With particular reference to organizations, Zigurs and Qureshi (2001) posited that virtuality involves activities that can take place anytime, anywhere, with no physical, geographical, and structural constraints. They believe that virtuality is the “elsewhere,” something that is not here because we can not see or experience its physical presence. It is a space and not a place because it is not fixed. A place is static and has walls and boundaries, whereas the virtual is fluid and flexible, though it connects and associates people, things, and objects. With virtuality, individual choices are believed to be expanded to numerous and new possibilities, unrestricted by local constraints. For example, it can involve an expansion of the way people shop, work, and play, loosening their local and physical ties which restrict what is available to them.

We found the following statement illustrative of the expansion we wish to pursue:

We [humans] are able to step [into virtuality] through the looking glass. We are learning to live in virtual worlds. We may find ourselves alone as we navigate virtual oceans, unravel virtual mysteries, and engineer virtual skyscrapers. But increasingly, when we step through the looking glass, other people are there as well. (Turkle, 1995, p. 9)

There are several issues that arise from Turkle’s statement. The virtual world is unbounded and nonlinear, with a free flow of movement. It expresses the flexibility, fluidity, and creativity that are embedded in virtual context. In fact, an inherent part of virtuality is said to be that of “playfulness” (Sotto, 1997). As Rheingold puts it (1991, p. 373) “[play] is the first thing most people do when they find themselves immersed in a virtual world.” Being playful, according to Romanyshyn (1989) allows individuals to get away from the “real” world, to “lift off,” “depart from earth,” “escape death,” and “turn on the dream” (in Sotto, 1997, p. 46). Such potential for freedom and flexibility is purported to enable a fluid exchange of ideas and information, improving opportunities for learning (thus, unraveling virtual mysteries) and creativity (thus, engineering virtual skyscrapers). There is also an perception that an electronic link, a computer system, acts as the “looking glass.” Information technology has indeed been considered vital in building and maintaining virtual organizations (Fulk and DeSanctis, 1995; Rockart, 1995). An expanded view of virtuality is that an information system, enabled by new forms of IT, produces computer-generated representations of the world (Jackson, 1999). But moving beyond deterministic view of IT, we believe that virtuality is not only about information technology. It is also about

interacting with people whom we may not know, but who share the same interest and conceptual space as us. Therefore, even though computer-mediated communication is an important contributor to virtuality, IT does not dictate virtuality. Rather it is engaging and being a part of a social and conceptual network which is important, and it is within these revised networked spaces where we wish to explore virtuality.

Panteli and Dibben (2001) following Sotito (1998), have described virtual teams as “topos”¹ for the exchange of discourses where their fixity is not determined by their location but rather by the social orders and flows that constitute them. To function, virtual teams require the presence, or more accurately the telepresence, of individuals as virtual workers. According to Steuer (1992), telepresence is the experience of presence in an environment by means of a computer-mediated communication. Rethinking virtual teams as a group of individuals who experience telepresence contributes to a better articulation of virtuality since this specifies the unit of analysis for a study as the individual. In doing so, it shifts the locus of attention from technology and the organization, to the individual and how she perceives her role in the virtual environment, and her relations with other virtual team members. Clearly, virtual teams are neither effective only because of technology nor as a result of organizations wanting to extend their boundaries, but also and most importantly because individuals are able to trust, and thus interact and work together in these electronic and nontraditional environments. An initial focus in the literature on technology has tended to overlook this point.

Varieties of virtuality

Virtuality as a matter of degree

The notion that virtuality is a matter of degree is becoming widely used among researchers in this field, and is acknowledged by the contributors in this book. Zigurs and Qureshi (2001) have explained the different degrees of virtuality with reference to the internal orientation and the external orientation to virtuality: “Internally, an organization might include isolated individuals who work primarily through IT and are rarely physically present ... Externally, an organization may interact via IT with suppliers and/or customers” (p. 129).

With specific reference to the literature on virtual teams, there is an increasing acknowledgment that virtual teams fall along a continuum from

traditional face-to-face to completely distributed (Crowston et al., 2005; Kirkman and Mathieum, 2005). As Schmidt, Temple, McCready, Newman, and Kinzler (Chapter 5) show, a wide range of teams are left in the middle of this continuum and these are often called “hybrid” teams; a concept also adopted by Oshri, Kotlarsky, and Willcocks in this collection. Acknowledgment of the hybrid nature of virtual teams is also made in the contribution by Dixon and Panteli (Chapter 8) in their attempt to explore the nature of virtuality in teams which combine face-to-face and technology-mediated interactions.

Virtuality as a matter of dimensions

There seems to be a general agreement that virtuality is multidimensional (Gibson and Gibbs, 2006). For example, according to Shin (2004), virtuality is the degree to which a group has temporal, cultural, spatial, and organizational dispersion, and communicates through electronic means. Similarly, Chudoba et al. (2005) posit that virtuality depends on discontinuities in geography, time zone, organization, national culture, work practices, and technologies. Gibson and Gibbs define virtuality “as a multi-faceted higher-order construct comprising four independent defining characteristics identified in previous literature: geographic dispersion, electronic dependence, dynamic structural arrangements, and national diversity” (2006, p. 455). Their study found that these features need to be seen in their own right as they are not always interrelated. For example, geographically dispersed teams are not always structurally dynamic, but instead consist of the same members that operate in a stable environment.

Virtuality within and beyond organizations

Even though it follows from the above discussion on variations of virtuality that the emphasis of our current understanding has remained with the organization and its surroundings, it is also important to go beyond this setting to explore the role and effects of virtuality beyond organizations. Our argument is that exploring virtuality both within and beyond organizations will provide a better understanding of the nature of virtuality. In what follows, therefore, reference will be made to variations of virtuality that exist within organizations (e.g., virtual dispersed individuals, distributed teams, and organizations) and beyond organizations (e.g., online communities, markets).

Virtuality within organizations

During the last decade there has been an increasing literature on virtual organizations and virtual teams. This body of research generally agrees that virtual organizations (Quinn and Jackson, 1996) and virtual teams (Lipnack and Stamps, 1997; Jarvenpaa and Leidner, 1999) consist of a collection of geographically dispersed individuals who work on joint projects or common tasks, and who communicate electronically. Various types of virtual teams (Panteli, 2004), virtual organizations (Davenport and Pearlson, 1998), and virtual alliances (Burn, Marschall, and Barnett, 2002) have been identified.

Given the explosive growth of virtual teams, virtual intra-organizations and interorganizational alliances, virtual arrangements constitute an increasingly important aspect of contemporary organizations. Indeed, the growth of virtual work arrangements has highlighted the role of computer-mediated communication and the diverse tools which support virtual work interactions. The first part of the book presents a collection of studies that explore the nature of virtuality within organizations. The aim here is to gain insight as to how virtuality affects organizations and its members. Issues of shared expectations and understanding among virtual team members, as well as collaboration and cooperation, are discussed. These issues are crucial in understanding and promoting virtual work arrangements.

The recent organization and information systems literature has given overwhelming attention to virtual teams, their effectiveness, dynamics, and communication patterns. Virtual (i.e. distributed) teams require and are challenged to produce effective communication, especially in collaborative and knowledge-intensive projects. Oshri, Kotlarsky, and Willcocks (Chapter 2) argue that developing and coordinating expertise in globally distributed contexts is far more complex than in co-located teams because of knowledge asymmetries, coordination challenges, and communication issues. Therefore, companies that engage in globally distributed work need to be able to find a balance between distributing expertise, and coordinating and integrating expertise through a process of socialization where one “learns the company’s ropes.” In a globally distributed environment, this process should be ongoing and should be supported by a series of technology-mediated activities beyond face-to-face meetings.

Chudoba and Watson-Manheim (Chapter 3) highlight a common assumption within the virtual team literature, that work is harder in these teams because members must communicate across temporal and spatial boundaries. However, some research suggests that a lack of shared work practices is a more significant impediment to successful performance

in the virtual work environment than these various boundaries. In their chapter, they attempt to shed light on the role of shared practices by first looking at the relationship between the use of the communication media repertoire – the collection of communication channels and shared routines of media use across members of a team – and the processes of building and maintaining mental models in a virtual team. They consider the consequences of virtuality as a perceptual rather than an objective phenomenon. In other words, members of a team may work across objective boundaries (e.g., multiple time zones, different organizations), but the boundaries are not always perceived as problematic. Their discontinuity construct, they argue, is a factor contributing to perceptions of problems at the boundaries, which means that increased effort by the team is required to accomplish work because of the differences in expectations introduced at the boundary. These differences must be negotiated and resolved in order for work to be accomplished.

The study by Weems-Landingham (Chapter 4) assesses virtual team cooperation from a contingency perspective, proposing that performance tactics are moderated by the degree of perceived virtuality. Through illustrative examples of virtual team experiences, this work provides an evaluation of virtual project manager behaviors associated with team effectiveness and virtual team cooperation. It is found that successful virtual project managers are relationship-oriented, and that they use both formal and informal networks in ensuring that critical resources are available, accountable, and responsive.

Schmidt, Temple, McCreedy, Newman and Kinzler, in Chapter 5, discuss the phenomenon of virtuality in team-based environments from an interdisciplinary perspective. They posit that virtuality occurs in different degrees and constitutes multiple configurations of organizational design in the hybrid workplace, somewhere between traditional and fully virtual environments. Using quantitative and qualitative methods, they found that virtuality is not significantly related to the economic effectiveness of a team's output, but rather to indicators of social and psychological efficiency. The study also found that although identity and identification is positively related to the degree of virtuality experienced within each team, the general level of virtuality in the sample shows that this effect is not exploited to its full potential.

Issues of identification are discussed by Yan (Chapter 6). Given geographic dispersion, virtual organizations find it difficult to rely on direct control and coordination. Instead, they bind the organization through shared values and norms. Organizational identification therefore moderates the often difficult social relations that exist in virtual

organizations. This study highlights the social nature of virtuality by illustrating the role of ongoing and political interactions in developing shared understanding in a geographically distributed organization.

Lewis and Katsorchi-Hayes's chapter (Chapter 7) examines the consequences of diverging views of virtuality in practice, and specifically examines differences in relation to customer and supplier relationships in a competitive and commercial context. They argue that understanding virtuality in contemporary organizations requires understanding the business context and norms of those organizations. Their discussion is based upon a three-year study, contrasting various visions of what was technically feasible and organizationally desirable in the UK chemicals industry. Through interviews with managers and staff of companies, the research provides insights into the different meanings that organizations attribute to the virtuality of work and to the acceptability of potential implementations of a middleware technology. It was found that interpretations of virtuality among the potential users and participants were strongly influenced by established work practices, and by previous experiences of relationships-at-a-distance with suppliers and customers. There was also a sharp contrast between the enthusiastic visions of virtual work by technical developers, and the negative views of users who perceived internet-only interaction as rigid, alienating from well-established ways of working with suppliers and customers, and unworkable. They conclude that virtual work needs to pay attention to the norms and values in the local context, and how ICTs will affect and be affected by these influences.

Dixon and Panteli's chapter (Chapter 8) draws on recent research into the growing phenomena of virtuality in organizational teams, particularly collaboration. In particular, this chapter uses the concept of virtuality in teams, not in technological terms, but as discontinuities. Using data from an interorganizational case study, the chapter highlights the multiple levels of discontinuities that lie beyond those traditionally associated with technology-oriented views of virtuality. The discussion emphasizes that it is this complexity of discontinuities that increasingly matters in our understanding of virtuality.

Virtuality beyond organizations

The second part of the book presents a collection of chapters on the nature of virtuality beyond organizations. Here the emphasis shifts from virtuality within organizations and their subgroups (e.g., virtual teams) to inter-organizational and societal instances of virtuality. These include

empirical studies on online communities and conceptual studies on the phenomenon of virtuality in general, from both a theoretical and research perspective.

There is no doubt, as DeSanctis and Monge (1999) argued that the changing nature of information and communication technologies in organizations will be different in the long run than in the short run. Indeed, only recently have we seen the emergence of new online communities offering different social realities and virtual experiences for its members. Blogs or Blogospheres, for example, have been shown to be substantially different to online chatrooms. Herring et al. (2005), in a content-analysis study of 203 blogs, describe them as hybrids, because they allow social interaction while giving authors control over the communication space – such as the what, how, and frequency of contributions. Further to enhancing social networks, blogs have been presented as an upcoming corporate communication medium (Lee, 2006) and an open-source source of information (Blumenthal, 2005) due to the vast amount of information that they carry.

Pluempavarn and Panteli (Chapter 9) argue that there is a need to examine how the social identity of individual bloggers influences and is being influenced by the blogging community. Bloggers are active in selecting to participate in those communities that match their interests, and they can be members of more than one group. Furthermore, specific blogging communities create social identities, which affect members' participation and interaction with others inside and outside the group.

Papargyris and Poulymenakou (Chapter 10) explore the case of massively multiplayer online games (MMOG) on the internet, as a virtual world where players participate in virtual communities, engage into collective actions, and construct intersubjective understandings of their relationships with others and the virtual world. Their ethnographic study suggests that players acting collectively in a MMOG share an enjoyment but also an agony in making sense of the virtual game setting and, as a result, employ various instruments and strategies in order to negotiate their understandings. Such instruments include various metaphors, game rules, and players' roles, while common strategies include petitions, propagandas, and peripheral discussions. In these communities, players learn the game's rules and mechanisms through continuous experimentation. The meaning of the virtual world is gradually constituted through repetition of trial-and-error practices. Indeed, the social distribution of knowledge of the virtual world is acquired directly by engaging in meaningful actions, or by sharing it with other players that, for example, were present at a past event.

Moving away from empirical studies, the remaining chapters aim to develop conceptually the nature of virtuality. A critique of the existing

literature is that much of it has been simply extensions of nonvirtual research, with a few complications regarding space and time (Robey, Schwaig, and Jin, 2003). We question virtual work as simply an extension of traditional work – a social imperative – while acknowledging that both global (virtual) and local (real) is important in anchoring and directing virtual outcomes.

Chiasson (Chapter 11) discusses alternative conceptions of the local, global, and virtual, through Shields (2003) and others, in order to loosen a typical focus on electronic channels as virtual-global, and face-to-face communication as concrete-local. The result is a shift towards other *liminal* spaces “in between” all three, but also back to virtual possibilities before ICTs, mediated through language and meaning. He argues that ICTs are only an evolution and not a revolution in virtuality. Based on this, the virtual is no longer tied only or even primarily to an electronic medium, but to the ideal-present concepts that influence and are influenced by absorbed individuals. As a result, every moment of our life is filled with the virtual and concrete – behaviors in particular circumstances (the concrete), the talking and influence of others using electronic text (virtual), the exploration and realization of future actions (probable), with the intent of forming new social movements, friendships, and contacts (abstract).

Along a similar line of inquiry, Kreps (Chapter 12) deals explicitly with the question “Are the real and the virtual truly as opposed to one another as might at first appear?”. His chapter – perhaps the most philosophical in the current collection – questions whether the real and the virtual are really so opposed, and, in the course of various arguments which examine this issue, he questions whether virtuality can indeed be regarded as any kind of threat to the mental health or psychological development of those engaged in it – or indeed to a society that embraces it. He concludes that virtuality may even be inherent in the nature of what it is to be human.

Acknowledging the diversity and variety that exists in virtuality research, Hunsinger (Chapter 13) presents the case that virtuality is best approached from a transdisciplinary perspective. The area of research that constitutes virtuality is already multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary, but he argues that transdisciplinarity will benefit the field by creating a new axiology – a new common set of understandings – that will make sense of the field to its broader audience. This audience for virtuality research is global and constantly changing, so fixing a set of common axioms and conventions into our research will enable the global research community to grow and encompass the field, while maintaining its legitimacy in the face of disciplinary fragmentation.

Concluding comments

Collectively, this book questions the technological emphasis in definitions and approaches to virtuality, and, through them, the destruction and loss of the local worlds in which users live. At the same time, the book recognizes that virtuality increasingly extends and transforms practices within and beyond organizations, through the far-reaching effects of ICTs.

This edited book demonstrates that virtuality not only increasingly extends and transforms organizational and societal practices; it also extends and transforms its own nature, its varieties and dimensions. Virtuality is not just what we experience when we go through the electronic looking glass. This is only the beginning, as the virtual experience can be considered to start both before and after one crosses the electronic threshold and finds the other people there.

A multitude of interpretations could be given to “virtuality.” Virtuality is manifested symbolically, metaphorically, materially, mentally and physically. What a better example than the case of MMOGs presented by Papargyris and Poulmenakou, who show that the virtual world is a province of meaning where, through a scenario-driven MMOG (material), players enjoy and share a life, negotiated through their “life-worlds” in which they celebrate their agony (mental) and triumphs in this imaginary and virtual world. Diversity in the way we approach and explore virtuality is important in order to capture the current and future diversity of virtuality itself.

With this book we have aimed to bring together a collection of studies that show the complex nature of virtuality, as well as the varieties of virtuality. Though there has been overwhelming attention on the possibilities that virtual world has created, there has been little discussion on the current state of research in this field that is embracing the characteristics of the virtual society. To advance research and discussions on the topic, we sought papers that addressed the variety of perspectives and research issues in the field of virtuality within and beyond organizations. The contributors to this edited book have, in different ways, identified and discussed critical issues on virtuality. Collectively, they assist in unraveling the mystery of the virtual world and in showing that the virtual mystery is a project under constant construction! These chapters allow us to reflect on research practices and help us in developing an agenda for further research in this area. We will do this in our last chapter, “the epilogue.”

Notes

1. In Greek, “topos” means “a place.” Here, it is used as a social setting rather than as a physical environment.

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