

Who's building whom? An Actor-Network approach for understanding relationships between players and avatars

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Abstract

Technologies have always caused impacts in mankind. This article approaches more specifically the influences that the virtual environment has in the real one. It speaks on the transformation process in which the contemporary subject is inserted, as well as some of its characteristics. It approaches a possible relation between the use of avatars and the process of identification, in which the subject constitutes itself in relation to the *other*. Under the perspective of Actor-Network Theory, it points the virtual relations as being more dynamic than the real ones. It tries to show that the comprehension of the use of avatars and what they represent for their user is of great relevance to understand which characteristics are being forged by these technologies in the subject that emerges from this digital age.

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1. Introduction

The history of mankind gets along with the history of technology. The study and the development of techniques not only modify our daily routines, but also modify our interpersonal relations, relations with God, even our ways of thinking. Currently, if we think about the influence of technologies in our lives, we think about the computer and the Internet that, together, possess infinite functionalities. Its first uses were limited primordially to communication and now they had become an important way of social contact. However, parting from the idea that the subject constitutes itself from the *other*, we can not only analyze computer network environments as an interaction space, but as a space of constitution of the subject. Through computers we access so intense and practically real experiences that it provides the experimentation of new forms of being. In this plan of infinite possibilities, which is the virtual environment, the *other* is constructed by the subject itself, since it has the freedom of being what it wants. Each day it's more common the insertion of people in virtual environments, becoming difficult to study the contemporary society without taking in account this space. We have then a new territory to exist, and one of the ways of visiting it is by means of the avatars, a way to project our bodies and minds in the virtual worlds of the electronic games. The avatar is part of

the subject, its creation; it's the way that people present themselves in the virtual context. Parting from these points of view, it is possible for us to understand some psychological aspects of the relation between human being and machine, more specifically in the identification that the subject makes with the avatars.

2. Related Work

According to studios of diverse areas, such as sociology [see Bauman 2004], psychoanalysis [see Birman 2003; Forbes 2005; Pinheiro and Vertzman 2003] and philosophy [see Jameson 1995], the contemporary subjectivity is passing through transformations. Other authors have attempted to understand this current subjectivity and its changes from the experiences mediated by the information and the communication technologies.

Turkle [1997] carried through researches with users of interactive games and believes that today's subject is formed by multiple "Is". The simulation that the virtual reality allows makes the identity fluid and multiple. Still in accordance with Turkle [1997], beyond the multiplicity, the contemporary subject has as characteristic the concurrence, therefore its Is act in simultaneous way. In Brazil, Nicolaci-da-Costa [2002, 2003, and 2005] attempted to understand the relation between the Internet and the current subjectivity. According to her, great transformations in the everyday make subjective changes occur. In this way, the popularization of the Internet couldn't happen without leaving its marks. The online world brings experiences that we would not have in the offline world. Nicolaci-da-Costa still says that good part of publications made regarding the Internet focus its harmful effect. An example of pessimistic vision of the technological impacts is the one from the French sociologist and philosopher Jean Baudrillard. According to him, information is exchanged and images are reproduced so excessively that we lose the relation of identity between the significant and meaning. The relation between subject and object isn't direct; we only have access to the "appearance" [Baudrillard 2002]. Honorato [2006] made studies on virtual communities, more specifically on Orkut. The author affirms that the Internet resignified itself and started to be a socialization plan with proper characteristics where people exchange information and satisfy their necessities of affiliation. This way, through virtual communities the human relations and behavior can be studied in a bigger scale. Trying to show the positive aspects of the interaction subject-net, Romão-Dias [2007] searched traces from the current subjectivity by

interviewing chat users. The author affirms that, in a virtual environment, the subject using a nick is free from other people's judgment and feels more unencumbered. This security brought by the anonymity and the absence of rebuke, according to the research carried through, made it possible for the subject to play and have different behaviors from the ones they would have offline.

3. Some Approaches on Avatars

3.1 Avatars, links between real and virtual lives.

In his book *O que é virtual*, Pierre Lévy [1996] considers a new vision of the concept. He shows how erroneous it is to consider the virtual reality as devoid of existence. According to the author, the *virtual* is a part of the *real*, not opposing to it. From this point of view the *virtualization* is not an *unrealization*, but a mutation of identity, a displacement of the gravitational center. This process dislocates the object in the time and the space. The *virtualization* causes atemporality and *aterritorialization*. According to Lévy [1996], the *virtualization* process was always present in the constitution of mankind, either by the language (*virtualization* of the present), technique (*virtualization* of the work) or by the contract (*virtualization* of the violence). This is the process in which the contemporary subject finds itself. Information, companies, economies, bodies, currently everything's been virtualized. The Medias don't take only information; they take our senses to where the facts occur, project our voices and opinions all over the globe. They bring the world to our reach.

To Nicolaci-da-Costa [2005], the subject of the 21st Century is multitask and feels pleasure in practically everything it makes online. This subject is ready to try new forms of being, it's always in movement, however it doesn't make it through its body; but for its writing, and by its senses it has access the different realities. He is somebody flexible and highly adaptable, and for this reason it presents itself in diverse spaces with diverse identities and characteristics. It knows few limits for its desires. If these are indeed the characteristics of the contemporary subject, it's a strong indicator of why each day more people spend hours living in function of their avatars.

According to Colen and Queiroz e Melo [2009a], avatars are a sophisticated and almost complete way to project our bodies and minds in virtual worlds, since we have the possibility to choose physical characteristics and play equal or different roles from the ones in real life. There are much more options when the avatar is a character from electronic games. This category of virtual interaction generally has vast worlds full of beings and other characters. In the case of the Massive Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games, several of the characters which the player interacts with are other players. In games like

Everquest, World of Warcraft or Lineage II, the player needs to create a character in order to play. The user gives it a name, physical characteristics, profession, etc. While making these choices the player opens possibilities, but also creates some limitations. According to Gee [2007], when entering the universe of a MMORPG, the subject takes to the virtual environment its *real identity* with characteristics of all the roles it plays in real life filtered by its identity as player. One second identity that appears is the *virtual identity*, with characteristics from the character according with its physical form and capabilities. Still in this process a third identity appears, the *projective identity*, which is a set of the character's features and the aspirations the player has on what it must become.

What we can infer is that virtual games environment, primordially the MMORPGs, provides the subject with the possibility of manipulating, playing, creating, being things that in other ways would be impossible. These are the connection point, the link between real and virtual lives. With the anonymity, there's a suspension of the social look/censorship, occurs an analytical and confessional practice, becoming authorized the expression of the unsayable, causing appearance of another word, of another action and, why not, of other inhabitants of our subjectivity [Lanzari 2000].

3.2 Avatars as facilitators of identification process

One of the most basic concepts of Freudian theory and the metapsychology is the concept of *identification* (*Identifizierung*). However, during the development of psychoanalytic theory this term modifies its meaning if articulating with others. The concept of identification is an attempt of psychoanalytic theory to explain how what is outside the subject goes inside. According to Issa [1997], in Freud there isn't a systemized theory of *identification*, however it is possible to extract from his work necessary elements for a formularization. According to the International Dictionary of Psychoanalysis [Mijolla 2005], *identification* "is an unconscious mental process by which somebody makes part of its personality according to a personality of another, who serves as a model" (p. 787). According to Freud, this is main way people relate with each other, as well as one of the processes that constitute psyche. According to Freud, *identification* is not a mere imitation in respect to the pretensions of etiological similarities, it is derived from an element that remains unconscious [Freud 1999]. This partial identification can then be distinguished from the imitation, which is a voluntary and conscientious process. This type of identification is what it allows social life, since people don't see themselves as rivals and approach for feeling that they have something in common. It is also by this process that the I constitutes itself. In short, it's by identification that the subject apprehends habits and characteristics of others. It takes for itself some values, excludes others and in this

process he recognizes traces in common with its pairs. These elements absorbed, selected and related are what it constitutes the subject.

Ferenczi [1916], when focusing its interest on identification, introduced the *introjection* concept affirmed that “the I is always searching for objects to identify with, transference objects”, and introjects them to grow. Opposed to *introjection* we have the *projection*. The term would be the intra-psycho process that would create or mold a perception (or set of perceptions) referring to a external object, that, although the subject believes to be perceiving it in an objective way, when actually it's doing it based on its own characteristics [Mijolla 2005].

Later, but still in this context, Melanie Klein [1997] introduced the term *projective identification*. This expression assigns the mental mechanism by which the subject lives deeply the unconscious fantasy of dislocating total or partial aspects of itself to an object. According to Grotstein [1985], the subject using *projective identification* can invade the object to control it or to be controlled by it, thus eliminating the feelings of abandonment; evacuate or refuse aspects of itself and deposit them in an object or objects, getting rid of undesirable aspects from its personality; externalize aspects of itself recognizing analogous objects as familiar; explore the environment searching for object that tie with aspects of itself; or communicate with its other intra-psycho aspects.

It is possible that *identification*, more specifically the *projective identification*, has in the avatars an excellent tool to carry through its goals. Furthermore if we consider the fact that the character in the virtual environment submits itself to the subject's control and inhabits outside the limits of the critic and censoring look from society, suffering different consequences from the ones in the real life.

3.3 Actor-Network Theory contributions

An extremely fruitful way of studying the phenomena of the avatars would be through the perspective of Actor-Network Theory, which is a conceptual and practical instrument to follow the movements of this simultaneous construction of men and objects where materiality and sociality are blend together, having as result our mankind condition. According to ANT, no feature is inherent to something or somebody. It emerges from relations and transactions between elements, not being thus preset or perpetual. Everything we have is interactions, points in a net that influence each other according to their capacity of stabilizing, expanding and reproducing. By this perspective, not only people are elements of these interactions, but also the objects, machines, ideas, guidelines, organizations, etc. All inside causes and suffers effects from these relations. This way, also agreeing with other theories, we part from the idea of a subject being composed by the connections established

with others, in the need for something to show the limits and the possibilities of its existence [Colen and Queiroz e Melo 2009b]. In Latour [2006], we find the expression “Actor-Network Study” to designate a kind of investigation that aims to map situations of a social that is not earlier to the relations between the actors, but defined as something in constant modification, result of amazing entities, fact that comes to break the certainties about the composition of the world we live in.

Studying the contemporary ludic phenomena mediated by digital technologies, we verify that each day it's more common the insertion of people in virtual environments, which are an open field where the contemporary subject can mold the objects which he desires to interact with, and one of the ways of doing it is through the avatars. When using an avatar, the subject earns great mobility, being able to change its position in relation to the other at any time. With the position, the vectors that act on the user are also changed. In this context, by the game's own features, the identity appears to be exceptionally dynamic, being able to be reconfigured quickly, according to the creativity of the users behind the avatars.

The experiences that the subject has all the time identifying with other elements happen in a way much faster in virtual environment. This might be possible because the subject itself can construct the *other* to relate to, or for the ability to present itself in different forms on its relations. The avatar is the possibility to have a new identity, to try a new role.

3.4 Approaching

Since it's a research that aims to comprehend a phenomenon that happens between real and virtual realities, the insertion of the researcher in the cyberspace is necessary. To collect the data, observations and interviews will be made. It's interesting for this work to maintain the freedom and security that the virtual environment provides. In order to make the observations, and the interviews as well, we're using a research methodology in internet that was denominated by Kozinets [1998] as “netnography”. After observing the dynamics of the environment, we'll invite some subjects to be interviewed. To access, in an objective way, data about the personality of the users and their respective avatars, we'll use the BFI (Big Five Inventory). This tool was created from the analysis of terms from the dictionary that refer to personality. According to the lexical hypothesis, socially relevant and salient features of personality are encoded in natural language [Allport, apud John & Srivastava 1999].

4. Conclusion

In the last century we had more technological transformations than in all history of mankind. The new changes are occurring very quickly and are

demanding new abilities from the contemporary subject, which reveals itself as fluid, mobile, multiple and borderless. It adventures through different and vast worlds, full of options. It puts on identities; presents itself in diverse ways and in the process avatares becomes its avatars.

This article is fruit of a study still in its initial phase that tries to understand which elements the subject takes with itself to the virtual life, and which ones it brings from there. It aims to understand what the elements influence these mutations, the usage of this space of infinite possibilities which is the virtual reality, and its impacts in the real reality. Since it's an ongoing research, we can only defend its relevance. Knowing the avatars and what it represents for its user would be of great relevance to understand which characteristics are being forged by these technologies in the subject which emerges from this digital age. With the results, we hope to contribute with researches on new functionalities for this interaction between the contemporary man and the cyberspace, with therapeutic, educational and commercial developments, among many other investigative possibilities.

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