

The Virtual Identity, Digital Identity, and Virtual Residence of the Digital Citizen

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INTRODUCTION

Since cyberspace appeared (Gibson, 1984), our existence has been endowed of a new dimension: “the virtual”. This new “space”, open to many interpretations, has been recognized as a philosophical category, becoming a subject of passionate speculation by many thinkers: Deleuze, Lévy, De Kerkchove, Maldonado—to cite just a few of the recent ones, but one could recede even to Aristotle and Plato.

However, if we leave the conceptual level, we realize that today “the virtual” exists for us because something very real exists and is surrounding us: technologies. We shall discuss this view and the effect that “the virtual” and the technologies associated with it have produced on us: the birth of three new attributes for any individual living in the digital society, a person’s *virtual identity*, *digital identity* and *virtual residence*.

In the past, information and communication technologies (ICTs) worked exclusively as agents of transformation of the corporate and business worlds. For a long time Internet and the Web behaved as places for blurred, faceless crowds. Then, in less than a couple of decades, and with a sudden acceleration, the impact has shifted to the individual. A specific set of emerging technologies (e.g., wireless, locative and micro/nano-technologies), is affecting the private, intimate sphere of the individual, where identity, reputation and privacy reside. At the same time the virtual and real dimensions begin to mix and sometimes even to collide.

There are currently many efforts to understand, define and manage the three attributes mentioned above. They are becoming essential *possessions* of man in the digital world, while the complexity of the issues relating to them proportionally increases. It is therefore convenient, before we delve deeper into the subject, to set up some provisional, informal definitions (see Exhibit A).

IDENTITY

First of all, what is the concept of “identity”? This term, already confusing in the real world, risks to be all the more so in the virtual world. There is an entire *European Network of Excellence* dedicated to exploring this concept, FIDIS (2005), “*Future of Identity in the Information Society*” (<http://www.fidis.net>). One of its key researchers attempts a basic definition:

Identity has to do with the characteristics of the individual, and what makes it unique or on the contrary similar with the others. Identity can be defined from an internal perspective or in the perspective of its interaction with the environment. (Nabeth, 2004)

The notion of identity affords many levels of complexity in its wide semantic field and it is a changing one (Rost, 2003). It is a composite concept, as represented in Figure 1.

Exhibit A.

Virtual identity	“iPod, therefore I am”: this is how the young generations, roaming the digital sound spaces, state their identities (quoting Apple’s CEO Steve Jobs on his cult music player).
Digital identity	The representation of a human identity that is used in cyberspace to interact with machines or people
Virtual residence	An attempt to establish in cyberspace an equivalent of “domicile” in the off-line world

Information and communication technologies have shaped the concept of “identity” in a digital world by applying the attribute “virtual” to the headwords of identity: “I”, “me”, “self”, “persona”. The result is called *virtual identity* (VID).

VIRTUAL IDENTITY (VID)

Does “virtual” mean “immaterial”? Let us look at some examples of the modern generation of *avatars*. For instance when, inside a fantasy world, they introduce themselves to their community, as “Elewin Lamfeu” or “Adsarta” in the *Encyclopédie de l’Héroïc Fantasy* (Fantasy-Archives, 2007). Let us take notice that there exists on the Web an “avatar service”, which moulds a 3D animated character on the user’s specification, with body, face, clothes and with the addition of all possible accessories (Meez, 2007); or the “selling of avatars”, pretty images ready to be downloaded into our cell phones (Chameleon, 2007).

So great is the strength of the presentations, the liveliness and effectiveness of these digital creatures, that we

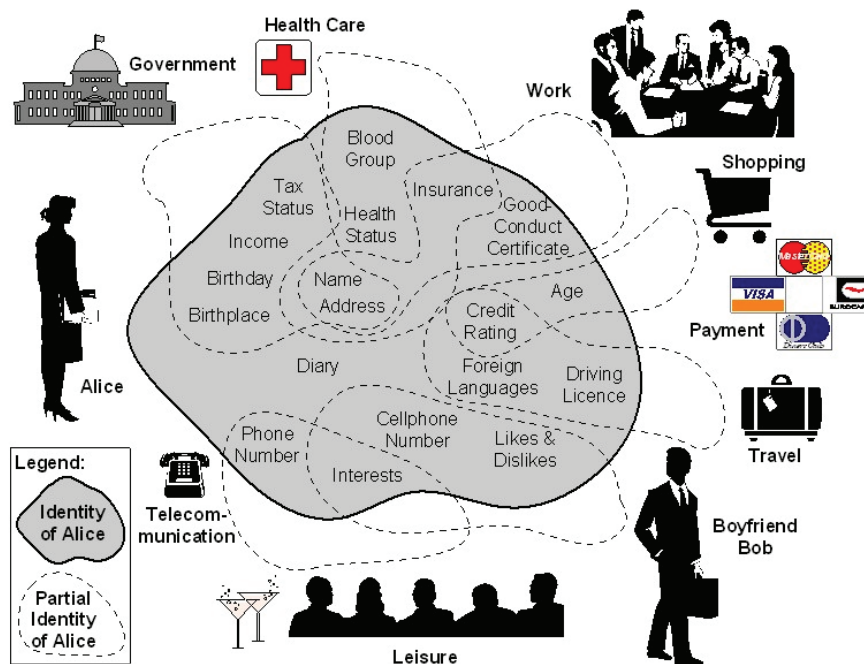
become uncertain whether we are in front of fictitious and unsubstantial entities, that is, virtual ones, or facing a different case. Perhaps we are witnessing a graft of realities of different grades or a *second reality*, a new existential state that surreptitiously slips between the real and the virtual as we usually understand them.

VID is born when “online identity” is born, simultaneously with the first computer game, named MUD (Multi User Dungeon), the famous 1978 EssexMUD (UCSB, 2007). This reference is also adopted by the researchers at the large European project PRIME (*Privacy and Identity Management for Europe*, <https://www.prime-project.eu/>), who have done a very thorough terminology effort on the galaxy of notions pertaining to identity. Quoting in summary form some of their work (Pfizmann & Hansen, 2006, pp. 24-25), we have:

«*Virtual identity.*

Virtual identity sometimes is used in the same meaning as digital identity or digital partial identity, but because of the connotation with “unreal, non-existent, seeming” the term is mainly applied to characters in

Figure 1. Representing the identity and partial identities of Alice (Source: Clauß & Köhntopp, 2001, cited in FIDIS document (FIDIS, 2005, p. 20))



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