Time: A Premise of Virtual Life

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Abstract. Why do humans aspire for a virtual life? The answer is important, because it can explain the phenomenon that we are fond of, or even addicted to virtual worlds such as computer games, on-line communities, avatars, and so on. This paper presents an account with respect to time. Emphasizing the importance of time to understand virtuality, the paper gives an answer based on the three principles: (1) Humans exist with time, (2) Humans experience and tend to resist the finitude of time, and (3) A way of resisting it is aspiration for a virtual life.

Keywords: human existence, time, virtual life, virtual world.

1 Introduction: Every Human Lives a Virtual Life

We often live computer supported virtual lives through on-line games, virtual worlds like *Second Life*, virtual reality systems, and so on. Not only computers but also traditional media such as TVs, books, and movies, serve as nice tools supporting virtual life. Human desire for a virtual life is not the one appearing suddenly together with computers. Such desire already existed before the birth of computers and multimedia technology [1]. For example, people had read novels and been moved by powerful but fictitious stories. In fact, everyone imagines, dreams, plans, and doubts. Just as we humans cannot live out of reality, we cannot live without virtual world, either. According to Pierre Levy, virtuality and reality are two important ways of human existence [2].

Then, why do humans aspire for a virtual life? There must be many plausible answers, which eventually help provide design rationales for systems supporting virtual life, as well as understand humans. This paper shows that time is an important premise of virtual life. Without time, one cannot think of the future nor remember the past. Because we live with time, we can imagine, plan, and recall. Without time, therefore, there is no virtual world. Virtual worlds are constructed over time span. This paper gives an answer to the question of why people long for a virtual life through the following three principles: (1) Humans exist with time, (2) Humans experience and tend to resist the finitude of time, and (3) A way of resisting it is aspiration for a virtual life.

2   Three Principles

In this section, the argument "Since humans are temporal being, they aspire for a virtual life" is explained in more detail by the three principles: (1) Humans exist with time, (2) Humans experience and tend to resist the finitude of time, and (3) A way of resisting it is aspiration for a virtual life.

2.1   Humans Exist with Time

While the present is about reality, the past and the future are more about virtuality. Therefore, the notion of time is a key to understand virtuality. In particular, Heidegger believed that humans cannot be understood only by reason, mind, etc., but also within time. From the early 20C, time became a crucial concept to understand human existence among western intellectuals. Heidegger's "Being and Time" [3] and Bergson's "Creative Evolution" [4] are perhaps the most influential literatures. According to Heidegger, the meaning of life is explained through the historicality of our existence [3]. Therefore, the existence is not fixed but more dynamic. The potential of our existence is fulfilled according to time. Psychologically, Zimbardo and Boyd also mentioned that different time perspectives affected our decisions to choose certain ways of living, suggesting six perspectives, e.g. past-oriented and future-oriented [5]. Time also affects human behaviors, e.g. time pressure negatively affects helping behaviors [6]. Our physical forms, perspectives, characteristics, and ways of thinking change with time. Human minds and decisions are always working together with time. Because of time, we recollect, regret, wait, fear, imagine and plan. Humans are the beings with time.

2.2   Experience and Resistance of the Finitude of Time

What happens when humans exist with time? As stated in Heraclitus' famous saying, "You cannot step twice into the same river", time is irreversible to us. Importantly, we feel impuissance about time in our everyday lives. Everyone dies as time goes by. Humans face the problems that change brings. We may have joy today, but not tomorrow. Happiness is transitory by nature. Time causes change, and it brings about human anxiety. As a living condition, anxiety has been analyzed and explained from psychological perspectives by Fritz Rieman [7]. We even suffer from the potential to suffer or get into problematic situations. Without time, we may not have such pain. We experience the finitude of time through death, pain and uncertain situations. As we know it, the first truth among four noble truths in Buddhism is that humans suffer. While many religious truths accept human suffering, humans tend to devise every activity to avoid the fate of death and pain [5]. The denial of it is like that of the fact that time has the end. A common phenomenon is that humans resist the finitude of time in order to free from anxiety and psychological stress.

2.3   Aspiration for a Virtual Life to Resistance of the Finitude of Time

"Timelessness" is an essence of Freud's view on the unconscious [8]. However, even the conscious could be timeless. In fantasy, for example, past, present and future are

united in one representation. A young single lady may imagine of a marriage in the future, and then suddenly think of yesterday's baseball games. Though human legs and arms are limited to move here and there, human thought is free and unlimited to go back to earliest childhood or to a point in the future. Human beings seek freedom and ways to overcome the finitude of time that they face in the real world, and move to a virtual world where it is not time-restrictive, by means of thought. Concerning this, Kim has described it as follows [1]:

> "Reality is a useful word that can symbolize various types of limitation, in that actions, words and plans are limited, in reality, with respect to time and space. There seems to be no way by which we, as humans, can escape reality. However, certain individuals aspire to overcome the limitations imposed by reality, and search for freedom and change. The question is how such aspirations may be realized. One way is to create virtual worlds or spaces. By living in a virtual space, humans can augment monotonous lives, and forget an embattled reality that has become hard and dreary." ([1], p. 616)

Virtual worlds are the spaces beyond the finitude of time and with the human mind. The success of virtual worlds on the net is deeply rooted in the human mind of longing for a virtual life [1]. In this respect, the idea of time is also understood as the creation of conscious mind [9], as Einstein said, "Space and time are modes by which we think, not conditions under which we live." Humans have freedom of thoughts. Using this freedom, they want to move to a world in which time does not dominate, which is a virtual world.

3   Conclusion

In this paper, I proposed the three principles in relation to time in order to give an account of the phenomenon that humans aspire for a virtual life. While admitting that they do not explain it completely and more work remains, I believe that this study sheds light on the importance of understanding time in the context of virtuality and its related systems.

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