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VIRTUAL ENVIRONMENTS AS SPACES OF SYMBOLIC CONSTRUCTION AND CULTURAL IDENTITY

Latin-American Virtual Communities

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Abstract. The aim of this work is to understand the sociopsychological and cultural realities of virtual communities as live spaces of meeting and high interaction framed within the Latin American context. The study will consist of a comparative ethnographic study of several Latin communities, using the tools of participant observation and focused interviews.

1. Approaching the Symbolic Dimension of Virtual Life

The present work has as a principal goal to assess the sociopsychological and cultural (symbols and meanings) realities of the virtual community group life framed in the Latin American context. Using a comparative ethnographic study of several Latin virtual communities, the sociopsychological and cultural phenomena of the virtual group in the sense expressed by Harré (1979), will be described.

The specific psychological phenomena and concepts central to this work are íntersubjectivity (Fernandez, 1989), group identity, symbolic communication, social acts (and its expressive dimension) and meaning processes. There's an obvious influence from Symbolic Interactionism, and Etogenics.

More than new channels of global communication, with CMC we are facing the birth of new social and cultural spaces of interaction for daily life. This symbolic and cultural meeting is a very complex and rich phenomenon that opens a new horizon of proposals and questions. Will it be the end of the ruler ideologies, or the birth of a new global unifying one? Habermass (1993) says that as long as there is two way communication in media, there will be public communities that fight homogenizing ideologies. CMC offers this double direction communication.

In this particular case, the project will be developed in the Internet Relay Chat environment. Despite the purely textual nature of the chat environment, it offers the versatility for the creation and maintenance of communities. Its commands and other features make IRC a very popular and attractive medium for communities to live in.

We define *virtual community* in the sense of Rheingold (1993) presented in his book *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*: "Virtual Communities are social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace".

To assess analytically the study of virtual communities, Jones (1997) proposes a distinction between cyberspace, within which the community operates (called virtual settlements), and the community itself. It is through the analysis of these virtual settlements (objective components), that my research will characterize and classify the properties of a virtual community. Those are the two faces of the same coin. The notion of interaction is central to virtual settlements (Jones, 1997). Virtual settlements are cyberspaces symbolically delineated by a topic or topics of interest inside which an interesting proportion of CMC interrelationship and interaction occurs. The existence of a virtual settlement implies the existence of a virtual community. The conditions necessary for the establishment of a virtual settlement are the following according to Jones (1997): (i) a minimum level of interactivity; (ii) a variety of communicators; (iii) common public space (where a significant portion of a community's interactive group CMC occurs); and (iv) a minimum level of sustained membership.

This work assumes technology not as a determinant of on-line life, but a prerequisite for the occurrence of the virtual community social phenomena (Fletcher, 1995). Virtual environments offer a unique space for the creation and recreation of group cultures, showing all the meaning and valorization processes involved in the sociopsychological interaction. The main objective is not to focus on the community members' intraconscious life, but on the *inter*conscious "space" of the communities. We see the virtual community as a whole sociopsychological phenomenon created by the interaction of its members, who belong and make their own íntersubjective dimension. The principal notion of culture assumed is that of Geertz (quoted by Van Maanem, 1990), who defines it as "webs of significance he (man) himself has spun". This shared symbolic and meaning delineation also explains our notion of group identity.

We can say that the major part of this research is of an exploratory nature, because its main objective is to describe and to understand the virtual communities phenomenon. The implicit tasks are: the description and recognition of common and proper expressive resources (culture) of the

communities under study; and to discover the codes, norms and meaning structures that shape and valorize the members' acts.

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