

## Ritual in Virtual World

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### Abstract

This paper investigates ritual in the physical world and cyberspace both in practice and metaphor. Traditionally, a tribe executes its culture inheriting in various kinds of rituals in which maturity ritual is especially important because of its functionality to empower the next generation by means of examining the necessary survival skills. However, there is neither obvious form nor proper content defined as maturity ritual for young people in more and more societies nowadays, because the essence of rapid changing in technology and cyberspace, in which more and more young people get occupied, tend to forget and ignore the physical experience. Instead of regarding rituals as vanishing, I'd rather consider rituals as performing necessary transformation to suit the novel definition in cyberspace. More and more teenagers perform a metaphor of ritual via accessing Internet, but in the mean while, we have no idea about what kind of content performing empowerment to them. As online games prevail in Internet cafe (coffee shop providing Internet connection popular in asia), the possibility to transform oneself into an avatar in the cyberspace attracts thousands of people to stay late in Internet cafe. The meaning and motivation of this event reveal the ongoing shift in maturity ritual for instance. To illustrate the ongoing phenomena of ritual transition from physical world to cyberspace, several cases are reviewed and possible interpretations of virtual world are discussed.

**Keyword:** virtual world, cyberspace, psychology.

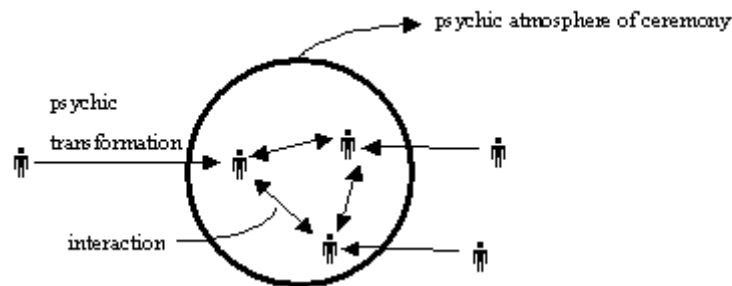
## **Introduction**

Although the terminology “virtual reality” is used in the fields of computer graphics, tele-operation, flight simulation, and etc., and so is “virtual world”, the connective property of Internet warmly embraces this term with its adaptation. One of the most important roles of the explosion of Internet, in my opinion, is not only to clarify the definition but also to magnify the deference of virtual world and real world. People power on their computers, hook on to the Internet, receive e-mail, chat or play online games with others, in a “virtual world” without confusion. On the other hand, they shut down their computers, go down stair to have a cup of coffee, and meet their colleague in a “real world.” Because of the empowerment of Internet technology, the possibility and necessity of shifting between virtual world and real world reach such an extent that never happened in the history.

Before the popularity of World Wide Web, the terminology of “virtual world” somehow remains a vague image, which may refer to an impression of unreal world. Fantastic fictions, supernatural experience, and all contribute to stimulate the imagination of virtual world. Publication, music, and art work can be considered as records of human’s mental activity and exhibit a world which is intangible and in a sense of “virtual.” However, in this kind of virtual world, people hopelessly share no interaction with the author and no connection with members getting immersed. For example, people in Taiwan, reading martial-hero novels, or even watching martial-hero movies, can only accept what the author has arranged and get into the “virtual world” constituted of their own imagination individually when the reading or a movie is going on. If there was something, before the Internet technology prevails, analogous to the property of virtual world in every aspect, in my investigation, it was

ritual.

If we cannot deny the importance of ritual affecting our culture developing, there is no excuse for us to pretend nothing happening in the virtual world and to ignore the effect resulted from it.



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Figure 1. Ritual model

One of the most wonderful abilities of human beings is to visualize their dreams by projecting current situations to the future. Rites, which exist in almost every culture, are the most important and effective means to make what a tribe dreams and visualizes into realization. The visualization is essentially “virtual” in contrast to the physical world, and thus, rites are in a metaphor of making “virtuality” into “reality” by confirming every participant’s self-confidence.

Generally speaking, since a rite is given an obvious aim to achieve in the future, it sets up a ceremony with proper psychic atmosphere by applying a specific scenario to the participants [Fig. 1]. The one who participates must experience a psychic transformation to play the expected role set by the scenario, and interact with other participants in a new behavior pattern resulted from his psychic transformation. To facilitate and enhance the transformation, utensils such as masks are usually adopted in some local religions in Taiwan, and this method also exists in many tribes in the

world. [5][6]

A rite should not be regarded as actors playing a preset scenario. Instead, a participant can interact with each other spontaneously, of course, according to the expectation surrounded by the ceremony's atmosphere. Thus, strong implication and confidence are established in the participant's mind.

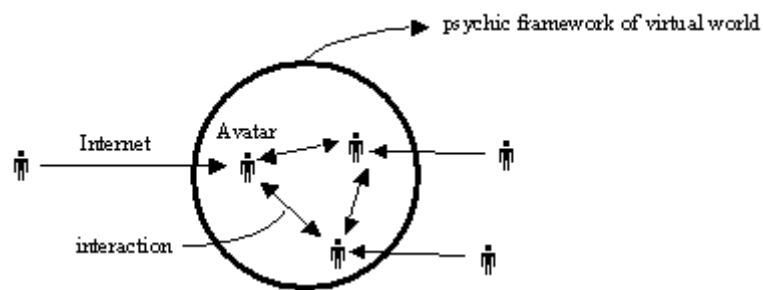


Figure 2. Virtual world model

Virtual world, as fulfilled on the Internet, shows much similarity with ritual in metaphor [Fig. 2]. The psychic transformation of each participant is via Internet, which basically sets no limitation in geographical proximity and results in a corresponding avatar in cyberspace. Avatars can interact with each other in the virtual world rendered by an atmosphere, which is defined as psychic framework by Heim [1]. Virtual worlds such as activeworld (<http://www.activeworld.com/>) and cybertown (<http://www.cybertown.com/>) provide avatar option to set the appearance of each avatar, which is similar to the usage of masks in traditional rituals. However, even though a virtual world does not support any appearance option, appearing in a virtual world is essentially wearing a mask in every sense including the usage of anonymous or nickname, and the distorted or fake personal information or affection.

The powerful feature of virtual world model over ritual model is that a virtual world

can be for any purpose, and often, aimless conversation constitutes the whole virtual world experience. This can be easily understood because the cost of involving in a virtual world is largely reduced by Internet technology. No wonder that Heim proposed cyberspace as meditative tools and advance for the Internet the minimal spaces of Zen.

Ironically, the most successful application of virtual world with precise purpose is online game, which not only takes advantage of Internet technology but also sets up vivid psychic atmosphere for thousands of potential participants. In contrast to the aimless conversation and chaotic navigation in many Internet applications, online games present strong impression of the story's background, obvious mission to complete, and negotiation or interaction between players. All the features above show that online games own the maximal similarity to rituals.

## **Rite of Passage**

Most cultures practice a rite of passage for young people. "In many Native American traditions, at least historically, young men were sent away from the tribe for a time to live alone in the wilderness in order to be initiated as warriors.... The rite also mark tribal recognition of that acceptance." [2]

In ancient China, young men at age of 20 and young women at age of 15 were ready to attend a Jia-Guan (wearing head decoration for adult) ceremony held by the elders in the family. They took some tests which were designed by the elders to prove their necessary knowledge, techniques, and endurance before the ceremony.

In most Native Taiwan traditions, the education for young people were exacting and challenging. The rite of passage was divided into 2 to 3 ceremonies, each separated by 3 to 5 years. The capabilities to be strictly checked included hunting techniques, ceremony knowledge, dancing style, planting techniques, channeling potentiality, and

etc. [3]

Nowadays, the traditional rite of passage either disappears for most people in Taiwan or even remains a corpse that is performed in very few schools or organizations.

However, if it happens, this empty formality may perform as the following stereotype in Taiwan. “We hope to express our welfare and expectation to students by holding an maturity ceremony. Candidates for graduate are arranged to carry out community service, visiting local elders to accept welfare, tramping eggs to symbolize the new born beginning, and drinking the wine of passage.”[4]

## **A Culture and Its Ritual**

In the examples described in the previous section, it is obvious that most ancient or primitive tribes practice rites of passage not only in a well-established form but also with its precise corresponding capability to empower. According to the surrounding natural and social environment, this kind of culture needs a selective functionality to choose suitable members for its tribal development and continuance. Thus, we may confidently come to a conclusion as the following description. The more clearly a culture expects something in its future, the more precisely it practices its rite of passage.

On the other hand, many cultures in the world suffer an embarrassing period to find their kernel values between their broken traditions and the overwhelming variety of modern cultures. For example, people in Taiwan are pervaded with anxiety of unknown future and almost never establish common values for its culture.

Consequently, people in this culture have no idea of what to empower their next generation, and thus, rite of passage becomes ambiguous and disappeared finally.

Unquestionably, a new definition of maturity for each teenager will come after a culture confirms its common value.

## Ongoing Alternative Rituals

In Taiwan, it is very often that two unfamiliar men in the public occasion become friendly after exchange their experience of military service. This experience not only is an obligation for an adult man in Taiwan but also plays the role of rite of passage common recognized in the society, which was pervaded with the common value resulted from two world wars that an adult was able to protect his tribe against invasion. However, the only concern of warfare is replaced by other issues such as world peace and ecology. As the common values changes, the rite of passage changes in form and metaphor.

The motorcycle racing of teenagers on the street on every weekend night should not simply be considered as traffic violation. They are actually performing, in my opinion, a distorted version of rite of passage. This kind of events shares so many common features with rituals that some teenagers consider as important ceremony for their maturity. The psychic atmosphere is set up by the anticipation and applause of crowded passengers on the sidewalk. Moreover, policemen contribute to this scenario by set up some checkpoints to disrupt the racing by arresting racers. The goal for these teenagers is very obvious: racing as fast as possible, escaping from the arrest of police, and winning the applause of crowd. Those who pass the challenges will establish self-confidence and receive feeling of recognition by the society. These young racers in Taiwan are actually participants of the forbidden ritual conducted by the watching and anticipation of people and police.

In the speech given by Mike Jiang [7], Associate Vice President of Acer GameZone, Some events happened in the online games are worth of notice. “At least twenty couples got married directly because of their same interest in playing online games since I began my job in Acer 1997”, Jiang said, “and some of them even held online

wedding ceremonies to share their joy with other online game players.” He gave another example, “Some game managers also find that some teenagers call their friends to have a “group fight” with another group of teenagers by playing online games in Internet cafe on the weekend night.”

These examples show that either the traditional ceremonies can be planted to the virtual world or the ongoing activities in virtual world emerge as rituals in metaphor.

## **Conclusion**

Rituals, the traditional methods of empowerment, can be considered as a specific prototype of virtual world. This method is also well used in some group therapy by conducting a psychic opera. As the coming age of therapy and the emergence of virtual world, Internet technology plays an extensive role including ritual and therapy.

Moreover, The new definition of maturity ritual should not passively rely on the traditional form that almost loses every essence but should be a serious job for each teenager to define it and explore all aspects of it in the world, especially in the virtual world. Certainly, this must come after the establishment of new common values.

If there is any reason why cyberspace is took as such important issue to help young people establishing their own maturity ritual, it must be that Internet technology makes it easy and convenient to perform ritual anytime and anywhere.

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