

Islamic Perspective: Virtual Worlds as a Western-Centric Technology

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Abstract

Although the number of virtual worlds and their participants is growing rapidly, this phenomena is primarily a Western Culture dominated environment. There is little if any attention paid to other cultures. This article examines this issue from an Islamic perspective? It examines the assumption that if virtual worlds are to become a truly global platform for collaboration, particularly in multinational enterprises, then it will be essential to "encode" the flexibility for social interactions to take place in a way that is sensitive to other cultures.

ACM Categories: H.5.2, K.4.2

Keywords: Culture, Design, Human Factors, Islam

Introduction

When a virtual world has a Western-centric design, its effectiveness and usability is limited. It cuts out non-Western cultures. Although the goal might be fostering global intercultural collaboration, "one size does not fit all."

Even in the global enterprise, there are still cultural divides. The growth of Internet users worldwide is estimated to be approximately 1.2 billion (Internet World Stats, 2007), an increase of almost ten fold compared to eight years ago. It has accompanied the advancement of computer mediated communication technologies (CMCs). With such growth, we assume that the world of 'virtual' is an emerging phenomenon in which people will continue to intensify and engage in globally distributed collaboration. Multinational corporations (MNCs) are leaders in use of communication technology as a platform for global virtual teams. They communicate their business ideas, and tele-commute across vast distances. Team members with different cultural backgrounds continue to experience intra- and inter-group conflict. Working together is inhibited by differences in value systems, attitudes, beliefs, and communication styles. Misunderstandings are easy to come by.

Virtual worlds are comprised of individuals, virtual communities, and global virtual teams working across organizations. A virtual community is a new social 'life form' surfacing from the Internet and CMC (Stolterman, Agren, & Croon, 1999).

Virtual worlds allow a type of intimacy that is not present in traditional collaboration systems. But are they a comfortable platform through which persons can collaborate? Culture does matter, even at a distance. It is even more important when persons have "face to face" meetings. Should one's cultural values need to adjust to the technology of virtual

worlds? Or should virtual world technology be re-engineered so that it does not repress cultural traditions?

Several issues highlight the Western-centric nature of the virtual worlds. The Internet was created in the United States of America, a Western country. As such, the design of its interface, IT applications, and usability is a total reflection of the Western cultural values. Since virtual world is a Western phenomenon, the cultural values are different from the non-Western cultures such as the Eastern or Islamic cultures. The fundamental issue to explore here thus relates to the compatibility between technological fit vs. cultural fit (Zakaria, Stanton, & Sarkar-Barney, 2004).

Will virtual worlds emerge as a phenomenon supporting globally distributed collaboration in Middle Eastern countries where the dominant culture lies in the Islam, its values, beliefs and traditions? If the virtual world platform is going to be useful, effective, and attractive for international collaboration, issues of cultural compatibility must be considered in their systems design.

As people collaborate virtually, their communication styles depend largely on content or context of the messages sent and received. "Religion plays a vital role in Arab culture, influencing most decisions in life and business." (Elashmawi & Harris, 2000, p. 51) Studies of Arab Middle Eastern culture have also described three basic cultural values in common: collectivism, honor and hospitality (Feghali, 1997).

When people are engaged in the distributed collaboration in the virtual world, it is critical to avoid misunderstanding and misinterpretations. Participants must comprehend accurately the meaning of what is said. How things are said is as important as what actually is said. The communication style one uses for generating ideas, exchanging opinions, sharing knowledge, and expressing ideas is culture centric.

Things can easily go wrong. Cultural barriers stemming from different managerial communication styles may adversely effect collaboration, slowing down negotiations, deliberation of ideas, self-disclosure, conflict resolution, and coordination (Thorne, 2003).

Culture-related management problem areas include overcoming high anxiety and uncertainty of feelings (Gudykunst, 1997), managing conflicting and frustrating situations (Adler, 2002), saving face in confrontational situations (Ting-Toomey, 1999), making effective group decisions (Oetzel, 2005), using language and non-verbal communication (Lim, 2003; Tayeb, 2003), and adjusting to and acculturating in a new environment (Kim, 2005).

In order to understand the emergence of virtual world from a cultural perspective, we can use the cultural lens from Hall (1976). He suggested that "culture is communication and communication is culture." Based on the reviews of the relevant cross-cultural management and intercultural communication theories, Hall's (1976) cultural dimension that he gave the term "context" is an effective lens to explain the phenomenon of globally distributed collaboration. He developed a cultural framework that explains how much and what information is required for successful communication. Context is based on the concept of attributions. It lies on a continuum that varies according to whether people come from high context (HC) to low context (LC) cultures. These cultural contexts have their own unique identity, language, systems of nonverbal communication, material culture, history, and social structures.

Communicative behavior is strongly rooted in one's cultural background. Manifestations of culture are often shown in a person's intercultural communicative behaviors. Different cultures communicate using different styles, and this has an impact on their collaboration. For example, in high context cultures (e.g. Malaysia, Korea, Japan, France, and etc.), people put more emphasis on non-verbal cues and in low context cultures (e.g. USA, UK, Italy, Australia, and etc.), people rely more on words spoken or written. The concept of high context and low context communication styles is well-supported (Bresnahan, Shearman, Lee, Ohashi, & Mosher, 2002; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988; Gudykunst, Matsumoto, Ting-Toomey, Nishida, Kim, & Heyman, 1996, Kim, 2005; LeBaron, 2003; Pekerti & Thomas, 2003).

The theory also encapsulates the significance of that intercultural understanding needed for facilitating effective communication between individuals from different cultural backgrounds. Culture is a system for creating, sending, storing, and processing information (Hall & Hall, 1990). (See also the larger community of researchers who share a common interest in investigating intercultural communications including Adler, 2002; Chen & Starosta, 1998; Gudykunst & Ting-Toomey, 1988; Triandis, 1994). Hall's theory has been applied significantly in the context of face-to-face in organizations, yet it has not been tested in the virtual worlds. When people collaborate in virtual world, people still maintained their communication styles as if they communicate in face-to-face encounter (Zakaria, 2006).

The design of virtual worlds should not be dominated by the West. Instead, IT designers require a total acculturation of non-Western cultural values such as Islamic culture, recognizing an alternative 'total way of life' by the Middle Eastern people. Without such sensitivity from designers, it is very difficult to imagine

how people from diverse cultural backgrounds can adopt, adapt and efficiently utilize the technology systems of virtual worlds.

A Virtual Burka?

From a cultural perspective, the followings are three most relevant issues in virtual worlds:(1) creating an Islamic identity, images and appearances in virtual world, (2) maintaining appropriate communication styles and using appropriate languages, and (3) opportunities for building relationships and rapport. These issues are important when IT designers develop applications that are culturally-sensitive for virtual users such as online gamers, virtual communities, and global virtual teams.

When designers want to create an Avatar for the virtual gamers, they need to highly consider the image and identity (e.g. clothing) of the female players in particular. For Islamic women, they need to cover their heads with scarf and appropriate piece of cloth and the costumes also need to cover the whole body. As it is now, in all the virtual games, the women seemed to dress in a varied form of costumes, sometimes more exposed, which are not deemed as appropriate for the Muslim female audience. As in communication styles, Arabic people normally use vague, indirect, and ambiguous styles (Zaharna, 1995) as compared to Western styles who are comfortable to speak directly, concisely, and straight to the point (Gudykunst, 1998). In this respect, Arabic people prefer non-verbal cues more than Western people who prefer verbal cues. Thus, certain form of CMC technologies such as email may not be appropriate for the Arabic people because it is lack in the non-verbal elements.

Another example is the collectivistic value that is ascribed by the Arabic people. They like to work in groups and teams, and relationship building is considered as their priority agenda when conducting business transactions. This value contradicts with the Western values that often prefer to work as individuals. They also focus more on the task orientation, and relationship building becomes secondary. Arabic people often sacrifice their own advancement for the common good of a team's project (Hasan & Ditsa, 1999). They prefer a situation-centeredness, teamwork, and collectivism rather than self-reliance.

These key issues rooted in deep cultural identities have not been fully explored and understood empirically. Further questions must be investigated. How can we design and create an identity and image in the virtual world that reflects female and male Islamic values? What are the communication styles and languages that are acceptable and appropriate?

How do females and males develop social relationships during their virtual collaboration without crossing their religious and cultural boundaries? What business ethics do Islamic people employ in the virtual world that complies with mutually understood rules? How important is time orientation in the virtual world when people are segregated by differences in time zones?

The research agenda for virtual worlds in the next few years should emphasize more the cultural perspective so that people can better utilize and optimize any sophisticated technology available for distributed collaboration. IT designers and multinational organizations need to be fully aware of the myriad cultural issues impeding on the design, applicability, compatibility, and effectiveness of the IT as recommended for use in the virtual worlds. Any cultural clashes would lead to detrimental effects on the success of intercultural collaboration conducted virtually. Better to develop the right design now.

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