

Disembodiment is not enough – Ageing in the Virtual Space

TALK BY ELMAR STRACKE (UNI BAYREUTH) AT IACAP 2022

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On this talk

1. Dimensions of Ageing
2. Fourth Spaces: avatar or personal identity
3. What social and existential ageing means for Fourth Spaces
4. Conclusion

Dimensions of Ageing

Up to 12 dimensions of age and ageing (Rüberg 1991):

calendar,
biological,
social,
existential,

administrative,
functional,
psychological,
legal,

ethical,
historical,
personal,
religious.

Dimensions of Ageing: Social Age(ing)

- Adaptation to roles, behaviors, and positions of a certain age category
- Closely linked both to age cohorts and age groups, follows life events
- Depends on other dimensions of ageing, e.g. biological age as cultural code
- Social construction with strong influence on one's identity
- Cultural codes of age-appropriate behavior can be a relief or a burden
- Cf. Krekula et al. 2018, Rüber 1991, Neugarten 1981, Rothermund/Brandstädter 2003.

Dimensions of Ageing: Existential Age(ing) – 1/3

- Subjective perception of one's position on one's own timeline (Knell 2017)
- Increasing share of the past and decreasing share of the future (Amery 1966)
- Rooted in the experience that one's own lifetime and the world's lifetime do not coincide (Blumenberg 2001 [1986]):
„the fundamental liminal experience of a world which seems not to prescribe any limits besides death“
- Typical expressions: „With 90 years of life, I have had enough“ or „I still have most of my life before me!“

Dimensions of Ageing: Existential Age(ing) – 2/3

- Depends on one's assumed life expectancy.
- Requires a finite life span (?)
- Existential age is limited by our consciousness: no conscious perception of birth or death -> people are indifferent to dying now vs coma now and dying in 20 years (Nagel 2012)
- Biological age can carry on while existential has ended (or been interrupted)

Dimensions of Ageing: Existential Age(ing) – 3/3

- Has an impact on people's behavior (Lynchard and Radvansky 2012, Carsten and Lang 2007, Kass et al. 2003).
- With approaching death (increasing existential age), people try to morally „conclude“ their lives (e.g. Schopenhauer 1841).
- Reduction of curiosity or compassion might be a result of an increasing *absolute* existential age (Knell 2017, Kass et al. 2003 or Montaigne 1595).

Fourth Spaces

	Personal Identity based	Avatar based
Example	Most social networks (e.g. Facebook)	MMORPG (e.g. World of Warcraft)
Disembodiment	Real body in the virtual world	Virtual body
Biological Age(ing)	On platform: Subject to manipulation, high level of independence	On platform: Not necessary and often not existent, highest level of independence
Social Age(ing)	Access and platform behavior	Access and platform behavior
Existential Age(ing)	Access and platform behavior	Access and platform behavior

Fourth Spaces: Personal Identity based

	Social Age(ing)	Existential Age(ing)
Access	If no other primary access criterion is given, social age often fills the gap (intragenerational open virtual spaces are rarely successful)	Reallocation of time budget (e.g. elderly people tend to consciously reduce contacts and concentrate on close, meaningful relations)
Platform behavior	Highly influenced by social age	No strong influence (?) unless the virtual space is part of narrative coherence

Fourth Spaces: Avatar based

	Social Age(ing)	Existential Age(ing)
Access	Choice of platform statistically influenced, but in principle not of concern („reinvent yourself“), escape mechanism	Allocation of time, setting priorities, but in principle escape mechanism.
Platform behavior	Determined by internal mechanisms, e.g. seniority through experience, in-platform wealth, early registration date etc.	Not determined by biological constraints yet the same patterns: <ul style="list-style-type: none">• Decreasing curiosity• Reduction of willingness to meet new people• Decreasing expectation for self-fulfillment

Age(ing) in the Virtual World - Conclusion

- Escaping biology does not mean one can escape age(ing)
- Both social age(ing) and existential age(ing) still apply for members of Fourth Spaces
- They even apply when there is a very strong disembodiment (e.g. Avatar-based spaces)
- Fourth Spaces are not made for eternity for everyone
- Thank you very much for your attention!



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About me

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