



Sexual presence: Toward a model inspired by evolutionary psychology



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ABSTRACT

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Presence is a phenomenon widely studied by different scientific disciplines. It can be defined as the feeling of being immersed in a reality generated by a range of simulation and immersive technologies, like virtual reality (VR) and related technologies. In this paper we explore a particular variety of this feeling, namely *sexual presence*, using evolutionary psychology as a theoretical framework. We translate differences between women and men in sexual imagery and in sexual behaviour into a *sexual presence model*, introducing *proto*, *core* and *extended sexual presence* as conceptual layers explaining presence. Our aim is to give an evolutionary interpretation of sexual presence, in light of recent findings, and to provide some new ideas for future studies.

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1. Introduction

1.1. The concept of presence

In the last twenty years, authors from different scientific backgrounds have contributed to the definition of presence (Heeter, 1992; Lee, 2004a; Loomis, 1992; Marsh, Wright, & Smith, 2001; Riva, Waterworth, Waterworth, & Mantovani, 2011; Sheridan, 1992; Slater, Usoh, & Steed, 1994; Steuer, 1992; Zahorik & Jenison, 1998). Presence as a psychological state akin to perceptual illusion is to be understood as the interplay between an observer and a technological medium channelling the observer's senses in an immersive fashion. The immersive effect of a given immersive experience is measured by the feeling of presence, which is defined as a psychological state or subjective perception causing an individual to give in to the illusion created by a computerized system (Sanchez-Vives & Slater,

2005). This illusion consists of forgetting both the external environment and the immersive technology hardware in favour of the simulated virtual content (Sadowski & Stanney, 2002). Presence is therefore derived from perceptions that result from perceptual-motor determinants, which tie the subjective perspective to a limited set of possible viewpoints (Renaud et al., 2007, 2010, 2011). These determinants are most likely mediated by emotional states and biological predispositions (Bouchard, St-Jacques, Robillard, & Renaud, 2008; Renaud, Bouchard, & Proulx, 2002; Renaud et al., 2011; Renaud, Rouleau, Granger, Barsetti, & Bouchard, 2002; Schubert, Friedman, & Regenbrecht, 1999). Presence as a psychological phenomenon shares commonalities with other cognitive processes that control the individual's actions in different contexts (Lee, 2004b; Riva, Davide, & Ijsselstein, 2003; Riva et al., 2011).

Despite the fact that presence appears to be a rather modern phenomenon involving complex new media, by 15,000 B.C.E. the Cro-Magnon man had already evolved a brain capable of creating and experiencing complex visual representations, especially with cave paintings. The caves of Lascaux, in France, for example, demonstrate that our

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ancestors were creating representations of reality in which they recombined components of the actual world in an interactive, multisensory experience. These paintings (mostly representing animal hunts, shamans or magical figures, and sexual scenes), which were experienced as reality itself by spectators, were lit up by flickering oil lamps that brought vivid illusory percepts to the foreground. This must have added to the sense that painters and spectators were immersed in a world apart, a sort of multisensory, all-consuming experience that engaged sight, sound, smell, and touch in one of the first conscious virtualizations of the physical world (Heim, 1995; Mioduser, 2005). The same level of identification happened with sexual and religious rituals, from hunting and fighting scenes in paintings and other representations to the catharsis in Greek tragedies: by being a part of the scene, sharing feelings and emotions, individuals could learn from the situation and replicate it in real life (Bennett & Feldman, 1981, p. 171; Groenen, 2000; Malinowski, 1929; Stone, 1995, 304 pp.). All these events were designed to stimulate participation and emulation: an increased feeling of presence could help maintain attentional engagement in the illusion-inducing display, therefore favouring the development of cognitive states to be translated into real actions (Bell, 2009, 368 pp.; Pagel, 2012).

As a general human experience, the feeling of presence has been studied from two different but complimentary perspectives, the volitional and the cognitive (Leontjev, 1978, 1981; Pacherie, 2006, 2008). In this sense, Riva et al. (2011) consider presence to be a neuropsychological construction that is the product of both volitive and cognitive processes; they say that presence is “the intuitive perception of successfully transforming intentions into action (enaction)” (Riva et al., 2011). Presence is closely related to our goals and to all the actions and operations we make to achieve them. For Riva and colleagues, presence is a single feeling that can be divided into three different sub-processes, which are defined as steps of a complex and mostly unconscious form of supervision of actions and experience. *Proto presence* is an unconscious process involving body movements and motor intentions of which we are not aware (Riva, 2009; Riva et al., 2011). *Core presence* is a conscious process that first primes the intended action, then sustains and guides it, and finally monitors its effects in the present. *Extended presence* is related to the consciousness of future intentions; it involves emotional and cognitive aspects and feelings about the self's future expectations (Riva et al., 2011). These three levels of presence are deeply connected to the evolution of the self (Damasio, 1999), that is to the consciousness of the continuity of the self in different contexts.

In this paper we will provide a tentative new point of view about a special kind of presence, sexual presence. The concept of sexual presence was first introduced by Lombard and Jones (2004) to describe the particular psychological, cognitive and physical feelings generated by pornography, i.e. by watching others having sex through special media. This narrow view of sexual presence can be extended to the experience of sexuality through immersive means, either as spectator or actor (Lombard & Jones, 2013; Renaud et al., 2012; Renaud, Trottier, Nolet, et al., 2013;

Trottier et al., 2012). It is worth noting that observing others having sex must have been a very common activity in our plio-pleistocenic environment. Nowadays sexual media content is consumed by millions of people every day around the world, and the main purpose of the “adult entertainment industry” (papers, internet, pictures etc.) is to make the individual feel psychologically and physically involved in the content. This becomes more evident if we think about current cyber-sex, erotic chat-lines, or erotic telephone-lines (Lombard & Jones, 2004).

1.2. Gender differences in sexual presence

1.2.1. How can we identify proto, core, and extended sexual presence?

According to Janssen (2011), sexual arousal is an emotional and motivational condition with several components, from genital response to sexual desire, that are thought to lead individuals to engage in sexual behaviour. Even though this construct is still under investigation by the psychological and medical research community, over the years a large number of studies have tried to develop a sexual arousal model in order to identify and recognize what sexual arousal is and what its components are (Barlow, 1986; Janssen, 2011; Sachs, 2007; Singer, 1984; Wiegel, Scepkowski, & Barlow, 2007). Despite this, everyone seems to agree that the female sexual arousal model should be different from the male one. Sexual presence as a feeling of being emotionally, physically and psychologically aroused by simulated sexual stimuli is closely related to sexual arousal and sexual behaviour, and we can therefore hypothesize that the three steps of Riva's model are different for men and women. And, at least for men, one of the main indicators of sexual arousal is represented by penile erection (even if it cannot always be seen as a *real* display of arousal; Gordon & Carey, 1995; Chivers, Seto, Lalumiere, Laan, & Grimbos, 2010).

Consistent with these arguments, we tried to identify proto, core and extended sexual presence in sexual behaviour using one of the main sexual behaviour paradigms in the literature. In 1984, Singer presented a three-stage model of the process of sexual arousal, which can be used to describe sexual presence in men and women. The first stage, *aesthetic response*, is an affective reaction to an attractive figure, which produces an increase in interest toward the object of attraction. This process involves eye and head movements toward the object. We can also say that this process involves both cognitive and volitional aspects. The main goal, which is an adaptive one, is to get closer to the person of interest and potentially have sexual intercourse with him or her. Therefore, the first stage can be described as proto presence. *Approach response*, the second stage, is a direct consequence of the first and involves bodily movement toward the goal and an increase in attention. This stage can be referred to as core presence. The last stage is *genital response*, a physical reaction to the closer proximity to the object. This response is driven by feedback from the object of interest, which leads to sexual arousal at the genital level. It is also mostly unconscious and uncontrollable, like proto presence, which is seen as an unconscious aesthetic and genital response.

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