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# TRUST PERFORMANCES AND DRAMATURGICAL PLAYS IN VIRTUAL TEAMS

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## ABSTRACT

*The paper uses the dramaturgical perspective for conceptualising trust development within temporary virtual teams. The underlying assumption is that temporary teams do not have the luxury of time, which according to the traditional trust theories, enables familiarity among project participants and promotes trust development. Yet, in these teams, trust needs to develop quickly and it is important that it lasts throughout the short duration of the project lifecycle. Using the metaphor of a theatre, the dramaturgical model of trust relationships is developed and is used to present actors, co-actors and audience as all playing a key role during the scripting, staging and performing phases of virtual plays. Particular importance is given to the interactions between these players at the performance stage. As it is argued, these interactions elicit the process of trust development within the temporary setting of virtual teams constituting to a type of trust relationship that is mutually negotiated and jointly constructed. This type of trust is called situated trust and emerges from the scripted and unscripted computer-mediated interactions of virtual players.*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

There is a widely recognised view that trust, as the positive and confident expectation in the behaviour of another party (Cook and Wall, 1980), is a vital requirement and a ‘need to have’ quality for effective virtual teams. Despite the recent overwhelming interest however, the character of trust and its development within virtual teams have not been fully appreciated in the literature. Virtual teams consist of geographically dispersed individuals who interact for a short period of time, through inter-dependent tasks guided by a common purpose with links strengthened by webs of communication technologies (Lipnack and Stamps, 1997). Based on these characteristics, the formation and development of trust within virtual teams may not be an easy task (Handy, 1995) or a task similar to the formation and development of trust in traditional face-to-face settings. Indeed, within the traditional organizational literature an important antecedent of trust is the degree of familiarity with other people; i.e. the more we get to know others then the more likely it is that we trust them (Lewicki and Bunker, 1996). With particular reference to temporary face-to-face work arrangements, Meyerson et al (1996) present the concept of swift trust, which may flourish even though the traditional antecedents seem to be missing. They suggest that swift trust could be strong and ‘resilient’ enough to survive the life of a temporary group since it centres around predispositions, categorical assumptions and theories as well as the competent and faithful enactment of clear roles and members’ associated duties. However, in the case of virtual teams, these factors may not exist in their entirety or may not exist at all.

Motivated by the need to better understand trust within virtual teams, the paper uses the dramaturgical perspective based on the theory of impression management (Goffman, 1959). Since the mid 80s, impression management has begun to gain popularity in the management and organizational literatures, but despite some recognition of its potential contribution in information systems (see

Beard, 1996), this perspective has so far been excluded in recent discussions on virtuality and virtual team behaviour; this paper will fill part of this gap.

Impression management is primarily concerned with the behaviour people exhibit for others in order to create and maintain the desired perceptions of themselves (Schlenker, 1980). In doing so, impression management makes up the everyday dramas and is thus also known as dramaturgical. In Goffman's (1959) classic work 'The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life', 'actors' engage in 'performances' in various 'settings' for particular 'audiences' in order to shape their 'definition of the situation'. Accordingly, performance in a dramaturgical scenario is "all the activity of a given participant on a given occasion which serves to influence in any way any of the other participants" (Goffman, 1959: 26). The others, who contribute to such performances and may be referred to as the audience, observers, and/or co-participants (ibid), have a vital role to play in the performance. All the players contribute to the definition of the situation they come to experience. In this scenario, actor and co-actors jointly construct their identity in a series of negotiations and renegotiations. This paper therefore suggests that it is through these interactions that trust is developed and that the trust, which characterises virtual project teams, is situated rather than swift. Indeed, the underlining argument of this paper is that dramaturgical acts, notably those of scripting, staging and performing, are all important for the successful completion of a virtual project and for creating and developing trust images.

## 2. DRAMATURGY AND TRUST DEVELOPMENT IN VIRTUAL TEAMS

As with theatrical plays, the key performance elements in organizational dramas are: actor and co-actors, audience, roles and expectations shaping the script, the stage and the actual performance which is constituted by verbal and nonverbal behaviour (Gardner, 1992). Based on these, the dramaturgical model of trust development shown in figure 1 presents actors, co-actors and audience as all playing a key role during the scripting, staging and performing phases of a virtual play. Of equal importance are the interactions (arrows) between these players, which as it will be argued in this paper elicit the process of trust development within the temporary setting of virtual environment. The role of the latter, i.e. the environment, is vital in our understanding of trust relationships since it will enable us on the one to contextualise the performance and where this is staged, and on the other to better comprehend the exercise of impressionistic behaviours that can be elicited within the virtual setting. In what follows, the main factors that comprise the dramaturgical model are explained and following from this, the case of a virtual play directed by TeleCo is used to illustrate the acts of scripting, staging and performing and consequently developing trust relations.

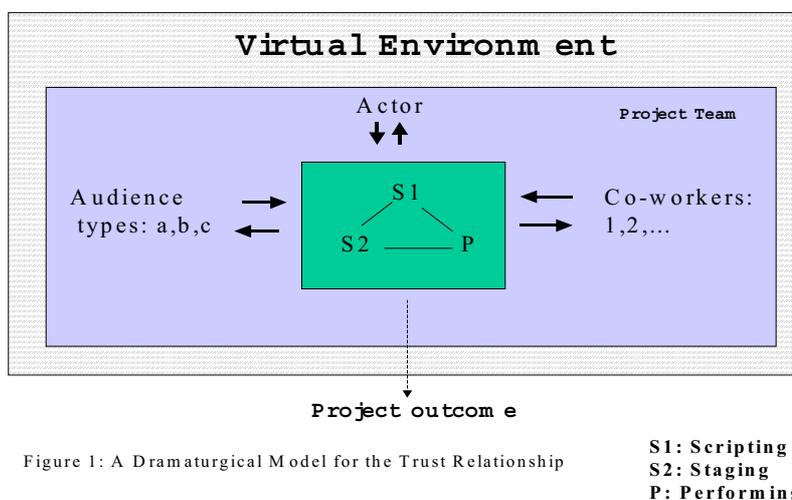


Figure 1: A Dramaturgical Model for the Trust Relationship

**S1: Scripting**  
**S2: Staging**  
**P: Performing**

## 2.1 The Virtual Environment: Potentials for Impression building

Virtuality has been defined as a space ‘which only attains reality by means of interfacing’ (Sotto, 1997: 42) via the media of information and communication technologies. An inherent part of such space is said to be that of ‘playfulness’ (ibid). As Rheingold puts it (1991:373) ‘[play] is the first thing most people do when they find themselves immersed in a virtual world’. Being playful, according to Romanyshyn (1989) allows individuals to get away from the ‘real’ world, to ‘lift off’, ‘depart from earth’, ‘escape death’ and ‘turn on the dream’ (in Sotto, 1997: 46). Accordingly, virtuality provides opportunities to both organizations (Zigurs and Qureshi, 2000) and individuals (Turkle, 1995) to project desired images. Turkle, in her book ‘Life on the screen’ (1995), gives several illustrations of such role-playing experiences. As she puts it: “[virtual communities] blur the boundaries between self and game, self and role, self and simulation. ... But people don’t just become who they play, they play who they are or who they want to be or who they don’t want to be. Players sometimes talk about their real selves as a composite of their characters and sometimes talk about their screen persona as means for working on their RL [real] life” (p.192). From a dramaturgical therefore perspective, virtuality takes on the role of a theatre that hosts performances; it provides the tools, equipment, ‘costumes’ and other facilities that enable performances to take place. In this way, the virtual environment becomes a space for various ‘plays’ to commence where actors engage in performances adopting roles based on selected scripts. The role of the other parties (i.e. co-actors and audience) is important in such theatrical performances. As Goffman put it (1959:20) “the others, however passive their role may seem to be, will themselves effectively project a definition of the situation by virtue of their response to the individual and by virtue of any lines of action they initiate to him”. This issue is presented in more detail in the following section that takes a focus on virtual ‘players’ and is used to discuss how ‘others’ influence trust development.

## 2.2 The Players

### -The virtual team worker as an actor

Each individual team member could be an actor in the virtual work space. This individual may already be attached to a physically-based or a virtual organization or work on his/her own as an independent contractor or work through an agent that assigns projects and roles to him/her as and when they are available. Two requirements are important for an individual to become a virtual actor. Firstly, s/he needs to be part of a network. Members of a network are interlinked forming a web of relationships and function within a frame of reference. In this way, a net appears as an entrapment (Rafaeli and Sudweek, 1998) since when part of a network or a web you are entrapped and movements are limited within that web only. Castells (1996) similarly explains that “the topology defined by networks determines that the distance (or intensity or frequency of interaction) between two points (or social positions) is shorter (or more frequent or more intense) if both points are nodes in a network than if they do not belong to the same network” (p.470). These networks can expand integrating new nodes and yet be able to survive as long as they can share the same communication codes, e.g. values, procedures or performance goals. Following from this, the second requirement is the need to have presence within that network. Individuals for example may show their presence in the ‘play’ by sending electronic messages to other members within the network to say that they are still there, to give an update on work progress, to reply to somebody else’s question or to provide feedback. Image building of trust could take place in any of these interactions and if successful would contribute to an individual being seen as competent, credible and motivated to serve the team’s interest; these images in turn provide the basis for an effective team relationship that can last throughout the duration of the project.

### -Virtual Team Members as co-actors

Even though the co-actors may be on stage at a different time than the actor (this would depend on whether the medium is asynchronous or not), the overall performance needs to show

coherence and continuation. Therefore, co-actors have an equal responsibility as the actor for the successful completion of the performance. All individual members need to act as a team and show images of cooperation and credibility in front of the audience. Yet co-actors have their own role to perform and will try to project their desired images through their actions; ‘others’ are themselves individuals whose own behaviour will aim to form positive impressions to other participants, actor and audience.

#### -Audience

The audience may not be on stage or it may not even be present in any real time during the play, but it still has a vital part in the various phases of the play and even a direct part on the performing stage where through their own behaviour may show their approval or disapproval of the actors’ enactment of the situation. According to the dramaturgical model in figure 1, there could be three types of audiences in a single play: a) co-workers who could be either on the stage themselves, co-performing, or off the stage just observing or working off-line; b) the producer, director and coordinator of the project who forms the team, has responsibilities towards the client organization for the project completion and therefore would be particularly interested in the progress of the play at its various stages; the coordinator may even be on stage in various occasions during the play to refocus the play, to improvise, or to renegotiate roles and tasks; and c) the client organization who is interested in the end result, but who may not be visible during the actual happening of the performance. When the curtains drop, there is a transition from the virtual environment to the literal reality off the stage and into the physical (real) world where the project outcomes would become visible, disseminated to the client organization and even announced publicly.

### **3. SCRIPTING, STAGING & PERFORMING: THE CASE OF TELECO**

This section presents a series of dramaturgical interactions and are used to understand the process of trust development through a study of the acts of scripting, staging and performing in a temporary virtual project directed by TeleCo (pseudonym).

#### **3.1 The Research Site & Research Approach**

TeleCo, describes itself as *“a Scottish company at the forefront of remote working and remote work management. It uses highly skilled independent workers to carry out information handling tasks for a wide range of organisations in the public and private sectors. Distance is immaterial. Through a combination of human resources and bespoke software, TeleCo has established valuable links with Newfoundland, Austria, Sweden, South Africa and the United States of America, and carries out contracts for clients worldwide”* (Company’s web site, June 2001).

Thus, TeleCo has the role of an independent co-ordinating agent between virtual workers and client organizations and has the responsibility for managing client projects until their completion when its virtual work teams also disperse. As a remote work management company TeleCo is able to form project teams drawing from its own list of registered individuals in its web-based skills database. According to its managing director (MD):

*“our company is absolutely a virtual company –one of the first in fact, in that all our administration has always been done remotely through our own bulletin board and email system and then through our web-site...the main purpose of the web-site is to act as a headquarter with specific file areas for clients and project management purposes”.*

TeleCo was studied as part of a larger project on virtual organizations. For the purpose of this paper specific data was collected with regard to a particular ‘play’, namely that of an engineering-related Spanish translation project which officially commenced in January 2001 the time when the commercial contract was signed between TeleCo and a US-based organization. Overall, this virtual project involved 25 remote team members from Scotland, England and Canada, including three project

team managers and two quality managers. The TeleCo MD served as the facilitator and coordinator of the project while another TeleCo executive had the responsibility for the negotiations with the client.

The study began in February 2001. I was soon given access to all the MD's emails regarding this project; these involved emails with clients, the TeleCo executive, potential project members, contracts and other relevant information as well as a sample task sent to members. Furthermore, I was put in the email distribution list of the MD and the language quality manager, which enabled me to follow the project as this was evolving. Further to these, interviews took place with TeleCo manager and executive, a quality manager and three team members. Due to the geographical dispersion of the members, interviews took place by telephone or by email. Two project team meetings were attended that gave the opportunity to talk to other team members and project managers and hear their views and experiences in being part of the project.

### 3.2 Scripting - The Role of the Contractual Agreement

Like in a theatre, the script sets up the basic relationships and patterns that inform the performance; in fact, without a script, a situation could turn to a chaos of events that have no reason or structure (Schlenker, 1980). Unlike theatres, however, where scripts provide lines for the actors to speak, in the virtual work space scripts often take the form of a contractual agreement that simply sets the requirements and time frame of the project; the contractual script thus helps to define tasks, structure and organise the virtual performance. The nature of the project may influence how rigid the script is and how clear and specific the roles are. Furthermore, a virtual play may consist of various contracts: contract with the clients, contracts with project managers and also specific contracts with individual team members.

In the case of the Spanish translation project, the most important contract that enabled the commencement of the play was the commercial contract signed between TeleCo and a US-based organization (the client). This contract is mainly time and output specific:  
*"...Translation of data from Spanish into English approximately 600,000 items at a cost of \$ XUS per item ...Performance of contract to be within two months of delivery of each item [files] for processing..." (Extract from official Contract).*

Following this script, the play director (MD) proceeded to find those people who had the appropriate skills to perform on the play. Initially, the project managers were selected: three project team leaders, a language quality manager and a technical quality manager. All of them were registered members of TeleCo's skills database and had previous experience with TeleCo projects. Using the skills database and advertisements, individual contractors were selected to join specific project teams. After recruitment, the play director set up the scene by organizing the project's bulletin board, provided training and allocated tasks and roles.

Therefore, the initial contractual script allowed the play director to enter into negotiations with project managers in order to define the specific roles during the given timeframe. As a result, the project managers had received and signed their own contract with TeleCo, whilst contracts were also signed with each individual team member. During the scripting phase of the project, the coordinator (TeleCo MD) played an active role in the play, became the producer and play director, assigned roles and prepared contracts. In doing so, the interactions that took place contributed to the scripting of trust. This scripted trust however was not enough; it was low and fragile and both parties (Teleco and individual members) needed trust to develop further. As an individual contractor put it: *"I was doing work for people I never met even though I signed the contract, and yes, [naturally] there were some doubts about payment"* (Team member 4, interview). Moreover, the quotation below shows that as far as TeleCo was concerned trust could only develop when the individuals who got involved proved that they had the competence to work on the project:

*"If a person is part of the TeleCo network that implies that certain standards are met and thus the person is suitable to work for us. The only way to guarantee this is, apart from taking the CV and do an interview with the person and we make sure that they are electronically comfortable, we would also never ask a person to work directly with a client that they haven't either had a piece of work [directly] for us or have worked with one of our project managers"* (MD interview)

### 3.3 Staging

In virtual plays, roles are enacted and thus impressions are formed primarily in computer-mediated interactions. For TeleCo, it was important to host the play on a stage that could accommodate the demands of the performance, but also one that is accessible and familiar to all players. Therefore, email has been the chosen medium which though text-based and asynchronous, it is widely available and enables messages to reach multi-recipients almost simultaneously: *"Email is to be regarded as the prime means of communication for the project. All members of project teams will be expected to check email for messages on a regular basis, and on an absolute minimum of twice per day"* (Extract from the Project Manager's contract).

Email was supplemented with web-based bulletin boards for task distribution; the MD put the files on the bulletin board and project managers were responsible to allocate these to their team members; completed files were also put back on the bulletin board and were then checked by the quality managers and finally removed by the TeleCo MD for delivery to the client. Where appropriate face-to-face communication and telephone conversations were used; all members were also informed of the MD's mobile telephone number in case they needed to contact her urgently.

### 3.4 Performing

Based on the script, the play was output, time and regulation specific and it needed to be performed according to the prescribed roles. However, as it is often the case with scripts, these do not always rigidly constrain players' behaviour. At an early stage of the project, it became clear that the task was more difficult than anticipated, whilst the client asked that the final output was delivered earlier than the agreed date imposing more pressures on project managers and members. Within this work climate, three factors were identified as critical in the development of the scripted trust: competence, responsiveness and openness.

Competence, which has been identified as a key dimension in the trust literature (Hart and Saunders, 1997; Mishra, 1996), was a factor identified by TeleCo at the scripting stage and remained an important criterion for evaluating individual performances. As the MD explained in an interview: *"We had the quality layer sitting on top of the project management layer. So, it wasn't completely trust in fact [in team members' performance]. [However over time], we have reached a stage where the quality checkers were not looking at every single file; so looking at one in ten, and only a brief glance of what goes through. So, in other words, the trust has built up between through the return work and that we know that these people are doing the job and that they are not returning rubbish"*.

Furthermore, in this study where computer-mediated asynchronous communication has been dominant, timely information and responsiveness were valued. The need to access emails regularly was a scripted behaviour as this was clearly indicated in the contract. Indeed, it was found in the email analysis that any urgent questions to TeleCo were answered almost immediately. In relation to this, it was also found that players had the tendency to keep others informed of their 'silence', though this was not a scripted behaviour. For example, the quality language manager distributed the following email:

*"...re: next week – to flag this up in advance: I am going to have to finish my other job for [International Voluntary Organization] next week – they are being patient, but I will need some days*

*on which I can concentrate more or less entirely on their report in order to do it with any kind of coherence and get it out of the way. I would really like to take as much of next week off as possible – I could be on hand for consultation but hopefully not 14 hours a day every day which is what I've been doing. After that I can promise to belong to TeleCo exclusively for some weeks ...Does this seem reasonable/possible?"*

Being honest and open for the reasons that kept one away from the play, shows respect for other players' responsibilities: *"First of all, apologies for not having responded to the many enquiries, helpful and informative mails that I have received over the last two weeks. I have been on holiday in Canada with my family introducing our new addition to her Canadian relatives (my husband is from Toronto). Secondly, I would like to respond to all the mails ..."* (team member 3, email). Where this was not the case, it led to frustrations as members felt that their work (and consequently their payment) was affected: *"I just wanted the managers to be on the ball and keep me topped up with work - sometimes it was a battle to get new work, even though deadlines were tight ... with better management control/communication I could have processed slightly more"* (Team member 1, interview).

*"I did notice sometimes on [this] project that my team leader did not always reply to all my email queries - this could be very frustrating"* (Team member 2, interview)

In a team environment, it is not enough for actors (e.g. TeleCo MD) to feel they can trust their co-actors (e.g. individual contractors), but it is also important that they are trusted by them. Open communication albeit asynchronous was critical in this project: *"The original contract had 600,000 items, it came out to have less than that...But project managers were made aware of any changes that were going on [and] ... would then inform their members...It is a very important factor of our way of working, that we have to communicate with people ... we have to make them feel that they want to do it. When we had the day [face-to-face] meeting in March, we had just set the project up and I went through the whole thing with great detail to everyone, project managers and individual contractors"* (TeleCo executive, interview).

Similarly, the quotation below shows an acknowledgement of the importance of openness and thus the need for an interplay of interactions within the life cycle of the project: *"As a virtual worker, I like to be informed of anything that might affect my working schedule. I also think it is very possible for virtual workers to feel isolated and continuing contact with a manager or designated deputy reduces that possibility. A simple e-mail or phone call is all that's required for the virtual worker to feel valued"* (Team member 2, interview).

It follows that the content and frequency of email messages could contribute to the development of trust; most importantly this needs to be a joint effort among all players who have to enact on their scripted behaviour and be competent, but also open and responsive showing in this way that they care about and value their virtual co-players.

#### **4. DISCUSSION**

The main argument of the paper is that in order to understand how trust develops in a virtual environment, one must examine the scripting, staging and performing phases of a virtual play. The richness of the dramaturgical perspective is that it enables us to explore these interactions and thus to achieve new insights in our understanding of trust within virtual team environments. It does so by clearly showing that not a single individual, phase or factor is responsible for developing trust within virtual teams. Instead, all players have a role to perform and that this role is both scripted and unscripted. This is more clearly seen in the performing stage where most of the interactions have taken place. The dramaturgical model in figure 1 has enabled us to position the trust development process as an interplay of interactions that take place between actors, co-actors and audience within the

temporary context of a virtual team environment. This could be an environment where individual members do not know each other, and also they are neither familiar with the coordinator nor the client organization. They rather come together under a formal script, that of the contractual agreement, which is output specific and time constrained. However, as it has been found in the case study, it is not only the contract that enables team members to trust each other. The contract is of course important because it clarifies roles, triggers interactions and most importantly enables the interactions to continue which in turn will exert an influence on trust development. In this way, the contractual agreement does not itself define the situated identities of the players, which are prerequisites for social conduct (Alexander and Lauderdale 1977); its role is to trigger negotiations for the development of a situated identity rather than to rigidly set this identity.

The role of information technology and computer-mediated communication in particular is critical in our understanding of trust development in virtual interactions. As Gardner et al suggested (1996), computer-mediated communication users will be most concerned about their image “when they are identified and interacting with an audience that they wish to favourably impress” (p.18). Therefore, even though the contract has been identified earlier as the first official script of the play it is argued in this paper that this is only an enabler for the play to commence as it was through the computer-mediated interactions (i.e. email exchanges) that impressions of trust were formed. In particular, despite the asynchronous nature of email, the content and frequency of email messages have helped in building and maintaining an interactive social situation that would last throughout the duration of the short-life cycle of the project. The study found that it is within the scripted and unscripted frame of reference that actors and co-actors manage to construct their trust relationship. This kind of relationship complements the formal contract and takes the form of a social contract (Orr, 1996); this is informal and unscripted and occurs despite the initial lack of familiarity with other people involved.

During the actual performance of a virtual play, such as the one presented here, the players take on the roles of actors and audience interchangeably. In doing so, they all need to employ impressionistic behaviour to secure a trustworthy image. Thus, actors, co-actors and the audience influence the situated trustworthiness of each other constituting to a type of trust relationship that is mutually negotiated. Then what follows are the actions of enactment, reinforcement and even some more renegotiations that will enable the relationship to last throughout the encounter. Accordingly, this type of trust is called *situated* trust, defined as the trust constructed in a specific situation with a particular audience at a given point in time. This conceptualisation of trust is based on the situated identity theory (Alexander and Lauderdale, 1977), which argues that actors perform a recognised action in a socially defined setting. This action however is neither predetermined nor is it random. It is rather ‘an emergent property of moment-by-moment interactions between actors, and between actors and the environment of their action’ (Suchman, 1987:179). Unlike therefore swift trust that exists *ex-ante* of a situation, situated trust emerges *with* the situation and cannot be separated in temporal terms from it due to its socially constructed character; this trust is developed and sustained through (re)negotiations.

## 5. CONCLUSION

The increasing pressure to perform in a short period of time with unfamiliar people and within a computer-mediated environment makes the impression management perspective vital to understanding the behaviour and interactions of virtual team members. The paper suggests that dramaturgical behaviour conveyed through computer-mediated communication should be included in our understanding of trust within virtual teams since such behaviour helps us to capture the dynamic character of situated trust. This type of trust is constructed jointly between the actor, co-actors and the audience even in the asynchronous telepresence of these players.

By using the dramaturgical perspective, this paper has extended existing research on trust within virtual teams and most importantly it has provided new insights firstly on the factors that might influence trust development in virtual teams and secondly on the dynamic nature of trust. It also complements previous studies, notably those by Jarvenpaa and her colleagues (1998a,b) that found the existence of swift trust in virtual teams, and it is hoped that this paper has presented an alternative view on trust within these types of teams, notably that of situated trust. This is imperative since there is a lot of discussion around virtual teams that are formed on the spot and are globally based and therefore it is important to understand not only the type of trust but also how this is formed and developed. The situated trust type allows us to do just that by relating its development to the interplay between all the players who act within the computer-mediated context of the virtual environment. The case that was presented in the paper was 'staged' on an email platform which is widely available. An area for future research will therefore be to compare how different communication media impact on the effectiveness of virtual performances.

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