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SI 410 Ethics and Information Technology

Reading and Discussion Guide 3 Avatars and Identity

This reading and discussion guide covers the three weeks of the course devoted to the nature of avatars and the relationship of virtual selves to personal identity. The guide lists the required readings, suggests things to look for while reading them, and poses some questions that could be raised during the lecture session. The guide also describes briefly the purpose of lab/discussion section.

Week 8: Avatars and Identity

- Tuesday October 26 Topic: What is an avatar?

Required Readings:

- Spence, E., "Meta Ethics for the Metaverse: The Ethics of Virtual Worlds," in *Current Issues in Computing and Philosophy*, edited by A. Briggie, K. Waelbers and P.A.E. Brey. Amsterdam: IOS (2008).
- Boberg, M. et al., "Designing Avatars," *Proceedings of 3rd International Conference on Digital Interactive Media in Entertainment and Arts*, (2008).

What to look for:

Spence is a piece of philosophy that makes an argument for the moral rights of avatars. The arguments in this paper should be familiar from your reading in the first three weeks of the course.

Boberg is a nuts and bolts treatment of avatar design.

Discussion questions:

1. What is an avatar – technically and philosophically?
2. What are the moral rights of avatars and how do these rights play out in practice?

- Wednesday October 27

Lab/Discussion

The lab session focuses on the avatar creation assignment, especially the background information needed to think about how to create the avatars for the assignment and what is involved with reflecting in writing on avatar construction.

- Thursday October 28 Topic: Identity in Cyberspace

Required Readings:

- Cocking, D. (2008). "Plural Selves and Relational Identity: Intimacy and Privacy Online," in *Information Technology and Moral Philosophy*, edited by Jeroen Van Den Hoven and John Weckert. Cambridge University Press, pp. 123-41.

What to read for:

Cocking discusses the implications of the fact that online communication affords us a lot of control over how we present ourselves. But there are also limitations on control, partly personal and partly social.

Discussion questions:

1. What is a friend in cyberspace?
2. What does Cocking mean by "uncooperative aspects of self?"

Week 9: Projecting Self in Virtual Environments

- Tuesday November 2 Topic: Avatars: Continuum or Prosthesis?

Required Readings:

- Matthews, S. (2008). "Identity and Information Technology," in *Information Technology and Moral Philosophy*, edited by Jeroen Van Den Hoven and John Weckert. Cambridge University Press, pp. 142-60.

What to look for:

In this reading and other readings in this module, a large question arises about the extent to which avatars are extensions or projections of the self in which control resides in front of the screen, versus the extent to which avatars are "other." In the latter mode, the environment creates the ethical norms. Read Matthews for how he tackles this issue. Compare with other articles you have already read.

Discussion questions:

1. In what way is an avatar like a false limb?
2. Are you a different person when there are few consequences for your actions?

- Wednesday November 3

Lab/Discussion

The lab session is a tutorial on using the Evolver tools to create avatars. The lab will also provide an opportunity to create and modify an avatar.

- Thursday November 4 Topic: Avatars and Anonymity

Required Readings:

- Wallace, K. A., "Online Anonymity," in *Himma and Tavani* (2008), pp. 165-190.
- Brennan, G and Pettit, P. (2008). "Esteem, Identifiability, and the Internet," in *Information Technology and Moral Philosophy*, edited by Jeroen Van Den Hoven and John Weckert. Cambridge University Press, pp. 175-94.

What to read for:

Anonymity creates potential and risk. How do these authors sort out the difference?

Discussion questions:

1. How are your identity and your self esteem related?
2. Are the conditions for self-esteem different in the online environment?
3. Are you threatened or empowered by anonymity online?

Week 10: Privacy and Virtual Environments

- Tuesday November 9

Topic: Privacy Reconsidered

Required Readings:

- Shoemaker, D., "Self-exposure and exposure of the self: information privacy and the presentation of identity," *Ethics and Information Technology* 12 (2010): 3-15.

What to look for:

Shoemaker has a really interesting take on identity and privacy in online environments. Compare his argument to that made by Brennan and Pettit in the previous week's reading.

Discussion questions:

1. What is the relationship of self-esteem to the right of privacy?

- Wednesday November 10

Lab/Discussion

This week's lab involves learning how to use the gaming engine tools to modify the virtual environment used for the game scenario assignment.

- Thursday November 11

Topic: Synthesis of Identity and Virtuality

Discussion questions:

This class session is an opportunity for synthesis and review, coupled with a look ahead to the application of avatar creation in a virtual environment.