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## **SI 410 Ethics and Information Technology**

### **Reading and Discussion Guide 4: Virtual Environments**

This reading and discussion guide covers a three-week module that investigated some of the ethical issues associated with gaming, simulation, and virtual environments, particularly those in which people interact with each other anonymously and with known identities. Virtual environments have their foundations in computer code, which defines not only the terms of interpersonal interaction but also the mechanisms for the creation of identity. The module builds on our consideration of identity construction and projection, by considering the construction of identity and in part through the terms of interaction among individuals.

#### **Week 11: Virtual Environments**

- Tuesday November 16

Topic: The Ethics of Virtual Environments

##### **Readings:**

- Brey, P., "Virtual Reality and Computer Simulation," in *Himma and Tavani* (2008), pp. 361-384.

##### **What to read for:**

Brey provides some working definitions of virtual reality and simulation, and the distinction between virtuality and reality, which is something we have considered in the previous module. Brey also describes the major ethical issues that virtual reality applications present to designers. Read this article for primarily for his summary of ethical issues.

##### **Discussion questions:**

1. Can you provide some examples to illustrate Brey's assertions about the ethical challenges in designing and using virtual environments?

- Wednesday November 17

##### **Lab/Discussion**

This lab focuses on some of the final assignment of the course, which is a team based exercise regarding gaining unfair advantage in a virtual environment.

- Thursday November 18

Topic: Ethical Game Play

##### **Readings:**

- Sicart, M., (2009). "The banality of simulated evil: designing ethical gameplay," *Ethics and Information Technology* 3: 191-202. [12 pp.]

### What to read for:

Sicart is a devotee of Floridi's theories of Infosphere and levels of abstraction (yeah!). You will get the most out of this article if you re-read the Floridi piece assigned in week 2 ["Information Ethics: Its Nature and Scope] and then read Sicart for how he uses Floridi's ideas. The key take away from Sicart is his recommendations for how to design ethical game play. Be sure to take notes on his five recommendations.

### Discussion questions:

1. Is ethical game play any fun?
2. How does Floridi's notion of transparency help us sort out what is real and what is fantasy?
3. How does Sicart see avatars and game players in simulated environments as direct moral agents, not simply reflecting their controllers? How realistic is it to expect that Sicart's recommendations can be implemented?

## Week 12: Virtual Environments

- Tuesday November 23                                      Topic: Gaining Advantage in Virtual Environments

### Readings:

- Consalvo, M. (2007). *Cheating: Gaining advantage in videogames*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, pp. 83-128.

### What to read for:

1. For Consalvo, the issue in the article is the single common reason that cheating takes place in online gaming, as opposed to three distinctive ways that people rationalize cheating. Read for the common reason and the specific rationalizations and make a short list for sharing.

### Discussion questions:

1. Based on Consalvo's definitions, why do individuals cheat? Why do online players tolerate other's cheating behavior, or do they?

- Wednesday November 24                                      Lab/Discussion Cancelled
- Thursday November 25                                      No Class: Thanksgiving Break

## Week 13: Virtual Environments

- Tuesday November 30                                      Topic: Games and Gender

### Readings:

- Royse, P., et al., "Women and games: Technologies of the gendered self." *New Media & Society*, 9 (2007): 555-576.

### What to read for:

1. Royse articulates three levels of involvement by women in gaming: power gamers, moderate gamers, non-gamers. Skip the theory (again) and head for the definitions. Make note of what motivates women to play or not play games.

### Discussion questions:

1. Are Royse's three levels of engagement limited to women?
2. The lab will break the class into groups by gender and mixed gender, where a set of questions will try to get to the bottom of the issue of gender differences in gaming.

- Wednesday December 1

### Lab/Discussion

This lab is supervised "free time" to work on your game scenario assignment in teams. Also, time to ask questions, raise technical issues, deal with team management issues.

- Thursday December 2 Topic: Rape in Cyberspace Revisited

### Readings:

- Dibble, Rape in Cyberspace (1993) [new addition, very interestingly written article; a classic]
- Powers, T., "Real wrongs in virtual communities," *Ethics and Information Technology* 5 (2003): 191-198. [a scholarly treatment of Dibble]
- Johansson, M., "Why unreal punishments in response to unreal crimes might actually be a really good thing," *Ethics and Information Technology* 11 (2009): 71-79. [various ways to think about consequences]

### What to read for:

1. Dibble's piece in the *Village Voice* is cool. Look for the specifics of what actually happened by and to the avatars in LambdaMoo.
2. The heart of Powers' argument is the relationship between the controller (player) and the character (avatar). He argues that real harms do indeed happen to real people through the interactions of avatars. Choose one of the many examples he offers, especially one that you may find far-fetched.
3. Johansson outlines four arguments for punishment of avatars by avatars for inappropriate online behavior. Make a list of these arguments.

### Discussion questions:

1. Did a rape really happen in cyberspace? What do we mean by "really"?
2. Who was harmed and in what ways?
3. Which way of thinking about punishment (see Johansson) is most appropriate for the case of Bungle's behavior?

## Week 14: Ethics and Information Technology

- Tuesday December 7 Topic: Game Scenarios

Team presentations on the game scenario assignment. Each team will have approximately 15 minutes to present the product of the assignment.

- Wednesday December 8 Topic: Game Scenarios

Continued: Team presentations on the game scenario assignment. Each team will have approximately 15 minutes to present the product of the assignment.

- Thursday December 9 Topic: Making Sense of Ethics and IT

**Discussion questions:**

This is the last day of class. Since there is no final examination, the class session is an opportunity for you to step back from the details of individual readings and demonstrate your ability to synthesize and make cross connections among the four modules of the course.