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SI 410 ETHICS AND INFORMATION TECHNOLOGY
Week 8a: Moral Rights of Avatars
THEMES

- What is an avatar
- Roles in creating and using avatars
- Moral rights of avatars
WHAT IS AN AVATAR?

1. Avatars
2. Roles
3. Rights

- Boberg: an embodiment of the user (3D, icon, text)

- Wikipedia: Avatar: disambiguation

- Wikipedia: Avatar (computing)

- Habitat (video game)
WHAT IS AN AVATAR?

1. Avatars
2. Roles
3. Rights

- **avatar, n.** A graphical representation of a person or character in a computer-generated environment, *esp.* one which represents a user in an interactive game or other setting, and which can move about in its surroundings and interact with other characters.

- (1985) Avatar introduced as the player (you) in Ultima IV

- Representation of self-identity (maintaining self-esteem) through a technological medium – i.e., social relations not face-to-face

Ultima IV, 1985
“A moral agent is an interactive, autonomous and adaptable transition system that can perform morally qualifiable actions.” (Floridi and Sanders [2004b])

- Interactive: system and environment (can) act upon each other
- Autonomous: system (can) change state without direct response to interaction
- Adaptable: interactions (can) change the transition rules [learning from experience]

- Action is moral if it CAN cause good or evil
ROLES IN CREATING AVATARS

- How avatars look
  - Identity expression and identification
  - Content creation in VR
  - Trust and reputation
- What avatars can do
  - Interaction, sharing, etc.
- Avatars and verbal communication
  - Communication of ideologies
- Avatars in context
  - Is the context of use important?

1. Avatars
2. Roles
3. Rights
MORAL RIGHTS OF AVATARS

Principle of Generic Consistency (Gewirth)

- Every agent judges goodness of purpose
  - Reinforces freedom and well being
- Because of this, every agent has prudential rights
  - Rights are essential enablers of good action
- Every agent must claim the rights to freedom and wellbeing, because..
  - Prospective Purposive Agent
- Therefore, ALL PPA’s have rights to freedom and well being – moral rights
  - Purposive action, self-respect, dignity

1. Avatars
2. Roles
3. Rights
MORAL RIGHTS OF AVATARS

- Does Universal Public Morality apply to virtual agents (avatars)?
  - UPM always takes precedence over role morality (professional practice)
  - Question: when moral harm occurs in VW, whose rights are infringed or violated: the player or the avatar?
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File:Ultima_IV_box.jpg, PD-INEL