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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
  - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avatar
- Wikipedia: Avatar (computing)
  - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Avatar_%28computing%29
- Habitat (video game)
  - http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Habitat_%28video_game%29

• OED , etc.

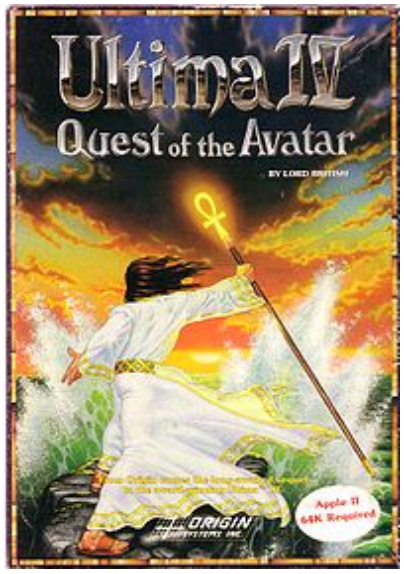
WHAT IS AN AVATAR?

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



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Origin Systems, "Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar", Wikipedia

Ultima IV, 1985

• Floridi, Information Ethics (2008)

ANONYMITY AND THE INFOSPHERE

1. **Avatars**
2. Roles
3. Rights

- "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

1. Avatars
2. Roles
3. Rights

- 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?

MORAL RIGHTS OF AVATARS

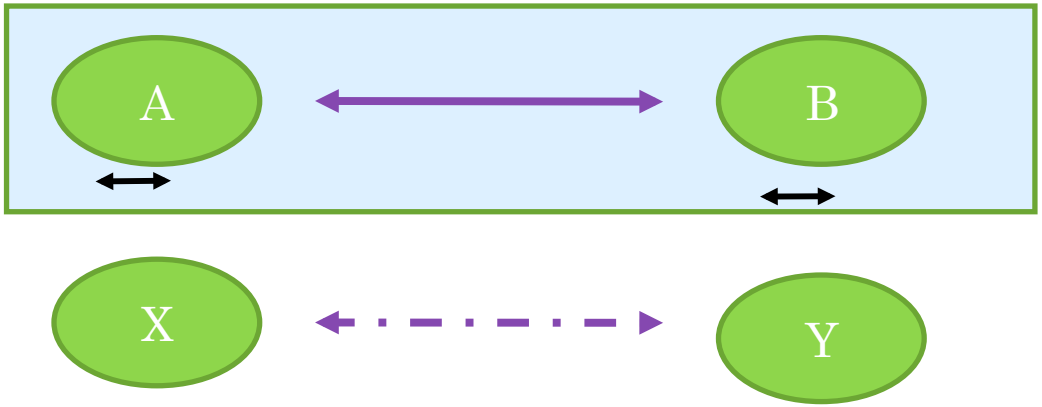
1. Avatars
2. Roles
3. **Rights**

- 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

MORAL RIGHTS OF AVATARS

1. Avatars
2. Roles
3. Rights

- 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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Slide 6, Image 4: Origin Systems, "Ultima IV: Quest of the Avatar", Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/File:Ultima_IV_box.jpg, PD-INEL

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