 Objective:
Integrate our studies of different aspects of virtual reality and virtuality.

What to do:
Answer any one of the following three questions in a five page (1200 word) essay:

1. In "The Cyborg Manifesto" (a part that we did not read), Haraway argues that:

"There are several consequences to taking seriously the imagery of cyborgs as other than our enemies. Our bodies, ourselves; bodies are maps of power and identity. Cyborgs are no exception. A cyborg body is not innocent; it was not born in a garden; it does not seek unitary identity and so generate antagonistic dualisms without end (or until the world ends); it takes irony for granted. One is too few, and two is only one possibility. Intense pleasure in skill, machine skill, ceases to be a sin, but an aspect of embodiment. The machine is not an it to be animated, worshipped, and dominated. The machine is us, our processes, an aspect of our embodiment. We can be responsible for machines; they do not dominate or threaten us. We are responsible for boundaries; we are they."  

With this quotation in mind, addressing the following question:

How would Haraway respond to the two philosophical camps exemplified by Moravec and Dreyfus? Does her embrace of the possibilities of the cyborg and her rejection of the organism / machine dichotomy ally her with Moravec and silicon evolution? Or does her rejection of absolute mind and insistence on the unique characteristics of embodiment align her more closely with Dreyfus? If she is aiming at some third way not represented by either author, how would you characterize it?

2. We have seen in this class positive notions of the potential of virtual reality. Donna Haraway describes virtuality as a site of resistance against various forms of domination and hierarchy. Other authors have noted the curative and socially-positive aspects of the free adoption of identities in virtual environments. Yet, if we examine the most common virtual reality applications of today (namely, computer and video games), we do not find the free play of identity, the resisting of stereotypes, but rather a repetition of very conventional representations of men, women and human activity. As the earlier text-based MUD environments have fallen from favor, they have been replaced with on-line role-playing games with a much narrower set of options for the expression of identity. Even the speculative accounts that we have encountered in this class do not, for the most part, depict virtual reality as a place for the creative and liberating exploration of human potential.

Why do the contemporary realizations of virtual environments fall so far short of the ideals ascribed to them? Does the fault lie in these ideals, in the current state of the technology, or somewhere else?

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1 The entire article is available at http://www.stanford.edu/dept/HPS/Haraway/CyborgManifesto.html
3. As we have noted in class, a certain degree of cultural acclimatization is required for any new technology especially one that transforms the presentation of self. Alexander Graham Bell famously predicted that businesses would use telephones but that no one would want such a disruptive device in one's home, and yet, many people now carry cell phones with them wherever they go. Similarly, we noted how early movie audiences had difficulty distancing themselves from the images that were presented, yet today's audiences do not experience the same sort of visceral panic regardless of a movie's subject matter.

It is possible that the concern over virtual identity felt by many authors we have read is also a matter of acclimatization. Consider the case of the on-line retailing giant Amazon.com. This company only does business on-line and can be known to consumers only through its virtual presence. While some hackers do attempt to defraud consumers with phony look-alike sites, it could be argued that the company's identity is a stable one over the years and is relied on by millions of consumers, despite the fact that almost none of them have ever met (except virtually, perhaps) anyone who worked for the company, or no one anywhere has ever visited an actual physical Amazon.com store. A few individuals current have this kind of substantial virtual identity (Ana Marie Cox, aka "Wonkette" for example), but one could imagine that over time many more will.

The problems of anonymity and instability of identity in the virtual world have been at the core of many writers concerns about virtual reality. What if technical means could be employed to make identity more stable? We might imagine an Internet in which cryptographic technologies have made it possible to deny anonymity if necessary — a chat room might be able enforce a requirement that everyone use their real names, for example, and email and other messages could be authenticated and reliably traced to their senders. Certainly the "Joan" incident would have been much more unlikely in such a world, since its creator would have had to forge a whole new identity (like getting a fake ID) rather than just being able to type in a personal description. In those parts of the virtual environment where anonymity was not allowed, there could be real and permanent consequences for the actions that a user takes.

Would the arguments about the dangers and problems of virtual environments be countered by a technical advance that allowed digital identities to be established in a stable and secure way? What problems would remain?

What to turn in:
Turn in your five-page paper to Course On-Line by midnight on 3/16. No late papers can be accepted.

Assessment:
Your essay will be graded in a manner similar to the unit papers. You do not need consult additional sources beyond the books and readings.

Note:
These are big questions. You will not be able to do justice to all of the issues involved in any one of them in 5 pages. Your best approach is to identify one topic on which to focus and explore it as deeply as you can, rather than attempt a shallow survey of all aspects of the question. The introduction to your essay should identify what aspect of the question you are addressing and acknowledge those aspects that you are omitting. You may find it best to write the essay first and the introduction last, as you may not realize where your focus lies until you have at least a first draft of your answer.