ISP 101: Focal Point Seminar
Virtual Reality: Matrix or Myth?

Wednesdays 5:45-9:00
Room: Lewis 1106
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Description
Virtuality – the expansion of human experience to computer-generated worlds – has been an enduring theme in futuristic fiction. It has also been the inspiration for many different strands of computer science research over the past 30 years, and it is already a real phenomenon for many computer users. This course will examine the promise and reality of computer-generated and -mediated experience. Students will engage in and reflect on virtual experiences of different kinds. They will explore some of the technologies that enable today's (and tomorrow's) virtual reality experiences. Students will also study some of the speculative texts that have made virtuality their theme. In addition, students will engage with thinkers who have critiqued the vision of the virtual future as sterile, inhuman and/or unattainable.

Liberal Studies Goals
This course promotes reflectiveness in its analysis of a contemporary theme experienced by all participants in 21st century culture, but especially by the young, for whom cyberspace-derived images and metaphors are commonplace. The course will look at these cultural phenomena from diverse perspectives and thereby encourages critical and creative thinking on the role of technology in contemporary life. It encourages value consciousness by asking moral and ethical questions about technology: What technologies should we build? What responsibilities come along with invention? What choices confront the users of highly-engaging virtual worlds? While it is not a major focus of this course, we will look at multicultural perspectives on virtual reality, especially "cyber-feminism", the feminist interpretation and adaptation of cyberspace.

Texts
ISBN: 0674576187
There will be other readings handed out in class or made available on-line. In week 4, students will need to watch The Matrix, available in the DePaul Library.

Assessment
This course is a Focal Point Seminar, which means that the emphasis is on active participation by all students. Prompt attendance and full participation in all classes is mandatory. Absence for more than 2 classes will result in loss of ½ letter grade per class.

- Participation – 25%
- Discussion leader – 25%
- Unit papers (4) – 30%
- Final exam – 20%
Participation
Students are expected to attend all classes, and to be active participants in all course activities. Each class session will have core readings, to be read by all students. Some sessions will also have additional readings that will be distributed among the students. There will be a short writing assignment "Admission Ticket" based on the core and (if applicable) additional readings every week. This assignment will be crucial to the class discussion for that week. A student without an Admission Ticket will receive no participation credit for that week.

Discussion Leader
Each week (except for week 10) we will spend approximately half of the class time in small-group discussions and activities. Each student will take on the role of discussion leader twice during the quarter. The discussion leader will have additional reading assignments and will be responsible for leading the group's in-class work.

Unit papers
The quarter is divided into four two-week units: Technology, VR Fiction, Virtuality and Identity, Philosophical Perspectives. There will be a five-page (1200 word) paper due at the end of each of these units, the topic of which will be announced at the end of the unit.

Final exam
There will be a take-home final made available the last week of class that will be due on 3/16. The final will be an essay on the topics and readings for the class. Additional reading may be required for the final exam.

Tentative schedule

1/5: Introduction
The appeal of virtual reality. Paradoxes and problems of VR raised by speculative works. Approach of the class: perspectives, methodology and sources.

Unit I: The Technology of Virtuality

1/12: Virtual Environments
Progress toward virtual reality: advanced display and I/O devices. Existing devices and applications. Technological limitations and future prospects.
Core reading: Vince, Chapters 1-4.

1/19: VR Applications
Applications of virtual reality in medicine, manufacturing, the military, science and the arts.
Core reading: Vince, Ch. 5-8
Additional readings: TBA

Unit II: Science Fiction

1/26: VR on Film
The imaginative construction of a VR future. Visual style in the depiction of an alternate reality.
In-class film: TBA
Out-of-class film: The Matrix
Due: Unit paper – Technology

2/2: Cyberpunk Fiction
Embodiment and reality in the cyberpunk fiction.
Core readings: Gibson, Neuromancer, Stephenson, Snow Crash
Unit III: Virtuality and Identity

2/9: Virtuality and Identity
Readings: TBA
Due: Unit paper – Science Fiction

2/16: Race and Gender in Cyberspace
Gender and racial identity in cyberspace. Cyberfeminism.
Readings: TBA

Unit IV: Philosophical Perspectives

2/23: Technological Utopianism
Virtual reality futurism and the disappearance of the body. Silicon evolution and its philosophical roots.
Core reading: Moravec, Mind Children
Additional reading: TBA
Due: Unit paper – Identity

3/2: Virtuality's Discontents
Core reading: Dreyfus, H. On the Internet.
Additional reading: TBA

3/9: Independent work on final exam.
Due: Unit paper – Philosophy

3/16: Final exam due

Policies

Students are expected to attend all classes and participate in in-class exercises. Class will start promptly. Students are individually responsible for material they may have missed due to absence or tardiness.

Assignments will be submitted to the Course On-Line site or as hard copy. Do not submit assignments by email. All assignments should be completed and submitted by class time on the due date. Unit papers will be accepted up to two days after the due date with a 10% penalty per day. The final exam may not be submitted late. It is not possible to make up a missed discussion leader assignment. Be sure that your discussion leader dates are ones that you can make. If you discover a conflict, please contact the instructor as soon as possible. It will be your responsibility to find someone in class who can switch duties with you.

Assignments (except for designated group assignments) must represent a student's individual effort. While students are permitted to discuss assignments at the conceptual level, under no circumstances should students share specific answers (electronically or otherwise). Unit papers and other written work must properly cite works consulted, quoted and/or paraphrased.

School Policies

Online Instructor Evaluation
Course and instructor evaluations are critical for maintaining and improving course quality. To make evaluations as meaningful as possible, we need 100% student participation. Therefore, participation in the School’s web-based academic administration initiative during the eighth and ninth week of this course is a requirement of this course. Failure to participate in this process will result in a grade of incomplete for the course. This incomplete will be automatically removed within seven weeks after the end of the course and replaced by the grade you would have received if you had fulfilled this requirement.
Email
Email is the primary means of communication between faculty and students enrolled in this course outside of class time. Students should be sure their email listed under "demographic information" at http://campusconnect.depaul.edu/ is correct.

Plagiarism:
The university and school policy on plagiarism can be summarized as follows: Students in this course, as well as all other courses in which independent research or writing play a vital part in the course requirements, should be aware of the strong sanctions that can be imposed against someone guilty of plagiarism. If proven, a charge of plagiarism could result in an automatic F in the course and possible expulsion. The strongest of sanctions will be imposed on anyone who submits as his/her own work a report, examination paper, computer file, lab report, or other assignment which has been prepared by someone else. If you have any questions or doubts about what plagiarism entails or how to properly acknowledge source materials be sure to consult the instructor.

Incomplete:
An incomplete grade is given only for an exceptional reason such as a death in the family, a serious illness, etc. Any such reason must be documented. Any incomplete request must be made at least two weeks before the final, and approved by the Dean of the School of Computer Science, Telecommunications and Information Systems. Any consequences resulting from a poor grade for the course will not be considered as valid reasons for such a request.