

COM 3050 “We are on the cusp of redefining the nature of identity and ethics
– and, hence, of life itself.”
-- Thomas H. Bivins and Julianne H. Newton, *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*

The Meaning of (Virtual) Life

Spring 2011

Tuesdays and Thursdays

3:30-4:45 p.m.

Brown 2048

#13175

Professor: Dr. Sandra L. Borden

Office: 325 Sprau

Office phone: 387-0362

E-mail: sandra.borden@wmich.edu

Office hours: 2-3:30 p.m. TR and by appointment

Course materials

All assigned readings are on electronic reserve.

Course description

Although the media have long offered us the thrill of entering virtual worlds using our imaginations, today’s digital technologies allow engineers to create gaming environments and computer simulations that far exceed the immersive possibilities of novels or films. Virtual reality (VR) beckons with avatars and realistic details that trick our senses into believing we have left our bodies and have entered into alternative worlds. People today talking about living part of their lives online and about having digital identities – of having virtual relationships that are as intimate as face-to-face ones. Some futurists even claim that we have become

cyborgs for all practical purposes – part human and part machine.

In this course, we will explore the implications of these developments for communication ethics. We will not focus on technological skills or learn how to navigate virtual environments. Instead, we are going to step back and ask critical questions about the place of VR in our lives.

We will focus in particular on ways in which VR invites us to experience immersion, freedom and fun – and the implications for our identities, our relationships, our responsibilities and our ideas of happiness. How does VR continue earlier efforts to expand our horizons using technology? How are today’s computer and gaming applications substantially different from previous adventures in virtuality? How do online friendships and communities affect our notions of identity and how we understand ourselves in relation to others? Do our actions in virtual worlds “count” ethically? Do the virtual worlds we encounter reinforce real-world inequalities? Does the kind of freedom we experience in VR teach us to live more responsibly in the material world? Would a mass exodus to VR extend our humanity? Demean it? Transcend it? Given that ethics and communication have always centered on humanity, what does it mean to communication ethics if we redefine humanity altogether?

Science fiction has long been interested in these sorts of questions, so

we will stimulate our moral imagination with the help of Neo, Data and other sci-fi characters. But philosophers through the ages have also been interested in such questions, so we will commiserate with the likes of Plato and Kierkegaard as well.

About the professor

I joined the COM faculty in 1996. My Ph.D. in mass communications (journalism) is from Indiana University. My research area is the topic of this course: communication ethics, with an emphasis on media ethics. I've published articles in the *Journal of Mass Media Ethics*, *Communication Monographs*, the *International Journal of Applied Philosophy* and *Southern* contributor to several books on journalism and professional ethics. My book, *Journalism as Practice*, won the 2008 Clifford G. Christians Ethics Research Award and the National Communication Association's 2008 top book award in applied ethics. My other books are *Ethics and Entertainment* (with Howard Good) and *Making Hard Choices in Journalism Ethics* (with David Boeyink). I am co-director of Western's Center for the Study of Ethics in Society and serve as the faculty sponsor of WMU's national ethics bowl team.

Course objectives

1. Heighten your sensitivity to the ethical issues that permeate VR.
2. The ability to appreciate and critique technological innovation within its historical, social and ethical contexts.
3. Increase your capacity to interact responsibly in virtual environments.

Your responsibilities

1. Academic dishonesty: I will not tolerate any form of academic dishonesty. I will follow up on any evidence of copying someone else's work, not doing your own work, collaborating on individual assignments without prior authorization, making up citations, passing off someone else's work and other forms of dishonesty. Examples of academic dishonesty include turning in a paper someone else has written, copying or paraphrasing materials from a source without proper documentation, and leaving out quotation marks for materials taken word-for-word from a web site. These are all offenses against the university's policies pertaining to academic integrity.

You are responsible for making yourself aware of and understanding the policies and procedures in the Undergraduate Catalog that pertain to Academic Honesty. These policies include cheating, fabrication, falsification and forgery, multiple submission, plagiarism, complicity and computer misuse. The policies can be found at <http://catalog.wmich.edu> under Academic Policies, Student Rights and Responsibilities. You should also consult WMU's Honor Code at <http://osc.wmich.edu>.

If there is reason to believe you have been involved in academic dishonesty, you will be referred to the Office of Student Conduct. You will be given the opportunity to review the charge(s). If you believe you are not responsible, you will have the opportunity for a hearing. You should consult with me if you are uncertain about an issue of academic honesty prior to the submission of an assignment or test. See "How to properly credit

sources” on electronic reserve for more information. Acadia University’s plagiarism tutorial at <http://library.acadiu.ca/tutorials/plagiarism/> is highly recommended (select the player Emma for APA style tips).

2. Classroom etiquette: Discussion and critical thinking are vital for learning the material covered in this class. I will ask you to be actively involved, whether it be role-playing or brainstorming in small groups. Many of the things you need to know to do well on your assignments--crucial concepts, application of theories, etc.--you will learn through such activities. That is why good attendance is essential.

Please feel free to bring examples related to the course content whenever you like. Everyone's perspective is appreciated and encouraged. However, for discussion to be useful and respectful, everyone must be attentive, courteous, engaged and constructive. That means: listening (not talking or texting!) when others talk; waiting your turn to speak; refraining from ridiculing, attacking or making racist, sexist or discriminatory remarks; doing your fair share of group tasks; refraining from monopolizing discussion time; and putting away materials unrelated to class. (That includes your cell phone! If I see you looking at your phone during class, I will count this the same way I do tardies and early departures for purposes of your attendance grade; see **Attendance** below).

Research has shown that multi-tasking interferes with comprehension and concentration (for a report on the latest research, see “Media Multitaskers Pay Mental Price, Study Shows” on electronic reserve). Active listening and note taking, on the other hand, increase attention (which is why I do not post or e-mail lecture notes). Besides, focusing

on something else is rude to me and your classmates. I realize this may seem ironic in a class on virtual reality, but, nevertheless, **no laptops, cell phones or other electronic devices in class**. If you’re having trouble keeping up with lectures, let me know. I’ll be glad to slow down, repeat information or give more examples.

You also should get in the habit of offering reasons for whatever position you voice. In this class, we don’t take opinions at face value.

3. Attendance: I expect you to attend all classes and to read all assigned readings *before* coming to class. We can learn together only if everyone comes and if everyone comes prepared. Sometimes classes will explicitly cover the readings; at other times they won’t. In any case, I will presume you have done the readings and will not merely summarize these in class. Since you will be responsible for all course content--whether it be in the assigned readings, or covered in class discussion, or conveyed in a clip--it’s not enough *just* to read or *just* to come to class.

You can earn points for attending class. It is important to note that what I am doing is *giving you credit* for attending class (rather than factoring attendance into your grade *only* as a penalty for exceeding a given limit on absences). This means you shouldn’t think of having “freebies” that don’t count “against you” should you miss class. (This means I don’t “excuse” individual absences.) Instead, those who attend class more will get more credit for attendance.

Of course, I realize that missing class here and there sometimes is inevitable because of job conflicts, bad weather, mild illness, family obligations, religious observances, etc. (see WMU’s policy on religious observance at

www.wmich.edu/registrar). Therefore, the attendance grade is set up so that you can miss class occasionally and still earn substantial credit. I suggest you miss class only when necessary so that you don't find yourself toward the end of the term having a lower attendance grade than you would like. Your attendance grade will be calculated as follows:

- 0 absences=40 points (A)
- No more than 1 absence=39 points (A)
- No more than 2 absences=38 points (A)
- No more than 3 absences=34 points (B)
- No more than 4 absences=30 points (C)
- No more than 5 absences=26 points (D)
- Subsequent absences=2 points each (E)

Three tardies/early departures will count as one absence. Regardless of when I take attendance, you are late if you arrive 5 minutes or later after class is scheduled to begin.

You should keep me abreast of circumstances, such as extended illness, university-sponsored athletic events, or religious observances, that will keep you from coming to class for two or more class periods. You may be able to recoup some of your attendance points in cases of such prolonged absence if you produce verifiable documentary evidence (*any* string of absences will result in at least *some* reduction in credit in order to be fair; at the same time, I don't want prolonged absences outside your control to have an *undue* impact on your attendance grade).

Examples of verifiable documentary evidence are a doctor's note or court papers; evidence must be produced THE DAY YOU RETURN TO CLASS in cases of unexpected prolonged absence, unless otherwise authorized. **Documentation will not be accepted**

after the final exam. If you know ahead of time of circumstances that will keep you out of class for several periods (such as athletic commitments), you should inform me RIGHT AWAY so we can discuss the impact on your attendance grade. **The only time you need to provide documentation is in cases of prolonged absence.**

4. Deadlines and exam dates: Any assignments are due at the BEGINNING of class. Any turned in 5 minutes or later after class is scheduled to begin on the due date will be considered late. The following penalties will apply to late assignments:

by 5 p.m. on due date	5% penalty
by 3:30 p.m. next day	10% penalty
by 5 p.m. next day	15% penalty
by 3:30 p.m. 2 nd day	20% penalty

If you are turning in a late assignment outside of class, and I am not in my office, you should have the COM office assistant on the 3rd floor of Sprau put the assignment in my mailbox. **Do not slip late assignments under my office door.** I will not accept assignments more than 2 days late; they will receive a grade of zero.

However, I will grant extensions at no penalty in cases of emergencies, serious illness and deaths in the immediate family. To receive an extension for an assignment, you must convince me BEFORE THE ASSIGNMENT IS DUE that it is impossible for you to turn it in early (for example, before you have to leave town) or make other arrangements to turn it in on time (for example, having a friend drop it off). You must also produce verifiable documentation. Examples of verifiable documentary evidence are a doctor's note or court papers; evidence must be produced by

the next class period after the original due date unless otherwise authorized. **Documentation will not be accepted after the final exam.**

Exams may be made up in cases of emergencies, serious illness and deaths in the immediate family. If you are unable to take an exam at the scheduled time, you must contact me **BEFORE THE EXAM**. If that is impossible, you must contact me as soon as you can after the exam. **Do not wait until the next class period to ask for a make-up exam.** Do not assume that you have been authorized to take a make-up exam just because you left a voice-mail message or an e-mail message. Make-up exams must be taken at the time assigned. You must produce verifiable documentation when you arrive for your make-up exam unless otherwise authorized.

Documentation will not be accepted after the final exam. Examples of verifiable documentary evidence are a doctor's note or court papers.

Job interviews and commitments, computer glitches, assignments/exams for other courses, personal travel plans, oversleeping, and forgetting will not normally be considered as grounds for waiving late penalties or making up exams. Start work on your assignments early enough to leave yourself some margin for error if something goes wrong at the last minute or to account for anticipated schedule conflicts.

Double-check instructions to make sure you have met all requirements.

5. Learning assistance: Any student with a documented disability (e.g., physical, learning, psychiatric, vision, hearing, etc.) who needs to arrange reasonable accommodations *must* contact me and the office of Disabled Student Resources and Services (387-2116) at the *beginning* of the

semester. See WMU's policies at www.wmich.edu/disabilityservices.

Although electronic devices are strictly prohibited, students whose first language is not English may use a paper dictionary during exams with prior authorization.

Assignments

Below are brief descriptions of the required assignments; you will be given more detailed instructions in class. You will receive study guides for the exams. I try to be as specific and clear as possible when giving instructions. However, I cannot anticipate all questions students may have. It is your responsibility to ask for clarification if you don't understand something. Due dates are subject to change. For graded assignments (except in-class assignments), put only your class ID on the first page, not your name. You will be randomly assigned an ID early in the term. **Assignments will not be accepted via e-mail except in extraordinary circumstances and must be authorized in advance.**

1. Reflection paper: On **Feb. 3**, you will turn in a three-page essay reflecting on a specific experience you have had with virtual reality.

2. Midterm exam: On **Feb. 15**, you will take an in-class midterm exam. The exam will consist of a combination of multiple choice and true-false questions that assess your recall and understanding of class concepts.

3. Application paper: You will turn in on **April 5** a four-page essay analyzing an assigned topic in a film or novel dealing with some of the issues we are exploring in the course. You will be

asked to compare and contrast the narrative's viewpoint on the topic with the viewpoint of one of the authors we have read for this class. You will be given a list of films and novels from which to choose, but may suggest alternatives subject to my approval.

4. Final exam: The university requires every course to have a comprehensive final exam. The final exam for this course will consist of a combination of multiple-choice and true-false questions that assess recall and understanding of class concepts. **The final exam is scheduled for 2:45-4:45 p.m. Monday, April 25.**

5. In-class activities: Short writing and small-group assignments will be frequently assigned in class to help you assess and extend your understanding of the assigned readings and class discussions. Your 12 highest scores (each activity is worth 5 points) will be counted toward your course grade, up to 60 points total (the other scores will be dropped). These activities may be given any time during class, and cannot be made up under any circumstances – whether it's because you're not here, or you're late, or you step out, or you leave early.

6. Learning logs: It will be much easier for you to follow lectures and get answers you need if you read the assigned material before coming to class. Research also shows that student achievement increases when students do the assigned reading. To encourage you to keep up with the readings, to engage actively with them, and to come to class prepared, I am offering extra credit for learning logs.

To get credit, you must turn in the learning log for a reading on the day for which it is assigned (In other words, you

cannot turn in a log late or early). Each learning log should be no more than one page (front and back). Split each page into two columns. In the left column, write down your notes on the reading. In the right column, write down the questions you have based on the reading. Each log is worth 3 points and will be graded on a $\sqrt{-}$, $\sqrt{}$, $\sqrt{+}$ system. Late logs (turned in more than 5 minutes after class is scheduled to start) will be penalized 1 point. Logs may be handwritten as long as your writing is legible. There is no limit on how many logs you may turn in.

Grading

I will give you a report of your standing in the course halfway through the term and again right before the final. I will be glad to show you the total points you have earned at any time during the semester. If you want me to review a grade, you must submit your rationale **IN WRITING WITHIN TWO CLASS PERIODS** of when you got back the graded assignment. This written rationale must make specific reference to my comments and to the grading criteria (see detailed instructions for grading criteria). Be aware that my review may result in a **LOWER** grade than previously assigned. I encourage you to come talk to me any time during the semester about problems you may be experiencing while there is still time to do something about them.

The assignments will count thus:

Midterm exam	60 points (15%)
Reflection paper	80 points (20%)
Application paper	100 points (25%)
Final exam	60 points (15%)
In-class activities	60 points (15%)
Attendance	40 points (10%)

Your final grade will be based on the percentage of the total 400 points you earn. Here's the scale I'll follow:

100-94%	A
93-87 %	BA
86-83%	B
82-77%	CB
76-70%	C
69-65%	DC
64-60%	D
59% and below	E

Important dates

Reflection paper	Feb. 3
Midterm exam	Feb. 15
Spring break	Feb. 28-March 4
Last day to withdraw	March 22
Application paper	April 5
Final exam	April 25

Tentative schedule

Accessing the readings: All assigned readings may be found through Waldo Library's course reserves system at <http://www.wmich.edu/library/reserves/>. To access these readings, you will need to create an account on this site (if you don't have one already) using your BroncoNet ID and system password. Add COM 3050 (instructor: Borden) to your list, then enter a password that will be given in class. During subsequent log-ins, the class will automatically appear on your account, and you will not be required to enter the password. After reading and accepting the copyright declaration, simply click on the PDF file you want to view.

Getting the most out of the readings: You will benefit most from the assigned readings if you do them before class and if you engage actively with them. Some key ways to do this are to preview the readings by looking at chapter introductions, summaries and subheadings first, asking questions about what you're reading as you read, and making notes to yourself (in the margins and in a notebook) to remind yourself of key points, key insights, and key questions you have about the reading (better than highlighting!). For more tips, see John Weber's excellent advice at <http://www.ocean.edu/readcoltext/howtoreadcollegetextdrjohnweber.htm>. See "Forget What You Know About Good Study Habits" on e-reserve for some research-backed tips for studying more effectively too. Remember, you may turn in learning logs for extra credit!

- | | | |
|-----|---------|--|
| (1) | Jan. 11 | <u>Introduction to the course</u> |
| | Jan. 13 | <u>Virtual reality and ethics</u>
Read: "The Virtual Sky is Not the Limit: Ethics in Virtual Reality" (Whitby) |
| (2) | Jan. 18 | <u>Movie screening: Surrogates</u>
No reading |
| | Jan. 20 | <u>Movie screening; Surrogates</u>
No reading |
| (3) | Jan. 25 | <u>Virtual reality and technology</u>
Read: "Change or Perish" (Cohen) |
| | Jan. 27 | <u>Virtual reality and history</u>
Read: "Does Improved Technology Mean Progress?" (Marx) |
| (4) | Feb. 1 | <u>Virtual reality and presence</u>
No reading |

- Feb. 3 **Virtual reality and relationships**
 Read: “2010: The Year Technology Replaced Talking” (Jayson) and “Brave New World of Digital Intimacy” (Thompson)
Reflection paper due
- (5) Feb. 8 **Virtual reality and responsibility**
 Read: “The Ring of Gyges” by Plato (Archie & Archie)
- Feb. 10 **Virtual reality and integrity**
 Read: “The Noosphere is Just Another Name for Everyone's Inner Troll” (Lanier)
- (6) Feb. 15 **Midterm exam**
- Feb. 17 **Virtual reality and agency**
 Read: “The Ethics of Representation and Action in Virtual Reality” (Brey)
- (7) Feb. 22 **Virtual reality and representation**
 No reading
- Feb. 24 **Virtual reality and character**
 Read: “Problems in Wonderland: A Virtue Ethics Approach to Virtual Child Pornography” (Charlton & Upson)
- (8) March 1 **Spring break**
 NO CLASS!
- March 3 **Spring break**
 NO CLASS!
- (9) March 8 **Virtual reality and the real**
 Read: “The Allegory of the Cave” (Plato)
- March 10 **Virtual reality and simulated living**
 Read: “The Matrix Simulation and the Postmodern Age” (Weberman)
- (10) March 15 **Virtual reality and freedom**
 Read: “Mill’s Harm Principle” (Lacewing)
- March 17 **Virtual reality and the social contract**
 Read: “The World of Warcraft Funeral Ambush: An Outsider's Perspective” (Seneca)

March 21 is last day to drop with a W

- (11) March 22 **Virtual reality and pleasure**
Read: "Robert Nozick: The Experience Machine" (Pojman)
- March 24 **Virtual reality and happiness**
Read: "Happiness and Cypher's Choice: Is Ignorance Bliss?" (Griswold)
- (12) March 29 **Virtual reality and commitment**
Read: "Anonymity Versus Commitment: The Dangers of Education on the Internet" (Dreyfus)
- March 31 **Virtual reality and humanity**
No reading
- (13) April 5 **Star Trek screening: Measure of a Man**
No reading
Application paper due
- April 7 **Virtual reality and the body**
Read; "Your Big Chance to Get Away from It All:" Life, Death, and Immortality" (Schick)
- (14) April 12 **Report on reflections**
No reading
- April 14 **The future of virtual reality: Fun revolution?**
Read: "The Fun Revolution: Ending the Politics of Misery" (Castranova)
- (15) April 19 **The future of virtual reality: Heroic quest?**
Read: "Technology and the Tragic View" (Florman)
- April 21 **Review for final exam**

FINAL EXAM: 2:45-4:45 P.M. MONDAY, APRIL 25.