

**DEREE COLLEGE SYLLABUS FOR:**

**HHU 2206 LE Mediated Lives: Avatars, Cyborgs, and Virtual Realities**

(same as HSS 2206)

Honors Seminar

Revised Summer 2016

**US CREDITS: 3/0/3**

**PREREQUISITES:**

WP 1010 LE Introduction to Academic Writing  
WP 1111 LE Integrated Academic Writing and Ethics

**CATALOG  
DESCRIPTION:**

The course considers the ethical, social, and aesthetic implications of virtual reality and artificial life in 21<sup>st</sup>-century technology-dominated culture. It aims to promote students' awareness of the potential outcomes--epistemological, psychological, ethical, and social--of technological advances that are based on virtual simulations, augmented realities, and intelligent machines.

**RATIONALE:**

In computer-simulated environments human life is experienced as suspended, mediated between the physical and the digital worlds. Computer developers attempt both to simulate physical bodies in virtual spaces and imitate human behaviors in expert systems and robots. Artificial intelligence systems are used in the processes of learning, deciding, correcting and justifying. The course will examine whether computers can simulate human processes such as intelligence and creativity, and whether the brain can recognize the dividing line between the physical and the virtual. Also, it will investigate to what extent the new mediated realities affect subjectivity, identity, aesthetic judgment, and social relations.

**LEARNING OUTCOMES:**

Upon completion of the course, students will be able to:

1. Understand the ethical and epistemic implications of mediated realities and artificial intelligence in human life;
2. Develop awareness of the aesthetic aspects of the new digital representations and artifacts;
3. Explore the psychological impact of mediated realities;
4. Examine the social impact of virtuality on individual and communal life.

**METHOD OF TEACHING AND  
LEARNING:**

In congruence with the teaching and learning strategy of the college, the following tools are used:

- Cases of virtual simulations and artificial life applications;
- Textual analysis, class discussion, workshop-style pair work and group work during class meetings;

- Active student-centered teaching approach in the presentation of course material to engage learners;
- Critical-thinking exercises and learning activities designed to help students acquire confidence and benefit from independent study;
- Student presentations of learning material to encourage involvement in the learning process;
- Co-curricular activities, ranging from collaboration with student clubs and societies to debates and event organizing, to encourage students' creative engagement with the material;
- Extensive instructor feedback on assignments and activities;
- Individualized assistance during office hours for further discussion of lecture material, additional reading, and assignments;
- Additional print and audiovisual educational material posted on the Blackboard course template;
- Other relevant educational material placed on reserve in the library

#### ASSESSMENT:

##### **Critical Essay** 40%

A 1,500-2,000-word critical essay dealing with one or more aspects of the course subject. The essay needs to display a firm grasp of the topic at hand, of the issues discussed in the course as a whole, as well as of the relevant bibliography (**use of at least 3-5 scholarly sources**).

##### **Creative Project** 40%

Students will deploy a creative medium of their choice to apply their insights on concepts and ideas explored in the course. The creative project includes a **500-word self-reflective essay** (which articulates the concepts that inform the creative project and relates them clearly to the content of the course), as well as **an oral presentation** of the creative project.

##### **Participation** 20%

Each student will be evaluated according to his/her contribution in the class, the preparation of the material and his/her critical ability. Furthermore, each student will be assessed in regards to his/her participation in group activities and discussions that will arise throughout the course.

The Critical Essay tests Learning Outcomes 1 and 4.

The Creative Project tests Learning Outcomes 2 and 3.

#### READING LIST:

##### **REQUIRED MATERIAL:**

Blascovich, Jim, and Jeremy Bailenson, *Infinite Reality: The Hidden Blueprint of our Virtual Lives* (Morrow, 2011)

##### **ADDITIONAL MATERIAL:**

Movies

*Avatar* (2009) [Directed by James Cameron]

*The Matrix* (1999) [Directed by Andy and Lana Wachowski]

*TRON: Legacy* (2010) [Directed by Joseph Kosinski]

**RECOMMENDED MATERIAL:**

Burdea, G. and P. Coffet (2003). *Virtual Reality Technology*, Second Edition. Wiley-IEEE Press.

Dreyfus, Hubert (1992) *What Computers Still Can't Do*, New York: MIT Press.

Haugeland, John (1985) *Artificial Intelligence: The Very Idea*, Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press.

Floridi, L. (2004) *The Blackwell Guide to Philosophy of Computing and Information*, Blackwell Publishing.

Franklin S. (1997) *Artificial Minds*, MIT Press.

Kurzweil R. (2000) *The Age of Spiritual Machines*, Penguin.

Minsky M. (1988) *The Society of Mind*, Simon Schuster.

Neapolitan, Richard; Jiang, Xia (2012) *Contemporary Artificial Intelligence*, Chapman & Hall/CRC.

Oliver Grau, (2003) *Virtual Art: From Illusion to Immersion*, Cambridge/Massachusetts: MIT-Press.

Penrose, Roger (1989) *The Emperor's New Mind: Concerning Computer, Minds and The Laws of Physics*, Oxford University Press.

Zhai, Philip. (1998) *Get Real: A Philosophical adventure in Virtual Reality*, Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, New York and Oxford.

**COMMUNICATION REQUIREMENTS:**

All written and submitted work (with the exception of in-class work) must be word-processed and adhere to the Harvard Reference Style.

**SOFTWARE REQUIREMENTS:**

Microsoft Word and Microsoft PowerPoint

**WWW RESOURCES:**

The course will use a number of on-line materials available to the students on Blackboard. Online news and sources are used in relation to the topics discussed in the course.

**INDICATIVE CONTENT:**

1. *Meditated Lives*: Virtual Realities and Artificial Lives
2. *Virtual Reality*: Virtual Existence; Computer Simulated Environments; Augmented Realities; Imaginative Worlds

3. *Artificial Life*: What is Artificial Intelligence; Expert Systems; Neural Networks; Natural Language Communication
4. *Cyborgs and Androids*: Intelligent Machines and Robotic Applications
5. *Ethical Concerns and Social Implications*: Dehumanization; Decision-Making and Learning; Making Reality Fit the Machine; Human Dependence on Machines; Robotic Ethics
6. *Virtual Aesthetics*: Avatars, Virtual Arts and Cyber Punks
7. *Epistemic Challenges*: Can Computer Think? Physical Reality and Virtual Reality
8. *Virtual Identities*: Being Digital; Virtual Friendship; Virtual Dreams; Diachronic and Episodic Selves.