Identities at Stake: How Empathetic Virtual Reality Reshapes Personal Identity

Jin Seok Park
Washington University in St. Louis

Follow this and additional works at: https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/wushta_spr2017

Recommended Citation
https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/wushta_spr2017/92

This Abstract for College of Arts & Sciences is brought to you for free and open access by the Washington University Senior Honors Thesis Abstracts at Washington University Open Scholarship. It has been accepted for inclusion in Spring 2017 by an authorized administrator of Washington University Open Scholarship. For more information, please contact digital@wumail.wustl.edu.
Interdisciplinary Project in the Humanities

Identities at Stake: How Empathetic Virtual Reality Reshapes Personal Identity

Jin Seok Park

Mentor: Pannill Camp

A common understanding of virtual reality (VR) places emphasis on its function as a machine that builds empathy. Current academic research relies on behavioral science to back this claim, which is insufficient in that its conclusions are heavily based on external observations, such as experiments where VR experiences led to a display of empathetic behavior. In order to understand how the mind motivates such action, I attempt to evaluate VR’s potential to generate empathy with a more theoretical approach by analyzing the frameworks of the mind proposed by two different philosophers: David Hume and Edmund Husserl. Although they formulated their ideas in the eighteenth and twentieth centuries, respectively, their works provide valuable insights into how the mind reacts to external perceptions. By applying the ideas of Hume’s empirical ego and Husserl’s transcendental ego to VR experiences, I posit that VR has the potential to reshape our notion of personal identity, particularly when the experience is geared towards building empathy. Specifically, the empirical ego helps us understand that personal identity is a collection of perceptions that are easily susceptible to change when new perceptions are introduced. On the other hand, the transcendental ego shows that the idea of personal identity is made up of the stances that we have intentionally formed regarding our experiences, which are less affected by individual experiences. By applying these frameworks to real and imagined VR experiences, I conclude that VR has the potential to reshape our personal identity and that the increase in empathetic behavior is not the sole effect of the technology but one of the many manifestations of such reshaping. Ultimately, I hope to demonstrate the value of philosophical frameworks in seeking to understand how a new technology may affect how we act but also how we think and define ourselves.