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Volume 12

Washington University
Undergraduate Research Digest

Spring 2017

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Recommended Citation

Park, Jin Seok, "Identities at Stake: How Empathetic Virtual Reality Reshapes Personal Identity" (2017).
Volume 12. 154.

https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/wuurd_vol12/154

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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.