

H/9.2/62.1 ~ TBD location ~ Monday 3:30pm-6:00pm

Office hours: Mondays after class or by appointment

Blog: <http://authenticityclass.wordpress.com>

Overview

This class investigates the murkiest grey areas of authenticity and human perception. Our central question is: what are the minimum requirements for creating an impression of authenticity in an environment, place, character, machine, person or responsive system? We're working in the territories of cognition, perception, behavior, experience, and sense-making as we investigate the boundaries and mechanics of authenticity. Overall, we'll learn strategies for creating richer and more subtle technology projects that ask users or participants for their contingent acceptance of the project's reality. Coursework includes weekly readings, field experiments, short papers, and a final project. The semester is split into two overarching themes.

Humanness.

When we attribute human-esque responsiveness or behavioral and emotional characteristics to a non-human, what cognitive processes are we engaging? What are some of the most persuasive signals of humanness, signals that are powerful enough to convey humanness even in the absence of other cues?

Identities and environments.

What is authenticity of person or of place? By what cues do we attribute authenticity to individual identities and constructed environments? How many or few cues does it take for us to read a system, a person, a constructed world as authentic? What lessons for technology makers are to be learned by investigating abnormal psychology, world-building, and manipulated truth/trust?

Goals

At the end of the semester, students should have gained insight into the dynamics and effects of various forms of authenticity and 'reality effects' in both human experience and technology projects; learned skills for evaluating users' emotional and social experience of things they make; and become familiar with the strategies used in various disciplines to manipulate the illusion of authenticity.

Work

The principal work of the class is in understanding and synthesizing your observations from the readings, discussions, and field assignments. You will *demonstrate* your understanding through your weekly reading responses, your participation in class discussions, your written assignments documentation of field assignments and final project documentation and presentation

Religion Explained, Pascal Boyer

Remainder, Tom McCarthy

Both are at the NYU bookstore, but you also may be able to find used copies around.

The majority of readings will consist handouts and online material. For the online material, I STRONGLY suggest that you make a printout and make notes on it as you're reading. It is very difficult to assimilate complex ideas without using your hands a little. I apologize to the trees for this.

Please note that you should check the class blog every week for your readings and response questions. Things may change as we go along, so that will be the most up to date information, and when possible I will post PDFs of your readings there.

Reading responses

Each week, you will submit a short reading response to me via email.

Assignments

There will be two field assignments, one short paper, and a final project in two iterations.

Grading

Participation: 40%

Field assignments and short paper: 25%

Final project and presentation: 35%

Note that all assignments must be completed to pass the class, including weekly reading response emails.

Attendance

Class attendance and prompt arrivals are mandatory. If you miss more than one session, or are habitually late, it will affect your grade. If you know that you will be forced to miss a session, let me know in advance.

Sept 20: The Varieties of Authentic Experience

As a group, we'll hammer out a working definition of authenticity and explore its edges.

Assigned reading:

Sherry Turkle, "Authenticity in the age of digital companions" from *Interaction Studies* journal
Tom McCarthy, *Remainder*

Class assignment:

Be prepared to share and discuss three examples of objects/people/places/experiences whose authenticity is questionable or impossible to evaluate. In doing this, take note of the different ways you're defining authenticity.

Sept 27: The Uncanny

What feels real and what feels fake and the creepy feeling in between. Freud's essay explores the psychoanalytic valences of the creepy feeling via analysis of the traditional tale of the Sandman.

Guest: TBD puppeteer

Assigned reading:

Sigmund Freud, "The Uncanny" parts 1-3 (PDF on blog)

Oct 4: Theory of Mind, Intuition, Empathy

The capacity to empathize, to project ourselves into the mind of another being, is central to our understanding of humanness and animacy. But not all humans have these special skills. What is the cognitive science of empathy, and how does it drive our perception and behavior?

Assigned reading:

C. Daniel Batson, "Not All Self Interest After All: Economics of Empathy Induced Altruism" from In D. De Cremer, M. Zeelenberg, & J. K. Murnighan (Eds), *Social psychology and economics*, and Janet Metcalfe and Hedy Kober, "Self-Reflective Consciousness and the Projectible Self" from *The Missing Link in Cognition*

ASSIGNMENT #1 DUE (field assignment)

Oct 18 : Anthropomorphism

What do we see when we see humanness? Why and how do we attribute humanness to objects, animals, and forces of nature?

Assigned reading:

Oct 25: Gods & Monsters

What does it mean to be sentient but not human? How do we understand beings with extra powers or confusing combinations of human and nonhuman qualities.

Assigned reading:

Three short essays on zombies and vampires from Richard Greene and K. Silem Mohammad, *Zombies, Vampires and Philosophy*

ASSIGNMENT #2 DUE (short paper)

Nov 1: Responsive Machines 1

Assigned reading:

Each student/group will read different studies of humanoid robots and present to the class.

Nov 8: Responsive Machines 2

A panel of guests will present and discuss their responsive machines/systems.

Guests: animator Eyal Ohana, roboticists Laura Greig and Heather Knight

Nov 15: Delusions

Assigned reading:

Case studies of patients suffering from misidentification delusions.

Nov 22: Reality and Unreality in Unreal Environments

Readings:

Students select a fictional work from a suggested list including *Coraline*, *Ubiq*, and others.

Guest: Game designer TBD

ASSIGNMENT #3 DUE (field assignment)

Nov 29: Hoaxes

Assigned reading:

Students will be assigned case studies of hoaxes and report on their hoax, its environment, play-

Dec 6: Impostors

What makes us believe a person is who they say they are? How have people gotten away with spectacular impostures?

Assigned reading:

Students will be assigned case studies of impostors and report on their impostor's story, technique, and apprehension to the group for discussion.

FINAL PROJECT, FIRST ITERATION DUE (including field writeup)

Dec 13: The Big Con

Assigned reading:

David Maurer, selections from *The Big Con* (Handout), students will also break into groups and watch con movies (as homework), reporting to the class on mechanics and storytelling techniques.

Dec 15: Final project presentations

FINAL PROJECT, SECOND ITERATION PRESENTATION