Book Reviews

Trust and Virtual Worlds: Contemporary Perspectives
Charles Ess and May Thorseth (Eds.)
Peter Lang Publishing (2011) Review
by Mitul Shukla

This is a slight book, being just over A5 in size with around 200 pages; for some reason it reminded me of my copy of The Prophet by Kahlil Gibran. However, it is not a book written by a poet philosopher, although it is book containing strong philosophical debate, and in certain areas I would argue it is profound. Trust and Virtual Worlds: Contemporary Perspectives is made up of a series of works which were originally presented at the ‘Philosophy of Virtuality: Deliberations, Trust, Offences and Virtues’ event which took place in 2009 at the Norwegian University of Science and Technology.

Reading through Trust and Virtual Worlds, I had the distinct feeling that that book was unafraid to tackle difficult concepts and subjects including, but not limited to, sexual objectification in child pornography, financial disparity and even mortality. This is not always an easy book to read. However it is one, in my humble opinion, worth reading.

Trust and Virtual Worlds is organised into three sections:

- Historical and cultural perspectives
- Philosophical perspectives on trust in online environments
- Applications/implications

I found it interesting that the first section of the book gives a fairly clear contextualisation, and then a further exploration, of the philosophical stances taken in the critique of the virtual space in the extant literature. Indeed the contributing authors contextualise and then underline the perceived mismatch of the dualistic view of the virtual and the real. Essentially, the point here is that rather than understanding the online and offline, or the virtual and the real, as being distinct spaces, we can, through the lens of embodiment, perceive not only the virtual as an extension of the real but more accurately as the two being interwoven.

This section of the book also has some interesting debate concerning the nature of how learning is affected by our presence in virtual domains. In fact, the point is made as to the effectiveness of online learning,
first from a dualistic perspective and then from an embodied one. Further exploration here is taken regarding tacit knowledge transfer online from an embodied perspective. An interesting point made in this part of the book is the improvement for some learners which is achieved through being non-co-located with other learners. The case is, essentially, that online learning is ‘safer’ for some students as they are not co-located with other students and are therefore more likely to articulate their thoughts, and indeed engage with others, on a given matter. This it is argued, primarily from a trust perspective, is the case as learners are less vulnerable to others through physical non-co-location with others.

The second section of Trust and Virtual Worlds looks at the impact on our understanding of trust online when we take the embodiment perspective as our basis of approach rather than the Cartesian dualistic perspective often taken in the literature.

This second section also elaborates upon the trust we give to online and/or software agents. Examples given in the text on these matters range from the relatively mundane rating systems that are used on websites such as Ebay or Amazon, to the potentially life or death situations encountered through the use of unmanned aerial systems such as the American Predator drone. This latter example is also one in which software agents need to trust one another, which adds a further layer of complexity to how we can understand and define what trust is.

A colleague once confided in me that his research area (trust) was a very ‘messy’ field. This viewpoint was essentially acknowledged towards the end of the second section of the book. Furthermore, some solutions to this ‘messy’ field effect were given. One offering in particular was the somewhat radical conclusion that we may gain a better understanding of trust, not as a focus of investigation but rather when trust is perceived as a supporting factor to other phenomena.

The part of the third section of this book I will focus upon here deals with virtual child pornography. This I found to be a well balanced, non-judgemental and insightful piece, however distasteful the subject matter may have been on a personal level. A key issue in this chapter is that virtual child pornography contains no real children, but rather depictions or avatars thereof. Further, that the creation, distribution and possession of such imagery can be seen as a ‘victimless crime’ even if this imagery can be deemed illegal. Ultimately, however, this chapter concludes that virtual child pornography is indeed a ‘harmful immorality’ based on the equality norm being essentially flouted.

In conclusion, Trust and Virtual Worlds is a book squarely aimed at an informed reader. However, having said that, all of the relevant references are given and therefore one could fill in any gaps in assumed knowledge by the authors. Overall I found this a highly insightful work which considered philosophical perspectives, as well as practical applications, and even the implications as to how this technology is and can be used or abused. I think this is a book I will buy.