**FUTURE OF COMPUTER ETHICS**

Computers and the transformations they engender have only recently entered into most people’s lives. Large mainframes used by the government and businesses made their debut only 50 years ago, and the personal computer began appearing in small businesses and homes as recently as the early 1980s. While the precursor of the Internet was created almost 30 years ago, widespread use of the Internet and the creation of the World Wide Web occurred during the past ten years. The field of computer ethics has been developed to address ethical problems arising from new technologies. While accurately predicting the direction of such ethical considerations in the future is impossible, some general speculations can be made on emerging trends.

**New Computer Ethics Laws**

Legislation is often slow to catch up to the reality of everyday life. Eventually it does catch up and this will prove true for many of the computer ethics issues we face today. For example, many attempts have already been made in the United States to draft laws increasing personal privacy protection.

**Artificial Intelligence and Avatars**

The first generation of avatars, digital representations that look and talk like ordinary people, has already appeared. Given the rapid advances in technological capabilities and artificial intelligence, predicting that avatars in the future will be indistinguishable from real human beings is not farfetched. This eventuality will pose a rash of ethical dilemmas. For example, should computer users necessarily be warned that they are dealing with an avatar and not a human being? Should avatars be prevented from emulating certain behaviors? In what ways might avatars be used by some for criminal activities, and how can such behavior be prevented? These are just a few of the numerous ethical questions arising from future developments in artificial intelligence.

**Self-Replicating Robots**

We already know that robots can be created that, in turn, create other robots. Such self-replication of technology has great potential to get out of hand, and it thus poses numerous ethical concerns. For instance, have we created a technology that might someday displace, dominate, or even eliminate human beings? How can we know? These are some of the ethical questions concerning robots that will be debated in the future.

**Narrowing the Digital Divide**

While the digital divide between developed countries is narrowing, the gulf between developed and underdeveloped nations is still vast. Debate over how this gap is to be narrowed will continue. Should poorer nations be encouraged to concentrate on gaining basic needs, such as adequate electricity, communications, and health care infrastructures, or should they be encouraged to use available resources to develop digital technologies in order to “catch up” with developed nations? Will computer technologies truly benefit less developed societies and, if so, how? What role should developed nations play in providing and monitoring the dispersal of such technology?

**Governmental Control of Internet Content**

Many people today are concerned about some of the content available on the Internet. Children and vulnerable adults are especially at risk. Some governments, worried about losing control over what information their citizens can access, have already placed severe restrictions on Internet access and content. The question of whether or not the government should control Internet content remains a topic of lively debate. The truth is that even if government controls of some type are enforced, rapid changes in technology will probably allow their circumvention. In the future, the questions of what should be done to control unacceptable Internet content and who should undertake such control will continue to be widely discussed.

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