

Bits & Bytes

Need for computer ethics prompts 'thou shalt not's'

For every person who loves computers, I would guess two people fear or hate them, and four or five merely tolerate them.

While they make some jobs easier, computers have taken away other jobs completely. Furthermore, while they open new possibilities, they can also restrict us, by monitoring our actions or demanding that we do only things a computer can measure.

A batch of theologians and academics, and a couple of chaps from IBM have formed a Computer Ethics Institute, and have come up with a Ten Commandments for Computer Ethics.

Dr. Ramon C. Barquin, president of the institute, states that "all information systems have one weak link: people. As long as human beings are users, developers and administrators of these systems, we cannot dismiss the possibility of someone utilizing their capabilities to do harm. Thus, not only technological safeguards, but ethical guidance is needed."

I have some trouble overlooking the idea that computers would be perfect if "weak" people didn't keep screwing them up. People are not merely an unpleasant necessity. Improving the lives of people is, ethically speaking, what computers — and all technology — should be all about.

But I'll give Barquin the benefit of the doubt and assume he is just being realistic about human nature.



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Computers

to harm other people.

2. Thou shalt not interfere with other people's computer work.

3. Thou shalt not snoop around in other people's computer files.

4. Thou shalt not use a computer to steal.

5. Thou shalt not use a computer to bear false witness.

6. Thou shalt not copy or use proprietary software for which you have not paid.

7. Thou shalt not use other people's computer resources without authorization or proper compensation.

8. Thou shalt not appropriate other people's intellectual output.

9. Thou shalt think about the social consequences of the program you are writing or the system you are designing.

10. Thou shalt always use a computer in ways that insure consideration and respect for your fellow humans.

mental reasons they had to have ten, and they had to couch them in the "Thou shalt not . . ." language of the King James Version of the Bible.

But this list doesn't add much to what we already know about ethical behavior. No fewer than five of the ten (Nos. 3,4,6,7,8) are simply variations on the original Ten Commandments.

Not harming others (1) and thinking about social consequences (9) are rather safe — to my mind, too safe and too vague — ways to deal with the moral dynamite of technology's impact on people. If you design computers or software whose primary purpose is to replace people with machines, and thereby to permit shareholders to make more money, for example, I would suggest you are in a moral quagmire.

I recognize the need to be competitive and all that. But the need to be competitive does not, by itself, justify work which will make many people miserable, even suicidal and violent. The fact that programmers and engineers wreak this havoc from a physical and mental distance puts them in the same category as the B-52 pilot who at 60,000 feet pushes a button because the little green dot on his navigational screen has lined up over the little red dot that is his target. The sterility of his personal circumstances does not excuse the rending of flesh and the destruction of lives below.