

CS290/390: Ethics Case Studies (Feb. 9, 2006)

Adopted from Michael Quinn's *Ethics for the Information Age, 2/e.* (Addison-Wesley, 2006)

Class activity: The instructor will explain about reading one or more of the cases below and discussing with fellow students. Discuss whether the actions described are moral or professional, and be prepared to explain your reasoning for making these judgments. If you believe something should have been done differently, or some action should be taken in response to what is described in the scenario, be prepared to explain that.

Case 1: Access to User Files, Child Pornography

Morgan McSorley, a system administrator for a large corporation, is installing a new software package on the PC used by employee Kelly Smith. The company has not authorized Morgan to read other people's files (email, web-logs, files in the user's home folders). However, in the course of installing the software, Morgan accidentally comes across directories with files that have suspicious sounding names. Morgan opens a few of the files and finds they contain child pornography. Morgan knows this is in violation of company policy, and believes also that possessing such images is against the law. What should Morgan do?

Case 2: Anti-Worm

A new worm is spreading across the Internet, affecting PCs by exploiting a security hole in a commonly used operating system. Chris Smart creates an anti-worm that exploits the same security hole on these machines in order to execute and spread, but this anti-worm will download a patch into the PC to protect the machine from the original worm. Chris releases his anti-worm, taking precautions that it cannot be traced back to its creator. It spreads quickly across the Internet, and like all such programs consumes great amounts of bandwidth and installs itself on millions of PCs. In the end, system administrators perceive it to be just another worm, and they fight it in the same way they protect systems from other instances of malware.

Case 3: Software Recommendation

Alex Jones calls the Department of Computer Science at Enormous State University seeking advice on how to improve the security of Jones's business' local area network. Alex ends up speaking to Prof. Lee Smith, an expert in the field. Prof. Smith answers several of Alex's questions about network security, and then Alex asks for a recommendation for a software package to fight security problems. Prof. Smith tells Alex about a program called NetCheks and that it received the top-rating from a respected magazine that reviewed such packages. Prof. Smith does not mention that the magazine gave another product a "best buy" rating that had fewer features but a much lower price. Prof. Smith also fails to mention that NetCheks is the product of a spin-off company started by Smith's former grad student at E.S.U., and that Smith owns a 3% stake in the company.

Out-of-class activity: Read one or more the professional codes of ethics and practice for computing professionals. Find clauses or statements that relate to the case you have been asked to examine, and be prepared to submit a list of those with a brief discussion of how they apply to the case.

- The ACM Code of Ethics: <http://www.acm.org/constitution/code.html>
- The ACM/IEEE Software Engineering Code of Ethics and Professional Practice: <http://www.acm.org/serving/se/code.htm>