

Interviewee: John Fodor (JF)
Interviewers: Michael Davis (MD)
Location: Kingston, NY
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QUESTIONNAIRE

SOFTWARE DEVELOPERS WRITE A CODE OF ETHICS

1. What is your educational background?

B.A. in philosophy (SUNY-Albany, NY - 1973). Ph.D. in philosophy (Washington University, St. Louis, MO - 1986). Post-doc/Masters in Technology of Education (Harvard University, Cambridge, MA - 1997)

2. What sort of organization do you work for? What do you do there?

I am the President of Interactive Learning Technologies (a company that I started in 1997). ILT leverages various technologies to create educational programs for schools and businesses. Since 1986, I have been Executive Director of a not-for-profit company, Education Media Resources. In both organizations, I produce, direct, and oversee the creation of interactive educational multimedia programs.

3. What experience, if any, have you had in software development? If you are a software developer, what led you into that field?

I've created a number of interactive educational CDs. The first ones were in the field of computer ethics. I did the software coding, as well as interface design for many of these programs. I became a software developer, because I saw the enormous potential computing technology has for educating people.

4. Are you an engineer?

No. I am first and foremost a philosopher, focusing on issues in applied ethics. I am particularly interested in computer, information, and technology ethics.

5. How did you hear about the IEEE/ACM Joint Task force on Software Engineering and Professional Practice (SEEPP)?

Don Gotterbarn called the task force to my attention. I've worked with Don since 1991 when he was a featured speaker at the National Conference on Computing and Human Values. The conference was underwritten by the National Science Foundation. It brought together many important thinkers in the field of computer

ethics including: John Perry Barlow, Dorothy Denning, Don Gotterbarn, Walter Maner, Dianne Martin, Keith Miller, Deborah Johnson, Donn Parker, Judy Perrolle, Willis Ware, and Joseph Weizenbaum. This conference was important in the history of computer ethics since it brought together individuals representing various perspectives in the field.

6. What led you to participate in SEEPP's work?

My interest in computer ethics was already strong, while working at the Research Center on Computing and Society. The Center had produced monographs and later -- with the assistance of Educational Media Resources -- a series of videos in the field of computer ethics. So it was a logical step to participate in SEEPP. Mind you, however, my involvement, as noted below, was very minimal.

7. Were you familiar with codes of ethics before you became involved in SEEPP? Explain.

Absolutely. We had been working with various codes of ethics at RCCS (see 5 above). We were familiar with all of the existing professional codes: IEEE's, ACM's, and ABET's. Our focus at the Center was to find ways of implementing computer ethics in curricula.

8. In what ways did you participate in SEEPP's work, especially in the process of preparing the code? (The more details, the better.)

Very little. I was on the early email list for a while, and commented on some of the issues that were discussed.

9. By what means did you participate? For example, did you participate by email, or by phone, or through face-to-face meetings, or by letter, or by informal conversation, or the like?

Email mostly. A few phone conversations with Don. I'm not sure how much of these phone conversation were related to SEEPP and how much they were related to the Center's work. These conversations took place been 1991-1993, occasioned by the NCCS [National Conference on Computers and Society]. We also crossed paths at various conferences. I recollect Don saying (when handing out a leaflet about SEEPP): "Here. This is what we talked about." My participation was over by the end of 1993.

10. Did any of these means of participation seem to work better than the others? Any seem to work worse? Which would you recommend as best? Why?

We had a VAX system. I did not find it particularly useful for email – when I compare it to today’s email programs. The phone was definitely a better way to communicate then (1991-1993). Fortunately, email has improved.

11. Any events that particularly stick in your mind relevant to the process?
(The more details, the better.)

Nothing springs to mind.

12. Do you have any documents, paper or electronic, relevant to your participation in the process? May we have a copy?

Yes, I had lots of electronic documents; I am a notorious pac-rat. I should have some materials backed up.

13. Has your thinking about codes of ethics changed as a result of your participation in SEEPP’s work? How?

Yes. I see first hand the practical, difficult, and bureaucratic process of creating a code of ethics that members of a large organization adopt.

14. What, in your opinion, is important about having a code of ethics?

A code of ethics is essential for any given profession. In many ways, it defines a profession, and distinguishes it from a group of people sharing common interests or performing similar activities. It also adds “gravitas” to a group. Consequently, it is not surprising to find codes of ethics in various professions, like medicine, law, accounting, and more.

While these codes do not necessarily make practitioners of a profession moral and ethical; they do set up clear guidelines for behavior (those that allowed, and those that are not). By having such codes, members of a profession can measure their actions easily. An important derivative of such codes, is the sense of safety and reliability that is engendered in the public.

15. Is there anything about your *participation* that you are especially pleased with or unhappy about?

I wish I had more time to participate.

16. Is there anything about the *final code* that you are especially pleased with or unhappy about?

While I think the code of ethics generated by SEEPP is a step in the right direction, I do disagree with a basic premise in the formulation of the code. SEEPP makes a point of not wanting to be thought of as an algorithm for solving ethical conundrums. In an ideal world, where individuals are comfortable in making moral decisions this approach would work. However, based on my research, I have found that most computer professionals are not very comfortable in making moral decisions. Moral decision making has not been, for the most part, a part of their formal educational training. Consequently, I believe that an algorithmic approach would work better for software engineers. I think some guiding principles attached to a database of cases (updated regularly) would be the best way to encourage computer professionals to consult the code on a regular basis.

17. Is there anyone whose participation in the process seems to you especially important? Explain.

Don Gotterbarn! I don't think the code of ethics would have seen the light of day were it not for his tireless work. Keith Miller is also someone who has evangelized the cause from its infancy.

18. Anyone who you think we should be sure to talk to? Explain.

There are others in the history of computer/technology ethics who have, in my opinion, laid the foundation for SEEPP. These include: Donn Parker, Willis Ware, Joseph Weizenbaum, Dorothy Denning and Peter Denning.

19. If you had been in charge of the process, what, if anything, would you have done differently?

If I had been in charge, I would have steered the code along the lines I describe above (question 16). Additionally, I would have worked on various ways of educating the members. Creating the code is a first step towards ethical awareness; the next step is to make sure all members understand the code and can work with the code in their daily practise.

20. Is there anything we should have asked but didn't? Anything you want to add to what you have already said?

Nothing that comes to mind now.