


Writing Assignment 1 (Revision 1)

Comment: Throughout the essay you switch back and forth from past tense to present tense. I'm not fixing that.

1. The topic of the article deals with the question of whether there are ethical issues that need to be considered with the introduction of Actimates Barney, an interactive plush toy that mimics human social interaction. The article presents the positions of four experts on this question, namely Allen Cypher from Stagecast Software, Inc, Allison Druin from the Human-Computer Interaction Lab at the University of Maryland, Batya Friedman from the Department of Mathematics and Computer Science at Colby College, and Erik Strommen from  Microsoft Corporation.

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2. Three of the four experts believe that there are potential ethical issues that need to be considered regarding the Actimates Barney toy. Allen Cypher is concerned that children may develop an emotional connection to this type of toy and may think that such connection is similar to making actual connection with real people. According to Allison Druin, the Barney toy may also discourage children from thinking for themselves because the toy appears to tell kids what to play or do. Finally, Batya Friedman believed that toys contribute to the learning process of children about human interaction and morality. Thus, Friedman raised the question of how a child's interaction with Barney would affect the child's social and moral development.

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Comment: Awkward. Try "contribute to the process by which children learn about human interaction and morality."

On the other hand, Erik Strommen believed that the toy is harmless and enjoyable. He believed that children are smart and can differentiate what is real from what is pretend. Thus, he considered the risk of children confusing real human interaction and interaction with interactive toys to be unfounded. Strommen also added that interactive toys like Barney present no moral implications. This is in contrast to the belief of Batya Friedman that toys are not value-neutral.

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3. With the integration of powerful and exciting computer technology into toys, Allen Cypher encourages everyone to take time and consider the possible negative impacts that interactive toys may have on children. In addition, Allison Druin believes that with the application of powerful computer interfaces in toys, manufacturers and computing experts must select carefully what features should be incorporated into toys.

4. To prove his point that humans are capable of developing emotional connection to a program that shows a certain degree of feelings or emotions, Allen Cypher gave a real-life example in which a secretary asked her boss to leave the room because she wanted privacy in talking to a psychologist program called Eliza. In the case of the Barney toy, Cypher is concerned that statements like “I really like you” and “You’re my special friend” can make children believe that Barney is actually connecting emotionally to them.

For Allison Druin, statements like “Exercise with me,” “Now let’s move like this,” and “Let’s sing” make Barney appear to have many ideas and create the appearance that he is telling kids what they should play or do. Druin fears that such behavior may discourage children to think on their own and be creative.

Batya Friedman gave examples to support his belief that toys help children in building their social and moral knowledge. Friedman believes that children learn about human interaction when they do role-playing with their dolls or stuffed animals. He also thinks that children learn about fairness, emotions, feelings, and consequences of one’s action through reading books and stories and watching movies.

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Finally, Erik Strommen argued that the Barney toy is harmless because there is no evidence or finding that proves otherwise. He also argued that children are smart enough to differentiate human from toy interaction because they are living in a world where highly advanced machines are part of children's everyday lives.

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5. Allen Cypher made a couple of hidden assumptions when he mentioned a scenario where the secretary of Joseph Weizenbaum asked him to leave the room because she wanted privacy in consulting with the Eliza psychologist program. First, Cypher assumed that the other panelists know Joseph Weizenbaum because he did not give any background information about Weizenbaum in his example. Second, he assumed that the other panelists were also familiar with the Eliza psychologist program because he only mentioned the name of the program without giving additional description of it.

Comment: This isn't the reasons Cypher made the assumption. It's the reason you know that he did. Change to "We know that Cypher assumed.... Because"

Batya Friedman and Erik Strommen also made hidden assumptions. Assuming that the panelists and readers are familiar with the Purple Moon series, Friedman only mentioned that the series is an example of a socially focused computer simulation. When Strommen said that the form of interface used in the Barney toy is similar to that used in television and web browsers, he too is assuming that everyone would know how the interfaces in television and web browsers work.

6. I believe there are potential ethical or social issues connected with the technology used in the Actimates Barney toy that need to be addressed. Considering that this technology is new and is being applied to toys for kids who are growing and developing mentally, emotionally, and socially, it is possible that such technology could have a negative impact on the developing

minds of kids. Unfortunately, the real impact of interactive toys on kids can only be determined through scientific studies that require time to carry out.

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Nonetheless, I agree with Batya Friedman's view that toys contribute to the building of social and moral knowledge in children. Since kids quickly follow and learn what they see and hear around them, they would definitely learn something from the Barney toy that imitates human interaction. The question is whether the things they learn are good or bad for them. I think that whatever kids learn from such toys can be turned into something positive through additional input coming from parents and other caring adults.

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My view on this topic is not influenced by any previous experience. However, Batya Friedman's concerns about the Barney toy influenced my view because the questions that he raised were based on examples that seemed valid to me.