Possible topics for talks in CS 225 (Winter 2009)

These topics are presented to provoke thought. The items below are not intended to represent a single presentation or essay. They are intended to be used as “jumping off points” for multiple discussions.

Privacy

1. Some stores specialize in maternity clothes for pregnant women. Is the fact that a woman is pregnant considered personal information? Should these types of stores be allowed to sell customer information to other companies that sell products to pregnant women?

2. Politicians are public figures, what if a newspaper got access the list of pay-per-view movies a politician watched? Should it be able to publish that list?

3. Is the image of your face considered private property? (Or, is the image of President Bush’s face private property?) What if a computer generated porn movie used your face on one of the characters? Should you be able to sue the company that made the film?

4. Should anonymity on the Internet be banned? restricted? encouraged?

5. Under what circumstances is data mining of personal data appropriate? Consider Amazon.com suggesting books, NSA data mining phone records looking for terrorists, advertisers examining your credit card records for shopping habits.

6. What are appropriate privacy expectations for email? Should your employer be able to read your office email? Should police be able to read your personal email with a warrant? without a warrant?

7. Should (or to what extent should) your employer be allowed (or expected) to monitor your web surfing on the desktop computer in your office?

8. What are appropriate privacy expectations on Facebook and other social networking systems? Is it appropriate for a prospective employer to reject you based on something they find on your Facebook page?

9. Is it acceptable for the local police to use automated video surveillance to make a record of all license plates passing through all intersections in Bellingham? Should they be able to use that information to help recover stolen cars? to give you a speeding ticket? Should your husband or wife be able to use that information against you in a divorce?

Security

10. Would you be willing to pay a small fee for a nationally or internationally regulated email system that used digital signatures to be able to identify the sender of each and every email and be able to eliminate spam? Would we lose anything by giving up the free, open and mostly unregulated system we have now?
11. Should Microsoft be liable for problems caused by the lack of security in their software? If yes, how do you address the fact that all software is buggy? If no, how do you address malicious acts (e.g. intentional back doors) or gross negligence?

**Privacy and Security**

12. Should (will) a National ID card system be implemented in the United States? If so, what conditions or controls should be applied?

13. The location and movement of people carrying cell phones can be tracked. How long should cell phone companies keep that information before it is destroyed? Should the government be able to collect and store it for future use? Can this information be used for commercial purposes, for example, how much do you travel or what stores do you visit?

14. Should state governments (like the state of Washington) be allowed to outsource software projects to countries like India and China? Should they be forced to use US based companies?

15. Discuss the theft of the Veteran's Administration laptop, resulting in the possible exposure of personal information for tens of millions of veterans and active duty military personnel. Was this the employee's problem? the VA's problem? What, if anything, should be done to avoid this kind of incident in the future?

16. To what extent should governments be responsible for preventing and/or policing Internet fraud?

17. Should the government be able to control research on cryptography? to what extent?

18. Should electronic voting be allowed? What about remote electronic voting, for example soldiers serving in Iraq? citizens traveling in Europe? Are safeguards required to prevent hackers from changing the results of an election? If yes, what safeguards?

**Software: Licensing, Warranties, etc.**

19. Should we have a law in the US outlawing “no return” software after the box has been opened? What if the media is defective or the software will not even install? Should the law take the price into account?

20. Laws have been proposed that would allow software makers to remotely disable software because of licensing violations. Would this benefit consumers or hurt them in the long run?

21. Should “non transferable” software licenses be legal?

22. Is the ESRP rating system effective? How could it be improved or should we get rid of it?

**Intellectual Property and Digital Rights Management**

23. Do music companies provide a useful service? If so, how and how much should they be compensated? If not, what would you propose to replace them?
24. The US has a very liberal software patent system. Canada does not allow software patents. Which system is better? Does a third system need to be developed?

25. Software copyrights are generally accepted today. Should you be able to copyright software? What about copyrights for user interfaces?

26. To what extent should your employer be able to restrict your future employment based on your knowledge of software trade secrets? Can your employer prevent you from going to work for the competition based on your knowledge of the internals of your employer’s software?

27. Media companies want to make hardware and software standards preventing you from skipping commercials when you view the show. Is this an ethical treatment of the consumer? (Remember that media companies make most of their income from advertising.)

28. The Digital Millennium Copyright Act (DMCA) makes circumvention of "technical means of protection" illegal, except in certain circumstances. What are the trade-offs? Should the exceptions be decreased or increased? Are fewer stronger controls needed? What are the costs to copyright holders and to society at large?

29. Explain the Sony "root kit" fiasco. Should this sort of thing be illegal? Why? If it is legal, under what conditions (e.g. notification, …)?

30. What are the legal, ethical, social issues associated with P2P file downloading? Should any restrictions be applied? If so, what restrictions are appropriate?

Social and Legal Issues

31. What should Western or the faculty at Western do to control, prevent, manage the problem of students plagiarizing using the Internet?

32. When is it appropriate and/or to what extent should electronic communication replace face-to-face communication? Think about business meetings, job interviews, criminal trials, etc.

33. Network Neutrality. What are the issues? What is Google's position? What is Comcast's position? What do you think should be done?

34. What should the future role of the FCC be? Should they continue to manage and allocate electro-magnetic spectrum? Are they the right agency to be regulating the Internet (e.g. network neutrality issues)? If you had the power, would you (and how would you) modify their charter?

35. Does everyone have a right to Internet access? Should we expect that society will provide reasonably priced high-speed Internet access to all (or almost all) residents? How is this same as or different than electricity, water, or phone service?

36. Do software engineers at large companies like Microsoft and EA need unions? What are the benefits and costs to the employees, to the companies, and to consumers at large?
37. Do software engineers need to be licensed like other engineering professions?

38. Should I read (should I be forced to read) all those End User License Agreements (EULAs)?

39. To what extent are individuals, businesses, and government responsible for the proper disposal of used electronics? How should the cost for disposal be managed?

40. To what extent is it appropriate for players to use automated assists (that is, programs) within the context of multi-player video games (like World of Warcraft)? What are appropriate actions for video game companies to control or prevent this?

41. Are extremely violent video games acceptable? Should they be banned? Should they be restricted (for example, not for young children)? What restrictions are appropriate?

42. What about video games with extreme sexual content?

43. Should child porn be legal if the images of children in the film are computer generated?

44. If I kill someone in a virtual world, should they be able to sue me? should I be criminally liable? How does this compare to crimes in the real world? Is this a property crime like vandalism or arson? Is this a personal crime like assault or murder? Is it a tort? What if I steal someone’s virtual money?

45. What are appropriate uses for robots? cleaning my house? watching my mother with Alzheimer’s? fighting in war? What controls should be mandated or enforced for these kinds of robots? Should I require special licensing for the manufacturers?

46. If I could build an intelligent machine, should I? Is it murder if I turn it off?