

Quiz for Computers and Philosophy

For the last quiz, I had you listen to a speech by Douglas Adams. If you'll recall, during that speech Adams tells a story about the first time he really saw some of the Internet's potential. It was about a student who hooked a nearby soda machine up to the network (and thus to the Internet). Below is a series of (made up) scenarios building on this story. Please read them and answer the questions that follow.

The student—let's call him Alex—writes a piece of software that will read the information coming from the soda machine and send him alerts about important events (no more Dr. Pepper; refilled with Dr. Pepper; etc.). Others in Alex's department begin asking if they can use this software, and Alex decides there might be a market for it.

1. Alex can copyright his idea for this software. **[1 point]**

True False

Alex creates his software and begins to sell it online. A month later, Tom, another student, releases a piece of software that does essentially the same thing. Alex takes Tom to court and demonstrates that there is a striking resemblance between their work.

2. How is the court **likely** to rule? (Circle two.) **[1 point]**

- A. If Alex has a copyright, then the court will rule in favor of Alex.
- B. If Alex has a copyright, then the court will rule in favor of Tom if Tom demonstrates that he created his software independently.
- C. If Alex has a patent, then the court will rule in favor of Alex.
- D. If Alex has a patent, then the court will rule in favor of Tom if Tom demonstrates that he created his software independently.

Later, Alex creates a new piece of software for a candy machine. He decides to patent it.

3. Some of Alex's friends complain to him that patents are not appropriate for software. Argue for this position on their behalf. **[3 points]**

Liz (another student) has an office that happens to be right near the soda machine Alex has been working with. One day, she sees Alex coming down the hall to get a Diet Dr. Pepper from the machine. She has a devilish idea. She doesn't like Diet Dr. Pepper, but she does like Sprite. And, she knows, Alex hates Sprite. So, she runs back to her computer and logs onto the soda machine. As soon as Alex has inserted his money, but before he makes his selection, Liz tells the machine to drop a Sprite. There is a pause; Alex curses at the machine. He fumbles in his pockets for more change, finds some, purchases a Diet Dr. Pepper, and walks away back towards his own building, muttering to himself about idiotic technologies. Liz waits a moment, goes out into the hallway, gets the Sprite lying in the machine, and goes back to her office to enjoy it.

4. Presumably, we would all agree that Liz has done something wrong. But what has she done? That is, what “offline crime” is her action most analogous to? Perhaps it is theft, but there are clear disanalogies between her actions and normal theft. Describe some ways in which the analogy breaks down, then offer an analogy of your own. **[3 points]**

At first, Alex just thought that the machine had malfunctioned, but eventually discovered what Liz had done. Alex had never before considered there to be a need for soda machine security. Yet now, it seemed, there was. Alex begins writing a patch for the machine's firmware, which he installs over the old firmware.

5. What is the difference between “white hat” and “black hat” hacking? How are Liz and Alex's actions relevant to this distinction? Offer your own examples of each, as well. **[3 points]**