On the first day of class two ideas were introduced. The first was that of the ethitechnical problem, that is, an ethical problem that arose because of some new use or development of technology. A well-known example is GPS tracking technology and its uses. Warrantless and continuous tracking of individuals’ cell phones by the government or private businesses (such as the cell phone vendor or service provider) was simply not possible ten or fifteen years ago on the scale it is now. Go back far enough and it was not possible at all. The ethical issue here is individuals’ reasonable expectation of privacy, which many would argue is a basic human right. For these reasons, GPS tracking fits the definition of an ethitechnical problem.

The other idea introduced on the first day was that some problems that many people might think arose because of a new technology are not really new problems at all, but just old problems in new forms. In particular, these are old problems that we have learned to deal with. The example used in class was students’ use of laptops during class. This is an ethical problem because laptops can be a distraction to other students, thus depriving them of a classroom environment conducive to learning. Such behavior can also serve as a public statement that the course material or presentation does not merit students’ attention, which is not a constructive or mature way to express that point of view. However, it seems reasonable to claim that this problem is not new because it is really no different than reading a newspaper in class, doodling, or passing notes on paper, that is, any classroom behavior that is distracting to others. Thus, laptops in the classroom do not fit the definition of an ethitechnical problem because the problem did not originate with the introduction of laptops.

Consider a third example of a possible ethitechnical problem: electronic gaming, namely, “video games”. This is a social problem when it reaches a level of addiction that negatively impacts a person’s job performance, school work, or social relations. Gaming is a problem of social concern, but where is the ethical issue here? Ruling out the subject matter of the game or game marketing that targets inappropriate audiences, is there really an ethical issue at the core of addictive gaming? To qualify as an ethitechnical problem, the problem must involve an ethical component as well as a technological component. (You are welcome to consider this question further in the following homework assignment∗.)

The homework assignment is to give three examples of current ethitechnical problems (in addition to GPS tracking). Also, give three examples of problems that involve current technology but are not really new problems (like laptops in the classroom) and/or problems that involve current technology and, while they are problems, do not have an ethical component (like the third example). That is a total of six examples. (“As a special case, for one of your six examples you are welcome to argue that the gaming problem really does have an ethical component.)

Use the examples above as the measure of the depth of analysis that is expected for each
problem that you choose. You are welcome to use outside sources but all writing must be your own words. Work individually or in pairs. If you work with a partner, hand in only one paper with both names on it. The paper must be typed, not hand written. It is due at the beginning of class on Wednesday, September 19. Please do not email your paper to your instructor. If you do not hand it in in class, ask someone in the CS main office to put it in your instructor’s mailbox.