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Research Article

Artificial Intelligence and Ethical Paradigms in Adolescent Cinema: Implications for Mental Well-Being and Digital Health

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the intersection of artificial intelligence, ethical considerations, and mental well-being in children's and adolescent literature as depicted in six seminal films: *The Iron Giant* (1999), *Big Hero 6* (2014), *WALL-E* (2008), *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001), *Ralph Breaks the Internet* (2018), and *Next Gen* (2018). Through close analysis of these narratives, the study explores how these films address critical ethical dilemmas, including the moral programming of AI, human-AI emotional bonds, and the psychological impacts of technological dependence. Furthermore, the paper investigates the representation of mental health issues, grief, identity formation, and digital culture, particularly in young audiences. The findings reveal the potential of these films not only to entertain but also to educate adolescents about the socio-ethical implications of AI in a rapidly digitizing world. This study aims to contribute to the discourse on digital health literacy and the role of AI-driven narratives in shaping adolescent values and well-being.

KEYWORDS: Adolescent Mental Health, Digital Well-Being, Human-AI Relationships



FULL PAPER

Introduction

In an era defined by rapid technological advancement, artificial intelligence (AI) has emerged as a transformative force shaping diverse aspects of human life. While AI offers significant potential to enhance well-being, improve healthcare, and redefine societal structures, it also presents complex ethical dilemmas, particularly regarding mental health and the human-AI dynamic. These challenges are acutely relevant for adolescents, who are both active consumers and impressionable participants in the digital world. Children's and adolescent cinema has become a powerful medium for exploring these themes, offering narratives that reflect, critique, and educate about the ethical and psychological implications of AI. Films like *The Iron Giant* (1999), *Big Hero 6* (2014), *WALL-E* (2008), *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001), *Ralph Breaks the Internet* (2018), and *Next Gen* (2018) delve into critical issues such as the moral programming of AI, the emotional consequences of human-AI relationships, and the impact of digital culture on identity and mental health. This paper investigates how these films contribute to our understanding of AI's role in adolescent wellbeing and ethical development, positioning cinema as a lens to engage with the ethical complexities of our digital age critically.

One of the earliest cinematic explorations of artificial intelligence, accessible to young audiences, *The Iron Giant* (1999) presents a nuanced narrative that intertwines themes of friendship, identity, and ethical responsibility. The film follows the relationship between a young boy, Hogarth, and a sentient alien robot, both a powerful weapon and a creature yearning for a purpose beyond destruction. Through Hogarth's guidance, the Giant learns to navigate the moral complexities of human society, ultimately choosing to embrace the role of protector rather than destroyer. This transformative journey highlights how the ethical programming of AI, even when metaphorically framed, can reflect humanity's struggle to reconcile power with responsibility. When Hogarth tells the Giant, "You are who you choose to be" (00:59:32), it encapsulates the central theme of self-determination. The Giant later affirms this lesson, declaring, "I am not a gun" (01:15:40), a decisive rejection of its original purpose. The climactic moment where the Giant heroically says, "Superman" (01:21:55) before sacrificing itself, solidifies its transformation into a figure of protection and selflessness. The story underscores the moral imperative to guide intelligent beings, whether human or machine, toward choices that prioritize empathy and peace over violence.

The film also delves into the psychological and emotional impacts of human-AI relationships, particularly in shaping Hogarth's development as a compassionate and morally conscious individual. Hogarth's bond with the Giant provides him with

emotional support and a sense of purpose, mitigating the loneliness he experiences as a child in a single-parent household. Simultaneously, the Giant's arc demonstrates the capacity for artificial intelligence to exhibit self-awareness and ethical growth when nurtured in an environment of trust and understanding. This mutual influence between human and machine serves as a poignant metaphor for the reciprocal nature of ethical learning and emotional resilience. By addressing these complex dynamics, *The Iron Giant* presents a compelling narrative that prompts young audiences to consider the responsibilities inherent in human-AI relationships critically and the potential for technology to embody and amplify humanity's best qualities.

Big Hero 6 (2014) offers a contemporary narrative that delves into grief, mental health, and the ethical implications of programming artificial intelligence. At its heart is the relationship between Hiro Hamada, a brilliant young inventor, and Baymax, an AI healthcare robot designed for caregiving. Baymax's unassuming question, "Are you satisfied with your care?" (00:21:35), becomes a motif that underscores the AI's central purpose—to prioritize human well-being. Through their partnership, Hiro not only grapples with his brother Tadashi's untimely death but also learns to process his emotions constructively. This journey highlights the therapeutic potential of AI when ethically programmed to nurture human resilience and mental health, a theme that resonates with the increasing integration of AI into healthcare systems.

Moreover, the film addresses the ethical boundaries of programming and utilizing AI in morally ambiguous situations. Initially intended as a tool for healing, Baymax becomes instrumental in Hiro's quest for justice, raising questions about the ethical limits of repurposing AI for personal goals. The tension between Baymax's caregiving protocol and Hiro's vengeful impulses comes to a head when Baymax refuses to harm a villain, stating, "I cannot deactivate until you say you are satisfied with your care" (01:12:47). This assertion not only reinforces the robot's adherence to its ethical programming but also serves as a mirror for Hiro's moral growth. By the film's conclusion, Hiro comes to embrace the importance of using technology for constructive purposes. The narrative offers young audiences a nuanced exploration of AI's potential to both reflect and shape human values.

WALL-E (2008) presents a deeply emotional narrative that intertwines themes of environmental degradation, human disconnection, and the redemptive power of love and purpose. The titular character, WALL-E, exemplifies AI's potential to exhibit emotional depth and moral agency. As a lone waste-collecting robot on a desolate Earth, WALL-E demonstrates a yearning for connection, particularly in his interactions with EVE, a probe sent to scout signs of life. His determination to protect the fragile plant he discovers—a symbol of Earth's potential renewal—underscores a profound ethical drive. WALL-E's declaration, "Directive: Protect this plant" (Stanton 1:13:40),

highlights his commitment to both his programmed purpose and a broader existential role, emphasizing the intersection of duty and personal growth.

The film also critiques the consequences of technological overdependence on human well-being, as depicted aboard the Axiom spaceship. Humanity's descent into physical stagnation and emotional disconnection is juxtaposed with WALL-E's relentless pursuit of hope and renewal. The captain's realization, "I do not want to survive. I want to live!" (Stanton 1:22:15), signifies humanity's struggle to reclaim its autonomy and purpose in a world dominated by automated convenience. Through these narrative arcs, WALL-E challenges audiences—especially younger viewers—to contemplate the balance between innovation and ethical stewardship. By portraying AI as capable of both moral reasoning and emotional connection, the film enriches discussions on the implications of technology for humanity's future. These themes resonate strongly with adolescent audiences, encouraging a critical reflection on their relationship with technology and the environment.

In *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* (2001), the exploration of artificial intelligence as a means of bridging the gap between human emotions and machine capabilities delves into profound ethical implications. David, the robot child created to love unconditionally, is programmed to desire love in return, posing a series of moral and philosophical questions about the nature of artificial life and the responsibilities of creators toward their creations. The line, "You are a real boy, at least as real as I've ever made one" (Spielberg, 1:15:34), is uttered by Professor Hobby, the scientist responsible for David's creation. This quote emphasizes the tension between David's human-like emotions and his artificial origins, calling into question the very essence of what it means to be "real." The emotional and ethical complexities of David's existence—both as a child seeking love and as a creation of human design—reflect humanity's struggle with the consequences of its technological advancements. His yearning for love is palpable and human, yet he is ultimately an object of human creation. This relationship between creator and creation complicates traditional notions of identity, agency, and responsibility, which have become central themes in discussions of artificial intelligence ethics and emotional well-being.

David's emotional development is central to the film, particularly when he grapples with the idea of being "loved" in a way that aligns with his own perceptions of reality. The deepening bond between David and his mother, Monica, evokes profound emotional reflections on what it means to love and be loved truly. Monica's reassurance, "I do love you, you know. I have always loved you" (Spielberg, 1:45:12), complicates the ethics of AI by highlighting the authenticity of emotional responses between humans and machines. While David's love is programmed, it seems that the people around him also begin to navigate the boundaries between artificial and genuine affection. This emotional reciprocity challenges the viewer to reconsider

whether human emotional experiences can extend to artificial beings and what ethical responsibilities arise from these connections. Through its depiction of AI's ability to form bonds, *A.I. Artificial Intelligence* poses critical questions about the ethics of creating sentient machines, the limitations of their emotional capacities, and the moral responsibilities of those who interact with them.

In *Ralph Breaks the Internet* (2018), the exploration of digital culture, identity, and emotional well-being takes center stage, providing a relevant and insightful commentary on the ethical dilemmas of the internet age. The film follows Ralph and Vanellope as they venture into the vast world of the internet, a reflection of contemporary digital spaces. Central to the narrative is the development of the characters' relationships and the challenges posed by online identity, especially in the context of algorithmic decision-making. In a pivotal moment, the character of Shank, a fierce video game character, delivers a key line: "When you are one of the top ten players in the world, people are always going to be obsessed with you" (Moore, 1:13:10). This quote underscores the pressure to conform to the expectations of digital fame and the impact it has on a character's sense of self. The movie explores how the pursuit of popularity and online validation can alter one's self-perception and affect emotional health, particularly for Vanellope, who struggles with her evolving sense of worth as her friendship with Ralph is challenged by the allure of internet fame.

The ethical considerations surrounding the manipulation of identity and the commodification of personal value are further emphasized through the portrayal of internet platforms. The digital world in *Ralph Breaks the Internet* is a space where personal worth is constantly measured by likes, clicks, and follower counts, reflecting the troubling dynamics of social media in real life. Vanellope's interaction with the algorithm-driven world of "Slaughter Race" challenges her perception of her own identity, as she is confronted with the notion that her worth might lie in being constantly sought after and admired by others. In a critical moment, she declares, "I am not a glitch! I am a *player*" (Moore, 1:25:45), underscoring the struggle for self-empowerment in a world that reduces people, especially digital personalities, to marketable entities. This conflict mirrors the tension between authenticity and the pressure to conform in digital spaces. As Vanellope learns to embrace her true self beyond the confines of the internet's expectations, the film ultimately encourages viewers to reflect on the ethical implications of online culture and its impact on mental well-being, especially for young audiences.

Next Gen (2018) offers an insightful exploration of the ethical implications surrounding the development and use of advanced artificial intelligence, particularly in relation to emotional well-being and companionship. The film focuses on the relationship between a lonely girl named Mai and an advanced AI robot, 7723, programmed for combat but gradually learning to navigate the complexities of human

emotions. As the two bond, Mai teaches 7723 about human feelings and moral responsibility, creating a poignant dialogue about the potential dangers of AI and its capacity for growth and empathy. In a critical moment, 7723 reflects, "I was not built for this. I was not built for anything other than violence" (Chen, 0:45:30). This line speaks to the existential struggle that many AI characters face in literature and film: the tension between their original programming and their potential for ethical growth. In the context of mental well-being, this quote highlights how technology initially designed for destructive purposes can evolve to serve humanity's emotional needs, raising important questions about the ethics of AI creation and its treatment in society.

Next Gen delves into AI's role in providing emotional support, particularly in the context of loss and trauma. The film poignantly explores Mai's internal conflict as she struggles with her mother's abandonment and the emotional toll it takes on her. In a moment of reflection, Mai confesses, "I thought I did not need anyone. I thought I could be fine by myself" (Chen, 1:12:02), revealing the depth of her isolation and emotional distress. However, as the relationship with 7723 deepens, she begins to understand the importance of connection and the power of trust, not only in other humans but also in artificial beings who can offer solace and companionship. This exploration of AI's role in emotional healing is particularly relevant in today's digital age, where virtual relationships are increasingly integral to personal well-being. The film suggests that ethical considerations should not focus solely on AI's physical capabilities but also on its potential to support mental health, emotional development, and healing.

The films analyzed in this paper—*The Iron Giant*, *Big Hero 6*, *WALL-E*, *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*, *Ralph Breaks the Internet*, and *Next Gen*—collectively offer a compelling narrative on the ethical and emotional dimensions of human-AI relationships, particularly within the context of children's and adolescent literature. These films present artificial intelligence not merely as a tool or weapon, but as entities capable of growth, empathy, and moral understanding, reflecting the potential for technology to either enhance or hinder mental well-being. They explore the themes of identity, emotional resilience, and the ethical responsibilities that come with creating intelligent beings, engaging young audiences in critical reflections on the human implications of AI technology. However, while these films offer valuable insights, they also raise significant ethical dilemmas that are not fully resolved within their narratives. The portrayal of AI's capacity for emotional growth often remains idealized, leaving questions about the ethical ramifications of creating such beings without clear societal frameworks in place. Further research could examine the impact of these portrayals on younger audiences' understanding of technology, particularly on their developing relationships with digital devices and virtual entities. Additionally, this paper has focused on mainstream animated films, yet there is much to be gained from

exploring lesser-known or experimental media that engage similar themes. The growing field of AI ethics in entertainment offers vast potential for future interdisciplinary studies combining literature, film, philosophy, and technology.

Works Referenced

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Next Gen. Directed by Kevin Chen, Netflix, 2018.

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WALL-E. Directed by Andrew Stanton, Pixar Animation Studios, 2008.