Ethical Design Guide
Promoting ethical design, before it’s too late.

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Either by action or inaction, through fault or ignorance, we have designed the world to behave exactly as it’s behaving right now... The world is on its way to ruin and it’s happening by design. “I Reading this quote from Mike Monteiro’s novel, Ruined by Design, was mind-blowing. Immediately, it made me feel oblivious. Delighted to download the latest useless app, I wouldn’t think twice about granting my personal information to anonymous developers. Coincidently, as a hopeful designer, reading this helped me realize it isn’t too late to change course. In my short yet stimulating time as a student designer, I’ve learned that design is a dynamic, ever-changing field. Compare your first experiences on the web to your favorite app today, you won’t find many similarities. But with a shifting industry comes ambiguity. Practice, career, and education are impacted by the dynamic nature of design. Yet, one major factor which halts the progressive nature of the field is the lack of an ethical code. Rather than developing innovative, human-centered design practices, the world’s biggest tech companies are concentrating on devious ways to put money in their pockets. This is all happening through unethical design practices. As a designer, I am inspired by the works of the Bauhaus, not only from their color and form but also from how their aesthetics and ethics align. They emphasized the social function of design, by being innovative but also focusing on human needs. Today, the digital world is dictating the rhythms of our lives. Rather than blaming societal issues on popular culture and social media, we should examine the function of the devices that fasten these problems. Designers must take responsibility for the things they create and how they impact millions of lives.

Ethic

[noun]
1. the discipline dealing with what is good and bad and with moral duty and obligation
2. a set of moral principles: a theory or system of moral values
As a first-generation American and the youngest of four, I held the full-time position of IT support for my family. With this responsibility came an early exposure to technology, and with that came an early exposure to design. At a young age, I understood that design was everywhere; every object we interact with has been designed to function a certain way, benefiting the user. Good design is a phenomenal experience, it provides users with a seamless, enjoyable product experience. On the other hand, it can be used to manipulate the user, tricking them into making decisions that do not benefit them but benefit the company. The latter is known as creating ‘Dark Patterns’. According to darkpatterns.org, a website created by Harry Brignull to spread awareness, they are tricks used in websites and apps that make you do things that you didn’t mean to.

Initially, dark patterns were techniques directed at unaware users, meant for short-term gains. An ordinary example of this is after selecting a flight or hotel, the booking website will “highly recommend” a subpar insurance service, priced at a percentage of your calculated total. If you decide to decline the service, you’re met with a warning in red, bolded font. Using a typeface typically used for warnings or emergencies, the site attempts to pressure the user into making a last-minute add-on that will likely go unused. With time, dark patterns have improved, becoming more sly, tricking even familiar users. The 2016 US presidential election brought a critical case of dark patterns to attention. News outlets all over the globe designed fabricated news stories regarding the running candidates. Later noted as “fake news”, these misleading headlines were designed to boost engagement and profits from users.

As mentioned earlier, I am automatically assigned to assist my parents with any technology-related issue, with good cause. Both over the age of 50, my parents have mastered using their favorite apps on their iPhones, yet, they have not adapted to dark patterns, which results in false information, overpayments, and unnecessary stress.

When thinking about addiction, people don’t typically imagine the need for information as a catalyst. Yet, it has progressively become a fixation that is taking over society. In recent years, those between the age of 16 and 24 spent more than three hours a day on social media apps. As a 21-year-old, I can firmly say, the statistics hold. Personally, opening the screen time function on my iPhone is a terrifying, yet thrilling experience. A measure of hours and minutes, exposing the amount of time I’ve procrastinated for the day. When we’re bored enough, my friends and I will reveal our shameful numbers, taunting the one with the most time.

Although deemed legal for all ages, the need for information feeds off of the brain’s reward system; a neurotransmitter known as dopamine. Every time we are exposed to a stimulating activity, our brain releases dopamine, subconsciously causing addiction. This goes for tapping every Instagram notification, reading every tweet on the timeline, and scrolling through every Tik Tok on the for you page. Even every time you pick up your phone, you become part of a dopamine-seeking-reward loop. Social media apps are designed like games; bottomless content appears as you scroll, just to be met with a pull to refresh option at the top of the page… and it doesn’t end there. The worst of it happens after you exit the app, that’s when the FOMO kicks in. The eternal content on social media platforms forces us to feel the need to constantly receive new information. Google’s former design ethics and product philosopher perfectly encapsulates the psychology behind social media apps in Netflix’s *The Social Dilemma*: “If something is not a tool, it’s demanding things from you… Social media isn’t a tool that’s just waiting to be used. It has its own goals, and it has its own means of pursuing them by using your psychology against you.”
Technology has drastically changed forms of human communication, interaction, and behavior in a multitude of ways. From the dot-com boom to the COVID-19 pandemic, the internet has carried society’s weight on its shoulders (or on its bandwidth). Yet, a statistic that is not widely known is that over 30 million Americans do not have access to high-speed internet. This creates a gap between the virtual and physical worlds, known as the digital divide. Since this is such a multi-faceted issue, I will be focusing on the designed aspect of the problem, rather than the inherited, systematic issue. Through personal experiences and extensive research, I’ve learned about a prominent design issue in modern technology that disfavors certain demographics. Seniors have signaled their frustrations over technology, for what seems like an eternity. A common misconception when designing for seniors is that the most important facet to consider is the user interface. Large typeface, contrasting colors, and increased volumes seem to be the solution to their setbacks, but that is inaccurate and fails to address the real issues at hand. Rather than pinning the problem on vision, hearing, and motor skill issues, we should consider the accessibility behind our products and clearly define our target users. We’ve created an interface that requires technological literacy. Rather than dismissing these concerns and classifying them as edge cases, designers should confront the issue head-on with honesty and transparency. As technology continues to emerge rapidly, the technical gap between generations increases synchronously. If we continue on this track, there will be a clear discrepancy of the latest tech’s targeted users, while underrepresented groups get left behind. If you’re a designer, odds are the term “human-centered design” resonates with you. If you’re not familiar with the term, the human-centered method is a creative method for problem solving and innovation. The main objective of HCD is finding deep empathy for the users — ultimately driving engagement and growth. Unfortunately, the latter has been the focus for many companies, generating a trend of profit-based designs. The enterprises of social media, streaming services, video games, and everything in between bear down on how to make the most possible money from users. I spoke with Amanda Beall, a professional UX designer, who started her career in the advertising technology industry. “The ad-tech space is super messy. It’s all about money. How do we make this GDP extra? How do we get people to buy the products?” Beall said about ethics in a professional design setting. A common saying in the tech industry is — if you’re not paying for the product, then you are the product. Not only are companies designing ways to cash out from users, but they are creating platforms encompassing profit-based design. ‘Pay to win’ has become a notorious term within the gaming industry. Players are given the choice to shell out a few extra bucks to access features that are typically locked. A common strategy used by developers is to make in-game purchases (known as microtransactions) more appealing by emphasizing the “premium” currencies in their game’s economy, like gold or gems, which are paid for with real money. Premium currencies are meant to make players feel like they’re getting a bigger payoff, as they’re spending one dollar for 100 gems. After spending $60 on a game title, players are met with extra price tags, creating a never-ending profitable cycle. The gaming industry is worth more than 138 billion dollars and microtransactions make up almost a fourth of that. Profit-Centered Design Digital Divide
By now, you should know that technology is constantly changing. New immersive tech like VR and AR will jolt us into new digital spaces, meshing future visions and current realities. But the element that shapes the future of our world isn’t the hardware of emerging technology; it’s the design of them. Every major industry has already been affected by artificial intelligence. Though AI is capable of speeds and capacities of processing that’s beyond human ability, it cannot always be trusted to be fair and neutral. Industry leaders have already run into ethical issues regarding AI. Like Twitter’s algorithm automatically cropping images to only show white people. Or Amazon’s AI recruiting tool that clearly favored the applications of men over women. Countless examples are beginning to bubble to the surface. Going forward, we need design to work for us; we need ethical systems and frameworks that strive for social progress. Ethical design is all about delivering products that actually help people’s lives, all while considering usability, accessibility, privacy, and trust. One important notion we must consider is that AI systems are created by humans, who can be biased and judgemental. It’s also worth mentioning that the large majority of AI professionals are white males. Expansion is important; the more diverse the data fed into AI systems, the better it can identify a variety of people. The future of AI is promising, yet alarming. As designers, we must produce systems that stay away from routine corporate public apology letters. Besides, the last thing we all want is the Terminator’s racist relatives taking over.

Works Cited

Promoting ethical design, before it’s too late.

Embrace technology’s past, allow it to shape us forward.

Be a designer without losing your soul.