Ethics of User Interface Design

ID 405: Human-Computer Interaction
Ethical & Moral dimensions of UI Design
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1. High-level ethical and moral issues surrounding the design of human-computer interactions that are increasingly autonomous and algorithmic, and diminish user’s sense of moral agency or may even mitigate moral responsibility for computer mediated actions.

2. Low-level interface design patterns used in websites and web-based applications to deceive users into actions that are generally not in their interest.
Creating moral buffers in weapon control interface design
By Cummings, M.L. ; MIT, Technology and Society Magazine, IEEE
(Volume:23, Issue:3) Fall 2004

• The Author takes a look at military and medical settings and describes the moral implications that decisions in those areas of interface design inevitably have.

• The basic argument she makes is, that a user interface can create a “gap” between a person’s actions and their consequences. This results in psychological/emotional/physical distancing from those consequences and therefore in diminishes the sense of accountability and responsibility. In short they create a moral buffer.
The Moral Buffer

Stanley Milgram’s Obedience Experiments, 1961
The Moral Buffer
The Moral Buffer

Fig. 1. Resistance to killing as a function of distance [4].
The Moral Buffer
The Moral Buffer
The Moral Buffer

- Lack of empathic clues
- Out of sight, out of mind
- Physical distance
- Psychological distance
- Users tendency to anthropomorphise computers
The Moral Buffer

1. Can interface design also have the contrary effect, creating a deeper sense of moral involvement by the user?

2. Are there other moral pitfalls in a user interface designers work – even when not concerned with life-critical systems?
The Moral Buffer
The Moral Buffer
In KOTOR you typically have with you one to three computer-controlled characters, who comment on your actions. Doing something morally questionable would result in "Why did you do that?", "Was that really necessary? He needed his money more than we do." or something to that effect, and usually you had to answer something.

In GTA, your victims typically die with a faint moan, and praise is the only thing you'll hear.
2 Dark Patterns

Deceive
Mislead/misguide/misdirect
Manipulate
Disguise
Hide or obscure
Misrepresent
Confuse/confound
Exploit errors
Coined by UK based UX designer Harry Brignull in 2010 to identify and document instances of deception appearing in various guises in user interfaces.

These are not poor designs done by incompetent designers, but carefully crafted interactions by clever designers.

In fact, the designs go through extensive A/B and multivariate tests to fine-tune the interface to trick users into doing something to achieve the most conversion.
Which one do you think might perform best in an A/B test?

Example A

☐ I would like to receive the latest special offers, promotions and product information from AcmeCorp.

☐ I would like to receive carefully selected partner offers, competitions and messages.

Example B

☐ Please tick here if you would prefer not to receive the latest special offers, promotions and product information from AcmeCorp

☐ I would like to receive carefully selected partner offers, competitions and messages.

Example C

Please send me occasional e-mail updates about new features and special offers from example.com

yes ☐ no ☐

Please contact me from time to time with special offers from example.com affiliated Web sites, publications and carefully selected companies.

yes ☐ no ☐
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Do Defaults save Lives?
Johnson & Goldstein, 2003 - via Danareily.com

"When donation is the default, there is a 16.3% (P < 0.02) increase in organ donation."
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IS THIS ETHICAL?

APPLE IPAD CASE
This item has been added to your basket to protect your new iPad from any bumps or scratches.

Remove this accessory from the basket

Subtotal (ex. Delivery) £459.00
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THE CONDÉ NAST OPT-OUT DANCE:

WIRED and Conde Nast would like to contact you with offers and opportunities. Please tick here if you would prefer to receive these messages: by email ☐ by sms ☐
If you do not wish to hear from us about other relevant offers please tick here: by post ☐ by phone ☐

Our partners sometimes have special offers that we think you will find relevant, please tick here if you would prefer to receive these messages: by email ☐ by sms ☐
Please tick here if you would prefer not to hear from our partners: by post ☐ by phone ☐

SKIP, SKIP, TICK, TICK, SKIP, SKIP, TICK, TICK, TICK!
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**ON ERROR:**

Passenger Details - All passenger names must match those in the passport/accepted travel document

1. Mr [ ] Joe [ ] Bloggs [ ] 0 Bags [ ]

Beat the queues, buy priority boarding:

- [ ] Yes
- [ ] No

Buy AXA travel insurance [ ] View policy benefits [ ] Please select a country of residence [ ]

If you do not wish to buy insurance select [ ] No Travel Insurance [ ] in the drop down menu.
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Easy in:

Difficult out:

“Your request to cancel your fitness membership cannot be processed online.”

“You may cancel your membership [...] by mailing in written notice of your cancellation request to LA Fitness, P.O. Box 54170, Irvine, CA 92619-4170”
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**Easy in:**

- Search Flights
- Select Tickets
- Make Purchase
- Realise you’ve bought insurance by mistake

≈ 5 minutes

**Difficult out**

- Locate 24hr call-centre number
- Make call
- Get referred to a different company (working hours only)
- Call insurance company
- Cancel Insurance

Up to 2 days
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