Design or Decoration?

You are reading this book at a time when the business of mainstream technology is not to create useful products and services for people but to create products and services that exploit one group of people for the benefit of another group. In Silicon Valley parlance, the former group are called 'users' and the latter group are called 'customers'. This is the business of nearly every mainstream technology company today, including Facebook, Google, and Snapchat. These companies care deeply about what they call UX (User Experience), but they do so not for the reasons that you might think.

When a company like Facebook improves the experience of its products, it's like the massages we give to Kobe beef: they're not for the benefit of the cow but to make the cow a better product.

In this analogy, you are the cow.

You might be wondering why these companies do this. The answer is simply that it's their business model; monetising their users is how they make money. This is a systemic problem that stretches back all the way to the way in which these companies are funded and the the socio-economic system in which they are founded.

Soshana Zuboff from Harvard Business School calls this socio-economic system 'Surveillance Capitalism'. Surveillance Capitalism is what you get when you combine the accrual of wealth that is the hallmark of Capitalism with the accrual of information that you get from surveillance. It creates a feedback loop between the two where technology acts as an amplifier that accelerates the gap between the haves and the have-nots while simultaneously eroding our democratic institutions and human rights.

I call the business model of companies operating within Surveillance Capitalism 'people farming'.

People farming is the process of obtaining, storing, and exploiting information about people. In industry parlance, we call this information data and the aggregations of your data held by corporations are known as profiles. These profiles, far from being static pieces of paper in a manilla envelope somewhere, are dynamic simulations of you. The more data these companies have about you, and the more time they have to keep analysing them using their algorithms, the more accurate these simulations get. And the more accurate your simulation gets, the better these corporations can exploit you.

At this point, if you're somewhat repulsed and perhaps a little angry or scared, good. That's the correct response to what is, quite frankly, an entirely unpalatable system that is toxic to social justice, democracy, and our human rights.

This is where the role of a UX designer and the marketing team comes in.

The goal of the UX designer in mainstream technology is to create a seamless experience that will distract or amuse you. Other goals are to addict you to the product so that you will keep using it (and thus divulge even more information about yourself). Your focus must be kept on the features of the product, the delight of the experience, and on the value you derive from the product so that you do not worry about what the product is actually doing (which is that is it tracking, storing, and analysing your behaviour so that it can exploit it for the benefit of the company and its customers).

If you're happy with this, you can stop reading now. You have a potentially lucrative career in UX Design to look forward to. Congratulations, may it bring you much money, a big house, and a fancy car.

If, however, you want to do better and make meaningful experiences that truly improve people's lives, read on.

All design is influence but design without ethics is manipulation. In fact, it isn't design at all; it is decoration.

Design is the holistic process of creating organisations, processes, and practices that enable the production of experiences that improve people's lives. Decoration is the process of hiding the true intent of a product or service so as to trick people into using them when they otherwise would not.

Design attempts to empower people; decoration attempts to make sure an otherwise unpalatable system is not rejected by the people decorators call 'users'.

So if you want to practice design, not decoration, start by removing the euphemism 'user' from your lexicon. Instead, start calling people 'people'. It's a small but important step.

But we don't have to stop there. Let's go further and adopt a core ethical framework to our work. The Ethical Design Manifesto is one such framework.

Ethical Design is not rocket science. It has three basic tenets, all of which are actually extensions of one core tenet: respect.

To practice design (not decoration), build organisations, processes, policies, products, services, and experiences that respect human rights, human effort, and human experience.

If that seems rather abstract to you, let me elaborate: Products that respect human rights are zero-knowledge and decentralised. That means that they do not track people's behaviour or hoard their data. This is as simple as designing a product so that instead of a cloud (someone else's computer), it stores its data and algorithms on the person's own devices. Whenever that's not possible, any centralised nodes use end-to-end encryption and act merely as facilitators to aid in availability and findability.

Furthermore, products that respect human rights are interoperable and free and open, so that they do not suffer from lock-in and so that you don't have to trust them (as they can be independently-verified).

And, as importantly, products that respect human rights are accessible to people of different abilities.

But we can't stop there. While respect for human rights constitutes the core of Ethical Design, we must also make sure that our products are functional and convenient to use. (Otherwise, quite simply, people will not use our products or services, no matter how much they respect human rights like privacy.)

And let's not stop there either: let's create products that respect human experience; experiences that are beautiful, amusing, and delightful.

This book will teach you how to do that. But remember that a tool is just a tool. You can use the lessons within this book either for decoration or design.

I hope you will choose the latter and join us in making the world a better, fairer, kinder and more delightful place.

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11 Oct, 2016