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*Tricked
by Design*



Tricked by Design

How you are being tricked on the web

Hazel opened the Adobe website and hit the download trial button. She had been meaning to try Photoshop for some time now. Almost a week later, Hazel finally remembered that she needed to cancel, only to discover that cancelling isn't as easy as just clicking a button. She was surprised to be trapped in a maze of menus, 'Sorry to see you go' messages and fake 'How can we improve our service?' screens; designed not to get feedback but to make her give up. This is known as 'hard to cancel', a specific type of dark pattern. Most of us have likely encountered dark patterns without realising it. A 2024 study of 642 websites and apps found that nearly 76% of subscription services use at least one deceptive pattern.

"Deceptive patterns are an easy way to make more money without much more effort." Dr. Harry Brignull

Every time you browse online, some websites are quietly manipulating your decisions. However, as with many things, "forewarned is forearmed", Dr Harry Brignull told me. He, in fact, coined the term dark pattern in 2010 and is the founder of Deceptive Design, a library and information source on all things deceptive online. Let's go over how to spot a dark pattern and a bit more on what they actually are. So you know what to look out for the next time you click sign up.

SIGN UP

You may be wondering: What is a dark pattern or deceptive pattern exactly?

It's a broad term to describe an interaction that is created to nudge the user into something they didn't intend to do.

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Dr. Alex Beattie, a lecturer in Media and Communications, explains how dark patterns are designed to trick people into giving a site more data or staying subscribed for longer. As he puts it:

resulting in making hasty purchases. The last one I would like to tell you about is hard to believe, but still works: It's called confirmshaming. This dark pattern makes people do

"DARK PATTERNS CAN UNDERMINE WILLPOWER"

- Dr. Alex Beattie

Web designers are tasked with creating the most user-friendly UI (user interface) possible. Sometimes, as Brignull points out, "they are created by mistake", so they are unintentionally a dark pattern created to provide a smooth experience for the user. There are many types of dark patterns; I would like to focus on three that stood out and are very common.

The first type, which Hazel encountered, is called hard to cancel. It refers to a website which makes signing up very easy but cancelling as hard as possible. This pattern works by making users give up and just keep paying for their subscription. However, hard to cancel isn't the only trick websites use. Another very common pattern is fake urgency: I am sure you have come across an online shop with a huge ticking timer, right? Those timers are there to pressure you into buying something before a presumed offer expires. Taking away your ability to think clearly and compare different offers, these patterns, "[undermine] the intent of the user", explains Dr. Alex Beattie,

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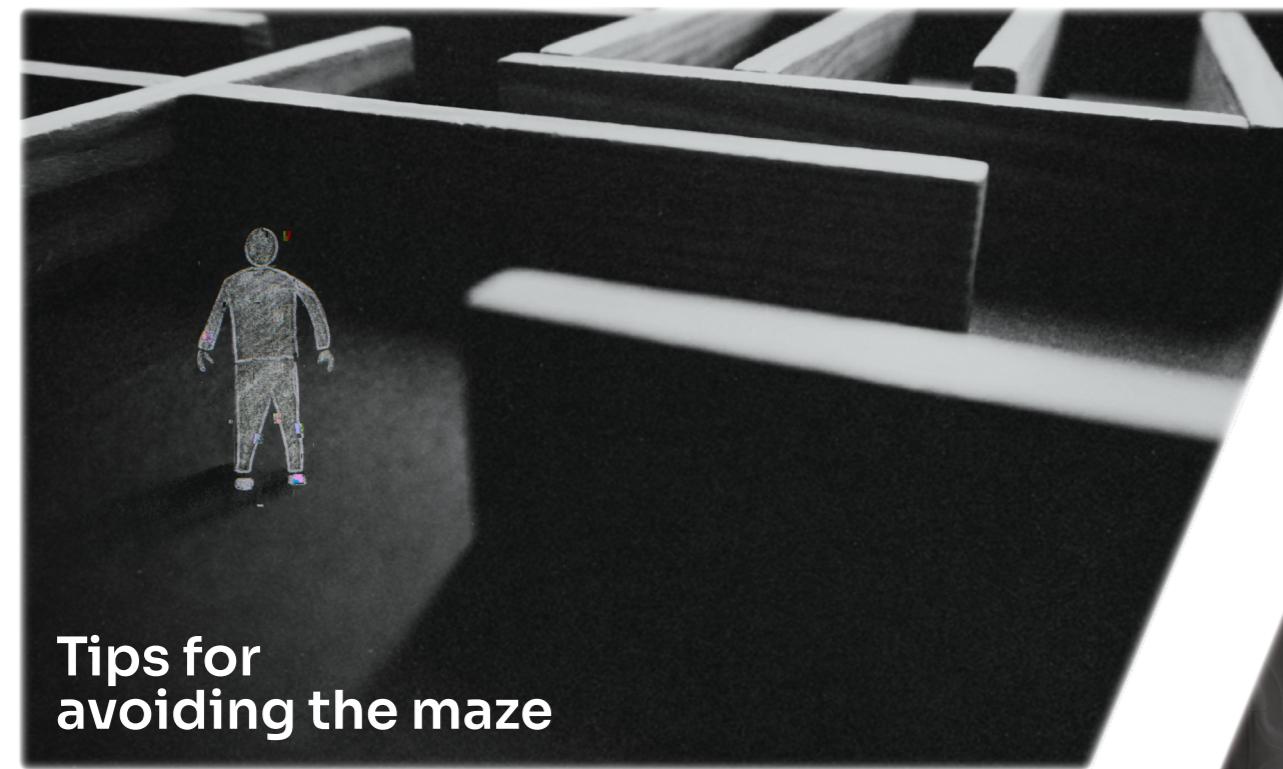
something out of shame or guilt. Are you one of the 960 million people who have downloaded Duolingo? If you are, you might have noticed that if you don't open the app in a week, it will present you with a pop-up of the Duolingo owl crying.

Designed to make you come back and use the service again purely because you feel bad for making an imaginary owl cry.

By now, you're probably realising that dark patterns are everywhere and that some elements of a website are designed to trick. So how can you avoid falling for them?

"Forewarned is forearmed"

- Dr. Harry Brignull



Tips for avoiding the maze

The issue with dark patterns is that they are designed to be hard to notice; after all, they are meant to deceive. Here are some tips to not be tricked:

Learn about the different types, for example, at Deceptive Design. From reading this article, you already know some, but there are just too many to list here. Also, pay attention to what you are clicking. I know sometimes you just rush through a website. Next time you are hurrying through the web, pause for a second. The more you look for them, the more you will see them.

When you go to the checkout page, look for hidden or pre-checked choices, like signing up for a newsletter. Additionally, watch out for manipulative language like a button saying, "No, I don't like saving money."

Finally, check that you aren't being misdirected into agreeing to something just because

the button is bigger. Many cookie banners make the accept button bolder than the reject one, if they even have one. Both of those examples are dark patterns designed to add friction and make opting out harder. Spotting deceptive design is a great first step, but what can you do about it?



Some well-known websites actually get into trouble and have to pay fines for using dark patterns. Another way to make users aware of dark patterns is to call them out on social media or by adding them to Deceptive Design. This can help others, and, as Brignull

writes, make "designers [...] act with more integrity".

Some countries, such as the US, UK and EU countries, actually have laws banning the use of dark patterns (e.g. the Digital Services Act (DSA) in the EU and the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) Act – Section 5 in the US).

Yet, because of the sheer volume of websites, as Brignull explains in his book Deceptive Patterns, "the number of dark patterns has increased over time, particularly as companies learn from one another and adopt similar strategies to increase profits, user engagement or data extraction." (Chapter 2).

To conclude, be wary of every click and watch out for red flags like ticking timers or manipulative language. As long as deceptive designs are used, people will always have to double-check what they are clicking and signing up for online. Awareness and reporting them is a first step to make companies realise they shouldn't trick people.



Hazel was browsing for a new book the following week when suddenly a big ticking timer popped up in the corner, distracting her. But a moment later, she realised this was a dark pattern, so instead of listening to her instinct, she calmly checked the price on a different website, rather than impulse buying. Knowing what to look for made all the difference.

*Never
again get
tricked
by design*

Written by Janosch Hussain.

Thanks to Dr. Harry Brignull and Dr. Alex Beattie for answering my questions.

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Duolingo owl crying: Duolingo press

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Magazine created for Media Studies at Te Kura