

Final Project Proposal

Christian Broms

For my final project, I'd like to revisit website aesthetics and their functionality. In particular, I'm interested in the kinds of "dark patterns" that guide our interaction with websites. By this I mean the fact that some buttons are brighter colors than others, some have background and others don't, some are prominently placed, and others aren't. All these choices are designed to manipulate you and make you move through the site in a certain way, often with a specific goal. Amazon is a great example of one such site—when checking out the buttons to pay are emphasized, while the buttons to go back are not. Most every website does this same thing with the options to delete your account; this functionality is hidden deeply within the menus. Same thing with the popup windows to subscribe, the subscribe button is large and bright, while the continue button is often without a background and placed somewhere else on the panel.

I'm particularly interested in this area because it's something we interact with everyday on most websites. There's real psychology that's being used to unconsciously exploit our attention online. It's also something that we've become so accustomed to through familiarity that we don't often consciously notice even though it dictates how we use the site. I think the best way to address this space would be to reverse this dynamic such that we are forced to confront this manipulative design by making it noticeable in some way, perhaps through a game.

I would like to make a game that makes the player go through a series of challenges in sites with particularly manipulative designs, with the goal of getting through fastest, or finding a certain piece of content. This puts the player against the website, such that the design becomes apparent to the player as they work to the goal and the website works against them.

There are two ideas I've had for how this might be built:

1. Create a scavenger-hunt-like browser extension that redirects players through a series of websites that have these "dark patterns" and give them a goal for each, like find a particular piece of content on the page. They enter the content and the game continues. The goal is to find each of the pieces of content as fast as possible. This would involve compiling a list of websites with particularly bad user experiences and pop-ups and

finding bits of content for each, then making the browser extension that guides a player through the game. The main limitation of this method would be that the game would only last for a little while, as websites change their design pretty often. However, this method would perhaps be a bit more impactful because it uses existing sites and would really draw attention to their designs.

2. Create a website that incorporates these “dark patterns” as someone clicks each button. For example, a task might be “click continue” and the continue button would be the least apparent part of the page. A pop-up might appear with an invitation to subscribe that’s hard to click way from and so on. The goal is to click through each of the goals as fast as possible. This would be based on other examples of websites but built with bootstrap or some other common framework. It could utilize text commonly found on other websites, and colors and styling elements. The main limitation here is that the whole site is built from scratch, so although it would draw attention to dark patterns it doesn’t have quite the same effect as using actual designs.