

How Ethical Considerations Shape Modern UX Design

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Ethics design isn't just about avoiding harm, it is about creating spaces that empower all types of users, protect privacy, and build trust. Every interaction a user has with an interface carries ethical implications, from accessibility and privacy to just feeling safe from deception. By studying UX missteps like deceptive patterns and accessibility oversights, we can learn how to design fair experiences.

Ethical considerations in design have grown alongside technology. In the early days of computers, designers often focused on solely functionality over user designs platforms. These interfaces could be inaccessible and confusing for people without tech knowledge. Also, manipulative design could exist with much less scrutiny. Over time, natural consequences came with this. Users won't use platforms that frustrated, excluded or misled them. Eventually, companies realized that ethical design was crucial.

The History of UX Ethics

Human-centered design thinking started way before the digital age, but ethical missteps have always been part of that. In ancient China (4000 BC), Feng Shui emphasized designing comfortability in spaces, showing early attention to human experience. Even subtle misalignments in layout could cause discomfort or inefficiency. This is an example of an early lesson on the impact of design choices on well-being. In the mid-20th century, industrial designer Henry Dreyfuss (1955) highlighted usability in everyday products, famously stating that friction at the point of contact is a failure of design. In 1966 Walt Disney applied human-centered

principles to entertainment, creating immersive experiences that anticipated user needs.

As technology advanced, manipulation in design emerged in early computing. Systems like the Xerox PARC graphical interface (1970s) were groundbreaking, but often designed only for technically skilled users. By the time Don Norman created the term “User Experience” in the 1990s, it was clear that designers needed to pay attention to not just usability, but ethical implications. Making sure that designs don’t mislead, confuse, or exploit users. This historical perspective is important because it teaches designers to learn from the past to help build ethical experiences that actually benefit their users.

Deceptive Patterns

Ethical challenges still exist in UX design, in what we call deceptive or dark patterns. These are design choices that deliberately manipulate or deceive users. Common examples include

- Roach Motel: Easy to sign up, hard to cancel
- Sneak Into Basket: Adding items by default without consent
- Confirmshaming: Guilting users
- Fake urgency or scarcity: Creating artificial pressure to act fast
- Privacy Zuckering: Tricking users into sharing more data than intended

Designers may use dark patterns to gather data and encourage purchases, but these short term gains often come at the expense of trust and user happiness. Most people have likely encountered all of these tactics in everyday interactions online. For example, pop-ups prompting users to enter an email for a discount, pre-checked boxes adding extra services to online orders, or urgent countdown timers pushing users to buy.

These deceptive tactics persist in design because they exploit common thought processes, such as the fear of missing out (FOMO), social pressure, or decision fatigue. Designers may feel pressured to implement these tactics by the businesses they work for to drive short-term engagement and boost sales, or hit performance goals. These gains are often temporary. Users quickly recognize manipulative practices which may draw them away from the platform. Prioritizing respectful user-centered design creates stronger relationships with users and will in turn support continuous business success.

Accessibility

Accessibility is a crucial aspect of ethical UX design. Ensuring digital experiences/products are usable by people of all abilities. Designing for accessibility begins with thoughtful choices like color usage and contrast, link styling, content organization, and navigation flow. These considerations are especially important for users relying on keyboard navigation or assistive technology like screen readers.

The Web Content Accessibility Guidelines (WCAG) provide easy to understand criteria to guide designers. Key things to consider include:

- Sufficient color contrast: Ensures text is readable for users with low vision or color deficiencies (WCAG 1.4.3).
- Descriptive links: Link text should clearly indicate the destination, avoiding generic phrases like “click here” (WCAG 2.4.4).
- Clear headings and labels: Logical, nested heading structures help users orient themselves and find content efficiently (WCAG 2.4.6).

- Alt text for non-text content: Images and graphics should have descriptive text for screen readers or be marked as decorative (WCAG 1.1.1).
- Logical tab and reading order: Keyboard navigation should flow intuitively, and focus indicators should be clear (WCAG 2.4.3).
- Error correction: Users should receive clear feedback and guidance to correct mistakes in forms or input fields (WCAG 3.3.3).

Accessibility doesn't just help people with disabilities, it often benefits all users. When products are designed inclusively, users are less likely to encounter frustration or barriers. A principle known as the curb-cut effect demonstrates this. Named after ramps that are cut into sidewalks for wheelchair users. Curb cuts ended up helping non-disabled people to such as, parents with strollers, people with bikes, and travelers with luggage. In digital design, similar effects occur. Closed captions were originally designed for people with hearing impairments, but now they help users watching videos in noisy environments or for following along with content in a foreign language. Also, when design includes proper color contrast and clear headings, it can reduce the user's cognitive load. This makes it easier for all users to scan and understand content efficiently. Many accessibility features are integrated into everyday design that users may not even realize their origin.

Designing for accessibility makes sense from a moral, legal, and business perspective. It ensures access for all users, helps organizations comply with laws and regulations, and expands potential customer bases or audiences. Integrating accessibility into the design process creates more inclusive, usable, and trustworthy experiences.

Ultimately, accessible design is ethical design and designing for accessibility is about designing human diversity. It acknowledges the different ways people interact with technology

due to variations in ability, environment, and context. Ethical UX design recognizes these differences and creates outcomes that are flexible, intuitive, and usable by the widest possible audience.

AI and Ethics

As technology changes, new ethical challenges arise. In modern times, the one that stands out most is artificial intelligence (AI). AI systems from recommendation engines to chatbots can help speed up the design process and improve user experience, but they also can unknowingly introduce bias. These biases often come from the historical disparities embedded in the data used to train AI models. When left unaddressed, these biases can reinforce inequalities.

Bias in AI can manifest in ways that affect users' everyday experiences. For example, Tina Glade explains in *Forbes Technology Council* (2025) "automated systems designed to evaluate loan applications. If the AI model is trained on data reflecting historical disparities, it risks perpetuating these inequities." This demonstrates the high stakes of AI in UX design. Users may be impacted by decisions they don't understand or have any control over. This can worsen trust in digital products and platforms.

UX designers have a responsibility to reduce these issues by ensuring transparency and fairness in AI-driven systems. One example is explainable AI, where interfaces communicate the reasoning behind recommendations or decisions. Things like visual cues, step-by-step breakdowns, and clear messaging help users understand how AI impacts their experience. This should reduce confusion and help build trust. Oversight, through regular monitoring of AI outputs also ensures that systems remain accountable and biases or errors are caught early. This

is especially important in areas such as finance, hiring, and healthcare, where decisions that have been influenced by AI have serious consequences.

AI ethics in UX should maintain empathy and human oversight in systems that increasingly act on behalf of people. Keeping human values at the center of design is increasingly important than ever with AI. Designers have to keep in mind they need to design systems that aren't just intelligent and functional like in the early days of computing, but also ensure they are fair, accessible to all tech levels, transparent, and trustworthy.

Conclusion

Ethical UX design is not a one-time consideration, it is an ongoing process of committing to respect and protecting users that evolves with technology and human needs by creating experiences that are fair, accessible, and trustworthy while taking into account the full range of human diversity. History and modern practice show that design choices have real consequences. Confusing layouts, manipulative patterns, or inaccessible features can frustrate users, damage trust, and exclude people from fully participating in digital spaces. Thoughtful user-centered design benefits everyone and builds stronger, longer-lasting relationships between people and technology.

Citations

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