

Critical UX Final Projet - Camille Jouanet

Shy Button: a satirical provotype to question dark patterns and digital agency

Introduction with Critical issue

The topic of dark patterns really resonated with me during this course. I came to realize how much these designs eroded the trust I put in my digital habits, particularly toward websites offering so-called “free trials” or “special discounts”. Whether these offers are genuine or not is irrelevant to me now, I just ignore them. The real matter is the ease with which a user can be manipulated into actions they never fully consented to.

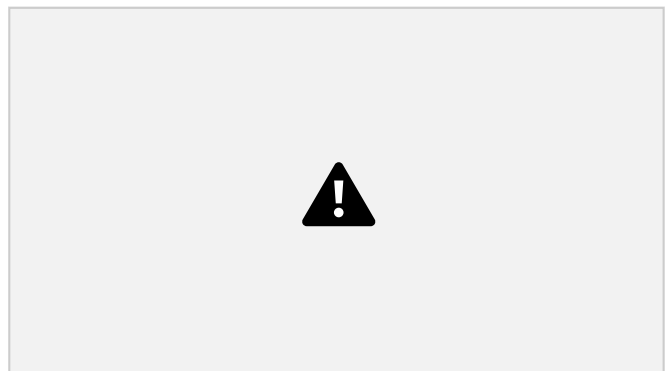
This project aims to explore how companies’ abusive use of unethical designs erode user autonomy, especially when it comes to subscription cancellation. By creating a deliberately frustrating and satirical unsubscription experience, my goal was to expose the manipulative tactics embedded in everyday recurring patterns and, more importantly, help users recognize these patterns themselves.

Design Process

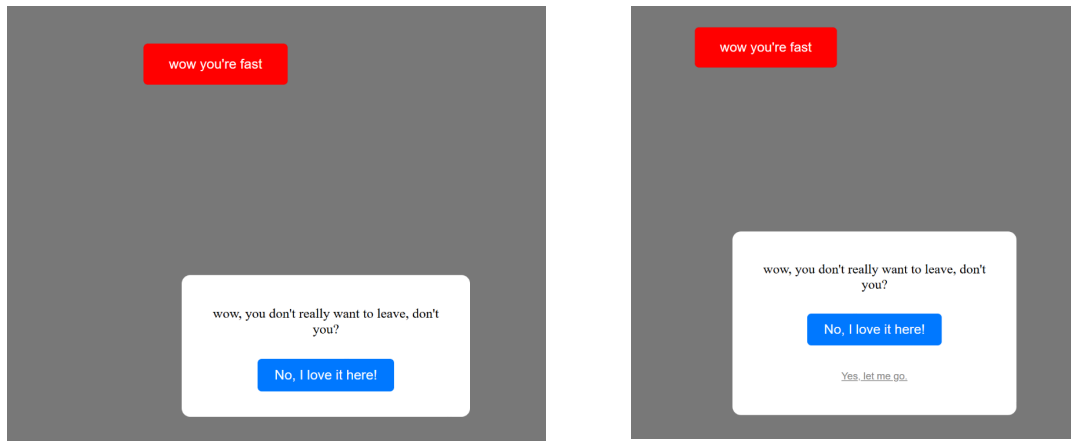
The core design of my project revolved around the idea of a button that would do its best to avoid the user’s cursor. This design makes the website’s intentions abundantly clear: it does not want the user to click here. This cannot be put onto a “bad UX decision” argument, as could be done with some dark patterns, such as deceiving color patterns for example.

Initial design

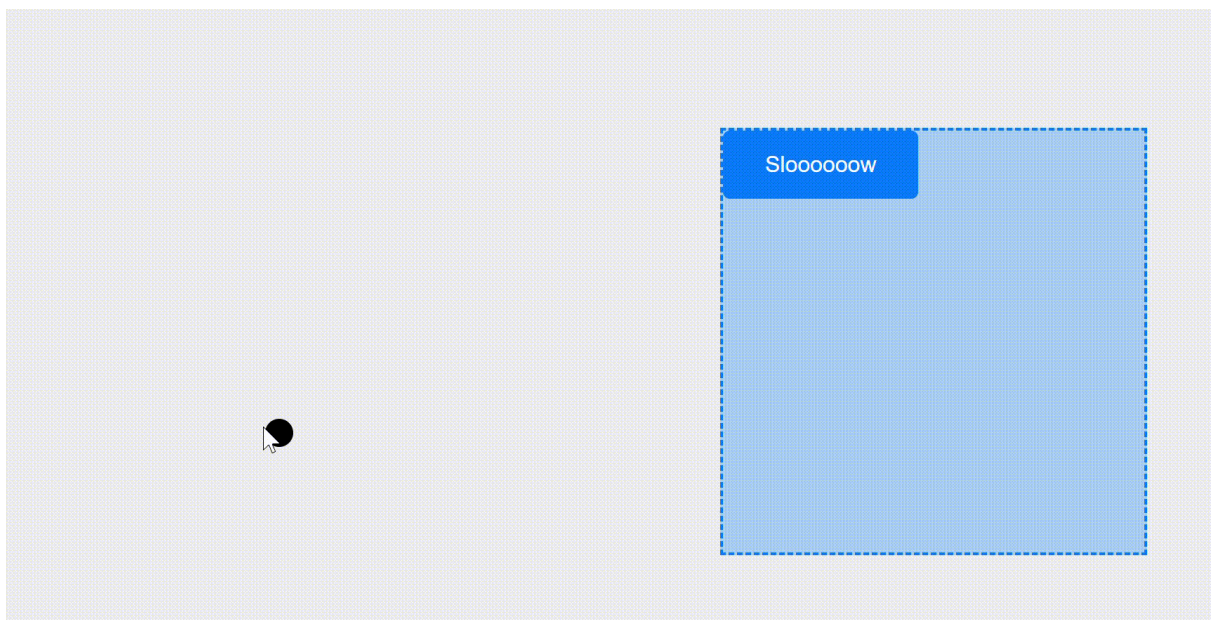
The first design was blunt: a single button escaping our pointer in a frantic manner. Because the button seems to shy away from the user, I chose to name this design the “**Shy Button**”. After some reflections, I ultimately decided to make the moving pattern of the button random, to make it imprevisible. This leaves the clicking difficulty to the user’s skills and luck.



When finally succeeding on clicking the button, users would face a pop-up message to confirm their choice (as if they'd spent dozen of seconds to click on a button and change their mind right after succeeding) and the confirmation option is only displayed when hovering over the cancel button, thus maximizing the chance the user will see it just late enough to be unable to change their course of action.



This moving button was fun enough to play with for a short time, but the novelty wore off quickly and it didn't offer much critique on its own. I considered implementing other ideas on the page, such as a "slow zone" where the cursor would severely lag, to further frustrate the user. However, it did not make the cut, as I couldn't implement it smoothly without undermining the overall credibility of the site. With more thinking, this feature could be included in a future version which manages to maintain coherency.



All in all, this first provotype was a playful take, but too simple. Without a narrative or critical lens, it lacked impact. I wanted to create an absurd parody of all of these websites where nothing can seemingly be done easily without paying.

For the styling of the site, I took inspiration from real-world websites, focusing on flight booking websites, which the idea of working on unsubscribing originally came from. This adds storytelling, giving users a sense of context and critiquing common dark UX patterns more directly.

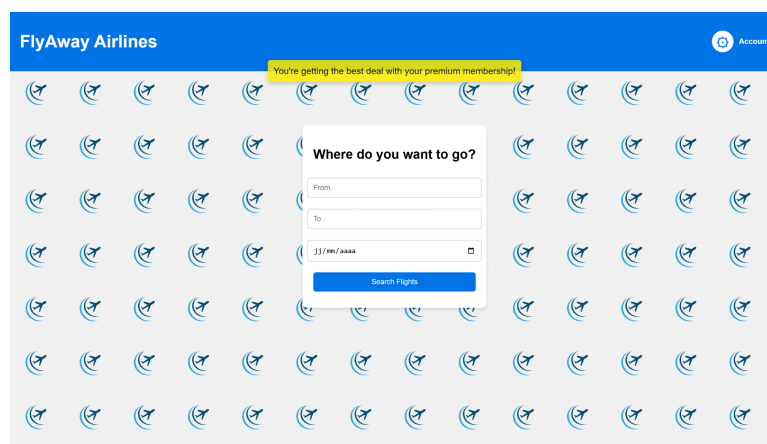
The idea to create over-the-top and absurd interfaces to parody already-existing dark patterns partly comes from the [Cookie Consent Speedrun](#) website, which combines pedagogy, absurdity and fun magnificently.

From here, it was decided. My website would consist of a very intentional cockroach motel, and it will attempt to trap as many ~~roaches~~ users as it can.

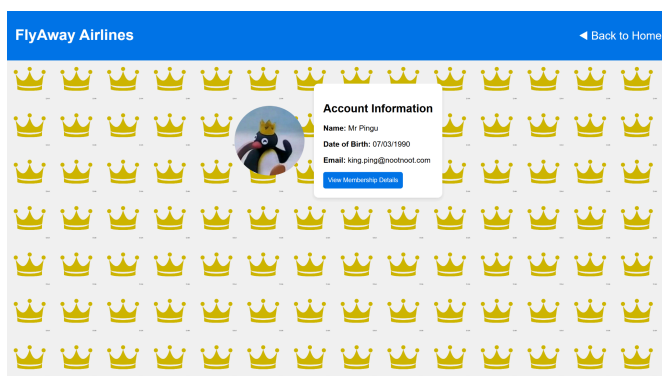
Final Design

1. User interface

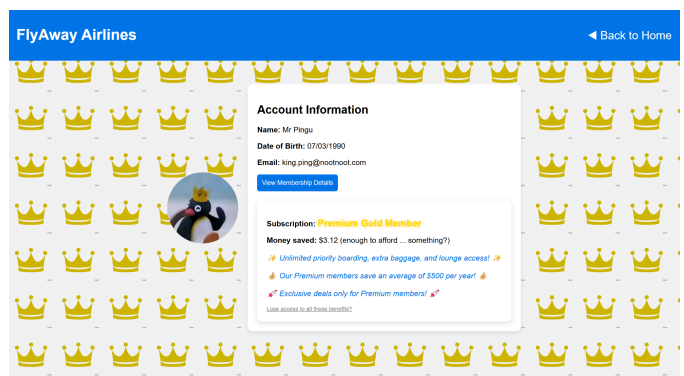
The overall interface was thought to mimic a flight-booking website featuring a main booking page and a settings page. To begin the unsubscribe procedure, the user has to go to the settings page - simple enough - and click on the tiny grey-colored link in a dropdown menu.



Landing page, settings menu on the top-right



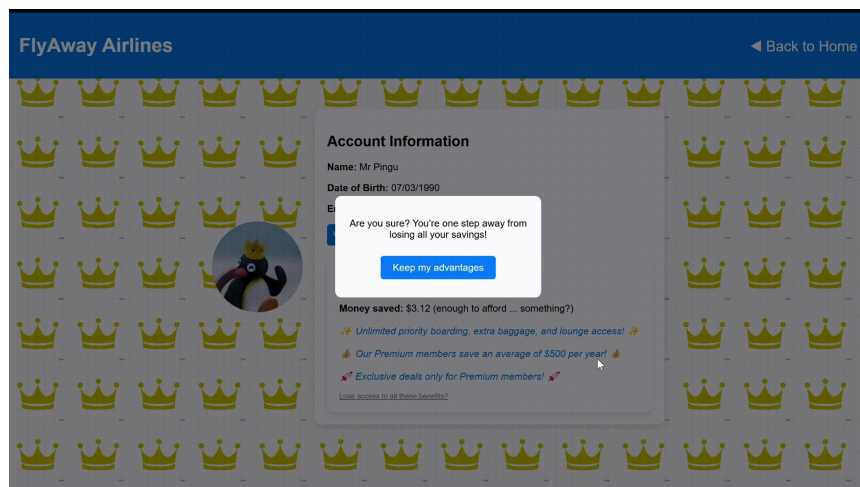
Settings page



Settings page - Membership details displayed

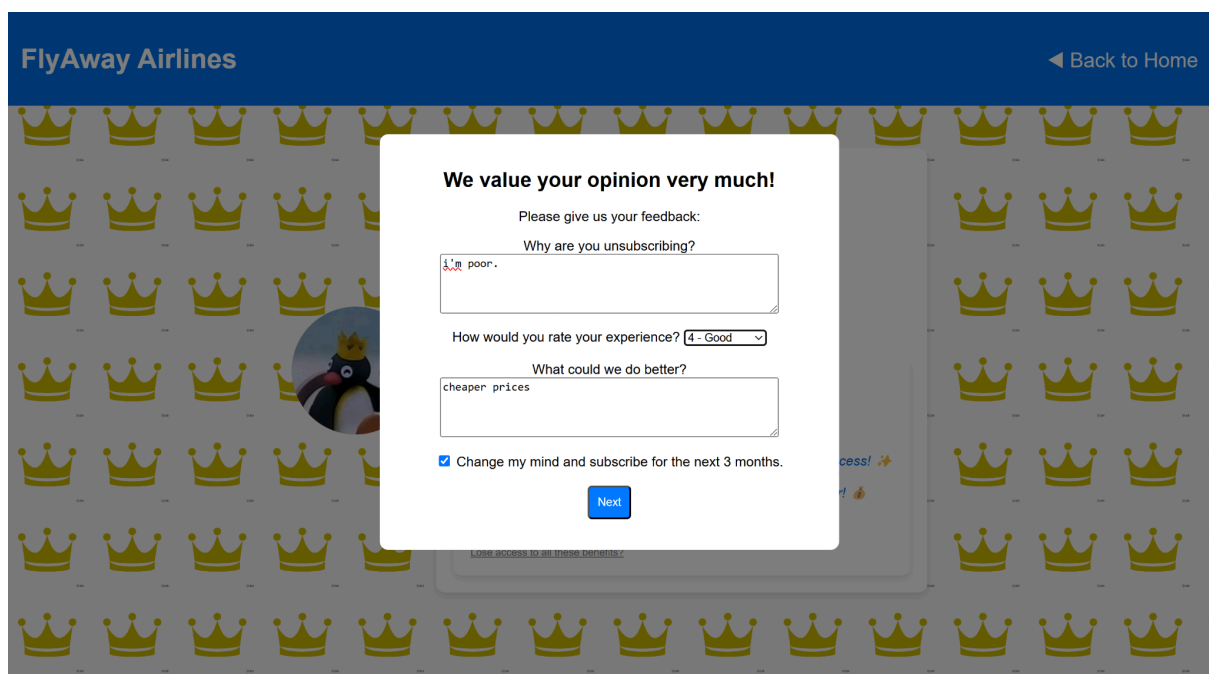
2. Misleading options

I kept the idea of the hidden confirmation option from the initial design, and added some guilt-tripping phrasing to the text.



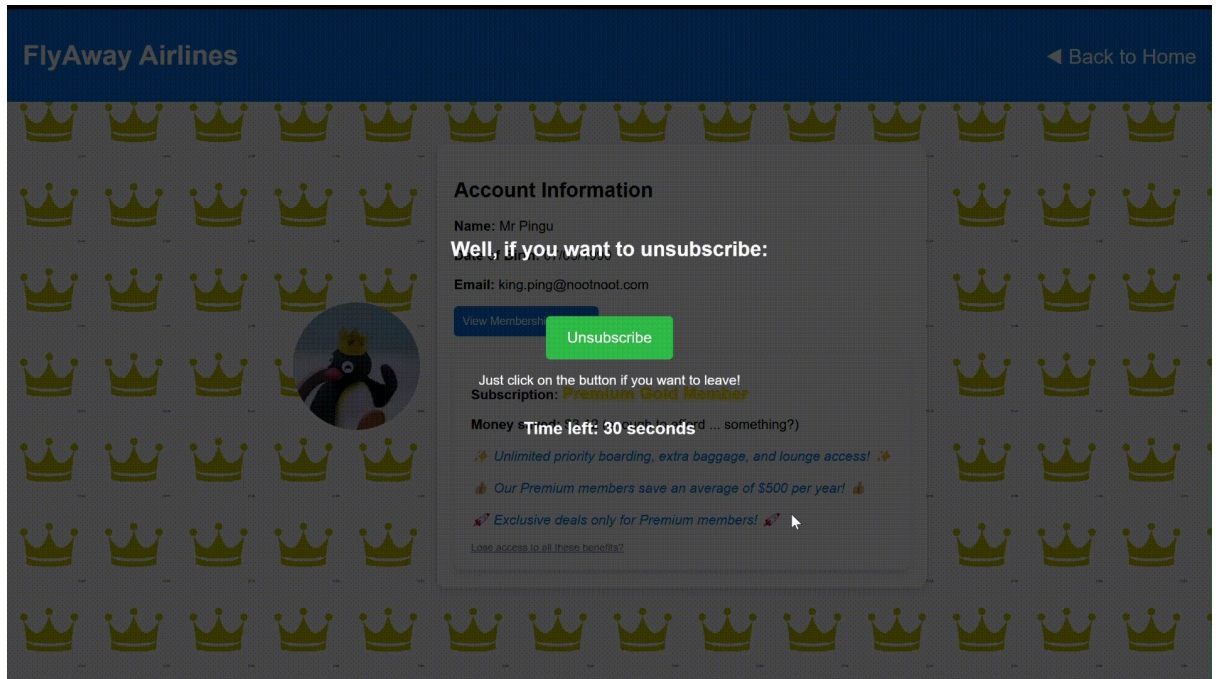
3. Useless form & automatic choice

This new step focuses on time-consumption. I added a form that is irrelevant to the user's goal, whose real purpose is to distract their attention from the already-ticked box that charges them more money and cancels their progression through the whole process. If they happen to fall for it, the perspective of going through the previous steps all over again might discourage them from unsubscribing.



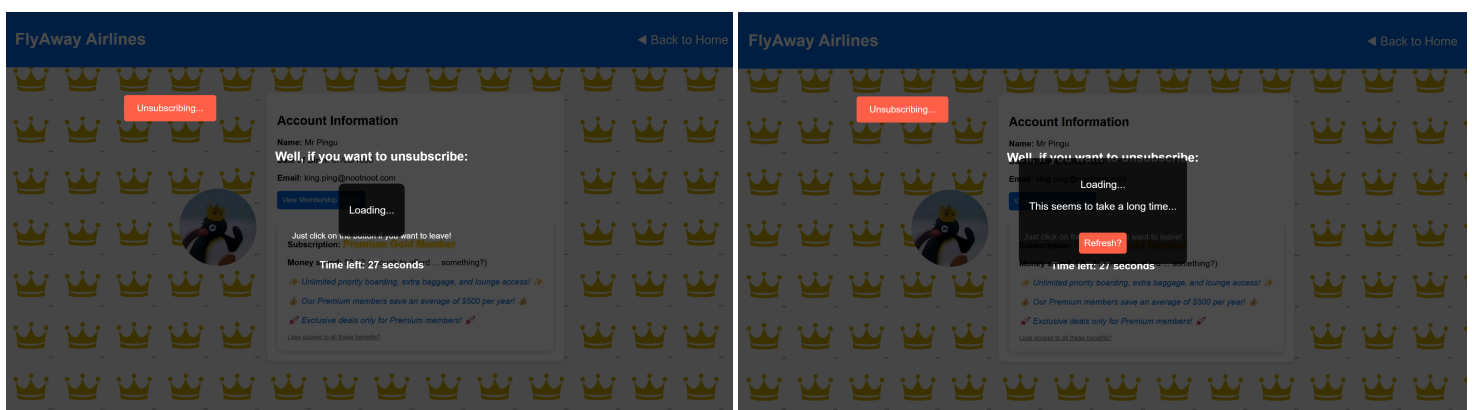
4. Shy button

This is where I chose to implement the Shy Button. The site presents it as a “challenge” to the user, with a 30 seconds timer pressuring them actively. In case of failure, just as for the form step, the user is brought back to the settings page and has to start all over again.



5. Fake loading & refresh button

If the user manages to click on the button, one last trap lies in their way: I introduced a fake loading of 20 seconds. Midway through the timer, an incentive appears to make the user refresh, tempting them to abandon the whole process. This is arguably the most manipulative pattern I used, since it blatantly lies to the user, rather than suggesting things.



User Testing Process

I asked 5 participants to test my website. Four of them had backgrounds in computer science and design. They were given the following scenario:

“You’ve subscribed to a premium flight membership for cheaper tickets. Now that your trip is over, you want to unsubscribe to avoid recurring charges.”

All tests were conducted on my laptop without a mouse, using only a trackpad. Initially, this was a decision made by constraint of circumstances, but I saw value in sticking with this setup for other participants to simulate uncomfortable UX conditions (as well as keeping similar testing conditions for everyone obviously).

Key Observations

- **Navigation to settings menu:** All users quickly located the “Settings” option in the top bar. They also identified where to begin the unsubscription process without assistance. One of them reacted to the discreet unsubscribing link reading “lose all of your advantages” by saying “this is really awkwardly phrased”.
- **Form trap:** Two out of five participants (40%) failed to notice the pre-checked “re-subscribe” option in the feedback form, unintentionally opting back in.
- **Shy Button:** Three of the users (60%) couldn’t click the moving unsubscribe button within the time limit. One participant (20%) gave up entirely at this stage, abandoning the process.
- **Fake loading screen:** 75% of the participants who reached the final screen chose to click the “refresh” button, mistakenly thinking the system was stuck. As designed, this action sent them back to the beginning.

Despite their frustrations, most participants reacted with amusement rather than anger. Once they encountered the first pop-up—featuring the hidden confirmation button—they seemed to understand the satirical tone of the experience. This early moment helped frame the rest of the interaction as a deliberate exaggeration of real-world interactions.

Analysis & Reflection

The core aim of my website —beyond educating users— was to frustrate them playfully. This created a challenge in interpreting test results: if a user got confused or gave up, was that a failure of design or a successful critique of dark patterns?

That being said, there are some clear takeaways to be found.

What worked

The satirical tone of the project was well-received. Users quickly recognized the parody, especially once the interface became intentionally “hostile” with the Shy Button. The Shy Button and fake loading mechanics were particularly effective at tricking the user and eliciting frustration throughout the process.

Participants openly talked about how they experienced similar tactics on real websites, which helped put unethical UX practices in perspective and discuss how to recognize them quickly.

What failed

One user gave up the experience when reaching the Shy Button step, which could be considered as the “main feature” of the site. This shows how frustration level needs to be thread carefully in order not to lose users entirely.

Some users did not notice subtle patterns (like the pre-ticked box in the form), which may reflect how used we became to those designs in digital environments, as observed with cookie consent forms for example.

Broader Reflections

The testing sessions confirmed a key insight: dark patterns efficiency relies on users’ impatience, inattention or focus capacity. When these patterns are exaggerated —as in my provotype— they become easier to spot and critique. However, in the wild, companies are not ashamed to make them as insidious as possible.

I also realized that giving users a more emotionally compelling context might have changed their responses to the experience. For example, if I had told the participants how much they were paying monthly for this subscription, or asked them to go through a fake sign-up process before the test, they might have approached the challenge with more urgency or concern. This would have made the roach motel metaphor even more impactful: easy to enter, tricky to leave.

Limitations & further improvements

When testing this website, each participant had their own grain of salt to make the site “worse” by complexifying the process even more based on their own experience. These frustrating experiences really are universal —we all suffered from it at one point.

Here are some of the recommendations I found interesting, along with some personal ideas:

- Leaving the form checkbox unticked and inverting the phrasing with “I don’t want to pay for 3 additional months before leaving”. The asset is less noticeable and the double negation is more confusing.
- Make the form mandatory to fill with a minimum word count.
- Add an overwhelming and distracting overlay (flashing screens, pop-up ads...).
- Confirmation through email, letter or phone calls during restricted hours.

- Blackmailing threat: “We have your credit info... Do you really want to upset us?”. (Funny but likely quite illegal.)
- Cancel button out of screen space, visible only by unzooming the page.

This project could evolve into a full awareness platform, with clear explanations of every dark patterns users are encountering and how to detect them, with some examples from well-known websites:

- Documenting dark patterns from major websites
- Offering interactive simulations to educate users
- Creating a browser extension that flags manipulative UI in real-time

Conclusion & Future Directions

This provotype was an opportunity to explore UX through a critical, provocative lens. It merges humor, frustration, and dark UX techniques to expose the subtle (and not-so-subtle) ways design can be weaponized.

During testing, it was rewarding to see participants recognize themselves in these manipulative flows and to hear them recall similar frustrations from actual websites. This moment of recognition is where critique becomes most effective: not just pointing fingers at “bad UX,” but encouraging users to reclaim awareness and agency in their digital interactions.

As digital experiences become more seamless and intuitive, the ethical boundaries of design become easier to overlook. That is where satire and exaggeration can become powerful tools: they slow the user down, produce discomfort and prompt them to question their habits.

Cultivating this kind of critical awareness is essential: by empowering users, it can lead to broader conversations around regulation and protection of digital agency.

Links

The full code files can be found on the github repository of the project:

https://github.com/kmillee/unsubscribe_game