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THE ETHICS OF USER EXPERIENCE DESIGN DISCUSSED BY THE TERMS OF APATHY, SYMPATHY, AND EMPATHY

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Abstract

This article is a proposition to discuss user experience design in the light of ethical implications depending on how the designer regards the user both during the design process and the intended use of the design once it is finished. There has been a lack of discussions surrounding the ethical dimensions of creating and maintaining an empathic point-of-view on the users, and the responsibility the designer thus holds for the users experience with a given system. This article will define the empathetic dimensions of user experience design by discussing its counterparts: apathy and sympathy, and the difficulties of avoiding these points-of-views in the user-centred design process. Exemplifying the differences and ethical implications for the designer in the interaction with the user through the design of interactive digital systems.

The article does not offer solutions, but poses questions on how ethics, designer, and users can interact through and influence on the design and the design process, and thus hopes to initiate a discourse in which the importance of ethical stance the designer takes in the design process is acknowledged.

Keywords:
user experience design, design ethics, Løgstrup, empathy, sympathy, apathy

1. The Importance of a Design Ethic

> *"It is simply not acceptable to take the attitude that, 'I just make the tools. I can't be responsible for how they are used.'*
> *The reality is, the design can have a huge impact on channeling usage along certain paths. Those of us who design such things need to make the best efforts to make sure that those paths conform to our ethical compass. Of course, that implies that we have to have some sense of what our values are."*
>
> (Bill Buxton 2007)

Design is important especially when digital interactive media are involved. Given the specific nature of material involved in designing digital media as 'the material without qualities' (Lowgreen & Stolterman 2006), and namely its total lack of boundaries and form, but having infinite possibilities of content,

the first aim of the designer is to create the boundaries by defining the design problem, give it form, and adjust it to fit the intended content. Furthermore, the movement towards a user-centred design approach, pioneered in the 80's and 90's by designers and scholars such as Suchman (1987), Greenbaum & Kyng (1991), and Bannon & Bødker (1989) has emphasised the iterative process, the dialog with- and observation of the user, and the problem-oriented approach to the design process as a core aspect of creating the best possible future scenario for the user.

In recent years a lot of design discourse has added the concept of empathy as a central aspect to how the designers within the user-centred design process established a deep understanding of the users, and thus informing what the optimal user experience should be (Merholz et al 2008, Kolko 2012). It can be said that empathy is a core interest for contemporary explorations of user centred design, and experience design. Yet, few designers stop to discuss what values and ethical demands such an approach to design entails. As Buxton points out in the above citation, it is most important for the designer to be aware of his own values when designing. This points towards Kranzberg's first law of technology, which is "neither good nor bad; nor is it neutral" (Kranzberg 1986). If the designer sees his design as user centred or experience design, he has to choose an ethical approach which enables him to see the user as the end and not the means of the design and the design process.

In other words, when the designer claims to be user-centred or to be designing the context of the user experience he also implicitly commits to shape and form certain aspects of the experience for a group of human beings, and thereby also adopting the responsibility for these experiences, and their consequences. This experience can both be a small flutter in the user's way of performing a simple task, enhanced by a given design, or it can be a life changing experience, brought about by an all-encompassing design strategy which catapults the user out of his everyday life (Hassenzahl & Tractinsky 2006).

Thus, the three main concepts of this problem space are; the designer, the user, and the experience. In this, the relationship between the user and the designer is the fulcrum of the design process and the subsequent design. Because of established responsibility for the designer towards how to frame the experience for the user it follows that taking responsibility involves taking an ethical stance towards both the user, the experience, and the design itself, since the design will affect the way the user perceives the world around him.

The common denominator being the relationship between designer and user, we choose to look at the problem posed in this paper from the ethical theory described as 'the ethics of the Other' as it is found in Løgstrup's works on

ethics (Løgstrup 1997) and to centre the discussing around the user-centred design concept of empathy, and its counterparts sympathy and apathy.

2. The Ethical Demand

> *"No one is more thoughtless than he who makes a point of applying and realising once-delivered directives. His claiming that the directives are radical really makes no difference. Thinking and imagination become equally superfluous. Everything can be carried out quite mechanically; all that is needed is a purely technical calculation. There is no trace of the thinking and imagination which are triggered only be uncertainty and doubt."*
>
> (Løgstrup, 1997:114)

The Danish theologian and philosopher K. E. Løgstrup developed the idea of an ontology-based ethic in his book 'The Ethical Demand' (Den etiske fordring). The grounding of the ethical demand is found in Løgstrup's sovereign expressions of life.'

For Løgstrup the starting point of ethics is not universality or laws on morals and ethical behaviour. His starting point is the specific meeting of two people. This meeting places demands on the two people involved. The 'Other' placing an unspoken demand of trust, openness of speech, mercy, and a wordless appeal for nonviolence on the 'I'. These demands are the sovereign expressions of life and they will, according to Løgstrup, always be present when two people meet each other. The sovereign expressions of life can be seen as an undercurrent in the meeting. Even though the life expressions are present, they will never be met fully. As Løgstrup says:

> *"The radical demand says that we are to care for the other person in a way that best serves his interest. It says that but nothing more. What this means in a given situation a person must discover for himself in terms of his own unselfishness and in the light of his own understanding of life. This is why in the very nature of things it is impossible to obey the radical demand on the basis of motives which are foreign to the demand."*
>
> (Løgstrup 1997: 58)

With this Løgstrup emphasises the human being as the fulcrum for our acting. In a design perspective we could see user needs, scenarios, and user generated design as a way to centre the focus on the human being. Thus the design becomes either sympathetic or empathic.

So the radical demand is based on the actual situation, the actual people involved in it, and how the 'I' determines what is in the best interest of the 'Other'. While the radical demand is underlying the interaction between the

two persons, the actual outcome is by no means given. Løgstrup does not apply rules, norms, or laws. Yet he explains, why people in general are likely to demand laws, rules, and norms:

> *"The social norms, on the other hand, give comparatively precise directives about what we shall do and what we shall refrain from doing. We are usually able to conform to these directives without even having to consider the other person, much less take care of his life."*
>
> (ibid.)

As Løgstrup points out the person as such becomes unimportant as soon as rules and laws are applied. The same can be said of a design process, which solely looks a specifications and requirements made by the requisition or requirements found by looking at the system instead of the people in it.

Socially accepted rules makes living and interacting with people easier. People do not have to think about what would be in the best interest of the Other, since all they have to do, is follow rules. But applying the rules in the relationship turns the Other into a mean instead of being an end. Thus the 'I' does not have to recognise the Other ones needs, does not need to actually 'see' the Other as a person, as long as the rules are obeyed.

The sovereign expressions of life: life manifestations

But what are the expressions of life and when do they become visible? And how do they relate to the design of user experiences? Løgstrup talks about different expressions and is not always clear on what is an expression and what is just acting on behalf of the expression. This can be explained by the very nature of his ethics, not being rule- or norm-based, thus being heavily dependent on actual situations. These situations are also the basis for user experience design, since the design must focus on the framing of a given experience for a given user.

Life manifestations can easily be suppressed, but they will then turn into something else. According to Løgstrup, suppressed life expressions can turn into wants. Hence the ever growing wants of people can be explained by a society which suppresses life expressions.

In other words, life expressions cannot be created, but they can be nurtured. Life expressions are underlying every kind of interaction between people, but are only visible when in fact being violated, negated, or suppressed. Failing to develop life expressions during upbringing may turn the missing expressions into ever growing wants, as can be seen in western society at the time being (Pahuus 1991).

Thus, the relationship between the 'I' and the 'Other' is defined by the responsibilities the 'I' has towards the 'Other'. This notion of ethics fits our proposed responsibility for the user experience designer ('I'), who should regard the affects of his design on the user ('the Other').

3. Relationship: Sympathy, Apathy, and Empathy

How can this relationship be expanded to a framework for discussing and elaborating the relationships between designer and user? We suggest using the following three frameworks presented in the title of this paper. Løgstrup's ethics as foundation for the possible positions the design may approach the user experience with.

In short, we propose the concepts of apathy, sympathy, and empathy within the following definitions:

- Apathy is the strict adherence to a system or a procedure.

- Sympathy is the reaction to an effect.

- Empathy is the reaction to a cause.

Apathy: system over user

Designs, which puts the system before the user, are often seen in both the development and the final designs typically conducted by large institutions or governmental organisations.

The design usually takes the system itself into account, while regarding the user as someone who has to learn how to use it. The needs of the systems are not adapted to the needs of the user, who is viewed as a part of the system itself.

The user is left to his own devices, and the design does not help the user understand how it works or what is expected from the user. The user has to adapt to the system and create his own understanding.

The designer acts like the 'I' who has a given set of rules set up to ensure his actions and final design are within the boundaries of correct ethical conduct. Following these rules, regardless of the given situation or the users concerned with the final design product, relieves the designer from any responsibilities for the actual design. The responsibility lies solely on the system itself. In this regard, the designer takes the ethical stance of apathy (Csikszentmihalyi 1997), were indifference and suppression of motivation or engagement helps distance the designer from both the stakeholders and the end-users.

This approach can be problematic since the user would have to adapt to the new design, often resulting in major changes of the way a situation is perceived.

How can the designer be held responsible if the client is approving everything? It's true that the client is historically the one deciding what functions something will have, because they assume the financial risk of failures (Krippendorf 2005). But a designer is not a mindless agent producing a product from a blueprint. There may be specifications, but the designer is the one drawing the blueprint. This is where the designer's role as an expert advisor comes into play. The client hired the designer because of his expertise in understanding how a particular medium functions. It is assumed that he has a body of knowledge that is deeper than the client's in a particular area. Thus the ethical burden is placed on the designer because the client does not have the expertise that the designer does. The client can plead ignorance but the designer cannot, and the apathetic stance therefore implies that the designer chooses to adhere to the clients requirements alone, and see the user a component in the systems as a whole.

Sympathy: giving the user what he wants

A sympathetic approach to design envelops the user and places the design responsibilities on the user. "What do you want?" is the typical question from a designer, who is sympathetic to his users. In this sense, sympathy means something akin to pity (Schauer & Merholz 2008). This maintains a distance between the designer and the user and does not necessitate understanding of the course of the problem - just the current problem setting. The design tries to take the user needs and demands into account and forcing the system to yield to the user instead of vice versa.

The designer uses the user demands as his explanation and justification for choices and rejections thus places success or failure of a given design in the hands of the user.

While Løgstrup does not cover this situation directly, he points out that it is the 'I' who has the responsibility to meet the 'Other' in every respect. Seeing the Other as the human being he is, means that the designer has to see beyond the 'Other's wants and find the actual needs. To overcome a sympathetic stance towards design is therefore also to overcome the fallacies of incomplete logic (Walton 2008) that often arises when not understanding the need of the 'Other', but looking solely at the wants. A contemporary example is the trend of the app-economy, where thinking "We want an app" is often not the actual need, but a symptom to other more important needs for the user - like for example a better restructuring of the existing IT-services to better nurture the user's needs and actions.

Empathy: giving the user what he needs

An emphatic approach to design puts responsibility for the resulting design in the hands of the designer himself. He has to take both the system and the user into account when designing. And while he does listen to the user and does undertake user-centred design, this does not entail that he gives the user what he wants. Quite contrary, the designer has to make his design decision by looking for the real problem - not what symptoms the user is pointing out.

This places far more demands on the designer than any of the other approaches, because the designer has to meet the user in the same way as Løgstrup's 'I' meets the 'Other': with respect and compassion, but without naivety. At the same time the designer has to be aware of the demands placed by the system, in which the design has to work.

The designer has to have a wider understanding of all the involved components of the design, since it is his responsibility to make the experience work. As the products and services we create become ever more complex and intertwined, he cannot possibly explore all of the contexts and situations in which the user may end up in. Even if he could, a catalog of observed behaviours is not sufficient to craft cohesive and compelling experiences. He needs to develop an intuitive understanding of the motivations behind these behaviours. Having an empathic stance helps the designer grasp the mechanisms that drive behaviour, as opposed to just the observed external actions.

This situation is how we see the ethics of 'the Other' in action. Typically, this involves the users - not in interviews or questionnaires, but through observing and interaction. The ethnological approach to understanding both the system and the user thus gives access to 'see' the 'Other' in every respect.

4. Contribution

All three of the above are viable approaches for design. We are not judging whether one approach is better than the other. The above is a proposal for a discussion on what the designer's ethical stance and conduct entails for his responsibility for designing part of the user's experience. At the same time we would like the designer to take deliberate choices, depending on which design stance is the most appropriate in a given situation and with a given user group. A design process continues in the final design, thus a user who has been seen as a part of a bigger system will always have to fit into that system, while a user who has been handled like the end of the design will have a much greater influence on how the system has to adapt to his needs.

As designers in practice we pick and choose our battles, and throughout our different design processes a professional identity emerges. How this professional identity emerges is not as much a question of educational, technical, or economical choices, but rather an ethical issue of approaching design by the point-of-view we find suitable for our responsibility for the users experience. After all, we are all end-users of products that someone else is designing.

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