TOWARD AN ETHICS OF PERSUASIVE TECHNOLOGY

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Where We're Going, Why We're Going There

Technologies have always changed our lives and how we lead them – but for the most part, the effects of these technologies on our attitudes and behaviors have been incidental, even accidental. Automobiles and highways created suburbs, but they were not invented with the intent of persuading people to commute. Early spreadsheets provided us with the number-crunching capabilities we needed to model future financial decisions, but they did not advise us to take particular actions, or reward us for what the designers considered "good" choices.

Likewise, there have always been human persuaders in society – masters of rhetoric capable of changing our minds, or at least our behaviors. Obvious examples of persuaders abound: cult leaders, mothers, car salesmen. Teachers, too, are persuaders of an invisible yet fundamental sort, altering the attitudes of their students day by day.

Often these persuaders have turned to technologies to amplify their persuasive efforts, as when Adolf Hitler literally amplified his voice using a megaphone to sway the German masses. Though the megaphone facilitated Hitler's persuasion, on its own, it could not have persuaded anyone of anything. Likewise, a television can display commercials, but only if someone is transmitting them. Without a signal, it shows only static.

Only recently have technologies emerged that are actively persuasive in their own right, artifacts created primarily to change the attitudes and/or behaviors of their users. The study of such technologies is known as captology. [1]

What if home finance software *did* persuade users to invest their money in the stock market? And what if the market then crashed, leaving users in financial ruin? Or, more subtly, what if the makers of the software arranged with certain companies to "push" their particular stocks? Would such designs differ in a morally relevant way from the practices of stockbrokers who encourage their clients to purchase certain stocks because those stocks earn them bonus commissions? [2]

We believe that it does, though in unexpected ways. In this article, we explore the ethics of persuasive technologies with an eye toward establishing real guidelines for their design and implementation. Doing so will require that we bring to bear on this new domain many of the questions (and answers) associated with previous work in the ethics of persuasion and in the ethics of technology—especially computers. Until now, no one has ever looked at the convergence of these fields.

Though contained within them, it informs them all.

[figure 1 about here]

How are we getting there? – Setting the terms straight

Articles about ethics are often peppered with jargon. In this way, ethics is a lot like computer science. In the following pages, however, we avoid specialized terms

except where they meaningfully enrich our discussion—and even then, we define them in context.

Let us begin with some working definitions. We view persuasion as an intentional effort to change attitudes or behavior and technology as the directed application of abstract ideas. In between actively persuasive technologies and passive technological media that facilitate persuasion (e.g. billboards and megaphones) are what we term structurally persuasive technologies, such as carpool lanes.

Ethics refers to a rational, consistent system for determining right and wrong, usually in the context of specific actions or policies. The creation of a persuasive technology is such an action. Admittedly, there are almost as many possible systems of ethics as there are ethicists. In strict **deontological** ethics, certain standards of conduct exist that must never be broken—even when obeying these standards might cause someone grief, or when breaking them once or twice (as in telling a white lie) might bring a person happiness.

Taking a very different approach, **act-based utilitarians** evaluate the ethics of any action by gauging its consequences with respect to a particular criterion—most often, human happiness or "well-being." Think of this as "pro and con" ethics. A comfortable middle ground is **rule-based utilitarianism**, in which we stipulate ethical rules if and only if always following those rules results in more compelling benefits than only sometimes following them. Below, we will draft such rules for the field of persuasive technology.

Throughout the article, we will refer to "the ethics of persuasive technology" instead of to "the ethics of captology." Captology is the study of persuasive technology, just as zoology is the study of animal species and political science the study of government. Zoology and political science are themselves not ethical or unethical, though the treatment of zoo animals, or the behavior of our government officials, might be valid areas for ethical inquiry.

Dark Designs

To explore ethical issues in persuasive technology in a creative and compelling way, we annually solicit from students "dark side" designs—that is, applications of persuasive technology with troubling ethical implications. Some of these fictional but provocative designs are included as sidebars.

Where We're Coming From – Persuasion and Ethics

Persuaders have always stood on uneasy ethical ground. If a serpent persuades you to eat a fruit, and if in eating it you cause humanity moderate distress, does culpability fall upon you or upon the serpent? Ethicists have struggled with such questions for thousands of years—and so has every persuader with a conscience.

Persuasion distributes responsibility between the persuader and the persuaded. In most simple cases, where one person is persuading another, we agree with Andersen that all involved parties share full moral accountability for the outcome [3]. If Brian convinces Fern to murder Jeff, in our view, Brian and Fern are each responsible for the murder. Fern is not less responsible because someone talked her into it; in the end, she

made the choice herself. Some parties might dismiss Brian as only an accessory to the murder, but none would dispute that he bears some degree—a large degree!—of responsibility for it.

To analyze the ethics of any specific persuasive act, we need to take a systematic approach, one that begins with a breakdown of standard persuasion and can be expanded to encompass persuasive technologies. To provide this approach, we propose a framework for analyzing acts of persuasion according to their motivations, methods, and outcomes, both intended and unintended. Our development of the framework begins with the basic relationship of a persuader and persuadee (figure 2). In these instances, while a persuader may still use a technology such as a megaphone or a billboard to convey the persuasive message, when distributing responsibility we ultimately look only at these two parties.

[figure 2 here]

However, our focus is on technologies created with the intention to persuade – what have been called "endogenously" persuasive technologies [1]. They differ from technological media in that they are **actively persuasive** intermediaries between the persuader and the persuaded person. Unlike billboards, they interact dynamically with the objects of their persuasion. This modified interaction is shown in Figure 3.

[figure 3 here]

The framework of motivations, methods, and outcomes can be applied in evaluating the ethics of a persuasive act in either case, but the introduction of an actively persuasive technology requires the motivations be attributed to the designer and the persuasive intent to the technology. Oddly, but meaningfully, the technology is both a method and the direct executor of persuasive methods.

We'll return to this framework later. First, however, we must consider if technology alters or even shares in the distribution of responsibility for the intent, methods and end of a persuasive act. To explore this possibility, we turn briefly to the study of computer ethics.

Another Place Where We're Coming From – Computers and Ethics

In 1991, an automated Volkswagen factory jumpstarted itself and manufactured twenty-four cars, which then rolled off an assembly line into a wall [4][1]. Who should be liable for the smashed cars and for the corollary damage to the factory?

We can begin to resolve issues like this once we accept as a reasonable assumption that human beings are free moral agents, though influenced by biology[2]. While we sometimes act in predictable ways, this does not render us automata. We have

[1] This has been described as karmikazi behavior.

[2] We all know that certain biochemical agents can cause drastic changes in our state of mind and in our chosen behaviors. This goes to show that at some level, our intentions emerge from our biological makeup. But this level need not be deterministic; nor is it predictable in a useful fashion. We feel like free beings, and so, both as ethicists and as everyday people, we ought to function within the framework of freedom.

intentionality, or at least a compelling enough illusion of it that for all "intents" and purposes we ought to accept it as real. To date, computers have demonstrated neither the capacity to form their own intentions nor the ability to make their own choices. By any sensible standard, therefore, they are not free moral agents [5]—and so when a computer makes a serious mistake, the programmer is often the first person blamed, the user the second, and mother nature the third. The computer itself gets off easy[3].

Similarly, we cannot realistically attribute responsibility for the persuasive act to the persuasive technology. If a slot machine with a compelling multimedia narrative entices people to gamble away their savings, the slot machine itself is not at fault. Nor does it deserve credit for making the gambling experience more entertaining. Rather, responsibility for the computerized slot machine's motivations, methods, and outcomes falls squarely on its creators and purchasers, while responsibility for the gambler's choice to gamble distributes on both these parties and the gambler him or herself—just as if it were a human being doing the persuading.

The major difference between persuasion via active technology and through traditional person-to-person channels is not the motivation, since the persuader still intends to persuade, or the outcome, since the persuaded person still undertakes that outcome, but the methods employed in the persuasion itself. Our ethical scrutiny of persuasive technology must center there.

With that, we return to the framework and some overdue definitions.

MOTIVATIONS vs. INTENT

The motivations underlying a persuasive act and the intent of that persuasive act are not the same[4]. Consider three people who intend to persuade a stranger to eat more fruits and vegetables. One might be motivated by a desire to increase the stranger's quality of life. The second might be motivated to bring in revenue for the family farm. And the third might be motivated by a secret hope that the stranger would eat a bad fruit and become sick to the stomach.

The persuasive intent remains constant, even as the motivation varies in an ethically relevant way. The first is clearly laudable, the third, problematic. The second falls in a more neutral zone, in which cultural context (see later section) regarding commercialism and the other factors in our framework—the persuasive methods and outcomes—grow in relative importance.

METHODS

[3] It's true that people sometimes *treat* their computers as if they were, in fact, free moral agents. Certainly, they get angry at a program when it crashes, or at a printer when it jams. Yes, computers make good excuses for missed deadlines. However, is a computer that displays child pornography "dirty" or morally reprehensible? No, because the computer has no sense of what is appropriate beyond the instructions given to it by human-driven programs.

[4] To figure out the motivation of a persuader, ask yourself, "why is this person persuading someone of something?" The answer might read, "John is persuading his children to eat ice cream because _____." The persuasive intent here is simply "to eat more ice cream."

We must also look at the ***methods*** by which a persuader persuades. If a person were to convince a stranger to eat fruit by playing on exaggerated fears, we might judge his methods unethical, even if his motivations were laudable.

The methods employed by persuasive technology are essentially similar to those employed by persuasive people. Humans can persuade through flattery. Work has shown that computers can flatter too. Humans can persuade through conditioning, by rewarding and punishing desirable and undesirable behaviors. Again, so can computers.

Technologies, however, embed these methods in a new and compelling context. For instance, while humans can persuade through basic role playing, computers permit simulations to reach an unprecedented level of complexity, realism and persuasive potential.

Much of this paper will look at the implications for the ethics of traditional persuasive methods when they are undertaken by technologies instead of by human beings.

OUTCOMES, INTENDED AND UNINTENDED

We must ultimately evaluate the ***outcome*** of the persuasive act – the ethics of what the persuaded person is persuaded to do or think. It goes almost without saying that if something is unethical for you to do of your own volition, then it is equally unethical to do when someone persuades you to do it.

What about unintended outcomes? Suppose that the stranger above proved severely allergic to and died after ingesting a kumquat. If few people were allergic to kumquats, such an unfortunate but unintended outcome would not be considered reasonably predictable, and the persuader should not be held responsible for the outcome. However, if this were a common allergy and the ensuing reaction thus reasonably predictable, the persuader should be called to account.

Later in this paper, when discussing the persuasive method of simulation, we will assert that designers of persuasive technologies must be held responsible only for reasonably predictable outcomes.

[figure 4 here]

The Responsibility of Designers

How sensitive should designers and programmers be to the ethics of the persuasive technology? Consider: someone persuading through a more traditional medium might hire an artist to paint a billboard. This artist seems to be in a position analogous to that of a programmer contracted to devise a persuasive program. We contend, however, that the programmer, because he creates an active persuasive agent, is even more accountable than the artist for the persuasive nature of that agent – and especially for the persuasive methods it employs. Programmers must never be reduced to mercenaries who do any kind of work for hire without sharing in the responsibility for it. This principle comes across clearly in the ACM Code of Ethics and cannot be overstated.

Ethical Design Imperatives

Given the above framework of motivations, methods and outcomes, we can already establish the first three of our imperatives for future designs in this space:

1) *THE OUTCOME of any persuasive technology should never be one that would be deemed unethical if the persuasion were undertaken without the technology, or that would be deemed unethical if the outcome occurred independently of persuasion at all.*

2) *THE MOTIVATIONS behind the creation of a persuasive technology should never be such that they would be deemed unethical if these same intentions led to a more traditional form of persuasion.*

3) *THE CREATORS of a persuasive technology must assume responsibility for all reasonably predictable outcomes of its use.*

There may be certain acts of persuasion that would not be practical without technology. For instance, it would be difficult to persuade someone through conventional means to maintain the proper pulse rate during exercise, but a simple biofeedback monitor can intervene appropriately.

The implementation of persuasive technologies in domains such as this one, where conventional persuasive techniques are difficult at best, calls for heightened ethical scrutiny. Even so, it is still possible to ask in a thought experiment whether it would be ethical for a person to attempt the persuasion without technology.

[figure 5 around here]

The Privacy Imperative

Human persuaders often exploit information about the party being persuaded. This is one reason why friends and family members tend to be the best people to persuade you of something. They know more about you and about your needs, including information you might prefer to keep private.

Persuasive technologies also take advantage of information about target users. They can collect this information themselves, or they can draw it from other sources, such as the Internet.

Suppose our proponent of fruits and vegetables learned from a friend that the stranger he was trying to persuade suffered from a chronic iron deficiency. He could then leverage this information by connecting the consumption of spinach to the stranger's need for iron. Likewise, a persuasive computer game might access online medical records, learn about the player's deficiency, and change so that an interactive spinach "character"—or even Popeye himself!—became the hero and wielded an iron sword in battle.

We propose two imperatives for the design of persuasive technologies with regard to the collection and manipulation of information about users. The first is simply this:

4) *THE CREATORS of a persuasive technology must ensure that it regards the privacy of users with at least as much respect as they regard their own privacy.*[5]

To complement this imperative, we must consider whether personal information is shared with a third party or used exclusively by a particular technology—whether, in other words, the persuasive technology plays the part of *big brother* or *little sister*.

First, consider a technology that monitors a child's water usage at the sink. It might chastise a child who leaves the water running while brushing her teeth. Here, the information about her water habits goes to an immediate persuasive end. We term this a *little sister* technology.

What if the sink kept track of whether or not restaurant employees washed their hands, so that their employer could later reward or punish them appropriately? Here, the same kind of private information—on water use in the bathroom—is retained and disseminated to a third party. We term this a *big brother* technology.

In short, technologies which provide us with information about ourselves are little sisters; technologies that provide us with information about others, big brothers. Because they relate with users on a one-to-one basis, in a way that preserves the privacy of the personal information, little sister persuasive technologies are the less likely of the two to raise red flags. Thus, our fifth design imperative:

5) *PERSUASIVE TECHNOLOGIES that relay personal information about a user to a third party must be closely scrutinized for privacy concerns.*

The Disclosure Imperative

Some persuasive methods depend on persuaded parties not realizing they are being persuaded—or, more often, not realizing *how* they are being persuaded. We are far less likely to believe the statements of a car salesman regarding the quality of a used automobile on his lot, than we are to believe testimonials by individuals with no stake in persuading us to buy it. Knowledge of persuasive mechanisms in a technology may sensitize users to their presence and decrease their efficacy.

6) *All else being ethical, the creators of a persuasive technology should disclose their motivations, methods and intended outcomes, except when their disclosure would significantly diminish the effectiveness of the persuasive technology.*

Simulations, Responsibility and the Reasonably Predictable

Most simulations require technology in order to become more than just an exercise in imagination and role-playing. With the help of computers, individuals can experience a world not quite like their own, in order to be persuaded to change actual attitudes and behaviors.

[5] Granted, this imperative does not guarantee that technologies will adequately respect the privacy needs of all users, since some creators may not have much regard even for their own privacy, especially within certain cultures. It is, however, a valid and valuable first rule of thumb.

We can distinguish between two kinds of simulation: integrated and immersive. An artificial infant intended to persuade teenagers not to become parents typifies integrated simulation. It brings a simulated baby into an otherwise real world; when the simulated baby cries, the cry is heard by real people in real situations. By contrast, an immersive simulation is one in which individuals must take part in a fully virtual world: for instance, flight simulators and MUDS.

Because immersive simulations are by nature rich circumstantial experiences, full of cause-and-effect relationships, and because integrated simulations can interact in realistic fashion with outside variables, the creators of both must be sure to anticipate unexpected outcomes. For instance, Baby Think It Over might cry the night before a student's SAT, negatively impacting his performance and subsequent college admissions possibilities. Or, a student might decide that she enjoys carrying around an infant, even it cries now and then, and attempt to create more of them. These are certainly reasonably predictable outcomes, and must be addressed by the designer—perhaps with an emergency shut-off switch on the infant, or with teacher oversight to confirm that it conveys the correct message.

Again, we believe that creators of persuasive technologies, and especially simulations, must hold themselves responsible for all *reasonably predictable* outcomes of their persuasive methods. Such reasonable prediction requires significant user testing and holistic, forward thinking on the part of designers.

The Accuracy Imperative

The truth is, persuaders often tweak the truth, or ignore it entirely. We expect this, so in many instances we regard someone trying to persuade us of something—say, to buy a car—with suspicion. We wonder what they are leaving out, and when possible check what they tell us against more reputable sources. We also have instincts that help us notice signs of dishonesty, from how much a person is sweating to the vibrations in their voice. A good liar has more than a poker face; he has a poker body.

Computers, however, can lie with equanimity. Moreover, people tend to trust in the information that computers deliver to them. We have no reason to believe that a device monitoring our heart rate will deliberately misreport it. Imagine, however, a scale meant to encourage healthier dieting habits. It might be programmed to tell a teenage girl she weighs less than she actually does, in order to minimize the chance of her developing an eating disorder. Certainly, the *intention* and *outcome* of this persuasion are positive ones. But by misreporting information, the technology risks being contradicted—and thus devaluation as a persuasive agent. The user might subsequently mistrust all persuasive technologies.

To summarize:

- The established credibility of computers is valuable, both for persuasive purposes and for many other applications in society.

- Most human beings anticipate dishonesty in other human beings, and can sense it to varying degrees. They do not, however, expect dishonesty from technology, nor do they have any instinctive aptitude for detecting it.

To safeguard this credibility, and to avoid its abuse, we propose a seventh imperative for persuasive technology:

> *7) PERSUASIVE TECHNOLOGIES must not misinform in order to achieve their persuasive end*

The Golden Imperative

To these seven imperatives we suggest one final overarching principle, what we term the "golden rule" of persuasion:

> *8) THE CREATORS of a persuasive technology should never seek to persuade a person or persons of something which they themselves would not want to be persuaded.*

We ground this principle first in common sense. Granted, some people may in fact want to persuade others and consent to be persuaded of things that many find objectionable—for instance, to abort fetuses. For the most part, however, combined with our other touchstones, we believe this will vastly minimize ethical abuses of persuasive technology—and, in fact, it could apply equally well to traditional, non-technological persuasion. In the case of encouraging people to have abortions, since abortion is an ethically problematic issue with powerful arguments on either side, any persuasive technology designed in light of our first touchstone would already have had to deal with this.

We also find support for this golden rule of persuasion in the work of a 20th century philosopher, John Rawls, who proposes that we consider ethics from behind a "veil of ignorance" [6]. Imagine you had no idea of who you were in society, of whether you were rich or poor, this ethnicity or that ethnicity, male or female. You would only agree to ethical rules that benefited you no matter whom you turned out to be. Similarly, if you imagined creating guidelines for an act of persuasion without knowing whether you were the persuader or persuadee, you would want to make sure the persuasion would be beneficial to both sides – just in case you turned out to be the person being persuaded.

A Note on Culture and Persuasive Technology

When making any statement about the ethical nature of a design, to not qualify it within a particular culture is to speak loosely. For instance, a persuasive doll intended to reduce teenage pregnancy might be accepted as ethical in the United States, but not in a culture that values early marriage and frequent childbirth.

The creators of persuasive technologies that may go beyond the bounds of their own cultural systems should therefore be attentive to reasonably predictable ethical issues associated with their transfer into other cultural systems.

While a full treatment of the impact of cultural differences on the practice and perceived ethics of persuasion is beyond the scope of this article, we believe that further attention to this issue is both valid and vital.

Conclusion

Our intent in writing this article was to persuade you to think critically about ethical issues at the convergence of technology and persuasion. But to analyze the motivation behind a persuasive act, it is important to put aside for a moment the intended outcome and ask, “Why that intent in the first place?”

So why persuade you? Because we feel that in the near future, persuasive technologies will become commonplace, affecting many people in many ways. By initiating this dialogue in the professional community, and by proposing a set of imperatives for future persuasive design efforts, we hope to steer the field in a positive direction from the very outset.

Our method was mostly an appeal to rational thinking. We employed the medium of this magazine to amplify our message, but no active technological intermediary beyond that.

The outcome, of course, is in your hands.

References

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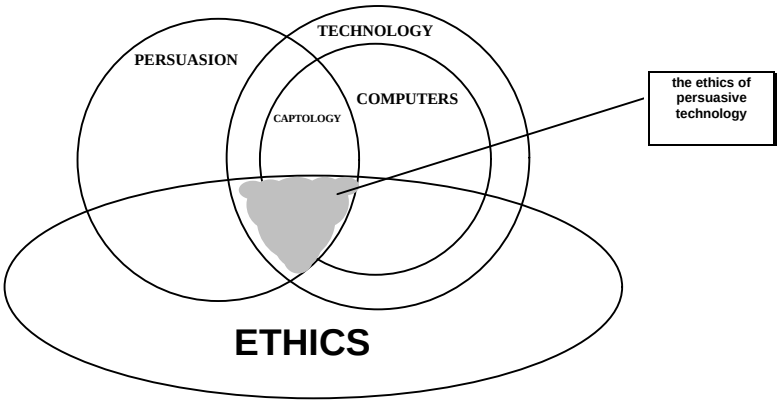
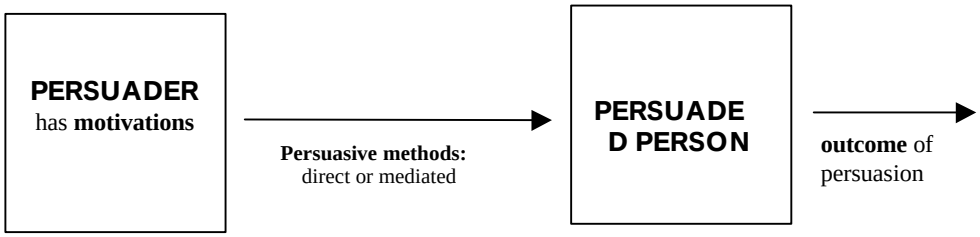
Figure 1



THE CONVERGENCE OF ETHICS, PERSUASION AND TECHNOLOGY

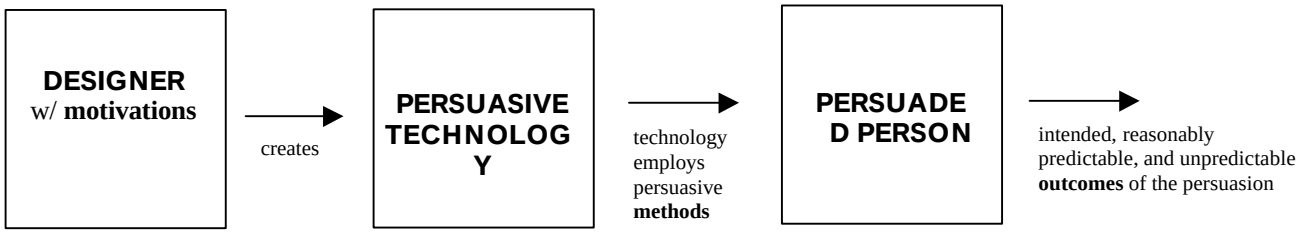
Ethical concerns in this domain must extend beyond just persuasive computers to all forms of persuasive technology, ranging from those simply structural to those more complex and cybernetic.

Figure 2



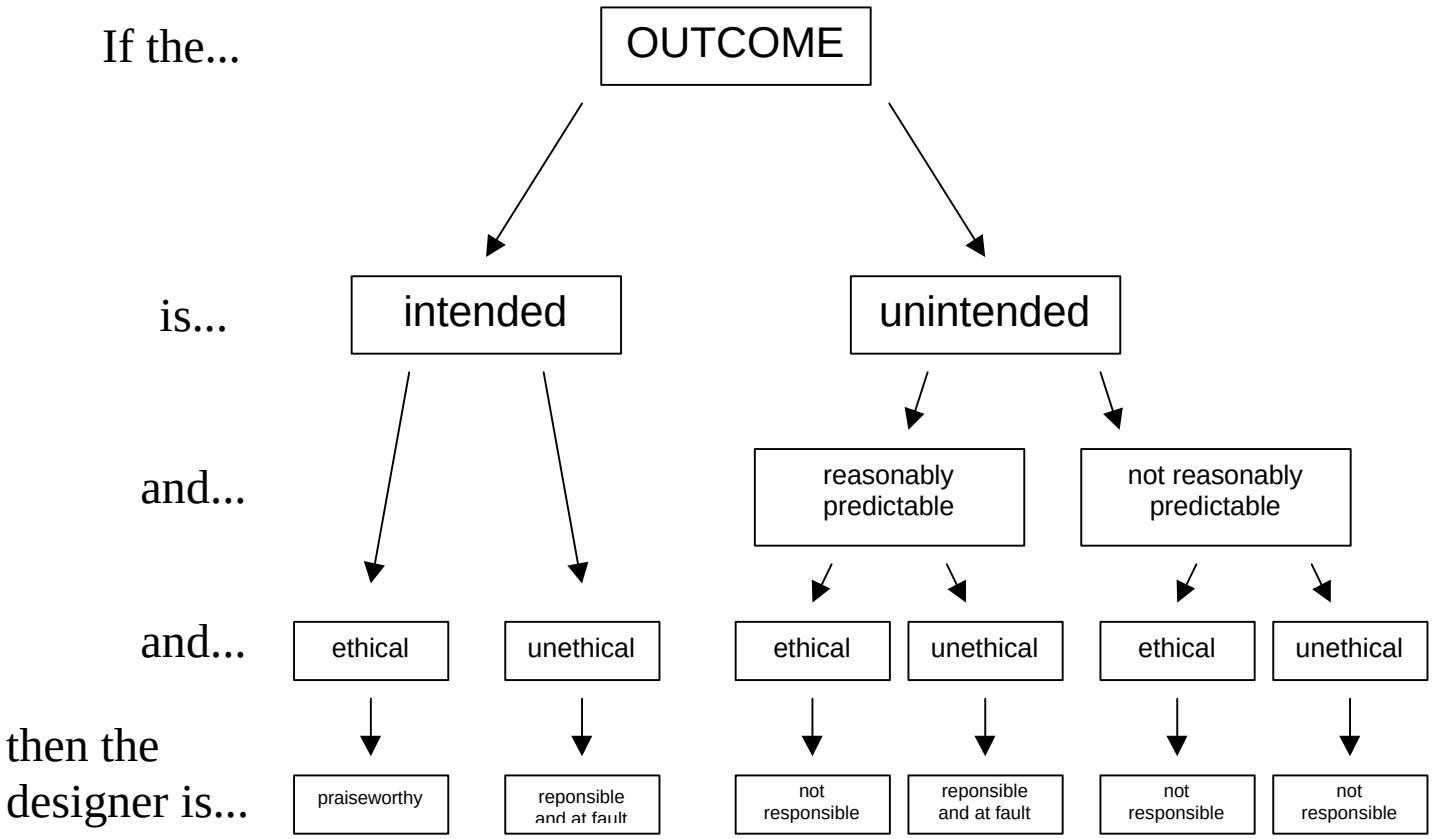
A framework for evaluating the ethics of a persuasive interaction in a traditional persuasive context.

Figure 3



A framework for evaluating the ethics of the more complex interaction of persuader, persuasive technology and persuadee.

Figure 4



A flow chart to clarify the differing levels of ethical responsibility attached to predictable and unpredictable intended and unintended consequences of a persuasive act.

Figure 5

FROM THE DARK SIDE

DESIGN NAME: Missionary
PURPOSE**:** To facilitate the conversion of individuals in a region to a new religion.
HOW IT WORKS: Missionaries distribute necklaces or other trinkets to new believers. These trinkets can be tracked and mapped by a central computer, and must be "recharged" regularly at a place of worship. If not recharged in a reasonable time, their signal to the central computer begins to fade, and missionaries are quickly deployed to restore the owners' faith.

No caption necessary

Figure 6

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Figure 7

THE IMPERATIVES OF PERSUASIVE TECHNOLOGY

i

THE INTENDED OUTCOME OF A PERSUASIVE TECHNOLOGY SHOULD NEVER BE ONE THAT WOULD BE DEEMED UNETHICAL IF THE PERSUASION WERE UNDERTAKEN WITHOUT THE TECHNOLOGY, OR THAT WOULD BE DEEMED UNETHICAL IF THE OUTCOME OCCURRED INDEPENDENTLY OF PERSUASION AT ALL.

ii

THE MOTIVATIONS BEHIND THE CREATION OF A PERSUASIVE TECHNOLOGY SHOULD NEVER BE SUCH THAT THEY WOULD BE DEEMED UNETHICAL IF THEY LED TO A MORE TRADITIONAL FORM OF PERSUASION.

iii

THE CREATORS OF A PERSUASIVE TECHNOLOGY MUST ASSUME RESPONSIBILITY FOR ALL REASONABLY PREDICTABLE OUTCOMES OF ITS USE.

iv

THE CREATORS OF A PERSUASIVE TECHNOLOGY MUST ENSURE THAT THE TECHNOLOGY TREATS THE PERSONAL INFORMATION OF USERS WITH AT LEAST AS MUCH RESPECT AS THEY TREAT THEIR OWN INFORMATION.

v

PERSUASIVE TECHNOLOGIES THAT RELAY PERSONAL INFORMATION ABOUT A USER TO A THIRD PARTY MUST UNDERGO A HIGHER LEVEL OF SCRUTINY FOR PRIVACY CONCERNS.

vi

ALL ELSE BEING ETHICAL, THE CREATORS OF A PERSUASIVE TECHNOLOGY SHOULD DISCLOSE THEIR MOTIVATIONS, METHODS AND INTENDED OUTCOMES, EXCEPT WHEN SUCH DISCLOSURE WOULD SIGNIFICANTLY DIMINISH THE EFFECTIVENESS OF THE PERSUASIVE TECHNOLOGY.

vii

PERSUASIVE TECHNOLOGIES MUST NOT MISINFORM IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE THEIR PERSUASIVE END

viii
the golden rule of persuasion

THE CREATORS OF A PERSUASIVE TECHNOLOGY SHOULD NEVER SEEK TO PERSUADE A PERSON OR PERSONS OF SOMETHING WHICH THEY THEMSELVES WOULD NOT CONSENT TO BE PERSUADED.