



How to spot Persuasive Design

Free Technology

Apps that are free have the highest incentive to use Persuasive Design. That's because instead of selling this technology as a product, designers of free apps use an advertising model to make money. That means that **the hours of our time spent on screens looking at ads is the product being sold - to the advertisers.** *All social media apps, all free-to-play video games,* and even free technologies that seem educational have the highest levels of Persuasive Design. Social media companies make more money the longer you stay because they can show you more ads. Video game companies make more money the longer you play, because you'll see more ads and are more likely to make in-game purchases. The more Youtube videos you watch, the more ads you see. Even educational apps like Chess.com, or the language learning app Duolingo, make money using the advertising model, using huge amounts of Persuasive Design to drive engagement.

What If I Upgrade To Paid? Often, apps will offer an option to upgrade to a paid version that doesn't include ads. However, even though the ads are removed when you pay, none of the Persuasive Design is removed. Even the ad-free versions of Youtube, Chess.com and Duolingo are full of Persuasive Design.

Infinite scroll

Infinite scroll is when you can scroll endlessly through content without ever getting to the bottom of a page. This is the difference between scrolling through a news site (like the New York Times) where you eventually get to the end, and scrolling through a social media site, which is bottomless. Our brains often rely on something called "stopping cues" to let us know when we should move on to another activity. (For instance, an empty plate cues us to stop eating.) If an app uses infinite scroll, it's intent is to keep you on as long as possible, so you know it has lots of Persuasive Design.



Notifications

Notifications are a Persuasive Design trick used to pull you away from whatever you're doing in real life and entice you back to your device. A tool is something we use when we need it, put down when we don't, and don't think about it until we need it again - think frying pan, screw driver or Google Doc. Any persuasively designed technology is not a tool. It has an agenda for how it wants you to spend your time, because someone is getting rich the more you use their product. Anytime a technology is actively trying to pull you away from real life with notifications, you know it has lots of Persuasive Design.

Gamification

Aspects of gamification like leader boards, badges, and/or levels, give a visual representation of progress. These progress markers are Persuasive Design tricks that both reward you with a sense of accomplishment, and also create a feeling of, "I'm almost there, I can't get off now!" This element of Persuasive Design is also used by slot machine gambling to create a feeling of "I can't stop now because I'm closer than I've ever been to winning!" When it's dinner time, how many times have you heard, "I can't stop now!" from the gamer in the house?

Social Competition or Social Feedback

Is an app or game rating your progress relative to the progress of strangers? Are you getting likes, followers, and social validation? Does this app make you wonder and worry what other people's reaction to your actions, statements, posts or progress will be, even people you've never met in-person? This aspect of Persuasive Design is embedded in both social media and video games and it capitalizes on the fact that we are extremely motivated by social acceptance and social rejection.

Penalties For Inactivity

Are you breaking a streak if you're not on the app for a few days? Are you letting down your fellow gamers when you don't log on everyday? Do you lose your status if you take some time off? Does accumulated "currency" go away if you stay away? These are signs that a very effective type of Persuasive Design trick is being used, which creates a "fear of missing out" in order to keep us coming back. For instance, Wordle gives only a single puzzle a day, and if you don't log on that day, you miss the puzzle.



Artificial scarcity or urgency

Anytime there is a sense of scarcity or urgency built into a technology, you're seeing an element of Persuasive Design. For instance, in Minecraft's "Creative Mode", resources and time are unlimited. In "Survival Mode", the element of scarcity is added by limiting resources and the element of urgency is added by needing to gather enough resources by night fall. Fortnite creates artificial urgency with limited-time-only maps, skins, and challenges. This type of Persuasive Design is also being used by any app that makes claims like, "Only 6 left at this price" or "9 other shoppers are looking at this item."

Advertising of Any Kind

Even if it isn't free, the maker of any technology that shows ads has an incentive to make it as rewarding as they can, to keep you on there for as long as possible. For instance, online news apps like New York Times are showing you ads while you read, and therefore use a moderate amount of Persuasive Design even though you paid for a subscription.

Daily Life Experience

Which type of technology hooks you is different for each person. If you don't enjoy gaming, no matter how high the Persuasive Design has been cranked up, it's not something you'll get stuck on for hours. On the other hand, sometimes technology with only a moderate amount of Persuasive Design can be extremely rewarding to some people. For instance, the simple camera features of a device are often enough to enthrall a toddler for hours. This is why it's always important to consider "How hard is it to regulate time spent?" If your child has a really hard time transitioning away from a particular screen activity, or a certain app creates a lot of conflict between you and your child, there's a very good chance they're experiencing the effects of Persuasive Design. Asking yourself, "Does my child want to use it for hours or are they able to self-regulate it?" is a good way to estimate how persuasive that technology is for your child.

