The Ethical Ecology of Service Design – An Explorative Study on Ethics in User Research for Service Design

Bertil Carlsson

berca955@student.liu.se

Department of Computer and Information Science

SE 581 83

Linköping, Sweden

Abstract

Previous studies have shown that ethical situations within design currently present themselves as an implicit and non-reflexive activity. Others promote a development of ethical tools, which are incorporated within the normal set of methods, and tools used during the design process. However within the service design discipline ethical research has been scarce, some might even say lacking completely. In order to shine a light on the ethics within service design this paper explores the ethical design ecology of service design and gives a first sketch of an ethical baseline for the field. The data represents six weeks of shadowing in-house and external service design consultants working in Scandinavia, later to be analysed by the three major normative theories within ethics and an adoption of the Value-Sensitive design framework. The results demonstrate that service designers at the moment often approach ethical problems in an implicit and consequentialist way and that when ethical situations are dealt with explicitly they are often of a nature in which the consequences of the proposed design solution easily can be foreseen.

KEYWORDS: Service Design, Value-Sensitive Design, Normative Ethics, Ethical Ecology, Value-Sensitive Situations

Introduction

Since the introduction of participatory design (PD) in the late 1970s design disciplines such as interaction design, experience design and service design has emerged as strong contributors to the way of looking at how design contributes to society (Gladwell, 2000; Thackara, 2005; Löwgren and Stolterman, 2007; Junginger and Sangiorgi, 2009; Penin and Tonkinwise, 2009). Design disciplines with a methodology which has been influenced by that of PD (Holmlid, 2009). The new approaches have contributed to a shift in focus for the designer, making it more user-centric, i.e. focusing more on user involvement throughout the design process than before (Salvador and Mateas, 1997; Buxton, 2007; Holmlid, 2009). The user-centric shift has forced the ethical view on the design practice to change as well.

This paper focuses on situations that arise during "normal states" of the service design process. By "normal states" the author refers to states that have no specific ethical backdrop. Previous studies have shown that designers indeed find themselves in ethical and moral situations (van Gorp, 2007; Knight, 2008; Lloyd, 2009) and others have (implicitly) stated that these situations are influential when trying to understand the ethical design ecology in which the designer acts (Steen, 2011; Kirkegaard Rasmussen and Graves Petersen, 2011). Furthermore the ethics research conducted within other disciplines of design has shown that ethical situations are often dealt with implicitly (Lloyd, 2009) and others have called for a more reflexive process when it comes to ethical matters (Steen, 2011) and arguing for an ethical approach which focuses on ethics during the design process and not as a tool for judging whether a design is ethically good or not. Van Gorp (2007) on the other hand focused on different types of ethical situations, normal and radical, and concluded that designers tended to follow rules and regulations a lot more when confronted with a design problem of a normal ethical nature than when confronted with a radical problem. Taking previous research into consideration this paper supplies a first description, but not finished, of the ethical ecology within service design, exemplified from a stakeholder interaction point-of-view because of the user-centric view in service design (Stickdorn and Schneider, 2010).

Values and Design

According to Driver (2006) there are a great number of people who believe that what makes an action good or evil depends on the consequence of that particular action. For instance, the act of murdering someone is wrong because of its

consequence, death. This approach is called Consequentialism and in design this would mean that whatever intentions the designer had during the design process the good of the design is not decided until implemented and effects of it can be seen, i.e. the consequences of the design.

Another approach is the Deontological which Driver (2006) describes as believing what makes an act morally "right" or "wrong" is the act itself, and not the consequence of that act, i.e. it is a theory which defines "right" independently of the "good". A typical deontological situation within design would be choosing not to lie to a participant during data-collection in order to get "better" results, since that would fall under the case of "lying is wrong".

The third is that of Virtue Ethics, which build its theory on the notion that when contemplating moral dilemmas, and situations we first consider how we ought to be. We might even consider the virtue by someone we admire, one could for example ask themselves; what would Ghandi do? (Driver, 2006)

In design this would mean for instance that the designer would place him or herself within the shoes of a specific user in order to guide them through the design process. In the next subsection a framework for how values could be framed within design and Human Computer Interaction (HCI) is presented.

Values in Design

Values in design can present themselves in numerous of ways, depending on the perspective. There is a debate in the design ethics community on how to best approach the ethics within design (Bausch, 2008; Knight, 2008; Steen, 2011) and which normative theory to ground it within (d'Anjou, 2011). Consequentialism is a theory present in the design processes, something which sustainability design attests too (Fry, 2009).

Value-Sensitive Design (VSD) is described as *"…a theoretically grounded approach to the design of technology that accounts for human values in a principled and comprehensive manner throughout the design process"* (Friedman et al., 2002, pp. 1).

VSD uses three categories of approach to values; conceptual, empirical and technical. The conceptual investigation is a philosophically informed analysis of the central constructs and issues under investigation (Friedman, 1996). This category has for instance shown itself during creative parts of the design process when designers or design teams tries to get a comprehension of the design problem at hand in the data collected during this study. The empirical investigation encompass any human activity that can be observed, measured, or documented, hence most methods used in social science research, as represented in the collected data during user-interactions and during data-collection (Friedman, 1996). The technical investigation deals with that a given technology is more suitable for certain activities and more readily supports certain values while rendering other activities and values more difficult to realize (Friedman, 1996).

A typical example of VSD can be seen in the European Union's cookie-law introduced 2011. This law meant that the user got a more explicit take on whether or not websites could store cookies on their computer, before the law this information was "hidden" within the settings of most web browsers and now the user is prompted to say whether or not the specific website is allowed to store cookies on the user's computer. An ethical implication not unlike the one presented by Friedman et al. regarding cookies consent in the Mozilla web browser (Friedman et al., 2002).

Service Design and Ethics

Due to service designs co-creative nature and because it often deals with soft issues, just as PD, ethical situations are bound to emerge. By soft issues the author here refers to an issue which might be solved in a number of ways, none of them better than the other but still decisive for what happens in the future. Service Design is also a design perspective that deals with both local and global norms and values, which might force the designer to deal with contradicting values represented by society and different societal groups, as it does in PD where this often is used to better the empathy and understanding that the participants have of the other group. It also puts the spotlight on the designer to catch these norms and values and represent them during the design process, making the designer the voice *of* and *for* the people.

Service design is a design perspective relatively new and a perspective which is composed by a vast range of practitioners coming from other fields of design, such as; graphic design, interaction design, industrial design and experience design to mention a few (Stickdorn and Schneider, 2010). This vast number of contributors to service design not only gives the field a divergent approach to the design process itself but it also gives an indication that the common ground between practitioners might be a bit skewed, resonating to the ethical ground on which they stand on coming in to the field. Making it ever so important to find out what ethical views are represented within the field.

Method

The study was conducted over a period of six weeks at two locations in Scandinavia. The first a medium sized service company which employs a service designer, the second a service design consultancy firm. The method used for data gathering was the ethnographic approach of shadowing which allowed the observer to observe and ask the service designer questions regarding e.g. viewpoints during data collection. An adoption of the Value-Sensitive Design framework and the three major ethical normative theories were later used to analyse the data, see Figure 1 for analysis illustration.
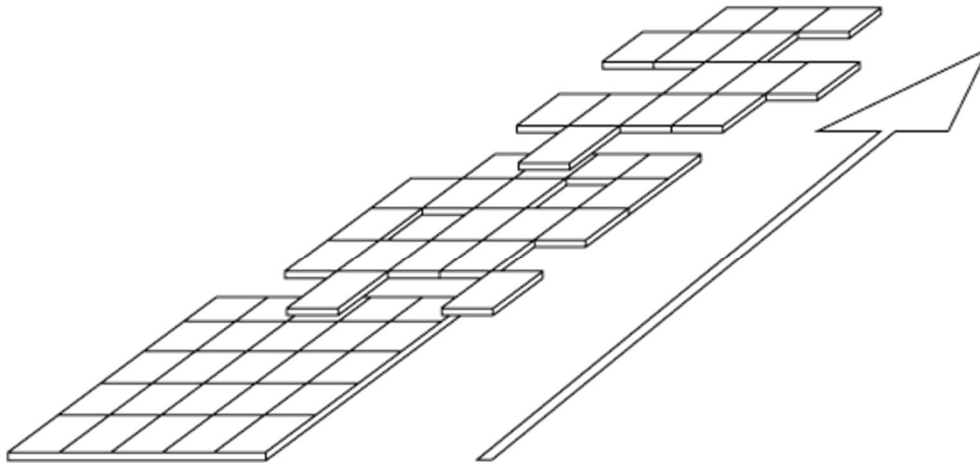

Figure 1   Visualisation of the analysis process.

In the lowest section all situations are represented. In the second all events identified by the VSD-framework and the third all situations identified by both the VSD-framework and the three ethical normative theories.

Results and Analysis

The standpoints of the service designers involved in the study reflect itself in the data by means of self-reflection on their part. At both locations the service designers rather see themselves as advocates for the user and their needs and do not bother or even want to be involved in the technical implementations of their design solutions. The procurer of the design job often shares this view, in the data their view is rather that the service designer's job is to research and inform them on what the users want or need. It should however be stated that this is the *intention* of the service designer (and procurer); situations where they are involved in the technical implementation process have emerged in the data. In those technical implementation situations the service designers still acts as an advocate for the user. This intended way of working has a direct effect on the ethical design ecology for the service designer since it limits/enables them to focus on one particular issue.

More often than not the service designers took on a consequentialist approach when thinking about their design. They often reflected upon their designs, during the conceptual stage in the process, as to what impact they would have on their user, how it would change their behavior, and if that behavior was sought after. If they did not know the answers to these questions they quickly reverted into an empirical standpoint and tried to figure out how to best get answers to their questions, and whom to talk to in order to get a valid response. The empirical category was the category which stood out the most in the data, not surprising since service design is a user-centric design discipline, and a lot of the activities which fell into the empirical category were goal oriented, i.e. consequentialist. As one service designer roughly stated it; we often know where we want to end up, my job is to figure out how to best get there.

Virtue Ethics was a category which was not as well represented as first can be hypothesized due to the intention of the service designers to be advocates for their users, for instance by the use of personas, customer journeys and other methods and tools for taking a user perspective. Very seldom did the service designers actually take the role of their users in order to help them make design decisions; it did happened, but not very often. Instead they often talked about and with the users as an outside group during meetings and workshops. They could themselves belong to the target-group and talk about their own experiences but still from an outside perspective. This is interesting because this not only enhances the consequentialist and deontological way of looking at ethical problems within service design but it also reaffirms the intention of the service designers to act as advocates for the users.

The deontological approach was often represented in the data when the service designers wanted to know when and how they could cut corners with their design. On occasion they asked a stakeholder during a meeting or workshop or when deciding on who to talk to and whom not to talk to. Another ethical situation which often arose after user-interactions were that of prioritizing user needs and figuring out which user needs to promote if contradicting ones emerged during user-interactions. Often the benefit of the many would win over the voices of few which attest to the consequentialist way of looking at a situation.

Steen (2011) identified designers as often talking about ethical problems in an implicit way and not as often in an explicit one. Which is true in this study as well, all of the above situations were of an implicit nature. The only time that values were talked about explicitly was when the service designers risked too design somebody out of a job or when data was represented as coming from point A when it really came from point B but represented as coming from point A. Situations where service designers risked designing somebody out of a job happened a couple of times during data collection and each situation had different results regarding viewpoints on how to best approach the subject. When the payoff for improving the user experience in the service delivery process was considered large enough the service designers tended to ignore the matter and said that it was not up to them to decide who lost or kept their job, however if the intended payoff was not considered large enough they were much more likely to opt for a solution which did not risk the persons job.

What these results show is that at the moment, service designers in Scandinavia often take a consequentialist approach during the service design process. They do this by setting goals and plotting a course on how to best get there by means of deciding on who to talk too and what to ask them about. From there a prioritizing of the user needs is conducted, during this part of the process both a consequentialist and a deontological approach can be taken by the designer depending on the situation. Finally all throughout the process the service designers see themselves as advocates for the users.

Discussion

There are a lot of ethical perspectives which designer can take when designing. One of the most talked about today is that of sustainability. How do designers of today adapt themselves to the situation in order to be able to look at the long term implications that their design might have on both the local and global community, which according to Fry (2009) very few do. However this is just one value perspective, of many, and it is up to the (service) design community to recognize that. There is imminent danger in only taking one perspective when designing (Hult et al., 2006), there needs to be a larger underlying process which fosters and aids the designers throughout the process and helps them identify key ethical perspectives (Steen, 2011). At the moment very few values are talked about and decided upon in an explicit manner within service design. There also needs to be an established framework on which these aids are grounded within (Fry, 2009). Designing just for sustainability, might hinder the designer and make them forget about other values that might be equally important to the end-user, ranging from human rights to family values. Previous work has shown that by actively taking new perspectives when designing the design process is enriched (Hult et al., 2006) which means that the ethical perspective is just one of many. What is important is however that each of them is represented in the process.

Tony Fry (2009) argues for a mentality of not adding something to the way we design but embedding it within the design process and having tools and methods where the designer by using these methods and tools *automatically* thinks these matters through. This paper contributes to that thinking by identifying ethical situations within service design and hence adding to the knowledge of where these tools can and should be used in future service design work. A first sketch for an ethical baseline of the ethical service design ecology has been drawn so that others, practitioners and researchers alike, can add and have their say on the matter.

The results show that ethical situations are seldom dealt with explicitly and often the values which the service designers represent are of an implicit nature, which raises the question of how aware the service designers actually are of the ethical service design ecology in which they work. Not by knowing that the service design field is a highly ethical discipline but rather how their choices will affect the lives of many. And by knowing which standpoint they have chosen which preconceived notions they bring with them before making a decision. However before being able to answer this question further research has to be conducted within the ethics area of service design.

Lloyd (2009) found that designers engage, both implicitly and explicitly, with ethical situations something which is apparent in this study as well. He studied engineers and architects during meetings whilst this study looked at service designers during their day-to-day work. This research hence adds to the knowledge about ethics in design and not only about ethics within service design since similar ways of approaching ethical situations within design between the two data-sets, an implicit approach, have been found. Furthermore Steen (2011) argues for a reflexive design process when it comes to ethical questions. That reflexivity can be found in some excerpts in the data collected in this study which shows that service design is a field which does work with reflexivity during the process however maybe not as much and formalized as intended by Steen (2011). He also argues for an ethical approach which focuses on ethics during the design process and not as a means of saying whether a design is ethically good or not, a point of view shared by the author of this paper. By combining the views of Fry (2009), Friedman (1996) and Steen (2011), i.e. implementing reflexive ethical thinking within already existing

methods and tools used (or if needed developing new ones) within service design and having a structured framework to map the ethical thinking towards the explicit ethical thinking which Lloyd (2009) talks about might be more apparent throughout not only the service design process but the design process in large. However the focus of the research presented in this paper is still the service design field and its way of working with ethical situations hence the larger discussion about an overarching ethical design approach will be left untouched in this paper.

Van Gorps (2007) work puts the results in this paper in another perspective, his conclusion was that when designers are put in-front of a design problem with an normal ethical nature they are much more likely to follow rules and regulations than when confronted with a radical ethical design problem. This is an interesting point of view if you consider the goal of the paper, finding out how service designers work with ethical situations during their day-to-day work. The results put forth here should according to van Gorp (2007) hence illustrate an accurate picture of an ethical ecology within service design since none of the projects which occurred during data-collection were of a radical ethical nature. A baseline based on the data here could therefore be seen as a good starting point.

Conclusion

A short overview of a couple of situations regarding service design and ethics has been presented in order to create a baseline for the two in the future. It has been done from the perspectives of VSD and the three major ethical normative theories. The results show that empirical situations are a major factor when considering ethical situations and service design and that the most prominent viewpoint would be that of consequentialism due to the goal-oriented approach in service design. In the future, along with other possibilities, more ethically challenging projects would be the focus of study and a more comprehensive interview study of the results this research has yielded for other service designers to respond and think about.

The research also suggest a new look upon how to implement ethical thinking into the service design process by adopting the views of Fry (2009) and Friedman (1996) so that the views of Friedman (1996) are modified and embedded into the tools of service design in a manner which benefit all stakeholders.

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