

Evolutionary Psychology as a Basis for Ethical Design: Virtual Status and Ubiquitous Altruism

by Olly Wright

Information Architecture

Ethical design typically looks at *professional ethics* (ethical business practices) or *user experience ethics* (the creation of “good” or positive user experiences). Excellent work has been done in both these areas. However, inspired by my long-standing interest in evolutionary psychology, I have begun to wonder whether this comparatively new and controversial area of science could provide the basis for a different perspective on ethical design.

Evolutionary psychology models human behavior by describing our primitive genetic drives (our nature), then looks at how these drives manifest in a given culture or setting (our nurture). As information architects we are designing new settings and potentially even influencing culture (as technology is wont to do). Given this reality, an understanding of how these primitive drives could play out in these new settings may prove fruitful. Perhaps by understanding and keeping in mind our low level, evolution-derived impulses, we can gently encourage humanity’s better traits and discourage our worst. Perhaps we can create tools whose design encourages good behavior and, in the long run, a more positive and healthy culture.

Inherent in this perspective is the McLuhanian notion that as humanity shapes its tools, those tools in turn shape humanity. The ethical consequences of this process are expressed in the 2000 restatement [1] by 33 signatories of Ken Garland’s 1964 *First Things First manifesto* [2]:

...Designers who devote their efforts primarily to advertising, marketing and brand development are supporting, and implicitly endorsing, a mental environment so saturated with commercial messages that it is changing the very way citizen-consumers speak, think, feel, respond and interact. To some extent we are all helping draft a reductive and immeasurably harmful code of public discourse.

As designers we create and influence the world around

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us. Then, as moral animals (in Robert Wright’s terms [3]) we interact in this designed world, and our behavior emerges as an interplay between our natural selves and the manufactured environment we have created for ourselves. Seen from this perspective, design is clearly a political and moral act, and an understanding of our nature is essential to understanding the consequences of our industry.

So where does evolutionary psychology fit in this picture? Among the many adaptive behaviors that have been identified, two especially relevant ones have been studied in detail: *status* and *reciprocal altruism*.

Status

Evolutionary psychology tells us that humans universally engage in status-seeking behavior. Such behavior comprises any activity that is targeted at raising our overall reputation and power within our social groups. Much as a male silverback gorilla will intimidate his rivals to enforce his preeminent role, humans engage in complex rituals of showmanship and politicking to climb up the social ladder. The adaptive benefits of this are clear – greater access to mates for procreation and increased access to resources to benefit the survivability of offspring. Our modern setting is not so different as a higher social status brings connections, employment opportunities, money and, of course, access to potential mates. Some things don’t change.

It is fairly safe to say that our status-seeking behavior is not the source of many of our species’ moral highlights. It is predominantly self-directed, and inevitably our success comes at the cost of others. Because of these effects, could we, as information architects, perhaps be seeking to eradicate or at least limit status-seeking behavior? Unfortunately evolutionary psychology tells us this isn’t possible – this trait is as much a part of us as our love for our children and our desire to reproduce. We must accept this part of ourselves and work with it.

Instead I propose, as would-be ethical designers, we can seek to mitigate some of the worst contemporary excesses of status expression by engineering and engendering *virtual status*. >

Virtual Status

Consider the nature of status in our modern consumer/capitalist society. Much of the conspicuous consumption we see is not driven by our simple needs. Subsistence and even comfort can only account for a fraction of what we buy. Much of what remains, and most of what represents our culture of excess, is fueled by our desire to display status. That expensive suit, handbag or watch is a way to display status, as innumerable commercials continually remind us. Stefano Marzano's shift to an unlimited market [4] has gone horribly wrong. Consumer luxury has become the superficial, but currently pervasive, way our natural desire for status manifests itself, encouraged by celebrity endorsements and media sanctioned narcissism [5].

This state of affairs suits business just fine. Status is relative, and hence the desire for it is insatiable. As designers for corporate causes we have become, as Ken Garland put it in his manifesto [2], *status salesmen*. And, as he also pointed out, by helping companies brand, advertise and market goods we are implicitly endorsing this process.

Fortunately the Internet has presented us with an out, if we want to take it. There is nothing written into our genes that tells us status has to be so highly weighted toward consumerism. Certainly the physical will always play a role, but not necessarily to the excessive level it does currently. If evolutionary psychology tells us one thing, it tells us that humans are highly adaptable creatures.

I suggest that we are already in the process of building the tools necessary to reverse this trend – tools that allow us to express our status virtually, as *virtual status*. And by improving our understanding of status through evolutionary psychology, we can refine and advance this effect based on a foundation of scientific theory and quantifiable research.

Consider my status. You could meet me and make a quick judgment based on my appearance and demeanor. But you could also type my name into Google and find out things about me – read my blog and writings, see where I have presented, see my profiles on various social networking sites, read my posts to several forums and lists and so on. All of these things go toward establishing my status, independent of my trappings. All of these things establish my status irrespective of my expensive clothes, car, home and lifestyle. Irrespective of how well I play the conspicuous consumer, of how much I buy from the status salesmen.

This type of status expression is going to increase. Currently it is the preserve of geeks. But as social networking and networked communications move to the

early then late majority, this effect can become more the norm. In particular, as our mobile devices enable us to network in real time via mobile presence and location-based services, this awareness of and reaction to each other's virtual status will become a part of our everyday social interaction.

Virtual status has the potential, if the technology is implemented appropriately, to encourage positive, ethical behavior. For a start, reducing excessive material consumption should ease the burden on the world's resources: sustainability, pollution and global warming, child labor. All these things are fed by our currently insatiable desire for more and more stuff. If instead this desire for more stuff as a form of status expression is channeled into the virtual world, then we can manufacture and sell status at a much lower physical cost. We can chop down as many virtual forests as we like and leave more of the real ones standing.

Perhaps even more profoundly, it may open the door to deeper and less superficial forms of cultural status expression. We make judgments based on the superficial because we don't have access to the depths. Perhaps technology can give us access to these depths?

As information architects it is our duty to understand this dynamic and design for it. We must provide multiple forms of expression for virtual status and make them user friendly and appealing. And especially we must make them various enough not to bias certain ways of being, but rather support the multitude of different talents, skills and personalities that humanity encompasses so that everybody has the chance to take part. We must avoid a digital status divide.

Reciprocal Altruism

In contrast to status, evolutionary psychology tells us that we have another natural trait that has a tendency to bring out a much better side of ourselves: *reciprocal altruism* [6].

Reciprocal altruism is our natural desire to help others – our urge to save the drowning man, to give a dollar to the homeless bum, to help a friend in need. This evolutionary drive is central to most social animals: it creates the glue that enables groups to effectively cooperate rather than act as if it's everyone for him- or herself. The meerkat standing guard whilst the others feed, the chimpanzee grooming another's back (of course in the expectation that the favor will be returned). Nature is replete with examples. >

Reciprocal altruism is close to what we could call our “moral instinct.” The moral philosopher Peter Singer [7] has argued that our social obligations to each other in society come from this genetic imperative [8]. He invokes the notion of what W.E.H Lecky called the *expanding circle*, being the circle of trust within which we practice altruistic behavior. Expand the circle; increase the altruism.

I am suggesting that in the same way that we can encourage certain forms of status expression, as information architects we can similarly encourage altruistic behavior. We can do this through what I call *ubiquitous altruism*.

Ubiquitous Altruism

Altruism has a big problem. The problem is this: *no one knows when you’ve been good*.

Pulling the drowning man from the lake is a morally praiseworthy act – one that, if known, is likely to encourage trust and altruistic behavior toward you in the future. People will know you are a good person. The problem is that unless you end up on the evening news no one knows you did it. By surfacing our altruistic acts through the technology of the web and social networking can we encourage this behavior? I believe we can. It is the virtual equivalent of the pink ribbon [9].

The potential for ubiquitous altruism is similar to that for virtual status. As the record of our actions is increasingly presented to the world via our virtual presence, its ability to inform and affect our lives increases. Especially with the rise of mobile presence and location-based services, it has the potential to affect our day-to-day lives and social interactions. If a relative stranger’s altruistic track record is visible to you, you can adjust your trust and opinion of them accordingly.

Done right, this also has the potential to encourage ethical behavior. One good turn deserves another, especially when your record of good turns is available for all to see. As information architects, as designers of social networks and new forms of communication, finding the right ways to collect, categorize and present this information will unlock this virtuous circle. Make it user friendly, flexible, accessible and above all honest, and the behavior will naturally emerge. Make the collection and display of altruism ubiquitous and the effect will spread.

Trust

It is important to understand in respect to reciprocal altruism that significant altruism only emerges given certain conditions. One only need look at humans in times of

stress and insecurity to see how quickly we can revert to self-preservation. Evolutionary psychology tells us that at its heart, altruism possesses a trade-type dynamic. We are more likely to engage in altruistic behavior when we stand a reasonable chance of the favor being paid back in the future. Hence “reciprocal.”

The most fundamental condition here is trust. When we trust people, we are considerably more likely to help them. After all, we hate to be taken advantage of, to be taken for a fool.

This gives us as IAs something more concrete to work with. Rather than directly trying to address altruism, a very difficult task, we can instead work on encouraging the conditions fertile to its growth. Enable trust, and you encourage altruism.

This is something we can see already on the web. An eBay seller’s rating or an Amazon user review is precisely this, albeit in a primitive form. Through user reviews and ratings we can establish trust and then enter into a transaction with a sense of increased security and trust. Social transactions are not so psychologically different from commercial ones.

The challenge here for information architects is to expand the cultural vocabulary of virtual expressions of trust. I believe we should start by looking at the real nature of trust in the world and seek to model it. This is trust not based on superficial expressions, but rather on the true nature of how it is established and maintained. Things like trust over time, loyalty, forgiveness, peer pressure and groupthink all need to be better understood and factored in. But at least we have a start, a direction. And through the field of evolutionary psychology and the work of people like Robert Axelrod [10] we have rich material to work with.

The Repugnant Conclusion? Implications for Privacy

There is a darker side to this, one which when I have explained these theories to people provokes considerable negative reaction. It is the implications for privacy.

The challenge is that we don’t trust people we don’t know anything about. If as IAs we want to expand trust virtually amongst wider and wider groups and at higher and higher levels, we need to display some kind of personal information. For either virtual status or ubiquitous altruism to work, you have to know something about the person. This implies a lowering of their privacy.

Transparency is necessary for trust. Transparency implies less privacy. For many this conclusion is repugnant.

However, I believe that in this case the ends justify the means. The information we should be releasing is not all personal information, but rather just the information that encourages trust. My physical address and my bank account details, the sharing of which might raise considerable risk to myself, go very little distance toward establishing trust. No need to share them. The valuable information, the stuff that does make a difference, is my social network – who my friends are, what I have done with them, how much they trust me and so forth. Such content is, not coincidentally, the type that we are beginning to model in the emerging social networks and mobile communications devices of the 21st century. Surfacing it will go much further toward establishing trustworthiness, while at the same time expose us to only minimal risk. This is where as information architects we should focus.

Likewise, all information does not need to be immediately public. Getting the granularity right is important. In an evolving reciprocal trust relationship, users can release personal information to each other as an equal trade – a delicate game of you show me yours, and I'll show you mine. How this process functions and how users experience it is a job for information architects and interaction designers.

Some have argued that perhaps privacy is lost to us anyway [11]. With Google and others gathering as much data as they can about us, Pandora's Box has already been opened. If this is true, and personally I believe it is, then the only decision left to us is how personal information will be shared. Surely an open model that encourages reciprocity and trust is preferable to a closed one where only corporations and perhaps government have access to the records of our personal lives. As I have said above, a focus on trust and on encouraging reciprocity and reciprocal altruism are the keys to designing for an ethical

and healthy culture in the future. And as information architects, designers of these new social tools and mediated interactions, we are in a position to influence this, should we choose to.

Resources

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