Much like the Force in the Star Wars movies, website design can have a seductive dark side. And in a world where information moves at the speed of light, it’s tempting to embrace the dark side by taking shortcuts in order to stay ahead of the competition and meet goals. While there are short term gains, the consequences of such actions are more perilous than you might think at first glance. (Warning: More Star Wars references ahead.)

The Rise of Dark Patterns

Over the years, there’s been an increase in the use of dark patterns in website design. Coined by user experience specialist Harry Brignull in 2010, dark patterns intentionally mislead and manipulate website visitors into making unintended choices. These are choices that benefit the website owners instead of the website visitors.

The internet isn’t just another medium used to interact with a physical store, it is a place in its own right. Consequently, the rules of customer engagement are as different as the rules of behavior within a cantina compared to a Jedi Temple. The online environment has been built as a non-linear, user directed experience. So when in-store tactics are used to influence consumer decision making online, it crosses a boundary because the users are no longer directing the experience.

Individuals and companies that use dark patterns in website design are focused on the short-term goals they can achieve. They don’t consider the negative long-term effects that it can have on their business. There’s a level of acceptance for poor online individual behavior, but for companies, it’s less tolerated every day.
Examples of the Dark Side of Manipulative Design

You’ve probably run into examples of dark patterns on the web whether you realize it or not. They’re everywhere. Some examples include:

• **Trick Questions** – The use of intentionally misleading or confusing language used mainly in opt-in/opt-out questions on forms. Of course, companies can argue that what they told you was true from a certain point of view, but that doesn’t mean it’s ethical.

• **Confirm Shaming** – Often used in pop-up windows, these messages try to guilt a user into opting into something such as signing up for a mailing list. Option 1 (opt-in): “Sign me up to receive FREE information on how to save a loved one frozen in carbonite!” Option 2 (opt-out): “No thanks. Han Solo makes a nice wall decoration in Jabba’s palace.”

• **Misdirection** – The method of distracting people from the option they’re more likely to choose by making the choice you want them to make more prominent and visually attractive.

• **Disguised Ads** – Ad links that are disguised as other site elements, such as navigation, in order to trick users into clicking on them. These are not the links you’re looking for.

• **Roach Motel** – Making a service extremely easy to sign up for, but very difficult to cancel.

• **Privacy Zuckering** – Named after Facebook CEO Mark Zuckerberg, this tactic tricks you into publicly sharing more information than you believe you are. It often comes in the form of lengthy fine print that most people don’t bother to read, and some companies take advantage of this fact. Always be upfront and transparent about what you’re going to do with the information you collect from website visitors. It’s becoming law to do so now in some parts of the world (e.g. GDPR and CCPA).

• **Friend Spam** – Benefiting from providing information about friends and family to a company (an email address, for example). If you’ve ever been offered something along the line of 20% off of a purchase by providing a friend’s email address, you’ve fallen victim to this dark pattern. May the Force be with you when that friend finds out it was you who sold them out just to save $5 on your next purchase.

Don’t Give in to the Dark Side

When used aggressively, dark patterns can make your website feel shady because you’re taking advantage of website users like you’re trying to unload an R2 unit with a bad motivator on some unsuspecting farmer on Tatooine. In other words, in addition to hurting user experience, dark patterns can damage consumer confidence and brand reputation.

Unfortunately, dark patterns are used because they work. Studies have also shown that most people don’t even realize they’ve fallen victim to them. However, as consumers continue to become more aware of things like dark patterns and how to take back their online privacy, these methods will only continue to work for so long.

When done correctly, companies can have an honest and mutually beneficial relationship with their customers. Great user experience lies where a company’s business goals and website visitors’ needs come together. That’s where you’ll find balance in the Force that is ethical website design.