

The Neutrality of Things

Who put that there?

A child strikes his hand on a table left in a hallway. The philosophy of technology has argued for a century over whether the artifact or the user carries the blame, and left the one decision that mattered outside the frame: the design decision itself. That decision is where the moral weight concentrates.

"Well, who put that there?"

A father watches his child walk through a hallway and strike his hand against the edge of a table. The child winces. The father, half-joking, asks.

The philosophy of technology has long been organized around a binary between instrumentalism and substantivism. This paper argues the binary misplaces the question.

THE BINARY

Instrumentalism

Artifacts are neutral tools. Moral status derives from use. The hammer is innocent; the person swinging it is not.

Substantivism

Artifacts carry embedded values and shape moral possibilities in ways that exceed individual intent.

Both positions leave the design decision outside the analytical frame.

PART I

The Narrowed Neutrality Thesis

Intrinsic vs. relational properties · Affordance theory · Three-layer intent

GIBSON (1979) · WINNER (1980) · LATOUR (1992) · AKRICH (1992) · VERBEEK (2005, 2011)

Artifacts are morally neutral in the sense of moral agency, but not in their effects on what actions are possible.

An affordance (Gibson) is a relational property: it is not in the artifact alone, nor in the user alone, but in the relation between them. A table edge at hip height, in a corridor where people move quickly, affords cutting, for the right body, in the right context.

This distinction grounds the narrowed thesis: artifacts may lack moral agency while their design generates foreseeable relational effects for which designers bear responsibility.

THREE LAYERS OF INTENT

Build level

The designer's choices: materials, geometry, placement affordances

Deployment level

The deployer's choices: context, population, integration

End-use level

The user's choices: purpose, duration, interaction

The design decision is the primary locus where moral weight concentrates.

SECTION IV · THE THIRD POSITION THE BINARY OMITs

The locus of moral agency is the decision that precedes and shapes the encounter.

Not the artifact, which has no agency, and not the user alone, but the choice, by an identifiable agent with knowledge or the means to acquire it, about how the artifact will be built, configured, deployed, or interfaced. The binary forced a choice between two poles and left this one outside the frame.

A class of choices, not one: individual designer decisions, organizational design policies, and the conditions under which the artifact reaches the user. Each shares the same structural place, ahead of the encounter.

PART II

A Pre-Industrial Genealogy

Maker accountability across three legal traditions

II

PLUTARCH · XENOPHON · CARTLEDGE · OGILVIE · EMROCH · MACPHERSON V. BUICK · GREENMAN V. YUBA · WINTERBOTTOM V. WRIGHT

Spartan Arms Law

Lycurgus codified maker liability for defective weapons: the armorer who delivered a defective shield bore responsibility for harms traceable to the defect. The weapon's neutrality did not insulate its maker. Plutarch, Life of Lycurgus; Xenophon, Constitution of the Lacedaemonians.

Medieval Guild Systems

Guild accountability mechanisms encoded standards for artifact quality and traced defects to their origin. Ogilvie, Institutions and European Trade: Merchant Guilds, 1000–1800 (2011). The framework predates product liability doctrine by centuries.

Common Law Evolution

Winterbottom v. Wright (1842) required privity; MacPherson v. Buick (1916) demolished it. Greenman v. Yuba Power Products (1963) codified strict products liability. Restatement (Second) of Torts § 402A (1965). Each step moved accountability toward the design decision.

The framework recovers a pattern available to earlier legal and institutional systems rather than imposing a recent innovation on ancient practice.

The shift was not natural law. It was a sequence of legal and economic choices.

Between the seventeenth and twentieth centuries, accountability was systematically relocated away from designers and toward users. Caveat emptor emerged as commerce scaled beyond local, face-to-face arrangements, shifting the burden of investigation from seller to buyer.

GUILD MARK → BUYER BEWARE

The guild model presumed the maker bore accountability and the buyer could rely on the mark. The caveat-emptor model presumed the buyer was responsible for ascertaining quality at the point of sale. The locus moved from maker to user by design.

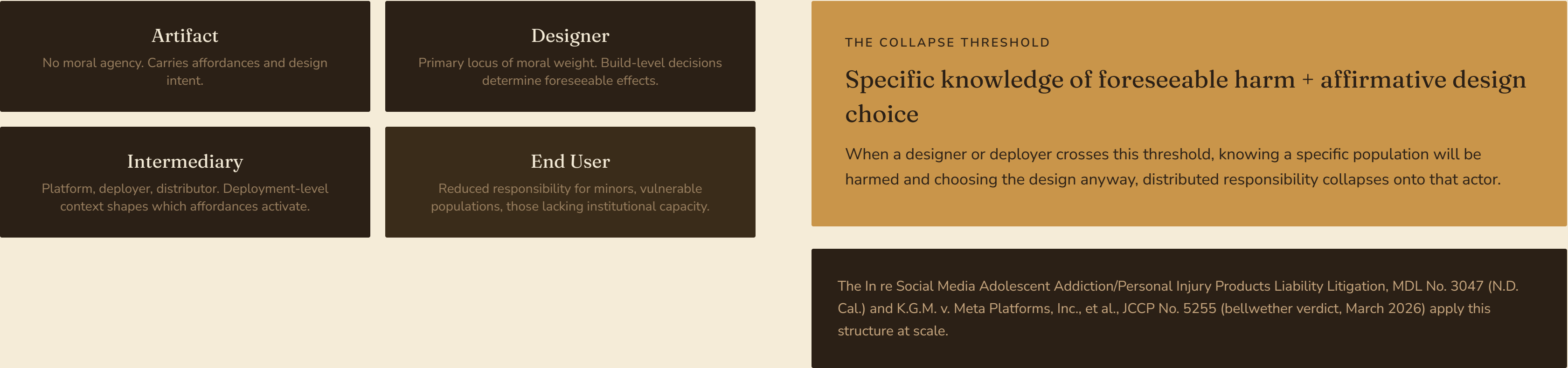
PART III

Four Actors, One Threshold

Distributed responsibility · The collapse threshold



FEENBERG · FRIEDMAN & HENDRY · NISSENBAUM · SONY CORP. V. UNIVERSAL CITY STUDIOS, 464 U.S. 417 (1984)



CALISE V. META PLATFORMS, INC., 103 F.4TH 732 (9TH CIR. 2024) · ESTATE OF BRIDE V. YOLO TECHNOLOGIES, INC., 112 F.4TH 1168 (9TH CIR. 2024) · CRONE & KONIJN (2018) · ORBEN & PRZYBYLSKI (2019)

Adolescent platforms as the hardest test of the framework.

The collapse threshold fires when a platform: (a) has specific evidence of harm to adolescent users, (b) continues deploying engagement-maximization architecture, and (c) operates on a population with reduced developmental capacity to resist designed compulsion.

THE BOUNDARY CONDITION

Adaptive AI interaction begins to require a different framework.

When a system develops a persistent behavioral model of a specific user and adapts in real time, the standard intermediary analysis changes. The forthcoming paper addresses this.

What changes at scale is not the structure of the analysis but the magnitude of the foreseeable consequences and the institutional complexity of the actors involved.

THE FRAMING

“Digital dementia” presents adolescent cognitive and attentional difficulties as a neurological consequence of screen exposure, with the rhetorical force of a comparison to neurodegenerative disease. It reaches mass audiences through popular media.

WHY IT DOES THE WORK IT DOES

Dementia is a clinical category for progressive, generally irreversible conditions with specific pathological markers. The adolescent difficulties are not that. The clinical content does not survive scrutiny; the rhetorical effect is to relocate accountability onto the user and away from the design.

CONCLUSION

The person who decided to place a hard-cornered object at hip height in a corridor where people move quickly and do not look down made a design decision with a foreseeable outcome. The decision is the locus of moral weight.

From the table in the hallway to the platform deployed to three billion users: the framework performs the analysis at any scale within its scope.

The table itself is morally neutral. The child bears developmentally proportional responsibility. The placement decision carries the weight that the binary framing had been unable to locate.

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