

Human gestures in design: A practical framework

Introduction

This framework translates fundamental human caregiving gestures into the context of design and technology, offering a new vocabulary for examining the ethical dimensions of our work. Originally developed from anthroposophic nursing practices and adapted through exploratory design research, this tool helps designers identify how basic human interactions manifest in digital experiences—and where caring design can slip into manipulation.

How to use this framework

For individual designers

- Self-assessment:** Review your current projects against each gesture. Where do your designs genuinely care for users, and where might they manipulate?
- Design critique:** Use the framework during design reviews to evaluate work beyond mere usability or aesthetic concerns.
- Ideation tool:** When facing design challenges, consider which gestures might address the underlying human need you're trying to serve.
- Ethical compass:** Before implementing persuasive techniques, map them to these gestures to reveal potential ethical tensions.

For design teams and organisations

- Workshop material:** Conduct team sessions where members identify examples of both caring and manipulative implementations in your industry.
- Decision-making framework:** When weighing design options, evaluate them through the lens of these gestures.
- Value alignment:** Use the framework to ensure design decisions reflect your organisation's stated values and ethical commitments.
- Client conversations:** Frame discussions about ethical design in terms that connect to fundamental human experiences rather than abstract principles.

For design education

- Teaching tool:** Introduce students to ethical considerations through the concrete lens of human gestures.
- Analysis exercises:** Have students analyse existing digital products to identify caring and manipulative applications of each gesture.
- Project criteria:** Include gesture-based evaluation in project briefs and assessment criteria.
- Interdisciplinary bridge:** Use this framework to connect design ethics to broader disciplines like psychology, sociology, and healthcare.

Practical exercise

Choose one digital product you use regularly.
For each gesture in the framework:

- Identify where and how the gesture manifests in the product
- Determine whether the implementation leans toward caring or manipulation
- Consider how it might be redesigned to better serve human needs
- Share your findings with colleagues to broaden perspectives

By engaging with this framework regularly, designers can develop a more intuitive sense of how our work affects the people we design for, helping us create digital experiences that genuinely care for users rather than merely extracting value from them.

This framework is a work in progress. I welcome your contributions, examples, and critiques as we collectively develop more caring approaches to technology design.

Gestures	Traditional meaning*	Digital manifestation	Ethical tension
Cleansing	Removing what is harmful or false to let the authentic emerge	Clear interfaces, content moderation, data cleanup, digital detox tools	Censorship, excessive control, over-sanitisation that suppresses diversity
Nurturing	Providing warmth, support, and resources	User onboarding, helpful notifications, inclusive design	Overprotectiveness, creating dependency, infantilising users
Relieving	Easing pain, discomfort, or pressure	Error recovery flows, frictionless UX, help systems	Avoidance of necessary complexity, deceptive ease masking ethical trade-offs
Protecting	Shielding from harm or danger	Privacy-by-design, encryption, safeguarding from dark patterns	Surveillance justified as protection, paternalism, removal of agency
Creating order / making room	Structuring chaos to create clarity and space	Information architecture, decluttering, filtering	Algorithmic gatekeeping, exclusion through design simplicity
Enveloping	Providing a sense of holding and safety	Ambient design, UI coherence, trustworthy branding	Manipulative trust design, over-familiar interfaces, “cosy” as camouflage
Balancing	Re-establishing harmony and proportion	Feedback loops, adaptable systems, emotional design	Predictive nudging that disempowers, false sense of control
Stimulating	Awakening curiosity or initiative	Gamification, playful elements, microinteractions	Addiction loops, exploitative engagement metrics
Challenging	Encouraging growth through difficulty	Stretch goals, creative constraints, feedback-rich environments	Overwhelming demands, gamified pressure, productivity anxiety
Awakening	Making someone conscious or aware	Notification systems, context-aware design, ambient feedback	Sensory overload, constant alerts, attention hijacking
Affirming	Recognising worth, validating experience	Personalisation, accessible UX, diverse representation	Echo chambers, over-validation, superficial feel-good features
Supporting uprightness	Upholding dignity, independence, and presence	Empowering tools, autonomy-first interfaces, consent flows	Fake empowerment, choice overload, performative ethics