

The app is free. You are not.

You downloaded an app. It was free. It works great.

But somewhere between the sign-up screen and the checkout page, something was designed to work against you.

A button that looks like a skip but isn't. A subscription you didn't know you started. A cancellation process built to make you give up.

**It's not a glitch. It's not an oversight.
It's a blueprint.**

Swipe to learn 5 things you need to know 

1 “Free” apps are designed to make you pay without deciding to

A dark pattern is a design choice that tricks you into doing something you didn't mean to do.

Subscribing when you thought you were starting a free trial. Sharing your contacts when you thought you were skipping a step. Agreeing to terms you never saw.

The interface is built so the “wrong” choice looks like the “right” one. That's not a bug. It's the product.

The term is “dark pattern.” The industry calls it “growth design.” **The effect is the same.**

2 Canceling is hard on purpose

Signing up takes one tap. Canceling takes five screens, two confirmation dialogs, and a guilt trip.

This is called a “roach motel”: easy to get in, hard to get out.

Some services require you to *call a phone number during business hours* to cancel a subscription you started at midnight on your phone.

If signing up takes 10 seconds and canceling takes 10 minutes, that's not friction. That's a strategy.

3 The “X” button isn’t always what it looks like

Pop-ups where the close button is nearly invisible. Screens where “No thanks” is gray text and “Yes, sign me up!” is a bright button.

Opt-out language written as double negatives: “Uncheck this box to not receive emails.”

These aren’t accidents. They’re tested, measured, and optimized to catch people who are moving quickly or aren’t reading carefully.

If you’ve ever accidentally subscribed to something, you probably didn’t make a mistake. **You encountered a design that was built to catch you.**

4 Your data is the product, even when you're the customer

Apps that require your phone number to show you a menu. Fitness trackers that won't work without location access. Photo editors that upload your images to the cloud by default.

The permissions screen is designed to make "Allow" feel mandatory and "Don't Allow" feel like you're breaking the app.

Most people tap "Allow" because the alternative looks like the app won't work. That's the point.

When an app asks for access to something it doesn't need to function, **it's not serving you. It's collecting from you.**

5 The people who get hurt most aren't the ones these apps are tested on

A grandparent who can't figure out how to stop a subscription their grandchild started.

A person with a disability navigating a cancellation flow designed for speed, not accessibility.

An immigrant trying to understand terms of service written in legal English at a 12th-grade reading level.

A low-income family charged for a "free trial" they didn't know was expiring.

Dark patterns don't affect everyone equally. They exploit the gap between what you know and what the

What you can do right now

- ✗ Don't rush through setup screens. If an app is pushing you to tap quickly, slow down.
- ✓ Before downloading, search “[app name] cancel subscription.” If the process looks unreasonable, that tells you something.
- ✓ Review your subscriptions monthly.
On iPhone: Settings → your name → Subscriptions. On Android: Play Store → Payments & subscriptions.
- ✓ When an app asks for permissions, ask: “Does it need this to do what I downloaded it for?”
- ✓ **Show someone in your life how to check their subscriptions.** That one matters most.

Be the person who shows someone else.

Technology should work for people, not against them.

When it doesn't, that's not a user problem. That's a design choice someone made, and someone else is paying for.

✉ Share this with someone who needs to see it.

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Technologist for the institutionally betrayed