

# Locating Ethics in Design Practice: An Exploration of “Doing” Ethics in Design

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## RESEARCH CONTEXT

Designers work within organisations that operate under rules, policies, and regulatory requirements. These frameworks aim to reduce risk and prevent harm, often addressing known issues and past failures. Problems arise when teams treat compliance as the endpoint of ethics. When requirements are met, ethics is assumed complete.

Research in some sectors shows that regulation often replaces ethical judgement rather than supporting it (Giddings, 2022). Regulation becomes explicit and formalised, while ethics remains implicit. Technology and design practices change faster than regulation can adapt, causing rules to lag behind new uses, contexts, and impacts.

Designers work close to both the design process and its users. They are often the first to notice gaps between regulation and practice as issues emerge through use and interaction. Existing policies rarely address these concerns fully.

Raising concerns directly is difficult. Organisational structures limit influence, and senior stakeholders may view ethics as abstract and unnecessary when regulation is present. To navigate this, designers act indirectly. They embed concerns into design outputs, processes, or accepted organisational language. They frame issues as usability, risk, or quality, and use artefacts such as prototypes to surface concerns. This reflects doing ethics through “other means” rather than explicit moral debate (Verbeek, 2006).

This research examines how ethics is done in everyday design practice, rather than formally defined or regulated.

*“There’s just these massive gaps in between these old compliance models - big enough to drive a truck through. And so we try to fill in the gaps.”*

Interview Participant quote

**RQ1:** How do design practitioners do ethics within design practice?

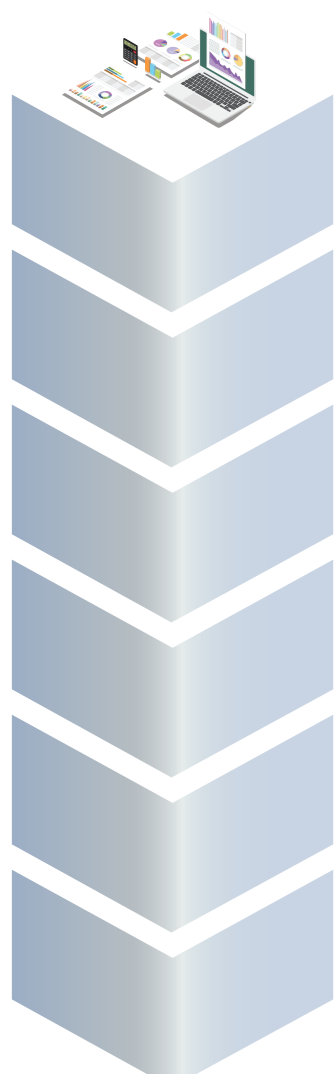
**RQ2:** What is the role of tools or methods in operationalising ethics?

**RQ3:** How do ethics tools and methods serve as boundary objects in design practice?



## METHODOLOGY

This research includes iterative thematic analysis, reflexive practice observation, theoretical analysis, and unstructured interviews to examine how design ethics operates across professional and organisational boundaries.



- Literature review:** Reviewed academic and practitioner literature on design ethics in technology to surface recurring concepts and debates.
- Thematic synthesis:** Applied thematic analysis to the literature to generate themes that informed data collection and analysis.
- Reflexive practice observations:** Conducted observations within professional design practice, supported by reflexive field notes.
- Theoretical analysis:** Analysed boundary object theory to examine how ethical concerns move across design, technology, and organisational contexts.
- Empirical interviews:** Conducted sixteen unstructured ninety-minute interviews with design practitioners to capture accounts of ethical practice.
- Thematic coding and synthesis:** Applied thematic analysis to interview data and integrated findings with literature themes and boundary object theory.

### SURFACED THEMES

The literature review organised existing debates around ethics in design into five themes:

#### UNIVERSAL TO SITUATED

The shift from fixed principles to context-based ethics

#### THEORETICAL TO APPLIED

A focus on practice, case work, and decision-making in real settings

#### SYSTEMIC TO SINGULAR

Debate on embedding ethics across the design process or addressing it at defined stages

#### TACIT TO EXPLICIT

Attempts to surface ethical knowledge that designers use but rarely name

#### PRIVATE TO PUBLIC

Are there differences in how ethics is done across sectors

## ANALYSIS

The interviews were analysed using thematic qualitative coding. The analysis combined two approaches. First, using inductive codes from the interview data, and then deductive codes drawn from the design and ethics literature reviewed iteratively during the study. I repeated this process to refine patterns, compare cases, and test interpretations across interviews. The analysis showed that designers rarely talk about “ethics”. Instead, they use indirect strategies to gain stakeholder support. They frame concerns using organisational priorities such as innovation, risk, or compliance. Ethical work therefore appears through practice rather than explicit language, making it hard to observe and study empirically.

To interpret this pattern, I used the concept of Boundary Objects (Star & Griesemer, 1989). This concept explains how shared artefacts, processes, or practices enable coordination across groups without requiring full agreement. Using this lens, the study focuses on how designers translate ethical concerns across roles including management, technical teams, and governance functions. Focusing on boundary objects shifts attention away from values or morals and instead examines how ethics move through everyday design practice.

*“I get resistant about like going into a big ethics deep dive because the word is so disengaging.”*

Interview Participant quote

## FINDINGS

This research demonstrates that boundary objects provide a practical lens for studying design ethics. By translating ethical concerns into tangible forms, they make ethics empirically observable through artefacts, processes, and actions. This approach shifts ethics research from abstract principles to measurable practices, offering a method to study ethics in action.

Boundary objects can be identified through:

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| <br><b>Observation:</b><br>Artefacts that support coordination across groups and allow translation of perspectives indicate boundary objects. | <br><b>Interviews:</b><br>Tools or documents that enable negotiation and translation of knowledge reveal boundary objects. | <br><b>Artefact analysis:</b><br>Shared objects that support coordination while allowing multiple interpretations may function as boundary objects. | <br><b>Interaction tracing:</b><br>Artefacts that mediate negotiation and translation between groups enable collaboration despite differing expertise. |
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Tracing these objects allows researchers to study ethics in practice. Researchers can see how concerns enter processes, how they change as they move across roles, and where they are limited or reinforced by organisational structures.

Using this approach, my study identified two types of boundary objects:

### 1. AMBIENT BOUNDARY OBJECTS

These can be reused across different settings or groups. They enable coordination and translation of knowledge at scale, supporting collaboration beyond their original context.

Examples include the Web Content Accessibility Guidelines or inclusion frameworks. These objects move across projects and organisations, gaining authority through standards, tools, and shared priorities such as innovation or risk management.

### 2. LOCAL BOUNDARY OBJECTS

These are highly contextual, adapted to specific practices or settings. They support coordination and negotiation within a single group but are unlikely to function outside their original context.

Example: a tool that checks whether design work follows brand rules. Such objects reflect local history and power relations. They shape what becomes visible, acceptable, or in need of change.

Through these boundary objects, ethics is done without being directly named, made visible through the artefacts, processes, and interactions they structure.

## CONCLUSION

This research shows that design ethics is enacted through practice rather than formal statements or regulatory compliance. Designers address ethical concerns indirectly, embedding them in tools, processes, and artefacts, and framing them in organisationally relevant terms such as risk, quality, or usability. Boundary objects provide a lens to study these practices, translating ethical concerns across teams, roles, and organisational contexts while enabling coordination, negotiation, and knowledge translation. The study identifies two types: **ambient boundary objects**, which can be reused across settings and scale ethical practice, and **local boundary objects**, which are highly contextual and reflect specific practices and power relations. Tracing these objects allows ethics to be studied empirically through observable artefacts, processes, and interactions, shifting attention from abstract principles to ethics in action.

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