

Personas Considered Harmful

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The *personas* technique used in HCI/UX is reviewed. While personas do serve a useful purpose, there are objections to the technique as interpreted by some practitioners. It is not as new or original as sometimes supposed; its terminology is problematic; it gives practitioners a false sense of knowing their users but acts as a barrier; it encourages practitioners in a patronising and dehumanising attitude towards users; it encourages the taking of decisions in the false belief that they are based on a scientific approach; attempts to support it by appealing to literature and drama are inappropriate; the lack of a rigorous method makes it error-prone. A recent empirical study of personas' effectiveness is discussed. The technique's confusion of the real with the imaginary is contrasted with some other techniques. Finally, it is speculated that the acceptance of such a potentially counterproductive technique may be attributable to "groupthink".

1. Introduction: how personas are created and used

Personas are fictitious model users based on a design team's knowledge of prospective customers. The persona encapsulates a set of goals and behaviours. The persona is not intended to be an average user, or to capture in any statistically valid way a set of data points. It is a design artefact intended primarily as a communication tool; by making explicit and documenting a specific set of goals and behaviours, the persona gives members of the design team a common focus. Given the generally interdisciplinary nature of design teams, it is helpful to have a low-technology design artefact that does not rely on abstruse modelling languages; this is perhaps the technique's greatest strength, which it shares with the scenarios technique (Carroll, 2000), with which it is often combined (Grudin & Pruitt, 2002). The persona can supposedly be used generatively by the design team in order to make design decisions.

A variety of approaches can be taken to the acquisition of the required knowledge of the users. Most commonly in the literature, ethnographic field studies are used. Contextual design (Beyer & Holtzblatt, 1998) can be employed. In Kuniavsky's account (2003) of "user profiles", which appear to be personas by another name, there is no mention of carrying out user research as part of the technique.

Once data points have been clustered together into groups which can be represented by personas, the method requires that the persona is fleshed out with detail, which can only be done by "making stuff up" (Kuniavsky, 2003, p. 146). Cooper is adamant that the persona must be defined in great and specific detail: it is more important to be precise than to be accurate. (Cooper, 1999). The persona must be embellished with a name, a photograph, and many fictional personal details. The objective of all this detail is to make the persona easily memorable. This rich detail is generally considered a *sine qua non* of personas (e.g. Brown, 2007). It is important to note, however, that neither Cooper (1999) nor Cooper & Reimann (2003) give clear-cut examples of the level of detail that should be used, and some writers and practitioners, such as Cooper's

colleague Goodwin, caution against “false precision” (Goodwin, 2002). This paper argues that this note of caution should be heeded far more attentively. Two key features of personas that the paper objects to are: the embellishment of the user profile with superfluous details, and the use of the persona as a generative reference point for decisions.

2. Cooper’s innovation: goal-directed design

Cooper (Cooper, 1999; Cooper & Reimann, 2003) claims to be (Cooper, 2003) and is acknowledged as (Floyd et al, 2008; Pruitt & Grudin, 2003) the originator of the technique. While asserting that personas are “unique” (Cooper, 1999), he acknowledges (Cooper & Reimann, 2003) that the marketing discipline of psychographics is a predecessor of personas. Psychographics was already an established method in 1975 (Wells, 1975). Mehrotra and Wells give an example of “lifestyle patterns” in 1977 that looks remarkably like the personas described in (Cooper, 1999; Cooper & Reimann, 2003).

The point distinguishing Cooper’s personas from lifestyle patterns is that they are based on the user’s behaviours and goals, rather than their attitudes. A focus on these aspects is certainly useful in design. Cooper (2003) explicitly takes goals as the starting point for his HCI design method, goal-directed design. He distinguishes between user goals and non-user goals, the former dividing into life goals (personal aspirations, deep drives and motivations); experience goals (how someone wants to feel) and end goals (expectations of the outcome of using a product).

The dividing line between goals and attitudes is not entirely clear-cut. Nor is it clear, despite the legacy of Card et al (1983), Norman (1986) and their followers in the HCI tradition, that people can necessarily be described in terms of a neatly expressed set of goals. Vickers (1965) was surely right to dismiss the centrality of a goal hierarchy in human motivation, suggesting instead the maintenance of relationships in time as a central concern in human life. People constantly shift their goals, preferences and even rules (Lave, 1988).

3. Terminology

While acknowledging the technique’s similarity to other methods, Cooper nevertheless introduces new terminology. “Persona” is the Latin word for the masks worn by the actors in Greek tragedy and later Roman theatre. In classical and anthropological scholarship the notion of the persona-mask is a complex and ambiguous area touching on profound issues of identity and society (e.g. Wiles, 2007; Napier, 1986). The functions of the persona-mask are not entirely clear. Besides its many levels of symbolic meaning, some researchers believe that it had the practical function of amplifying the actor’s voice (Vovolis & Zamboulakis, 2007). It is not clear whether Cooper was aware of these nuances when choosing the term, and if so, how he intended it to be understood in relation to them.

The problem is compounded by Cooper’s use of the phrase “hypothetical archetype” to characterise personas (Cooper, 1999, p. 124). An archetype is a model or prototype

from which instances of a thing are copied. By extension, the word can be used to mean a copy that is so produced. The most extensive usage of the term is made by Carl Jung (1991) and his followers. Jung suggested that humankind has a “collective unconscious” which acts as a pool from which people draw ideas without knowing it. Again, Cooper uses a term with profoundly resonant undertones without explaining why. It is not clear whether he means to use “archetype” in the first sense, i.e. a thing from which others are copied, or in the second, i.e. one such copy. In the first case, it seems arrogant for the designer to suggest that the real users are derived from an archetype created by the designer themselves; in the second case, if the persona is only one derivative of an original archetype, it seems inappropriate to burden the persona with copious specific detail which makes it hard to see them as a representative of a class.

A further complication with personas in connection with Jungian archetypes is that one of the archetypes described by Jung is what he calls the “persona”. This represents the mask or image that the individual presents to the world in order to protect the ego. It seems unlikely that Cooper would use both terms without knowing Jung’s work, but again the connection is unclear (Blomkvist, 2002).

4. Bringing personas to life

Grudin (2006) argues that it is natural for humans to model other humans’ behaviour. However, the fact that an individual often attempts to predict the actions of another individual does not validate the use of personas. A persona is explicitly and deliberately not an individual, but a cipher or chimera. There is no intuitively obvious value in attempting to predict the actions of something that does not exist, and it can hardly be called a natural human activity. In a further attempt to justify the use of fictitious characters by thinking of them as if they were alive, Grudin notes that characters in literature will sometimes seem to a writer to acquire a life of their own during the writing process. However, this “life” is within the mind of the author. It is ironic that Grudin invokes Dostoevsky as a case in point, since that author was at pains to construct irrational and unpredictable characters (e.g. Dostoevsky, 2006), who are far removed from the banal creations we see in persona-based design and could not conceivably emerge from the collective mind of an interdisciplinary team.

Garrett (2003) exemplifies the enthusiastic tone of some practitioners: “You can make your users more real by turning them into personas” (p. 54). This is an astonishing claim. Users are real; personas are not real. Garrett continues, “the specific details of our personas are fictional inventions, used to breathe life into these characters who will stand in for our real live users.” It could be suggested that, by using personas, designers unconsciously aim to achieve an illusion of complete control over the users by substituting them with a golem (Graham, 2002) or Frankenstein-like (Shelley, 1992) creation of their own which they hope can be guaranteed to do their bidding. Cooper (1999, p. 128) writes, “as we isolate Emilee with specific, idiosyncratic detail, a remarkable thing happens: She becomes a real person in the minds of the designers and programmers.” He insists that a persona must have a name, and that a persona without a name is useless. Interestingly, to some ancient peoples, a human’s name was associated with their soul; to know an enemy’s name was to gain power over him, and the name was the breath of life (Rhys, 1901). Again, it is hard to resist the image of the designer as a God-like figure.

5. Answering questions with personas

Hackos & Redish (1998) describe a different sort of “user profiles”. These are similar to personas, but the people they describe are real people. Using this technique, if the designer wishes to ask a question, they can ask a real person and receive an authentic, and possibly surprising, answer. Real people have real, messy and inconvenient problems, which develop over the course of a project. A mutual understanding of users’ problems can best be achieved in an ongoing dialogue between user and designer over the course of a project (Johansson & Messeter, 2005). Made-up people are carefully composed and by their very nature can only have problems that the designer already knows about. There is no rigorous process for deciding what features to include in a persona and which to exclude; these are arbitrary decisions of the designer. It is nonsense to speak of “interrogating” a persona for guidance on design decisions, because the persona is the creation of the designer, not a real person, and can only tell the designer what they already know.

Some practitioners believe that, because personas are created on the basis of empirical study and statistical analysis of data, the technique is scientifically respectable and that decisions made by interrogating a persona have a scientific basis. This is a mistake. The technique is designed as an appeal to the designer’s imaginative faculties and is not a scientific method.

6. The attitude of designers to users

Grudin and Pruitt (2002) complain that Carroll’s (2000) example scenario of an accountant using a spreadsheet is dull, hence the need for it to be enlivened by the use of personas. This is to overlook a seemingly obvious fact: the work done by accountants using spreadsheets *is* quite dull as a rule, and no amount of invented hobbies or children will change that. The demand for users and their lives to be thrilling brings to mind Boorstin’s strictures (1962) about people living in a mental world that is detached from reality in order to make it more exciting. It could be suggested that these comments apply particularly to the culture prevalent in, and promoted by, the software industry. However, people and their lives will not become more exciting because designers want them to.

The designer of an interactive interface sends a coded message to the user to this effect: “Here is my understanding of who you are, what I’ve learned you want or need to do, in which preferred ways, and why” (de Souza, 2005, p. 84). Users are sensitive to these messages, and do not like it when patronising or cynical attitudes (Portugal, 2008) show through. As Blomkvist (2002) notes, the conception of the user given by use of personas is heavily influenced by the technique’s marketing roots. The designer should beware of falling into the same trap as Orange, which decided to tell all its customers that each of them was either a dolphin, raccoon, canary or panther, incurring a chorus of derision as a result (Mobile Europe, 2006).

7. Empirical evidence for personas’ effectiveness

Personas supposedly help design teams to focus on an accurate picture of the target user. There has been little published research showing whether personas work or not. Long (2009) reports on a study into the technique's efficacy. Nine teams of students worked on a design problem. Three teams (the Beta group) used a persona description with a photograph and textual scenario document, three teams (the Gamma group) used a persona description with a hand-drawn illustration and a storyboard scenario document, and three teams (the Alpha group) used "image boards". The design solutions were evaluated and the results appear to show that the teams using personas achieved superior results.

However, there are several problems interpreting the results of the study. The image boards used by the Alpha group are not shown or described. The sample size is statistically insignificant. The solutions were analysed against Nielsen's (1994) usability heuristics and each design was given 0, 1 or 2 points for each heuristic, the points then being totalled for each design. The arithmetical scoring model is crude; there is no theoretical basis for treating Nielsen's list as a quantitative model of a solution's quality; and in any case Nielsen's heuristics are generic measures of usability which mostly do not assess a solution's suitability for a specific audience, the only exception being "Match between system and real world". Therefore, the only reliable conclusion is that the Beta and Gamma groups achieved a better level of focus on general usability issues than the Alpha group. No evidence is presented demonstrating that this follows from the use of the personas; it may follow from the use of the scenario documents, or from deficiencies in the "image board" used by the Alpha group. Long states that the hand-drawn illustrations were more effective than the photographs, yet the quantitative results contradict this: if so, however, then this strengthens the argument that the superior scores of the Beta and Gamma groups are attributable to the scenarios rather than the personas.

8. Contrast with techniques based on explicitly artificial devices

A more inherently honest technique is the use of "extreme characters" (Djadiningrat et al, 2000), where a fictitious character exhibiting extreme attitudes is invented in order to explore aspects of use that might be overlooked by focusing on more realistic model users. Here the designer explicitly acknowledges that the prototypical user has no correspondence to reality, but is merely an artificial device, in much the same way that the "human activity systems" of SSM (Checkland & Scholes, 1990) are acknowledged to be artificial thinking aids. Bødker (2000) acknowledges the value of caricatured scenarios in preference to balanced ones. By contrast, the personas technique requires the designer to suspend disbelief and think as if the persona were a real person.

9. Groupthink

When personas are used in real projects, it becomes clear that group psychology plays a considerable part in the process of trying to create personas. Because there is no rigorous or even rational basis for the selection of details to attribute to the persona, every suggestion from a member of the team is in fact a statement about themselves and how they want the other members of the group, or the wider audience, to perceive them. Team members do not necessarily know how or why they should challenge each other's

suggestions. Into this methodological vacuum personal and political factors will inevitably obtrude (Nielsen, 2004; Nielsen et al, 2006; Rönkkö et al, 2004).

Janis (1972) identifies a number of ways in which group decision-making by teams can be impaired by the presence of what he calls “groupthink”. These include a tendency towards conformity within the group, confidence even in extreme points of view when they are accepted by the group (cf. Heath & Gonzalez, 1995), and the stereotyping and dehumanising of people outside the group. It seems possible that it is this is why so many interdisciplinary teams feel able to collaborate with each other on creating elaborate and sometimes unrealistic (Marshall, 2003) surrogates for their users which can ultimately risk diminishing the very people that they are seeking to put at the centre of their design process.

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