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Defining And Applying Personas to UX Design

by [Justin Smith](#) 2 Jul 2012

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UX User Personas



This post is part of a series called [UX Foundations](#).

◀ [A Beginner's Guide to Wireframing in Omnigraffle](#)

▶ [Crafting the Experience of User Interface Messages](#)

Personas have long been integrated with UX documentation. They help us create fictional users, representative of our real users, which we can reference throughout our creative process to inform and validate our design and UX. Let's examine how we set up a persona and then utilize it throughout our design process.

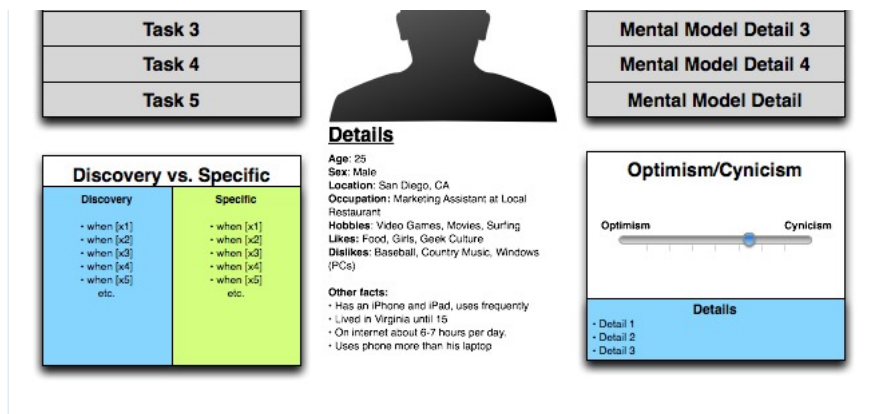
What is a Persona?

In terms of web design, a persona is a fictional example of a person within your user base. It typically includes details such as

- age
- sex
- occupation
- hobbies
- likes/dislikes
- other details germane to the product

Many times it also includes the personalities of these fictional users. The goal of erecting these details is to establish the mindset, desires, and necessary tasks of your users. Ideally, the persona creation process is informed by research and/or an intimate knowledge of an established user base. How you design them and what information you include is up to you and what you need.





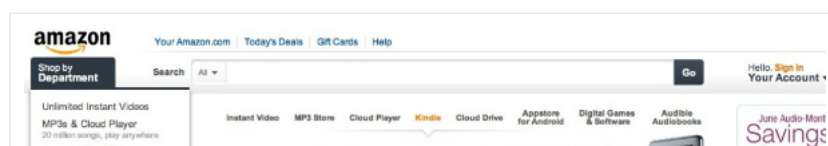
Example Persona.

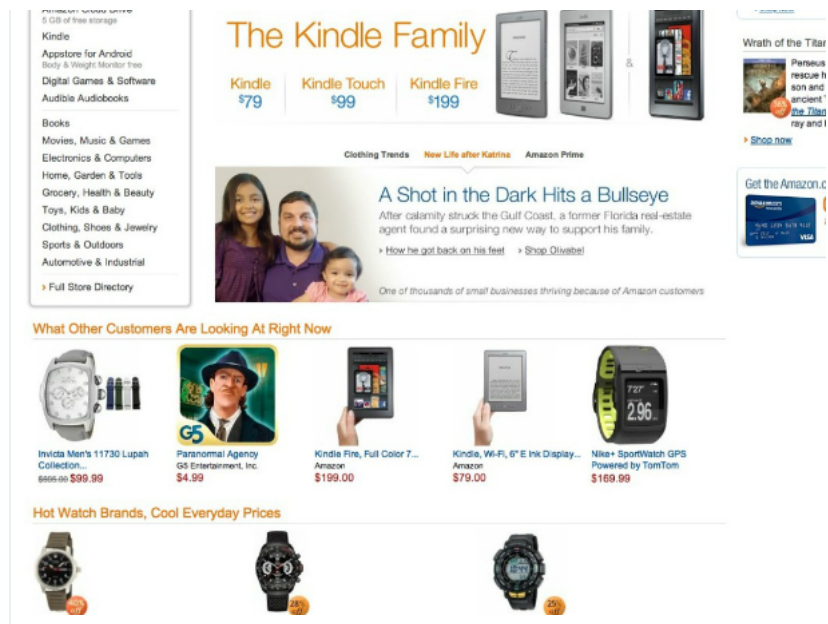
Personas help you design with a clear vision of your user in mind. It gives shape to your user base and pulls you out of having only a nebulous idea of a user. In giving shape to your user base, task definition and requirements gathering should also begin to crystallize. If user expectations and mental models are defined during persona definition then they too can help to guide the design.

Once defined and documented we can then use personas in our design process. Sometimes it makes sense to have personas that span several projects, other times it makes sense to define a persona (or several) for a specific project. Regardless of your approach, reviewing them before wireframing is critical so that you have the user base fresh in your mind. You also need to check them against your wireframes after completion to validate you are meeting your users' goals. [Barnabas Nagy](#) wrote a great article on his personal approach to integrating personas into his wireframes, where he has a small sidebar to constantly remind him of the personas he's defined.

Big Audience vs. Little Audience

Universal design is the concept that you are designing for virtually any and all people. This obviously makes it difficult to develop personas because there are thousands you could develop. So, who is your **core** audience? Who is your **fringe** audience? If you focus on your core audience when defining your personas you can still cover a large portion of your user base. The hope is that the design will still satisfy your fringe audience but to keep the focus on satisfying your core audience.





Amazon.com. A site with an enormous audience that calls for universal design.

A very different issue arises when you have a much smaller and well-defined audience. In this instance it feels as if you intimately know your audience and might therefore be tempted to not develop personas. In actual fact, this situation gives you the opportunity to get more *specific* with your personas. Utilize research to gain insights and help detail intricacies of your users. Small user bases are often when you can use personas across projects; getting very granular in your personas could help bump your designs up to the next level. You never know when a small detail could drastically change a design.



PBS Kids. A site with a narrower, more defined audience.

If you have the opportunity, get feedback from your users to inform and guide your persona development. This information can confirm or deny suspicions you have about your user base. It can help bring to light new ideas that you might not otherwise have considered. User feedback will help to further define your personas in a way that informs your design to provide optimal UX.

Tasks

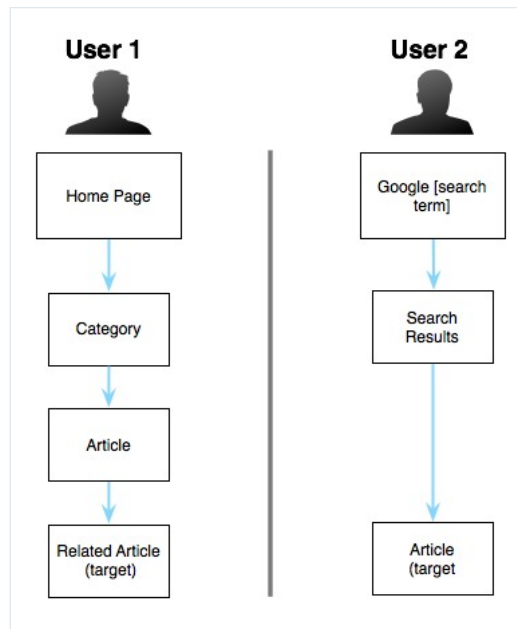
The What

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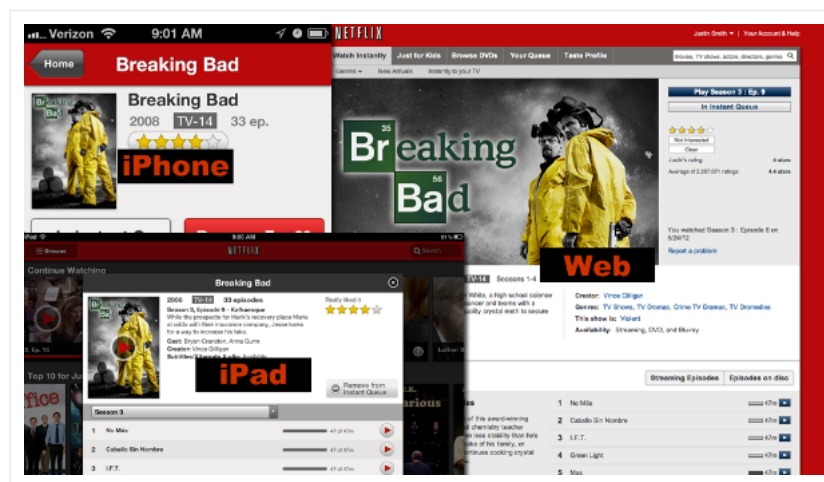
When developing personas, the question we need to answer here is "Are there different tasks for different personas?" Defining personas can help to uncover new use cases. Are the tasks you're designing for matching up with the user base your personas represent?

Diving deeper, we need to uncover how users are getting to that task in the first place. Is what we're designing for the beginning, middle or end of their task path? Different personas may end up taking different paths. This could also affect their mindset coming in, which could, in turn, affect your design.



Example of how two different users take different paths to the same target.

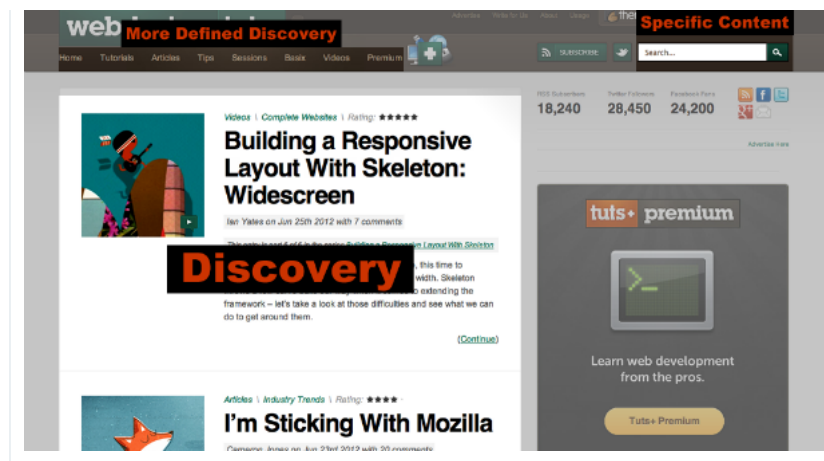
What devices are your personas likely to use? Are they expecting a cross-platform experience? You've probably heard the expression "meet the users where they are." Personas will help figure out where they are. An obvious example is that mobile usage is probably going to be very high with users in their 20s while the usage is very low with the elderly. However, personas may point out other details which drive user expectations.



Netflix allows their very large user base to watch their content anywhere.

The How

We mentioned the mindset of our users coming into a task because it determines whether or not users are just exploring or trying to find specific content. Are users coming in to see if you have that one item they are looking for? Do they just trust your site to serve up interesting content to them? This will certainly heavily inform the information architecture and interaction design elements. It may need to direct users to where you want them to go. It also could be very open to allowing the user to dive down various, divergent paths. It all depends on your users and their mindset when landing on your page or element



Users who want to browse vs. Users who want specific content.

This discovery vs. specific path fight could be task dependant as well as user dependant. Task dependant is sometimes easier because then you may be able to get away with only designing for discovery or a specific path. User dependant likely means you need to design for both. It could also be a combination of task dependant and user dependant. This is why most sites have you browse and search. That's an Information Architecture fundamental for sites with large audiences. Personas could help tell you which to lean on more heavily though.

Mental Models

Mental Models are what thoughts people form around an idea or activity and these vary from person to person.

For example, let's look at two mental models for taking a note. A 16 year olds mental model of taking a note may involve using a smartphone app, which is very different from an elderly person's mental model of using a post-it note. Mental models are incredibly important in UX because they illustrate how your user approaches a particular problem. If that's not shaping your designs then you're creating a bad experience for your user. Therefore, why not include this information in personas?



Apply Mental Models to your design process. (Image from [Photodune](#))

These mental models unveil the expectations of your users. This can then guide what interaction patterns you're using. If a user base has specialized knowledge that informs their decisions you should know this. Including it as part of the persona keeps these details at the forefront during design. It helps even after design to double check if your flow and interactions would make sense within the mental model of your users.

Optimism vs. Cynicism

One thing to look at for personas is the level of optimism and/or cynicism in your users. One shows what it looks like for the user when everything goes right. The other can help shed light on what happens when something goes wrong. That can be caused by user error, system error, as well as user delinquency.

Optimism

Optimism is what happens in the best case scenario. This is when the user does everything you want them to do. The user just wants to complete their task and, hopefully, your system is designed well enough to allow them to do that stress-free.

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Cynicism

Cynicism is a different animal. This is the user you don't want to deal with or think about. However, this is the user that's going to make your system better. It helps you figure out what could go wrong and how to design for it when it does.



He may have already broken your site. (Image from [Photodune](#))

The other variable in this type of persona is if the user is savvy enough to possibly *try* to break your system. Hackers are the first thought, but this also includes the user that just tries to see what they can break within the limits of your system. What kind of security measures do you need to set up? What error states do you need to design? Thinking about these questions during persona creation can be frustrating since it is contrary to the intent of your design but is crucial to optimal UX design.

Conclusion

Personas will help you create better designs for your user base. They're not only useful during the design process, but after it as well to validate that your designs meet your users needs. I've discussed lots of ways to add details and flesh out your personas.

The great thing about personas is that they can be transferrable between documents. If you layer them well you can keep them at a <https://webdesign.tutsplus.com/articles/defining-and-applying-personas-to-ux-design--webdesign-7561>

higher level and then dive into deeper specifics for each individual project. You can use them in whatever manner fits you and your work flow the best, but to have some ready-made information about your user base on hand is invaluable to designing great user experiences.

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