

Personas: Removing “the user” from design

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Who are our users?

- Well – to begin with they are humans – so it is hard to capture all of the different idiosyncrasies that people have
- We need techniques that allow us to transition from our traditional systems thinking to thinking about how people will use our systems
- Part of this, is understanding how it is that people undertake activities in interactive systems

Personas and Personae

- One of the really big challenges for programmers is to be able to step away from “the user”
- “The user” dehumanizes your users, making them abstract, and slippery to get a hold of in terms of knowing what their goals are and how they will act
- Understanding that gives a first step to being able to conceptualize what the system should do

A bit of history ...

- Personas were originally introduced in the book “The Inmates are Running the Asylum” by Alan Cooper
- Still held as one of the chief references
- Cooper advocates that personas are a powerful way to communicate between programmers and designers
- Emerged from practice, not from academic research – had real application on real projects

Life before personas

- Before personas were brought into the mainstream, design often relied on:
 - Role definition
 - Use case actors (bare bones “users”)
 - User profiling – trying to get information from existing interactions and generalize to the audience
- Unfortunately, this often led to unsolvable debates

Typical design in 1998 ...

- I lived through this conversation (or many like it)
 - Programmer: "What if the user wants to print this out?"
 - Manager: "I don't think we really need to add printing in version one."
 - Programmer: "But someone might want to print it."
 - Manager: "Well, yes, but can't we delay putting printing in?"
- What is the answer to this? There cannot be one
 - all we have is some vague notion of "someone" might want something some time

Personas as a means of ending feature debates

- Personas give you something to grab hold of in conversations like that:
 - Programmer: "What if the user wants to print this out?"
 - Interaction designer: "Rosemary isn't interested in printing things out."
 - Programmer: "But someone might want to print it."
 - Interaction designer: "But we are designing for Rosemary, not for 'someone.'"

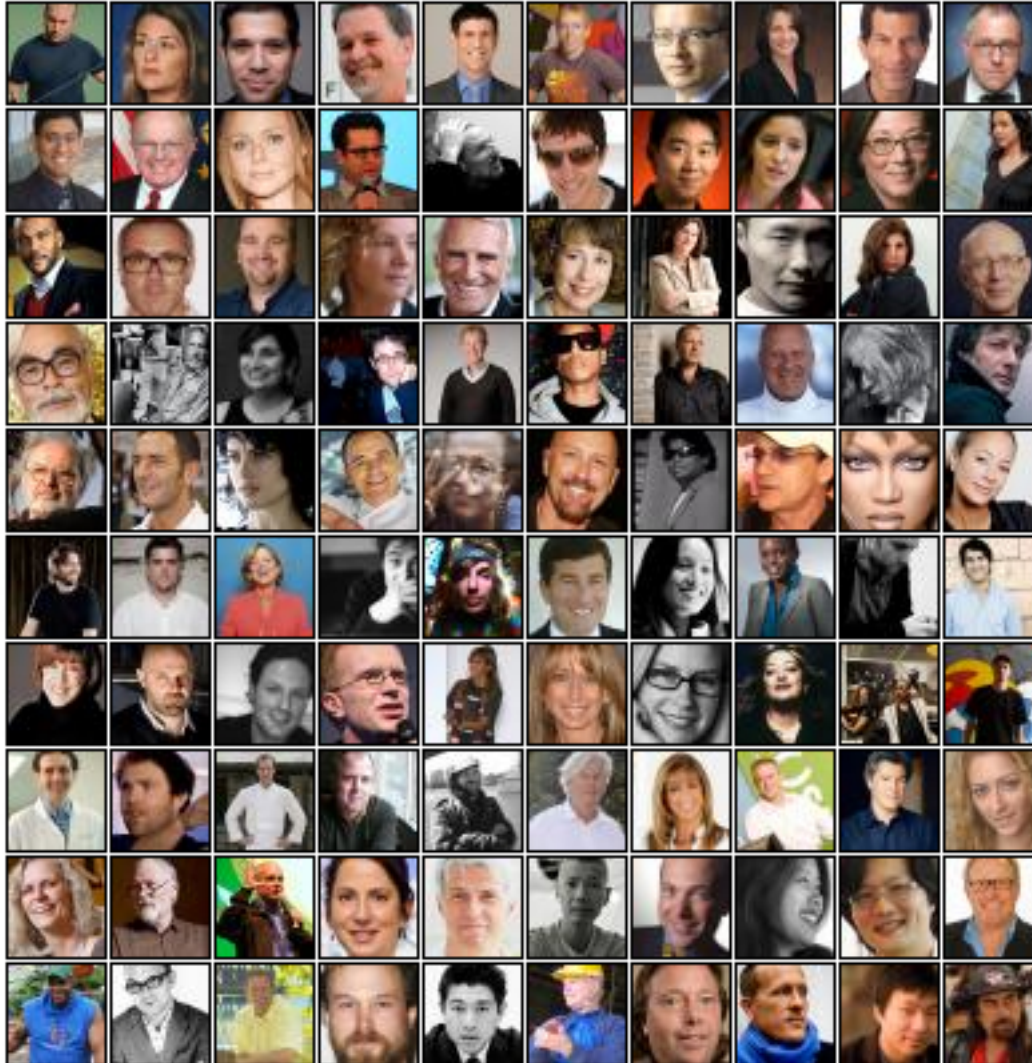
Personas are not ...

- ... a description of someone who is intimately familiar with the system
- ... a description of who will buy your software
- ... idealized descriptions of user skill levels (power user, average user, dumb brick user)

Personas are ...

- ... at their best when based on data and observation
 - see Pruitt and Grudin – note this is at odds with the original Cooper proposals
- ... realistic representations of skills and attitudes towards technology
- ... a robust cast of characters that can be drawn on during design meetings and activities
 - Other research confirms this approach, including the User Stories from agile SE
 - Cooper suggest no more than 12, preferably 3 – realistically in large systems this is too small

Personas are... people!



Building Personas

- Collect data about who the users might be for your system – cast your net wide and pare it down
- Define a wide range of personas that are precise about the user
 - They do not have to be entirely accurate, but they should be precise regarding who the user is, what they intend to accomplish with the system
 - A good persona provides you with a detailed picture of who the user is and why they would use the system

Persona Briefings

- Used heavily by Microsoft in the development of Windows and IE
- Usually based on existing data, either qualitative or quantitative in nature, or on personal observations
- The persona briefing captures different aspects of the user and collects them under broad categories

Possible Briefing Categories

- A day in the life
- **Work activities**
- **Household & leisure activities**
- **Goals, fears & aspirations**
- **Computer skills, knowledge & abilities**
- Market size & influence
- Demographic attributes
- **Technology attributes**
- **Technology attitudes**
- Communicating
- Quotes

Now ... iterate persona design

- Let's assume that you have created somewhere around 20 persona briefings
- How do you make them into a concise set of precise set of personas that can be used to communicate designs?

Carve them up: Affinity Diagrams

- A useful technique for grouping “like with like”
- Cut up the briefings, and stick them to walls or placards where things group together
- You get a subset of common features that you can then ensure are represented in a smaller set of personas



Very simple personas

- Rupak works as a network installer in Los Angeles. He works with computers all day every day and is very adept at getting them to function, but he doesn't really understand how they work. He survives through his reservoir of superstition and lore, his capacity for rote learning, and his endless patience.

Very simple personas

- Shannon is an accountant at a health spa in Tempe, Arizona. She is clueless about the Web, email, networks, the file system, and most everything else about computers, but she is an astonishing whiz with the Microsoft Excel spreadsheet program. She can whip out a new spreadsheet—complete with charts and graphs—that shows sales trends in no time at all.

More Advanced Personas

- Usability.gov has produced a very nice overview of different styles of persona including variations on how to present personas:
 - <http://www.usability.gov/how-to-and-tools/methods/personas.html>

Conclusions

- Personas are a powerful way to express information about for whom you are designing your system
- Plays to the strengths of humans
 - Pruitt and Grudin point to fiction and acting as examples of where similar techniques are applied

Readings

- The literature in text books is surprisingly small
 - Cooper, Reimann & Cronin About Face 3: The Essentials of Interaction Design, Chapter 5: Personas and Goals
- Pruitt, J. and Grudin, J. – Personas: Practice and Theory