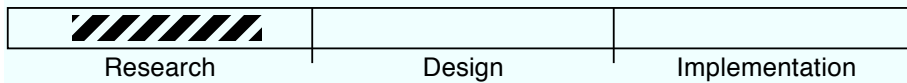# Personas

Research	Design	Implementation

What's the Technique?

This chapter explains how to create and use *personas*. Personas are fictional people representing specific groups of your target audience.

Personas might be useful to you if you are doing user research *and* if you are part of a larger team where the results of that research need to be communicated. If you're working alone or in a smaller team, don't feel bad about skipping this chapter.

Why Is This a Good Idea?

Personas can be useful because it's easier to talk about an imaginary person than it is to talk about a "market segment." Personas also help you focus your product.

Are There Any Prerequisites?

To create personas, you first need to do user research.

What Are Personas, Again?

By now, you've probably done some user research. You know what problems your product should solve, and you know what kinds of people will benefit from using it. While designing your product, you'll often

refer to this information. But how do you do that? Talking about target demographics can be hard. Which part of your target audience has this problem? What's their skill level?

Personas give you a way of synthesizing the information you've found during user research into a limited number of imaginary people.

When Alan Cooper first introduces personas as a software design technique in his book *The Inmates Are Running the Asylum* [Coo99], he describes them like this:

> Personas are not real people...they represent them throughout the design process. They are hypothetical archetypes of actual users. Although they are imaginary, they are defined with significant rigor and precision. Actually, we don't so much "make up" our personas as discover them as a byproduct of the investigation process.

Personas help you communicate. But they have some other advantages:

- They force you to focus your product. By creating a small number of personas, you are clearly defining the audience for your product. This takes away the futile idea that you have to please *everybody.*

- They make it easier to talk about your audience, and by thinking deeply about your target audience, they can help you make your design process more human-centered.

3.1 Problems with Personas

The goal of using personas is to make the design process more human-centered. But be aware that there are a number of problems with this.

Personas can be too elastic. Since personas are essentially imaginary people, they can't defend themselves. As a result, they can sometimes reinforce predetermined conclusions: if you're using imaginary people as your target audience, you can always come up with an imaginary scenario that validates whatever opinions you currently hold.

Personas give the impression of being human-centered without anyone having to interact with actual humans. They can be a fig leaf used to cover up a design process that is not human-centered at all. Personas can absolve designers from actually doing any of the hard work, such as going out there and testing design decisions on real people.

Creating personas can be time-consuming. Distilling all of your user research into specific people who represent parts of your target audience takes time. You also have to come up with back stories and communicate these to everyone involved in the process. Sometimes, the time required to do this may not be worth the advantages personas offer.

Talking about imaginary people can be uncomfortable. Pretending that "Emma" is an actual human being who wants to use your product when she's just a story somebody made up is not something everyone on your design team may want to do.

Especially on small teams, personas may not provide much benefit. It's likely that everybody involved has a pretty good grasp of who the target audience is. There's not much need to create imaginary characters to help with communication, and your product may already be tightly focused by necessity, since a small team may not be able to create a product that pleases a large audience even if it wanted to do so.

Still, if you keep these potential issues in mind, personas can be a valuable tool.

3.2   Creating Personas

Start with contextual interviews. Talk to people. You may start out thinking that there are many different people in your audience and that you need many different personas to cover them all, but as you talk to more people, you notice that a lot of them have similar goals. Based on this information, create simplified characters that cover the goals of a broad group of people in your audience. The fewer personas you create, the better. Having about three personas works well, but depending on your product, you may need more.

Each of your personas should have clearly defined goals. Why would this persona use your product? What does he want to achieve?

Next, you should add details relevant to the design. What's each persona's skill level? How old is this persona? What is the gender? What does a typical day look like for her? Is one of the personas more important than the other so that her goals should be satisfied even if it's to the disadvantage of another persona? What kinds of devices does each of your personas use? For example, if you design a website, does one of these people access it from a cell phone?

Once you've nailed down the relevant details, it's time to add some irrelevant, personal details. There are several reasons for doing this. First, adding personal details makes it easier to remember personas. Human brains like personal information. Second, details make personas less elastic. I noted earlier when talking about disadvantages that it is easy to project one's own ideas on a persona, because the persona can't defend herself. Well, the more specific details you add, the harder it becomes to do that. And finally, it's always possible that some of the details added here may suddenly become relevant during the design process. Add information about the persona's family, her job, and her interests and hobbies.

Finally, give her a picture and a name.

The picture should be distinctive and easily recognizable but not a photo of a person people know. Everything from stock photography to simple drawings tends to work well.

It can make sense to pick names that tell you who the person is (for example, the initials of the name could be the same as the first letter of her job, or the person's function could be used as a last name), but you should avoid names that have might have negative connotations (such as "Harry Hacker") or that might remind people of specific real people (like "Britney Bieber").

3.3 Working with Personas

When we talk about a product's design, we tend to think of our audience as generic "users." Will users like the ability to automatically upload a picture to a photo-sharing site? Will they be able to figure out how to use the uploading feature?

It's hard to figure out users' needs in such generic terms. With personas, this becomes easier.

Which one of our personas—if any—will want to upload a picture to a photo-sharing site? Given that persona's skills and intentions, how should we design the feature to satisfy her goals?

Instead of speaking in generic terms, talk about specific personas.

3.4   Personas Do Not Replace User Research

When using personas, it may be tempting to assume that since "Emma" knows how to use her computer and we designed the product for people like her, we don't have to involve actual users in our design anymore. That would be wrong.

Personas can help you communicate with other people involved in the design process, evaluate data from user research, and use that data when making design decisions. But they shouldn't replace actual users. You still need to test your design with real people to make sure it works.

The BizTwit Case

In the previous chapter, we visited a number of people working for different companies. The goal was to find out what kinds of problems our Twitter application for businesses could solve.

Now, we want to distill this information into a number of archetypal personas, each of which represents a specific part of our audience. Figure 3.1, on the following page shows how one of these could look.

This is a pretty succinct persona—in a real project you would probably flesh it out with additional details.

Takeaway Points

- Personas are imaginary people who represent specific groups of users in your target audience.

- Personas are not for everybody. Maintaining them takes time, and it's sometimes easy to project your own ideas onto a persona.

- Personas do not replace user research; they merely help you incorporate the results from user research into your product.

- Personas help you evaluate the information you find during user research, focus your product on a well-defined group of people, and communicate within the design team.

- Use personas to help with design decisions. Instead of talking about generic "users," talk about concrete personas. These are questions to ask: Who is this feature for? Will any of your personas want to use it? What kind of preexisting knowledge does this persona bring to the table? What kind of requirements does the persona have? Does the feature meet the persona's goals?

Mark Miller

Job	Management. Mainly involved with product development and customer acquisition, but sometimes also likes to focus on marketing.
Age	50 years
Gender	Male
Skill	30 years of experience (starting with an Atari ST) have given Mark good user-level knowledge of computers and smartphones. Knows how to install applications, but leaves operating system installs to the system admins at the company.
Goals	Would like to be able to post messages to Twitter from his PC and his phone. Messages often consist of a link to an article, with a few words of commentary. Would like to have the ability to check other people's messages before they publish them to the company's Twitter account.
Background	Has two kids who don't live at home anymore. Married to his wife Mandy, who works as a marketing executive at a stationery company. Likes to discuss marketing topics with her and tends to be quite involved in marketing at his own company. His personal style is somewhat understated. Drives a silver Mercedes and usually wears a dark gray suit. Uses a Lenovo ThinkPad and considers his choice to use an Android phone instead of a BlackBerry to be a fashion statement. Plays squash and tennis in his spare time.

Figure 3.1: A Sample Archetypal Persona