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https://medium.com/the-protagonist/the-most-powerful-design-tool-nobody-uses-a82fc523071d

Narrative is the Most Powerful Design Tool You're Not Using

Designers love to call themselves storytellers. So where are the stories?

Several years back, I worked on a design team tasked with creating a new, value-added service for an American health care company. The concept we came up with—kind of an obvious one in retrospect—was a service for adults who are caring for aging parents. It would help them with the many non-medical responsibilities they often take on: retrofitting homes with safety equipment, arranging transportation, setting up nurse visits, managing prescriptions, etc. This is a big job for working adults (who often have kids of their own), so a service that could lighten the load, we proposed, had a lot of potential.

But it's a hard concept to explain, to clients and other designers, and it comes with a thousand details that need deciding. It also spans a number of touchpoints:

- *Clearly there's going to be a **website** and an **app**.*
- *There also needs to be a **call center**—how do we select and train the ones who pick up the phone?*
- *It needs a **system for vetting and engaging** care professionals—who designs that?*
- *A lot of older care recipients are going to prefer **printed communication** to digital—how does that fit in?*
- *And how do we design the elements so that **they all fit together** when someone engages with the system?*

This kind of multi-platform alignment problem is extremely common in modern UX design; if you're a large agency, it might even be more typical than the one-off, just-do-this-website gig. Yet we *still* don't have a great tool for aligning design efforts. The interaction designers can lay out an app or website in their sleep, the service designers know all about call center workflows—but for the user, **it's all just one experience**, and it needs to feel like one. Everyone on the design team can sketch and brainstorm, and that's great for exploring individual elements, but the project that fails because a bunch of great elements didn't hold together is practically a cliché.

"How about if I write it as a story?" I asked in a team meeting, raising my hand hesitantly, like the schoolkid who can't quite believe he's the one with the answer. I was working as a content and marketing

lead, but frequently got brought in on design projects because I could quickly summarize strategic discussions—a task not so different from extracting an article out of a series of interviews.

"A what? What do you mean?"

"Well," I went on, "we've already got a couple of personas from the research phase, right? I mean, they're just characters. So what if I give them names, and then write the experience of the service from their point of view? **As first-person short stories.**"

A room full of quizzical looks. I'd written planning documents and helped build client presentations, but this was something else entirely. "It's not a heavy lift," I added. "I can have them ready in a day or two." This was true. Once you start writing for a living, banging out a thousand solid words is a familiar few hours of work.

What a thousand words are really worth

Two days later, I walked into the team room with a pair of printouts, in type large enough to be legible when pinned up next to the sketches and Post-It notes. I read them aloud.

"It doesn't seem exactly fair," the first began. **"Isn't 48 too young to be dealing with this sort of thing?"** It went on to tell the story of a woman whose mother's Alzheimer's was worsening, the worries and issues it raised, and the incredible relief of having a (theoretical) caregiver concierge service available through her insurance company, to help with the dozens of things she never realized she had to do. The second story took a similar format, but a different use case: an aging grandfather who falls and breaks his hip, prompting his son's family to invite him to live with them.

Both stories fleshed the personas out into living, breathing people with relatable concerns and emotions, while delving into the details of service engagement. One of the characters prefers the phone, and turns a lot of the planning over to a call center concierge he's especially fond of. The other uses the app and website like a superpowered planning calendar, clicking and reserving services and creating schedules to share with relatives and care providers.

The project team started talking in earnest. A service format began to emerge. Designers started to see tasks for themselves. They also had a lot of opinions.

- *Shouldn't the first point of contact be via website rather than phone?*
- *How much agency is [insert persona] willing to turn over to a person they've never met?*
- *Doesn't it make more sense for this component to be opt-in rather than opt-out?*

We were doing what good design teams do: hashing out the details, throwing ideas back and forth, nudging the concept around until it coalesced into something that could actually work. It's a familiar process, but it was happening **earlier in the project** than almost any other I've worked on, and with **greater precision**.

When it came time to present initial proposals to the client, we had a deck, sketches, mockups…and stories, edited and refined from those initial drafts. The client loved them. They passed them around internally, and referred back to them for the duration of the project. We felt like heroes.

Sketching with words

Stories have a lot in common with visual sketches. They both give form to an intangible concept. They can both be executed at various levels of detail. If the person producing them has enough experience, they can be produced quickly, and modified easily. They're both, in an important sense, **disposable**, which liberates the team to explore concepts without getting attached to bad ones.

Images have some well-established advantages over words, especially in terms of immediacy, and their ability to quickly evoke relationships and environments. This is one reason designers of all sorts, from ID to IxD to service design, tend to sketch when exploring and explaining things.

But words — especially when formed into coherent narratives — have some advantages of their own, that make them especially well suited to complex, multi-touchpoint UX design:

1. Writing a story forces decisions
In conversation, it's easy for a group of people to all nod and agree that they're "on the same page", while each having a different understanding of what they're agreeing to. Committing something to paper *in a clear and vivid way*, though, requires adding detail, and that means making decisions. Does the user create a profile first, or simply have a conversation? What's the most likely entry point into the service? At some point in the story, something probably goes wrong — how does that get fixed? When you start writing out the steps, these things start to emerge all over the place, like earthworms during a rainstorm.

2. Anyone can modify a story
With few exceptions, everyone writes and everyone reads, which makes a story uniquely malleable *and* democratic. Create a shared doc, give everyone on the team comment privileges, and watch the ideas pour forth. But a piece of advice: designate one person (with good writing chops) as keeper of the document, and limit actual rewrites to her or him, or you'll end up with an unreadable, redundant mess.

3. It's a great universal reference point
Just as design teams often create mood boards to keep a consistent visual direction, a story that

everyone's agreed to can do wonders to keep a complex UX system aligned. Pin it up on the wall, and encourage team members to go back to it often. Ask if what you're designing fits the story, and plug it back in from time to time so you can see what comes before and after it.

4. Stories can absorb anything

By the time you start writing a story during a design process, chances are good you've already created a bunch of other stuff: research insights, personas, sketch concepts for specific elements, relevant work from past projects, and of course, whatever the client gave you in the brief.

That's great. You can use it when you start writing, and you *should* use it. A story isn't just a place for you to dream things up, it's also the perfect way to evolve existing work by putting it into context. If you've sketched out an app, it should appear in the narrative. Personas become characters. The client's existing offerings can make an appearance, if they're relevant, and show how the concept fits into their bigger ecosystem.

5. There's an endless well of knowledge on what makes a good one

People have been telling stories for all of human history, and writing them for several thousand years, so a lot of the trial and error has already taken place. Take a creative writing course, rewatch a favorite movie, ask yourself why you keep rereading that one book over and over. The rules of good storytelling are flexible, but they're well-established, and they're a tremendous source of untapped potential for UX designers. But perhaps the most crucial advantage of story as a design tool is that…

We see the world in stories

Everyone from Aristotle to Joseph Campbell has written about the recurring role of classical narrative in human society, and with good reason: there's not a culture in history that hasn't told stories. Our brains are hard-wired for narrative, and each of us is constantly constructing and editing a story of some sort, especially about the things that happen to us. This makes a well-written story an incredible tool for building empathy, and for lending coherence to a sequence of interactions.

It also means, generally speaking, that if it makes a good story, it's going to make a good experience.