Proposing Co-Design of Personas as a Method to Heighten Validity and Engage Users: A Case from Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This paper proposes co-designing personas with users as a strategy to overcome a challenge inherent in the design of personas or fictitious users: On one hand, personas should appear realistic and believable as individuals, and on the other hand, personas should represent a broader range of users. By involving empirical users in all parts of the process of persona design, the risk of creating personas that are too stereotypical is minimized, as the participating users enrich the data on which the personas are based with up-to-date and firsthand contextual knowledge. Advantages of co-designing personas with users is illustrated by a case from higher education in which personas were co-designed with students as part of a project aiming at designing a smartphone application for Master’s thesis students.

KEYWORDS

Co-Design, Design Based Research, Master’s Thesis Students, Personas, Validation

INTRODUCTION: AN INHERENT CHALLENGE OF PERSONA DESIGN

Personas are fictitious users created from empirical data about actual or potential users. The method was introduced by Alan Cooper in 1999 in the field of interaction design of software and has since spread to other industries and contexts: product development, marketing, communication planning, service design (see Nielsen, 2011), and education.

The purpose of persona design is to transform a large number of heterogeneous users into a manageable number of specific individuals mirroring the variation among the users. Typically, a small number of personas are crafted on the basis of quantitative and qualitative data about users of a product or service. Each persona represents a wider range of users by incorporating a set of common user characteristics. The resulting personas allow interaction designers and others to obtain a vivid and memorable understanding of the users, and provide them with a clear picture of whom their product is to be aimed at. Personas may be described in more or less detail, and the information included in a persona description varies according to the intended use of the personas.

In the process of persona design, empirical data about users normally serve as inspiration to create personas. Data, which is then processed, analyzed and transformed into personas by researchers or consultants who might be following the ten steps to personas described by Lene Nielsen (2007). Users are in other words first reduced to data and are then “revived” by researchers. A disengagement
of users takes place in the course of this process, and this may cause the resulting personas to appear less believable as individuals – especially since each persona should also represent a subgroup of users or type of user. If personas appear too caricatured, they are less likely to be adopted and used by their recipients, and even if they are used, too one-dimensional personas may misinform design decisions (Triantafyllakos et al., 2009).

Designing personas that are believable as individual human beings is one of the challenges of persona design. To meet this challenge, persona designers need empathy, deep insight into the users, and narrative abilities according to Nielsen (2011). We propose co-designing personas with users as a supplementary strategy to ensure the personas’ believability and at the same time heighten their validity. Ours is not the first experiment to involve users in the persona design process. A common denominator of such experiments seems to be a lack of systematically collected empirical data or a narrowing of the data on which the personas are founded - contrary to the general recommendations of the literature on persona design (Nielsen 2007). The approach we suggest, however, meets these recommendations.

Before proceeding to discuss and argue for these points through a case of designing an app for Master’s thesis students, we draw on three other cases in which users have been involved in persona design (Triantafyllakos, Palaigeorgiou & Tsoukalas, 2009; Cabrero et al., 2015a; Cabrero et al., 2015b). Finally, we discuss results and implications of involving users in persona design, drawing on our experiences with using the method in relation to our own case in Higher Education.

INVoLVING USERS IN PERS oNA DESIGN: THREE CASES

Within Higher Education, persona design has been used for the last ten years, primarily in relation to the development of digital solutions for students: For instance, an academic career management system (Borges, 2012), a learning management system and anti-plagiarism software (Dantin, 2005), and app for second language acquisition (Pemberton et al., 2009) and in relation to mobile learning (Rebaque-Rivas et al., 2010). Persona design has also been used in connection to educational development (Yström et al., 2010) and for developing a website about e-learning for teachers (Gaiser et al., 2006; Panke et al., 2007). However, involving users directly in the persona design process is not often done, neither in a Higher Education context nor elsewhere, and only a few instances have been reported (Cabrero, 2014). In this section, we will present three cases where users have participated in creating personas (one set in Higher Education, two in other contexts).

The first case is described by Triantafyllakos et al. (2009). In this case, 54 Greek undergraduates students constructed ‘design alter egos’ as part of a collaborative design process. By means of the alter egos the students elicited requirements and ideas for the design of a piece of educational software. The authors use the term ‘design alter ego’ to distinguish the method from the persona method. Like personas, design alter egos are fictional portrayals of representative users with faces, names, personalities and life stories. However, design alter egos are not based on user data as are personas, but are made up by the participating students relevant to the problem at hand “through a process of introspection, recollection and organization of personal experiences, and, at the same time, reflection on other user’s attitudes and characteristics” (Triantafyllakos et al. 2009, p. 21). Each student creates his or her own design alter ego, resulting in a rather large number of fictitious users - in this respect design alter egos differ from personas.

Triantafyllakos et al. (2009) explain how the participating students constructed design alter egos guided by coordinators, a set of cards envisioning the design process, and a work sheet. Then the students explored how the design alter egos would act and respond in various scenarios. The authors conclude that the design alter egos technique provided an engaging and productive experience for the participating students, and they stress that the design alter egos induced the students with a sense of creative freedom and helped them overcome the fear of exposing themselves:
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