Chapter VI

Academic Storytelling: The Development of User-Driven Scenarios

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Abstract

This chapter introduces the concept of rich picture stories or scenarios to establish a collaborative effort in the design of new information systems. Systems designers need contextual information about their users in order to design and provide information systems that will function effectively and efficiently within those contexts. Story-telling or scenarios allow developers and consumers alike to create that all-important “meeting place” from which comes a collaborative effort in the design of new systems. One of the primary issues inhibiting the further use of storytelling or scenarios in information systems is the issue of validation, which is explored. It is hoped that this chapter will provide insights into the opportunities available to information systems users and designers to improve the quality of information systems through the use of valid user-driven scenarios.
Introduction

Scenarios are alternative descriptions or stories of how the future might unfold. Scenarios are especially important where rapid change is likely to occur and where there is high uncertainty about the future. In the process, they often provoke the imagination, raise fundamental questions, make explicit our deeply held values, and stretch our worldviews. (Institute for Alternative Futures, 2001)

Scenarios are not predictions of the future. Rather, in this context, they encourage people to think about how to navigate successfully through the developmental processes that lead to the creation of new, consumer-focused and user-centered information systems. Scenarios can, and should, expand our field of view, resulting in the cost-wise identification of possible opportunities and threats. They are an investment in learning.

Scenario-thinking endeavors to ensure that we are distinctively aware that there is not a single future coming and that we understand that what will eventuate will be shaped by what actions we perform today. The development of new information systems and their associated technology, for example, the much-anticipated video phone, have often been distracted by the anticipation of a monetary windfall made possible through a vast and pervasive future use for a system or technological device. The scenario process moves away from this predictive distraction in favor of clarifying the plausible and preferred future in a validated story.

Further, because the future is so elusive and can only be described in ethereal and insubstantial terms, it is useful to remember the adage of Professor Jim Dator, founder of the Alternative Futures program at the University of Hawaii: “Any useful statement about the future should seem ridiculous” (Institute for Alternative Futures, 2001).

The objectives of this chapter are to encourage readers to consider how scenarios can assist in developing the design of new information systems and to hopefully encourage researchers and designers alike, to consider the advantages available to them from the structured use of user-driven scenarios as one method of improving information systems quality.

Background

Just about every tribe or society of people has recognized certain members of their communities for their ability as storytellers. This skillful art has been passed
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