Experiential Persona

Towards Supporting Richer and Unfinalized Representations of People

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The Persona, as a 2D poster, is a commonly created and used tool in user-centred design activities. Whilst popular, many in HCI have critiqued its depictions of 'the user' as reductive, shallow, and static. Yet, there are not many alternatives. In this late-breaking work, we present our efforts to imagine and create an alternative to this 2D persona - one that consists of a carefully curated, staged collection of artifacts. We call this an Experiential Persona because it allows designers to interact with and explore the artifacts, individually and as a collection, to imagine and experience the world of 'the user'. This more embodied, interactive and open-ended persona can potentially support richer sense making; encouraging a more open, emergent, and unfinalized view of people we design for. This pictorial contributes to extending design tools, and exploring novel use of tangible artifacts to support design, as well as a way to represent design knowledge.

CCS CONCEPTS • Human-centered computing ~ Interaction Design ~ Systems and tools for interaction design

Additional Keywords and Phrases: Persona, Experiential Persona, Tangible, Embodied Interaction, Evocative Object, Material Imagination

1 INTRODUCTION

Personas are fictional characters created from user research data to represent the different user types that we design for [23]. In User-Centered Design, Personas are usually presented as 2D posters of different characters that often include a

name, demographic/personal information, behaviors, goals, etc. [9]. Personas are used to foster designer-user empathic relationships and to ensure that design outputs are focused on the target user group throughout the design process [13].

Despite its popularity, many researchers have problematized these Persona posters as frozen and reductive snapshots of people in a static document. These characters have no room for growth or development [10,18,23], thus lacking depth, personality, history and cultural context [5]. Such critiques are particularly problematic when these Personas are used in design within the third-wave HCI where open-endedness, polyvocality and unfinalized conceptions of people are central [6,7,19,27]. If our designed products are conditioned by the tools and methods that we adopt [18], then we must indeed explore more useful alternatives to the current Persona posters.

We have not found many useful alternatives to the 2D Personas. The closest is a proposal to use dramaturgical methods [14] to improve designers' ability to empathize and understand users they design for. Another loosely related approach is Empathic Modelling (in Inclusive Design) where designers use various props to restrict one's mobility or senses to better understand users when designing for people with particular disabilities [21].

This late-breaking work presents our explorations to reimagine an alternative to the current 2D Personas. We call this alternative persona an Experiential Persona. This Experiential Persona contributes to HCI methods by offering an instantiation of a Persona that is open to interpretation, and thus, resists singular and reductive depictions of 'the user'. Instead of a poster that contains texts and visuals to provide personal information about a fictional character, we offer a curated and staged collection of artifacts belonging to a fictional character. Instead of the designer reading and extracting information from a Persona poster, the designer must interact with our Experiential Persona; using various bodily senses to investigate, imagine, and interpret; in order to make sense of and to experience as well as to inhabit in a slice of the fictional character's world. We also contribute to design theory and designerly ways of presenting knowledge by showing how tangible artifacts can be recruited effectively as tools to support designing. Next, we describe the project where we explored the creation of this novel persona. Then, we explain the thinking and decisions that informed the creation of this Experiential Persona. Finally, we describe a public exhibition where we received some preliminary feedback from the audience about this Experiential Persona.

2 BACKGROUND: RESEARCHING THE EXPERIENCES OF OLDER TAIWANESE

This exploration for an alternative Persona took place during a storytelling project that was aimed at producing more nuanced and richer stories of older Taiwanese. In particular, the project sought to reveal older people's agency in the ageing process and the work they do to manage their capacity to age well. Such stories are important to help shift HCI design of technologies for older populations from the more common deficit-driven model [8] to one that supports ageing people's goals that are more cognizant of their agency and desires to manage their evolving experiences of the ageing process. We were also particularly keen to offer narratives of ageing that are non-Western centric; stories of ageing that highlights the particular influences of local culture, expectations and practices [20].

We gathered stories from 16 older Taiwanese (> 60 years of age) who participated in our project. These seniors are reasonably fit and still live at home. Using interviews, supplemented by probes and observations, we gathered stories of these participants in their homes. We also took many photos of our participants' homes during these visits. We wanted to learn about their lives, including who they are, their history, their situations, expectations, hopes, fears, and so on. Once the data collection phase ended, we transcribed the interview data and examined the probe returns. After conducting an initial thematic analysis of the data, we spent time discussing and sharing stories of our participants arising from our data collection, photos we took and visits. The first task we set ourselves was to create Personas that could best represent the users we met during our user research. Specifically wanted to use this opportunity to explore alternatives to the standard

2D Persona posters. The Personas would be presented together with the stories in a public exhibition at the conclusion of the project. The Experiential Persona is one of the explorations attempted. This paper focuses only on the Experiential Persona.

2.1 Home life of older Taiwanese

When reviewing our data, notes and photos of the fieldwork, one topic we spent a lot of time discussing was what we encountered in our participants' homes, in particular, the homes of a number of our female participants. We were struck by how various domestic artifacts featured significantly in these elderly women's everyday lives. We also became curious about the arrangement of these artifacts and the relationship between them. To gain some immersion into this world of artifacts, we decided to visit a local flea market - a place that sold vintage artifacts and memorabilia; things that reminded us of what some of us saw in the homes of many of our participants. And it was during this visit, when we had an opportunity to see, handle and explore various artifacts, that our imagination was fired. With the project's public exhibition in mind, we also felt that it would be appropriate to explore how tangible artifacts could be used in creating an alternative persona.

User research at a participant's home: A Participant's Study Desk

3 FLEA MARKET: RESOURCE FOR RELEVANT ARTIFACTS AND INSPIRATION

At the flea market, we were very inspired by how the sellers arranged their objects at the flea market. We noticed two types of arrangements in particular: personal belongings and household goods. Although these objects were not associated with an actual person or actual home, how the objects were grouped showed a form of rhetoric through everyday things [4], which gave strong impressions of how a person and a living environment could be. These concrete objects also helped to provide physical anchors for our imagination and discussion. Following how a 2D persona is usually created, we drew from our familiarity with our participants, and in discussion, began a process of selection and curation to create an ensemble of objects from various stalls at the flea market. We saw an opportunity to use the meanings we can borrow from these objects to construct a credible history of our participants. Gradually, we shaped the contours of an 'imagined' (fictitious) person and her living environment, echoing two types of metaphors mentioned by [15]: ontological and orientational metaphors. An ontological metaphor uses something concrete to imply something abstract, while an orientational metaphor involves spatial relationships. By drawing an analogy between metaphors and arrangements, we used concrete personal belongings to imply a person ontologically, and household goods to suggest a living environment orientationally.

Personal Belongings VS Household Goods

3.1 Borrowed Meanings: Evocative Objects/The Past

An examination of the objects collected from the flea market revealed their temporal histories. Yellowing photos, aged diaries, and the variegated covers remind us that these objects used to accompany someone. Traces of use left on personal possessions and everyday objects are interwoven with people's identities, which are co-constructed dialogically between the past and the present [25]. We can imagine a character, the objects' owner. Examination of the object can prompt new understandings of who the owner could be and what the owner might be interested in. These objects are also reminiscent of different periods in the past. Hence, we see the potential for these objects to act as catalysts of imagination, which helps to surface more information about people, place and time.

In a way, when we encountered these used objects, we were experiencing an embodied sensemaking involving the object owner's past and our current understanding of our elderly participants (from the user research data).

3.2 Creating New Artifacts: Recomposition/The Present

When considering how to create an alternative persona, we are reminded of the need to ground it with some specific personal details, especially of who the person is, in the present, such as a photo, biodata information, place of residence, and so on. After all, this is the gist of most 2D personas. We saw how various artifacts in people's homes could be used to provide such information. Based upon our observations in various households we created a number of artifacts that could directly and indirectly present this personal information. For this Taiwanese senior citizen persona, we designed/fabricated a number of artifacts. This includes her national ID card, some personal notes/reminder notes, her medicine prescription, household occupancy registration, medical records, and so on.

3.3 Audio Monologue: First Person Narrative

A further piece of designed artifact was an audio narrative. We felt that this could help bring the persona to life. As we will explain later in section 5, this audio component also served as a 'glue' to our Experiential Persona. Drawing from the user research data and the rich stories we had collected for this project; we wrote a first-person narrative - a monologue of this older persona. We then recruited an older Taiwanese woman to perform this monologue in order to create this audio recording. This person talked about herself, her past, her family, her challenges, and so on. During the exhibition, visitors can listen to this audio narrative using a pair of headphones.

4 FLAT ONTOGRAPHY: A RHETORIC OF IMAGINED PERSON

With the artifacts we have chosen and purchased from the flea market and having designed/fabricated and recomposed new artifacts, we laid out the entire set of objects to try to represent this fictional older person which we had in mind.

Instead of constructing a clear hierarchical structure of these objects, we saw every component in the ensemble as equally important. Therefore, we began to search for a proper form to build such a flat ontological representation.

Inspired by Alinea Phenomenology, a chapter about cookery as flat ontography in the book Rhetoric, Through Everyday Things [4], we used an embodied rhetoric to represent our imagined character. The book chapter uses a dish called "Lamb 86" from a famous Chicago restaurant, Alinea as an example to introduce the concept of flat ontography, which "helps us record all elements as equally existing and therefore equally rhetorical" [29]. As illustrated in the photo below, we used the 'flat ontography' with all the objects to provide the same rhetoric to the imagined character. All the objects are equally important, and exist equally. Such a flat ontography forms a rhetoric through things, in which the practice supported by specific brands of pencils and markers is as important as the behavior of taking medicine implied by the medicine prescription we created. This approach also helps us to examine all of the objects at the same time, to understand the relationship among them, and to regard it as a blueprint for spatial arrangement.

The Hidden Figure

5 PUTTING IT TOGETHER: THE EXPERIENTIAL PERSONA

The final stage of the exploration is to put this ensemble of things together. Inspired by what we saw in the homes of our participants, we found an old desk to 'display' and house the objects and artifacts we have collected and designed. This type of desk is typically used by older Taiwanese in their homes. Some of the more personal artifacts like photo albums and personal documents were kept in the desk drawers. We returned to the flea market to procure more objects such as books, a calendar, and other trinkets which reminded us of things we encountered in our participants' homes. These were used to further suggest personal interests, social life/activities, and interior aspects of the person. Since the procured objects were not from the same owner, and ranged in age, we found it useful to use the recorded monologue as a way of linking these procured objects and designed artifacts together. We set up a pair of headphones on the desk for people to listen to this monologue. To further help recreate the domestic environment of our participants, a hidden speaker was installed behind the desk, playing ambient sounds, which were recordings of TV sounds. This was the ambient sound we often heard in the homes of our participants. They would leave the TV on, even though they are not watching it, simply because they wanted to feel that there's someone else in the house.

Therefore, the entire set-up including the ambient sound was carefully staged to make the audience (person encountering this Persona) feel that she has suddenly stepped into an older person's 'home'. A comfy old chair invites the audience to sit in front of the desk. While listening to the person speaking via the headphone, the audience can explore and interact with the various objects and artifacts. The monologue also tells the listener about the space and stories about some of the physical objects that the audience sees in front them. Through this, the audience can be fully immersed in amongst the objects, artifacts; inhabiting this space bodily and with all her senses in the person's lifeworld. That is why we call this an Experiential Persona.

6 EXHIBITING (AND ENCOUNTERING) THE EXPERIENTIAL PERSONA

When we staged this Experiential Persona in the exhibition, we chose to place it in a corner of a large exhibition space. Visibly distanced from other exhibits, it almost seems as if it is trying to avoid making its presence intrude too much onto others - an attitude that we learned about our older Taiwanese participants.

During the exhibition, visitors were noticeably curious about the set-up of this Experiential Persona. There were no explanations or guide. The visitors only knew that this was an exhibition about stories of older Taiwanese. As we hoped, people sat down and began exploring the artifacts on the desk, in the drawers and on the wall. Those we spoke to, told us that the setup allowed them to be immersed into another 'world', surrounded and embodied in amongst the physical and audio artifacts. They told us that the immersion was greatly heightened by the audio monologue (through the headphones). Once seated, every single visitor who interacted with this persona were visibly engaged and curious; exploring different artifacts in acts of active sensemaking. Some told us that they are like detectives, searching and examining different clues to piece together a narrative of the person. The variety of artifacts provided different ways and required different senses to 'read' and to make sense of the set-up and the person. In addition, and most importantly, the open-ended nature of object/artifacts appear to support a wide range of creative sensemaking, encouraging multiple interpretations of the person. We noticed that this set-up also encouraged audience members to explore the artifacts with others; discussing and comparing notes, in acts of collaborative sensemaking. As a result, this Experiential Persona appears to not only able to quickly facilitate the audience immersion into the lifeworld of the person, but potentially greater engagement with 'the other'.

Putting It Together: the Experiential Persona/ An audience member exploring the Experiential Persona during the exhibition

7 DISCUSSION

This exploration for an alternative Persona has led to one example of how we can create and present representations of our users in a way that is more engaging, embodied, open-ended and 'alive'. At the same time, the Experiential Persona we present also adds to discussions in HCI that focus on 'things'. One trajectory of this discussion argues that design knowledge/thinking/understanding can also be presented through things, not just through texts alone [22]. Examples such as 'annotated portfolios' [11] and 'thingly publication' advocate that the thing itself can be used as an output to represent knowledge [22]. Similarly, the 'things' of our Experiential Persona (besides the 2D poster), add to and enrich what we can convey about our understanding of users produced during user research. Our persona draws upon the many subtle properties and materiality that cannot be reduced. Thus, our use of 'things' can potentially increase the possibility for the designer to continue to explore her understanding of users through the materials. As such, this Experiential Persona is a designerly way of presenting persona. Next, we discuss three ways whereby the use of things makes this persona work.

7.1 Heightened, Embodied and Dialogical Sensemaking

Our Experiential Persona resonates strongly with advice on how to overcome some of the limitations of the widely used 2D persona first introduced by Cooper [9]. For example, when conducting Experience-Centered Design, Wright and McCarthy [28] suggest the need to "provide the resources that allow readers to identify with and maybe even for moments in our imaginations become that person". In this Experiential Persona, the staging of a collection of carefully selected familiar objects and designed artifacts, invites us to enter the user's world and even to imagine ourself as the user. We are encouraged to interact with these objects and meaning-loaded artifacts with one's body and different senses. Through this embodied interaction, and from our own perspective, we are provided with opportunities to enter into "the other's' lifeworld" [10] through heightened dialogical sensemaking. As Adlin and Pruitt [1] insist, personas are effective only if we can make them "come alive" for those using it. As such, this Experiential Persona is also another instantiation of a dialogical tool [16] that can be used to facilitate one's dialogue with the other and through this, better understand the other person's experience.

Furthermore, the variety of stimuli, and the open-ended nature of these artifacts were found to have the potential to support multiple interpretations and much greater possibilities for discoveries and meaning making over time. This heeds Pruitt and Adlin's [23] recommendation to "help designers to develop a relationship with our personas, creating compelling stories that unfold over time" that allow people to "extrapolate from and extend them". The interactions supported by this Experiential Persona also encourage sensemaking that resists the singular and finalized sensemaking of 'the other', avoiding simplistic and reductive views of people whilst potentially supporting multiple interpretations of the people we design for [18,19,27].

7.2 Material Imagination

In addition to heightening dialogical sensemaking in a person, the staging in the exhibition also creates a space where poetic interaction [17] and sensemaking of place emerge. As Bachelard focuses on the personal and emotional response to the buildings in life [2], this Experiential Persona appeals to our lived experience in architectural space rather than conceptual interpretation. Therefore, we worked on the experience engendered by these artifacts rather than on explicit meanings with a typical 2D persona. The desk drawer implies containers, secrets to reveal, something to store, and so on. A calendar, memo stickers on the wall and ambient TV sounds invite us to immerse ourselves in a specific temporal-spatial moment as the owner seems to have just stepped away for a while. Thus, this Experiential Persona can be regarded as a type of persona with "material imagination" as Bachelard proposes [3] in contrast to "formal imagination". Rather than being conceived intellectually in formal imagination like that of a 2D persona, people could be phenomenologically evoked by the Experiential Persona with material imagination that comes through contact with tangible personal belongings and immersion in the space. As we observed during the exhibition, this Experiential Persona has the potential to sensitize members of the audience regardless of whether they know how older Taiwanese people live, since the communication is not intellectual; via texts, photo, and visuals, as it is typically in a 2D persona.

7.3 Evocative Objects

Sitting at the desk, listening to an old lady's monologue through the headphones, gazing at the objects on the desk and in the drawer, whilst exploring the old photo albums must jog a person's memory of someone. Unlike the 2D persona, the Experiential Persona uses multiple tangible objects as the tool (jumping off point) for interpretation. These evocative objects play an essential role in externalizing imagination [24]. Sherry Turkle considers objects as companions to our emotional lives or as provocations to thought. The idea of evocative objects underscores the inseparability of thought and

feeling in our relationship to things [26]. Our search for objects in the flea market was a search for ordinary things instilled with extraordinary significance [12]. This Experiential Persona is made up of a number of evocative objects; each, a catalyst that elevates the resonance of the experience and memories, and projects these impressions onto the character the persona represents. Also, because everyone's experience and memories vary, different and emergent meanings as well as imagination can be elicited at the moment of interpretation and co-construction, allowing for multiple interpretations, and new and emergent experiences.

8 CONCLUSION

This Experiential Persona draws and borrows meanings from, as well as exploits the rich materiality and evocative nature of objects and artifacts, individually and as a collection. We show how the juxtaposition of everyday objects obtained from a flea market with carefully designed artifacts can be used to build and present a 'history' of a person from a particular demographic and how different artifacts can be designed to embed/reveal various person-specific information. We described the ways audio can be used to make the persona more evocative and alive; helping to thread the various artifacts together, and with the addition of an ambient soundtrack, contribute to building a more believable lifeworld that invites the audience into the person's world.

Our exploration and creation of this Experiential Persona makes a number of contributions to HCI. Firstly, it responds to the calls of many researchers for approaches that are more effective in representing 'the user' and in particular, approaches that offer richer representations of people: less static, not simplistic and reductive as well as more authentic [10,19,24,27]. Secondly, this Experiential Persona contributes to the explorations of design tools that are more aligned to the commitments of third-wave HCI and experience-centered design. Thirdly, this novel persona contributes directly to designerly approaches that tap into our embodied interactions with tangible artifacts, as well as supporting whole body and multi-sensorial sensemaking to connect and to enter into the worlds of people we are designing for. Finally, this persona is also another instantiation of a designerly way of using 'things', and not just to rely on texts, to present design knowledge, and in this case, our understanding of our participants.

This Experiential persona is simply one physical instantiation of a less reductive, closed and limited persona. Although we have yet to formally and vigorously evaluate the effectiveness of this novel persona, the feedback from the audience response shows this to be a promising and fruitful approach that deserves further exploration and experimentation. This persona may be easier to construct for certain demographics, and given the effort needed for its creation, may be more suitable for use in design projects that run for longer periods of time and projects that seek open-ended explorations of possible/multiple solutions. Nevertheless, we hope that this exploration can offer other designers some inspiration to reimagine tools that can more effectively support our efforts to truly design for the full range of the human experience.

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