How do designers and user experience professionals actually perceive and use personas?

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Research overview

Questions

- How do experienced UCD practitioners actually perceive and use personas?
- What do existing practices say about how personas should be created and used in the future?

Study

- Examined how UCD practitioners at one company, with prior experience using personas, perceive personas' use and value in real industrial product design.
What we do and don't know about personas

The Good

Long track record showing personas can be effective tools for...

- Design
- Communication
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➔ What are the pros and cons of personas for experienced UCD practitioners?
Personas

**Personas** – hypothetical archetypes of actual users.

- Goals (life, career)
- Personifying details (gender, age, interests, personality, family)
- Info pertinent to the design problem (job role, tech literacy)

### How can I use personas?

**Design activities**
- help designers to internalize a mental model of users as they design
- feature personas in storyboards & scenarios
- guide the designer's process of sketching & prototyping
- enable iterative evaluation of prototypes, e.g., through cognitive walkthroughs from the persona's perspective

**Communication activities**
- align large development teams toward specific user issues
- make decisions about requirements
- advocate for particular designs approaches
Method, participants, context

Method

- Semi-structured interviews via phone.
- 90 minutes: 40 min interview, 40 min cognitive walkthrough using two personas.
- Audio recorded, loosely transcribed, open coded, analyzed for recurring themes.

Participants (14)

- 10 designers (visual or interaction design)
- 4 UX professionals (user research and interaction design)
- 2 to 22 years UCD experience (mean 10)
- Training: HCI (5 participants), Design (4), Computer Science (2), Engineering (2), Other (1)

Context

- IBM: global enterprise; creates technology products and services for businesses; large, influential UCD community.
- Product groups A (2 participants), B (8), C (2), and Research (2)
Perception and use of personas: 3 types

**Persona Champion**
Made fully productive use of personas as described in prior literature.
Had an enthusiastically positive opinion of personas.
(3 participants)

**Persona Moderate**
Focused on user role information in personas for design.
Had a moderately positive or neutral opinion of personas.
(6 participants)

**Persona Pessimist**
Did not use personas to design.
Had an indifferent or negative opinion of them.
(5 participants)
## Perception and use across demographics

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To be honest with you, I rarely use personas myself... I find them useful for requirements gathering and I actually find them useful for the client. But I don't design with them or design off of them... It [a persona] is basically useful for non-designers trying to comprehend the design process. Or maybe if they are designers and they are trying to simplify the process for non-designers. Personas are helpful if you have never designed to start thinking about users. But it is different if you are talking to a professional designer who does this for a living.
Personas were not used by most designers to design

I sometimes use personas but I can't say that I use them deeply. In the course of developing design, I am trying to define audiences... When I go to the end user audience, it is a matter of using the level of technical savvy of the persona to get an understanding of what I need to do in order to provide the feature.
Personas were not used by most designers to design

What I like about the personas that we've written in [division A] is that they are **very grounded in people**... All those people we were talking to, they start to come through and **come alive**... **I come out with solutions that Gerard never even thought of** that might be based on him and based upon his pain points or his goals or his use cases, but they're **my creativity blended in** with that, from the conversations.
Personas were used for communication

- Create common ground between a designer and stakeholders regarding the design problem.
- Advocate user needs with the development team and stakeholders. Prevent others from making design decisions for themselves.
- Advocate designs on the basis that they address user needs.
What user information did designers use to design?

1. Real users or user data
   - Primary way to derive the rich understanding of users required for design.

2. User role information
   - Info representing critical design constraints, absent narratives & personifying info.
   - E.g., job responsibilities, skills, educational background, tools used.

You can't design to somebody else's understanding of the problem. **You need to be part of the user research to design something.** That is where the best designs come from.

When they were first developed... I think they were much more personas. People would say oh 'Paul' or 'Jim' or whomever. Now I think they're much more roles, oh 'the test manager' or 'the tester'... I **don't necessarily feel like anything was lost because...** in a fast-paced environment... we **care much more about the role and what they're doing**... I think the stuff that was lost was the extras, like 'Paul likes to go on bicycle rides,' not the 'Paul uses Microsoft Word to import his existing test plan.'
Why were personas not used for design? 😐 😞
Why were personas not used for design?

Personas are **abstract**

- It is hard to understand the abstraction process from user data to persona, so personas come across as lacking critical detail.

If I'm making an e-commerce app and I can take all 40-something women shoppers in the Mid-West and turn that into 'Katie' my persona, I feel like the **generalization that is being made at that point, makes me feel slightly uncomfortable**, rather than just having the body of research to start with.
Why were personas not used for design?

Personas are *abstract*
- It is hard to understand the abstraction process from user data to persona, so personas come across as lacking critical detail.

Personas are *impersonal*
- The personifying details in personas fail to provide a sense of empathy.

I think there are a lot of subtlety or details, things that cannot be conveyed from the description... I don’t think you can really think or act like [the persona]... To be frank I always have doubts about the persona and how they are going to be used... I feel like it's more of a communication tool.
Why were personas not used for design?

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Personas are impersonal
- The personifying details in personas fail to provide a sense of empathy.

Personifying details mislead
- It is difficult to select personal details that do not create false constraints on the design problem.

That [personal] data is not useful at all... The reason why is that, if this were a real human being, yeah, I might care. But given that it's a persona... it creates the illusion that this is a real person. So it makes me feel more confident I'm actually designing for a person, but I'm not. So it actually is just deceptive...
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- It is difficult to select personal details that do not create false constraints on the design problem.

Personifying details distract
- Personifying details make it hard to focus on the aspects of a persona that are critical for the design problem.

The persona brings more aspects that are particular to an individual... those peripheral aspects become more prominent... at the cost of substance and losing the essence of what is important... So we end up with these [personas]... with these nice looking pictures and fancy job titles and extremely exciting lives. And soon the medium becomes the message...
What we do and don't know about personas...  
...For UCD practitioners

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2. Deploy & use personas
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1. Create personas
   - Accuracy and focus are more important than engagement. Careful selection of personifying info to accurately portray users and focus on key aspects of design problem.
   - Separable layers: persona ↔ user role ↔ user study data.
   - De-mystify the abstraction process by involving designers in persona creation.

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2. Deploy & use personas
   - Exposure to users or user data is critical for design.
   - Personas are incredibly valuable for communication with people outside the UCD team.
   - Complex design situations, such as collaboration.
Summary and future work

- Personas were not used by most UCD practitioners in their own design work...
- ...But they were used to communicate with others.
- Perception and use of personas varied by formal training and experience creating personas (not on job role or years UCD experience).
- For design work, UCD practitioners used user role info and exposure to users or user study data.
- Personas were not used for design because they are abstract and impersonal, and personifying details mislead and distract.
- Implications for creating, using, and deploying personas for use by experienced UCD practitioners.
- Future: additional studies of personas use & perception by experienced UCD practitioners in other organizational contexts.
Thank you!

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EXTRA
What we do and don't know about personas

Long track record showing personas can be effective design tools.

- **Design**: Power is in their ability to engage design and development teams and help them predict user reactions to designs.

- **Communicate** about users and UCD to non-UCD practitioners. Avoid "elastic user" who can be bent and stretched to suit edge cases or one's own beliefs.
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➔ What about experienced UCD practitioners?