Constructing the user

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Abstract

Often ethnographic studies are used in the design process to give the designers an understanding of the users. My claim is that when the designers are faced with the ethnographical material they will try to figure out whom the person presented in the material is and they construct a user from the material. In order to make this process successful the presenter of the material must look at this construction process as well as at the material presented.

When we encounter a stranger we have a tendency to see the person as a stereotype. The stereotype is built on knowledge of previous meetings with others, and ordered into categories that form the basis for the stereotype. In this paper I present my experiences with how designers construct a user as a stereotype. In my experience this can happen both when they are presented with field material and when they rely on their own knowledge.

I present how designers negotiated the construction, how the construction went, and which implications it had on the design process. Finally I discuss how a material can evoke sympathy for the user, and how it should be presented. Using inspiration from character building in film and the distinction between empathy and sympathy I discuss how this could influence both field studies and the material presented to the designers.

1   Why design for a single user?

A design process that has a focus on the user as an individual person is part of both participatory design processes and scenario-based design methods. Other methods use individuals as design material, but they are not seen as persons (e.g. use cases). The benefit of a design process that focuses on the individual user is both to see the individual user as a representation of a group of similar users and the user as a person that the designers can engage with. Thereby focusing on the users needs rather than on the designer's whims and ideas. This is achieved by involving actual users in the design process or by creating fictitious characters from research among the users.

Focusing on the single user – the Persona (Cooper, 1999), the Model-user (Nielsen, 2002) - is part of design processes that identifies and breaks down the different groups of users and express these as profiles of single users. Designing for a single user makes it possible for the designers to feel sympathy for the user. But, as I will show later, to feel sympathy craves information that comprises both the user's actions and feelings.

2   The user as a character

Sharrock showed how designers talk about users without ever meeting one, and how, during the talk, the user is constructed as a scenic figure (Sharrock and Anderson, 1994). Users are always present in the designers mind in some form or other in Sharrock's example they are unconsciously part of the design process as somebody the designers speak of without ever meeting one. When designers are faced with ethnographical material they will also try to figure out who the person presented in the material is, what characteristics the person have and they will create a user from the material. This process can end with the designers constructing a stereotype and, as I will argue, stereotypes can be obstacles in a design process that considers users' needs.

In a meeting with a person the initial forming of a category that the person belongs to will eventually be broken when an in-depth knowledge of the person is formed, and the stereotype transforms into a personal character. Designers have often not the possibility to undergo this transformation. They will meet the users in a pre-selected and analysed form. As it is not always possible for the designers to meet the "real" users there will be an act of communicating the fieldwork to them, whether this is video material, interviews or photos. From the material designers will create a user – a fictitious user that do or do not resemble the real person in the ethnographical material. It can be a collective and negotiated process or it can be an individual process. In order to make the process – the move from the stereotype to character – conscious, the presenter of the material must look both on the material presented and at the process of constructing the user - creating a character.

I will distinguish between:
- "The user" who is the person being observed or interviewed.
- "The stereotype" who is a creation done by designers based upon presented material, the designer use their own cultural knowledge to understand in the creation and it has the form of a category.
- "The character" that is based upon presented material and includes the person's sociology, physiology and psychology. The designers create a rounded character that allows them to understand and identify with the person. (Horton, 1999)

3   The workshop

Over the years I have conducted several workshops where the aim was to construct model-users and I have observed how difficult it is for the participant to avoid creating stereotypes (Nielsen and Pedersen, 2002). I see having sympathy for and identification with the user as a design parameter that moves design away from a view on the user as alienated from the designer to a view where the designer understands the users needs and motivations.

The workshop I was invited to observe during my stay at Interactive Institute, Malmoe was different from the workshops I have conducted, as it has a focus on video as a tool to inform the design process (Buur and Binder, 2000). Observations and interviews in an environment are transformed into video snippets. The video snippets represent activities, interactions and processes. The video material is used in a game form that gets the participants to engage in the material, discuss it and use it as an offspring for design. The workshop I observed (Johansson, Fröst et al., 2002) consisted of far more than I use here. The video snippets made it easy for the designers to get a grip of the surroundings and the game form furthered discussions and design ideas. I focus on a partial process I observed in the beginning of the workshop, and not on the workshop as such.

The designers were asked to define Kerstin and her needs in a video game session. They were presented with video snippets of Kerstin and her daily work life and with other persons and daily life. In a game form, the designers were asked to consider Kerstin's needs and understand the presented material from her point of view. During this session the designers both negotiated and constructed Kerstin and interpreted her needs. And they constructed Kerstin as a character. When the first designer was asked to give her impression of Kerstin's needs, she put emphasis on the way Kerstin told about her daily life and mostly on how her environment looked, how neat and well organised it was. This started the construction of Kerstin as a person who seldom came out of her office. In the following example the designer describes Kerstin as competent, a nest-builder, asocial and a bore. Kerstin possessed these features during the whole design process. She was understood in a one-dimensional perspective and stayed so for the rest of the design process.

Designer 1 (D1): "she is the type of person that builds a nest. She is really interested in her job and seeks the information she needs herself. She has a lot of breaks from people visiting her in her office. She is competent but boring. She's a mate, but she's got librarian-looks."
Designer 2 (D2): "(….) She sits with her papers and like to be by her-self and is not very social. Papers must be printed and there must be order."

The construction of Kerstin was of a one-dimensional character. Later in the process a feature from the Kerstin was presented, that she organises yoga-classes for the whole company. The designers included this information and it fitted into their construction of Kerstin of her as alienated from them-selves. Their tone of voice made the audience laugh when the yoga was introduced.

D2 presents Kerstin's view of the designed office to the other designers: "Here I sit because it's very quiet. I have had the yellow screen put up, because I think the room is far too open. (…) In front of me is the person responsible for economics, she sits there because she is so quiet and it's nice and safe to share the space with her. (….) Here behind the wall I usually run some yoga exercises. (Laughter from the audience)

The alienation prevented the designers to engage in Kerstin and identify with her. In this discussion the designer (who also were an employer) sees Kerstin as suffering from stagnation, and she will do so if the designer do not intervene

D2: "I have as an employer a responsibility to get Kerstin to make a move too. I have a responsibility for her not ending in stagnation. I must move the company forward and this implies that I move Kerstin too. So I cannot just fulfil her old needs that she sits in the corner in her little office."

In the group session that followed the designers were asked to design an environment from Kerstin's point of view. Kerstin was quickly put in a corner next to the boss and the environment was designed with features that came from the designer's own needs, discussed during breaks.

Designer 2: "It's common to see somebody bringing a sick child to the office, so we have created a corner with a bed and a sofa. The border between family and work is far to inflexible."

When the designers later presented Kerstin they realised they had created a character they disliked and this furthered a discussion about the users as such and the designers as something other, a very fruitful discussion in the design process. The game format furthered designers to engage in the material, design and discuss this is however not the issue for this paper

The video material holds strong empathic values. It is my claim that there is a need for a move from the empathic feelings to sympathy for the user and in this move there must be an emphasis not only on the environment but also on the user's feelings and emotions.

4 The stereotype

When we encounter a stranger we have a tendency to see the person as a stereotype. The stereotype is built on knowledge of meetings with others and formed as a category. We do not see the person as possessing a unique constellation of characteristics, but add the person to a previously formed category. (Macrae and Bodehausen, 2001)

One definition of stereotypes is that they are "socially constructed representations of categories of people"(Hinton, 2000). A stereotype is very difficult to work with in a design process that focuses on users needs rather than on users goals. It is necessary to get access to the users feelings and knowledge as more than one dimension of the character is needed to raise sympathy.

With inspiration in what it takes to get spectators to feel sympathy for a fictitious character in film I will use Murray Smith's (Smith, 1995) definition of the levels of engagement that comprises the feeling of sympathy. Thereby proposing a framework that can direct the presented fieldwork and enable designer to engage in the user. The different levels of engagement that comprise the structure of sympathy are recognition, alignment and allegiance.

- Recognition is information the enables the designers to construct the character as an individual and continuous human agent.
- Alignment: the process of which the designer is placed in relation to the character's actions, knowledge and feelings.
- Allegiance: the designer's moral evaluation of the character. Allegiance is dependable of the access to the character's state of mind and of the ability to understand the context of actions.

Smith makes a distinction between empathy and sympathy as the two elements comprising engagement. Empathy does not require that we share another person's values, beliefs and goals. It is constituted of emotional simulation and affective mimicry. During the emotional simulation we understand the characters emotions by trying out different emotions that fits the situation. The affective mimicry is an involuntary response to an emotional situation, e.g. the raising of hair in the back of the head when the protagonist feels fear. In order to engage both element are needed and they can disrupt each other and adjust to the understanding of the narrative situation.
To engage in a user not present, the designer engage in the same way as in a fictitious character. What is not presented is negotiated and drawn from the designers' categories of persons. The emotional simulation negotiates the understanding of the user's emotions e.g. tension in a work situation or body language towards a colleague. Recognition is based both on presented material but also on own knowledge. The more presented the less is drawn from own experience. It is the element of feelings, present in alignment and emotional simulation, which becomes the critical factor in the development of engagement from the material.

5 Conclusion

To present field studies to designers is an act of communication that involves choosing both the material and the form of the presented material. And at the same time the presenter must be aware of how the material will be received and interpreted.

Stereotypes are created from common knowledge of what representation certain categories of people have. By adding information that does not support and go against this common knowledge it becomes more difficult to create the stereotype and thereby alienate the person. In choosing the material the presenter should put emphasis on both the usual HCI areas: context, tasks, goals but also give the designers information about who the users are as persons.

The distinction between the rounded character and the flat character can be a guideline for what to look at in the material and also what to look for during field studies. The rounded character consists of actions, emotions and personality (Nielsen, 2002). When the designers get an understanding of the users emotions and personality they understand the users motivation for actions and they do not have to make these up. It is inevitable that we as human beings look for the motivation in order to understand the person in front of us. If we are not presented with clues that gives us an understanding of why, we have to make the "why" up and it is the first and easy pick to find a "why" in the categories

Ethnographic material in HCI is collected, interpreted and communicated. Often the act of communicating the material is overlooked. Focussing on the setting, the work and the situations in the presented material give designers little clue about whom the user is as a person. If the designers are to fully understand the users both ethnographers and researchers are to present material that also consists of and presents the user's emotions and personality.

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