

USING STORYTELLING TECHNIQUES TO CREATE BETTER INTERACTIVE EXPERIENCES

Stories can help us express powerful design solutions and define interactive products, services, and systems.

Stories are tools we use throughout the interactive design process to:

- Understand an interactive product's context of use
- Demonstrate how a design concept fits people's needs
- Express potential solutions to people for feedback

Mastering the use of stories in your interactive design process will require you to consider the following three things:

1. The ELEMENTS that must be included in your stories for them to function properly
2. The types of EFFECTS that you intend your stories to have on other people
3. The different EXPRESSIONS of stories that you can use through the interactive design process, at increasing levels of fidelity

1. ELEMENTS

A design story won't function unless it has these elements:

- CHARACTER: The people who are the primary actors in the story
- ACTION: What the people do in the story
- SETTING: The locations and objects that our characters can interact with
- HAPPENINGS: How the location acts on the characters (out of their control)
- EVENTS: Descriptions of individual actions our characters (or setting) are doing
- SCENE: Multiple events in sequence, describing what happened to the characters over time
- CONFLICT: An issue or problem that the characters need to overcome

A well-crafted story includes more than just the above information. It also includes CONTEXT. A story's context is comprised of the details that explain WHY characters choose to act. If you take a detail away from the story and the story collapses, then it ISN'T context.

Context in a design story works when your character understands why they are choosing to act. Otherwise, your audience will question the believability of the story. Contextual details should be rooted in your understanding of real people, drawn from the appropriate research sources or personal knowledge.

2. EFFECTS

Do you consider what effects you want to create before constructing stories? On your team? On your client? On your users?

There are five types of effects you can seek from stories that you construct. They are on a scale from the easiest effects to create from the hardest, in order of challenge:

THINK: Story details aid the audience in remembering factual Information, considering new and challenging opinions, and reconsidering perceptions and personal biases

FEEL: Stories cause the audience to experience positive and negative emotions; they sympathize with the characters in the story and the conflicts that they face

RELATE: Upon encountering the story, the audience wants to share the story with others, debate its meanings, build upon the story's content in order to enhance it

ACT: The story inspires short-term action, some of which might lead to longer-term behaviors (perhaps based on exposed contact to multiple stories)

BELIEVE: The audience fits the story into their belief system; this often requires exposure to many stories over a long period of time, and the stories are only one of many factors

Here's a challenge you can use to learn how to hone your storytelling skills, around inspiring people to think and feel in certain ways when they come into contact with an interactive product...

A LIFE CHANGING MEAL

Create a new kind of cutlery that helps people feel a certain way when they eat.*

For example: You may want people to feel satisfied, excited, or frustrated. How would you design your silverware to inspire those emotions when they are used?

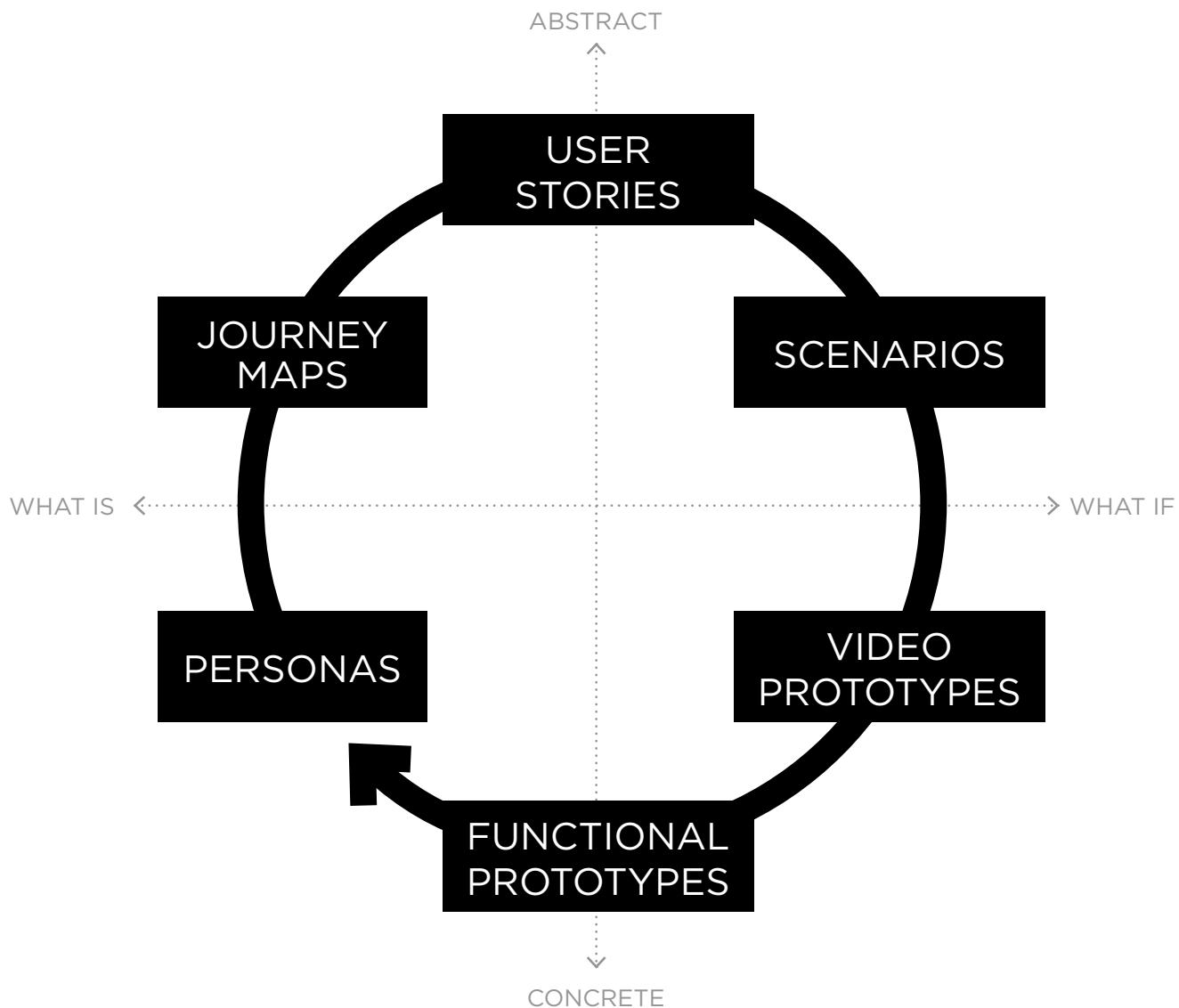
Limit yourself to 1.5 hours for your initial explorations and creating an actual version of the cutlery to test out. Then ask someone to eat a meal with your cutlery. Did they feel how you'd intended them to feel while they'd used your cutlery? If they didn't, what changes do you think you'd need to make to your cutlery to create the desired effect?

* Disclaimer: Cutlery can be dangerous, if you aren't careful. Make sure to use materials for your cutlery that will not harm themselves or others around them during use. For example: If you want to make someone feel angry, do not wrap your fork and knife with barbed wire, assuming that they will be capable of eating a meal using them without hurting themselves. (Not that anyone has ever done this...)

3. EXPRESSIONS

In the design process, stories are the fastest way to understand how an interactive system works and communicate design intent. This happens both in the abstract (as early design concepts) and in concrete detail (expressing an interactive product's full functionality). Stories can't contain the entire functionality of a system in them. Instead, they define slices of those systems. By deliberately selecting the right stories, we can see the system as a greater whole through overlapping slices.

What follows are storytelling tools that designers use at varying points in the design process to envision systems:



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PERSONAS: A tool designers use to typify the audiences they are designing for. Personas should include composite info about attitudes, behavior, and unmet needs. Use these at the start of any interactive project, then revise based on what you learn through future research efforts.

JOURNEY MAPS. A journey map dives into a persona's experience at each stage in their lifecycle with an interactive product. Use this when you don't know enough about how your potential users interact with a product, or if you plan to provide a new system to them and justify where and when they may use it.

USER STORIES. A user story is a formulation that helps you visualize how a user comes into contact with a designed system: "As a <user role or persona> I want to <do something, a piece of functionality> so that <achieve some unmet need, business value, or intent>." It should answer the 5W's—who, what, when, where, why—but is abstract enough to inspire a wide range of solutions as to HOW it can be done.

SCENARIOS. Scenarios take the flow of using an interactive product and put them into context, showing why a design solution exists and showing how it's being put to use by your personas. They can be sketched like comics and/or digitally illustrated.

VIDEO PROTOTYPES. Video prototypes take a scenario and express potential solutions exactly as if they're being used by a potential user in reality. These prototypes can be used to understand complex concepts and communicate design intent to your team.

FUNCTIONAL PROTOTYPES. The design as you'd envisioned it. Put the real thing into people's hands and see if the story they relate back to you about how they intend to use the product matches what you'd imagined.

Here's a challenge you can use to practice moving from design concepts through storyboarding a scenario to generating a video prototype:

FROM HERE TO THERE

Create a teleportation system for easy everyday use on city streets. Demonstrate its use in a 60-second video scenario. Limit yourself to one hour to create the video. Follow this process in order to keep within the time limit:

1. Plan. Over 20 minutes, create a 6-frame storyboard that includes your user persona, context of use, and your user interface solutions.
2. Make. Take 20 minutes to make out of paper everything you'd need to bring your storyboard to life. Rehearse it a few times to make sure the story makes sense.
3. Film. In your last 20 minutes, take your storyboard and film it with a smartphone or camera. Try to capture it all in just a few shots that you can edit together fast.