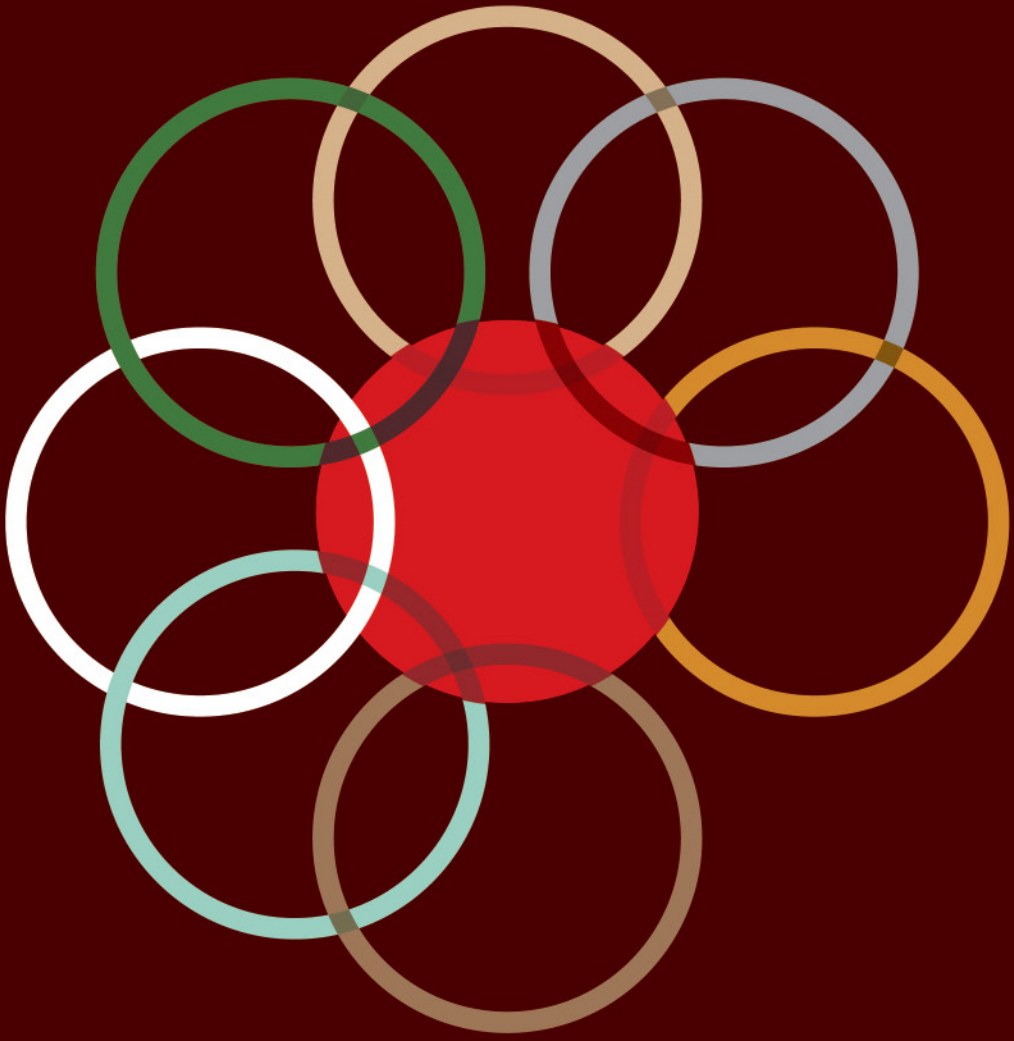

# STORYTELLING FOR USER EXPERIENCE

Crafting Stories for Better Design

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CHAPTER 8

# Using Stories for Design Ideas

The stories you have collected are not blueprints for design, but they can serve as unparalleled inspiration for the design process. They hint at the goals, attitudes, and needs of the people you are designing for. They can also lead to the story the design must tell.

When we say that the design must "tell a story," we are not just talking about games or interactive fiction, or even about turning a work application into an adventure ("Conquer the benefits allocation maze..."). Instead, we mean the kind of stories that help you create new designs. These stories are used to make you think of new possibilities, give you the tools to encourage a self-reflective kind of thinking—design thinking—or so you can imagine designs that will improve the lives of other people. Stories explore ideas from user research.

In Tom Erickson's view, design is as much about communication as it is about the end result. This includes communication with the eventual users, as well as communication among a collaborative team. The stories are a

tool to help designers "grapple with the messy, ill-defined issues" that are part of the design process. They do this by not only creating small scenarios, but also by communicating the emotional overtones, the social and organizational dynamics that are just as much a part of the story as the factual narrative. Used in this way, stories activate the mind by providing rough sketches with openings for discussion.

Imagine that you have been researching attitudes toward new "green technologies" as you work on a product to help people use resources more wisely. You might have heard people talking about how difficult it was to tell how much electricity or water they were really using. And you probably heard attitudes ranging from the altruistic ("We should use fewer resources for the good of the earth.") to the selfish ("Why should I be the one to scrimp?"). You probably have a few story fragments. But you still need to turn this information into a design. That process might involve sketching ideas for screens as Jeremie Jean and Aaron Marcus did in "The

Green Machine: Going Green at Home" (in UPA's UX Magazine 8.4) when they imagined a smart phone application that would help people visualize their energy use by showing a graph that compared their goal to average use by others. Or you might create a story showing how your design idea would work.

### PURPLE BUILDINGS

***Tom Erickson's story describes a design solution to the problem of how one might use monitoring of resources to encourage people to moderate their usage habits while at the same time not having a Big Brother scenario where every toilet flush is metered and reported to the utility.***

**Xiang-Wei left the transit station and turned onto her street with foreboding in her heart. She looked down the street, and her fears were confirmed: Her building's skin, normally a healthy green, was discolored with purple streaks. How embarrassing—their building was overdrawn on its water allotment.**

**It wasn't her fault. That morning, alerted by feedback in their apartment, she and her husband had skipped their showers and made certain that their children used no more than their 10-liter allotments.**

But it was difficult to believe that their building-mates were to blame. She'd gotten to know the 24 other families that lived in the co-op over the last two years, and they were all generally responsible. Her husband thought that there was a leak somewhere in the building. That seemed unlikely to her because most appliances monitored their resource usage and sent out requests for assistance when out-of-band consumption events occurred. But her husband said not everything was instrumented—pipes for example—and that there could well be a leak, especially since they'd had a mild earth tremor last week. Old Dr. Lee, who lived just down the hall, spoke darkly of hackers, implying that vague enemies had broken into the resource monitoring system with the aim of embarrassing them. But Dr. Lee was well known to be a bit…odd and, besides, the penalties for hacking into resource control systems were severe.

Xiang-Wei reached her building, and hurried up the walk through the front garden, feeling her cheeks color. Fortunately, she had come home early, and there weren't many people on the street, but still…

There was just one thing to do: organize a vote of the co-op to ask the resource authorities to turn on fine-grained monitoring. That would enable them to identify any leaks, or to put the finger on the miscreant who was wasting resources. ■

Not all new design stories have to be as big as a building. Stories can illustrate designs that solve smaller problems as well. No matter how big or small the idea, one type of design story takes a point of pain and transforms it into a successful, happy ending. As an example, here are some short story fragments from users of a payroll program:

> My co-worker usually does the payroll. When she's on vacation, we always have to scramble to get everything done right and get the staff paid on time.
>
> The instructions in our software are fine, but they don't include little details like which set of checks we should use for payroll. We all dug through our wallets looking for a stub so we could see which number series to use.
>
> It's not the routine things that are a problem. It's special stuff like bonuses and advances.

Maybe you used these fragments in a short story to illustrate the problems and frustrations:

> Mary was filling in on payroll while the office manager, Kathy, was away. On Thursday, just as she was about to run the payroll checks, she remembered Kathy telling her about some special bonus checks due that week. She groaned. Special checks...special anything always seemed to go wrong for her. If she could just remember what Kathy said. She stared at the confusing mass of notes pinned up on the wall behind the accounting computer. None of them said anything about bonuses. She groaned again. Last time she got something wrong, it took weeks to clean up the problems.

Now you can think about how this story could end differently and write a new story that changes the pain into delight with a new feature for the payroll software.

> Mary was filling in on payroll while the office manager, Kathy, was away. She didn't like this part of the job—ever since she'd made a mistake that took weeks to

clean up. But Kathy told her not to worry this time and when Mary clicked on "Weekly Payroll" she saw why. All the information she needed was right there on the screen. Instead of the confusing grid of numbers that had caused all the problems last time, she saw step-by-step instructions built into the forms. Best of all, Kathy had obviously written some of the instructions, because they described the procedures in their own office, like the note that told her which way to put the checks in the printer. But the best was the reminder of the special bonuses due this week. Everything was set up, and all she had to do was click.

A short story like this not only suggests new features, but connects them to the user research and the people who will benefit from them.

## Stories evolve through the design process

During the design process, your use of stories will evolve as the design goes

through brainstorming (generative), concept (expressive), and specification (prescriptive) stages. As the design progresses, your stories will too, changing format and adding detail.

The number of people working with the stories expands as you move from analysis to design. In the early stages of user research, the user experience team was working most directly with the stories. Now, as you move into the design phase, more people are involved. People who were not involved in the user research (or were only involved in some parts of it) will begin to work with what you have learned and with the stories you have collected and selected.

How your company or project is organized will also make a difference. If you have a strong user experience team, your experience with using stories will be different than if you are the lone voice of user experience on a more traditional technical development team.