

## 20 Years (and Counting) of Personas in HCI: A Legacy to Safeguard

In the fragile history of human-computer interaction (HCI), the personas artefact has been around for over twenty years now. This makes a decent stretch to reflect on its origins, developments and evolution, and how it has been situated in a variety of contexts, disciplines and projects. This time-span has also shaped a number of benefits commonly shared by persona supporters, as well as a set of challenges posed by those sceptical. Furthermore, personas have been embedded into two mainstream HCI methodologies, i.e. User-Centred Design, Participatory Design, and a combination of both, which makes a poignant case for a critical debate on how personas have been drawn on across cultures, specifically beyond the Global North, and what this means ontologically and epistemologically. It is equally compelling to look at the trends in the research, praxis and adoption of personas today, and what the future may bring to personas – how, why, when, where and for whom. The aim of this position paper is to provide a historical standpoint on the first two decades of personas and ways in which this legacy can be judiciously curated and sustainably safeguarded, so that current and upcoming generations of HCI researchers and practitioners can draw on a holistic stand of this representational artefact.

As the author of this paper I hold a genuine long-term commitment to the persona artefact. This is because I recently undertook -and completed- a PhD focussed on the co-design of persona artefacts outside the global north, for which I probed a four-case-study focused on (1) how four ethnic groups in pastoral and urban Namibia took on, understood and co-designed persona artefacts together with a group of local and international researchers, (2) what methodological and epistemological differences and similarities materialised as per methods, tools and techniques deployed by contrast with mainstream personas, and (3) how these artefacts were taken on and understood in local and international locales. Further, this endeavour enabled the team to produce and publish a number of conference papers and book chapters on personas (Cabrero, n.d.) besides my thesis (Cabrero, 2019).

On top of the fieldwork, data analysis and publications generated, through the length of my PhD I amassed a comprehensive amount of existing literature directly related to personas. These served to shape my understanding of personas, narrow down my research foci, and to write the literature review chapters of all the aforesaid publications. Additionally, I stored and organised these referential sources in a reference management software, i.e. “Zotero”, which I kept and keep curating and preserving since I began collating sources for the PhD.

Monographs, academic papers, grey literature, and audiovisual and other materials form this body of personas referential heritage. Since early steps in my PhD, and because I did this in my previous career as a filmmaker specialised in Spanish Dance documentaries, my idea and commitment have always been to bring it all to live and share it in a sensible manner with the wider HCI community. It is so I found that this web domain was available, <https://personas.technology/>, and acquired it at the time. Personas Technology Ltd is also the name of the organisation through which I perform technology consultancy services, whilst the domain is also going to be the main platform to host the supporting materials of a monograph on personas that I am currently finishing writing, and which is entitled *Personas Across Cultures: The Next Billion Users* (Cabrero, 2020).

As such, I have been consciously doing all this work so as to have a decent base to create the necessary infrastructure to share this cultural heritage of persona artefacts in HCI. Thus, I believe the proposal on personas that intend I bring to this workshop makes a fair degree of sense within the more holistic aim of the blueprint proposed by the organisers.

While open to suggestions, I picture my initial contribution to this workshop as follows:

**Source:** The term Personas was famously coined and brought to the mainstream of HCI and interaction design (IxD) by Alan Cooper (1999). Yet, and over time, there have been a number of understandings, definitions and arguments developed about what personas are. Lene Nielsen (2019) explains the mainstream lenses through which personas are situated: The goal-directed perspective by Cooper (1999), the role-based standpoint by Pruitt and Adlin (2006, 2010), the engaging perspective that Nielsen supports herself (2012, 2019), and a less mainstreamed though widespread view –the fiction-based perspective by Blythe and Wright (2006). A further mainstream proposal is that of a mix-method approach by Mulder and Yaar (2006). As part of the legacy of personas, one could think of interesting for the HCI community to have a series of videos where the above proponents could brief their approaches as a more consumable output that may engage others in learning about approaches to personas without having to necessarily read through the entire literature.

**Historian:** Among the myriad of perspectives, I find the this a fairly agreed upon definition: Personas is a communicational artefact to represent sets of people sharing commonalities concerning needs, requirements and motivations too to do with the design of technologies. In mainstream HCI personas are typically embedded within User-Centred Design (UCD) as a philosophy. This understanding usually means that personas are exclusively studied, created and handled by design professionals involved in technology design processes. Participatory Design (PD) is a further philosophy that strives to involve existing or potential users of technologies in the design process, and on which, over the years, researchers and practitioners have produced an increasing number of case studies touching on the study, creation and deployment of personas in PD. From my work on and understanding of personas, I have drawn an evolutionary timeline of personas for the book aforementioned that derives from these two approaches, and that, to the best of my knowledge, forms a sense-making approach of the history of the personas artefact in HCI in the last 20 years. This approach may, for example, assist researchers / practitioners from different cultural backgrounds -and with different understandings of HCI as a whole- to cultivate their own voices while scaffolding from existing research and case studies on the personas artefact.

**Futurologist:** To acquire a comprehensive understanding of the personas artefact in HCI, I find practical to look at the current trends in research, praxis and adoption of personas, and what past and present may bring to its future, how, why, when, where and for whom. This refers to both, cross-cultural ontologies and epistemologies, to the way in which other living entities may or can be approached from a perspective similar to personas, and to how curating personas as a specific artefact in HCI can benefit the community in order to consciously pick and choose approaches. To do this through a well-informed perspective that may be beyond trends can create meaningfulness and value through ethicality and integrity as driving principles in designing technologies when utilising persona depictions.

**Designer/developer:** I hold myself more as a social scientist than a computer scientist. Yet, I also find myself genuinely keen to keep learning my programming, algorithms, etc. in order to satisfy my own interests and passions, but also to make a good use of such skills and acquired knowledge to accomplishing my aims in the aforesaid. And so, to be able to make a good use of all the publications in my Zotero to organise a solid source of consultation -as opposed to a single source of truth- and offer a comprehensive amount of existing literature directly related to personas to others who may value such an endeavour.

**Disseminator:** All the aforementioned ought to allow me to accomplish my personal and professional aims, whilst also contributing to this workshop and its aim in preserving our legacy, in my particular case, by reporting further on personas in the workshop and to assist to curate the outcomes proposed (e.g. contributing to the intended publication), and any possible resources and/or synergies which may emerge from the workshop. Thanks!

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