

Developing Criminal Personas for Designers

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Abstract

This paper describes a research method used to develop *criminal personas* for use by designers in a process called Cyclic Countering of Competitive Creativity (C4). Personas rather than profiles are developed to encourage designer ownership, to improve the level of engagement with countering the criminal mind, and encourage the responsibility to keep the personas live and developing, rather than be adopted as simple checklists built from available criminal profile data. In this case study indirect access to offender details was used to develop the personas. The aim was to give particular focus to the offenders' 'creative prompts', which enable designers to more effectively counter their own design solutions, by a role-play approach to critical review and counter design. The C4 process enables learning through failure, and strengthens the development and selection that takes place within the design process, but C4 does rely upon the development of relevant and engaging personas to be effective.

Key Words: personas, design against crime, C4, creativity, critical review

Background

Criminology has great opportunity to develop and disseminate its knowledge and research methods across disciplines. Further to this, not only might criminology teach others, it might learn something new through such a beneficial process. Presently, as commented by members of the British Society of Criminology at their 2008 conference in Huddersfield, there is a growing need to bring new perspectives into the profession. With a view to enabling criminologists to better appreciate the opportunities of working with designers, this paper first provides background and a

description of process. It goes on to discuss how crime research and approaches to persona development have aided designers from the School of Design at Northumbria University in the development of criminal personas for counter perspectives in crime prevention projects, using the C4 critical design process.

C4, (Cyclic Countering of Competitive Creativity), engages members of a development team with key personas of their competition. These personas are applied within the 'proposal-critique' cycles of the design process at the points of critical review, enabling users to consider the creative counters to their creative proposals. These personas are researched and applied specifically to enable designers to think more like their competitors when reviewing proposals, from concepts through to developed designs. In addition this process helps avoid subjective protectiveness over ideas, and improves experiential learning. In the absence of the C4, a typical design process would likely focus upon an analysis of the user experiences, and in this case possible crime data including victim perspectives. This would be followed by a review of development and market opportunities. It is proposed here that more value, in the form of inspiration and realism, may be acquired for the process by broadening the Human-Centred Problem Solving¹ approach, by adding the offenders' perspective.

The beginnings of the C4 process originated with Hilton taking a novel approach to crime prevention in response to a Royal Society of Arts tamper evident baby food packaging project in 1989, which resulted in a major award. The approach followed the observation that designers, at times, fall into the trap of being protective of their ideas, seeking to prove a proposed function rather than investigating disproof. The scientific method of looking to disprove, was arguably more logical. If no disproof was found for the success of a function or aesthetic, then it would be reasonable to conclude that the proposal would be effective.

In the early stage of developing the C4 process it was acknowledged that a more demanding or negative process would quickly be dropped in favour of easier approaches, unless the rewards were clearly desirable and engaging. The approach proposed was to use, and to enjoy using, a role-play process. The personas of 'Malicious' and 'Calculating' packaging tamperers were developed and applied on the first occasion. These personas were, however, what are now referred to as 'assumption' personas (Pruitt and Adlin, 2006), developed from preconceptions and some readily available information through the media. In brief, the personas used for the RSA project were:

- The Malicious persona who tampered opportunistically for kicks; they would 'have a go' at almost any package but give up if it required determination;

¹ Human-Centred Problem Solving is a design method for engaging systemically with the human impact of problems and their solutions; aiming to improve quality of life.

- While the Calculating persona was a planner with the goal of extortion from retailers, they would target packaging of those products and brands which carried the greatest commercial impact; and these individuals would be very determined.

At this point a differentiation between profiles and personas should be made clear. Profiles, were first developed by Brussel (1968), and are defined here as ‘working constructions’ of yet to be identified individuals. Crime scene data is gathered to develop criminal profiles, which are applied as investigative tools to narrow down suspect pools and to catch suspects. Ainsworth, (2000) reported that it has been difficult to evaluate the success of profiling, as profiles are not evidence or proof themselves, and inaccurate profiles may lead some investigators off track. An accurate profile may equally fit a number of other people, and so care must be taken not to treat the ‘suspect’ as guilty until proven so.

Personas, as defined here, are ‘working constructions’ of identified types. The persona development uses criminal records and direct accounts from the offenders; otherwise it uses secondary accounts through their associates, or crime-prevention agencies. These accounts develop the offenders’ perspectives, reflecting their opportunity and risk imagination, which could then be used in team situations, as a countering tool to improve the critical thinking and analysing processes in Design Against Crime (e.g. Cooper et al., 2002). The success of this approach is that it immerses and engages the team members in the development and application of the counter perspectives, and more effectively informs the process than the use of assumptions developed from personal experience alone.

This process is not without its own ethical concerns though. The users must guard against developing and applying the personas in an unethical manner. The intention is to determine solutions which challenge and positively change the offenders’ behaviour. The process must not physically or mentally harm the offenders, their associates, or bystanders, by either the process of investigation, role-play, or solutions developed.

So why invest time in development and application of criminal personas and the C4 process if it can be ethically challenging? It was found in review of these projects, to provide designers with:

- Counter perspectives which enable a more objective critical review process
- An understanding of how offenders may see and think about opportunities differently
- A more effective learning experience within the project development process
- A means of more effectively undermining the value of the offending behaviours

- Opportunity to develop solutions which may avoid escalation, like some form of 'arms-race'.

In the case of C4, the personas are used in cycles to attack concept solution proposals intellectually, following each concept generation period. The 'criminal' aim is to see if the crime prevention proposals can be obstructed, resolved, or even misused for further criminal intent. The 'designer' aim is then to address, negate or counter the 'criminal' criticisms and propositions. The C4 process cycles the phases of creative and critical thinking from designer to criminal to designer to criminal, until a point is reached where strong propositions have been selected and developed.

It was identified during the tamper evident packaging project that, though the profile background of a persona was useful in establishing a context and motivation, the most important element of the personas was their creative prompts. The prompts specifically relate to opportunity identification and considerations of criminal access, or countering of crime prevention products and services. As prompts rather than instructions, they are not intended to describe exactly how to commit a specific crime, but suggested how a particular persona would more generically consider and develop offending opportunity. It was logical to conclude that, although offenders might differ in motivation and perspective from designers, there was still evidence of creative and critical thinking processes being employed (as noted by Brower, 1999).

An additional point of concern has since been that if the prompts are addressed as part of the project brief, as a set of considerations or a checklist, there is a danger that to some degree it becomes a tick-in-the-box exercise. The beauty of persona development and application is that things like creative prompt lists can be kept alive, being added to, in response to the new experience and observations of the users. It would be inappropriate to develop a persona like a snapshot, unresponsive to change. Engaging with change, looking for new opportunities, enables further development of competitive edge, in this case possibly forecasting the next form of crime before it becomes a reality. For instance, as new technologies are reviewed in the press, there is opportunity to use C4 to think ahead of the 'competition'.

Ex-offenders' experiences might be used for product/service development, as is the case in some security related firms to test systems and services. However, it is an effective alternative or addition if designers can be enabled to switch between defensive and offensive perspectives at will, especially at the concept development phase of a project.

This process was more recently applied by Hilton and Irons (2006) across the professions of Product Design and Computer Forensics, when the potential of C4 for improvement in quantity and quality of ideas generated with criminal persona brainstorming was investigated. A significant amount of secondary research was carried out in preparation, with reference to a range of texts including: Katz (1988), Ekblom (1997) and Gudjonsson and Sigurdsson (2004). This informed the creation of more

developed personas than had been used for the tamper evident packaging project. However, these more effectively researched personas were edited to provide only concise prompting to those individuals engaged in the brainstorm sessions. In review of that project, the evidence suggested that there was justification for further research, with a view to enabling primary research to inform more effectively 'developed' personas.

The following section describes the development process for C4 criminal personas.

Persona development process

Katherine Henderson, co-author of this paper, was initially given a selection of the prior research texts to review, including: Mawby (2001), Bartol and Barton (2005), Hilton and Irons (2006) and Pruitt and Adlin (2006).² She was then introduced to members of Newcastle's Community Safety Unit (CSU).

First priority for the project was to build a sense of reality by discussing what themes would be the most appropriate to investigate and present. It was proposed by the CSU that burglary from student accommodation and graffiti in Newcastle would be two major and contrasting themes. With the directional themes agreed, the second priority was to create a network of informed contacts who could describe and discuss the real issues and offender considerations, without direct association with the offenders. The choice not to base the primary research on direct interviewing of offenders and ex-offenders in this instance was down to the short timescale of the project and the anticipated time frame for the University ethical procedure. However, a future, longer-term project would aim to take this direct route to persona development if possible, following ethical approval. The network of contacts included representatives from:

- Community Safety,
- Crime Prevention,
- Prolific and other Priority Offenders Team,
- Probation,
- Mental Health, and
- Education.

Through these points of access the researcher was able to carry out a series of in-depth interviews, gaining 'real life', rich and detailed information, not considered accessible through secondary research.

It was noted that some of the sources interviewed carried conflicting perspectives. This important observation was also made in 2007, by

² Other texts could have been used as a starting point; however the aim was to give Henderson (a designer) an overview of the subject prior to more focused engagement.

members of the ThinkCrime Expert Panel, a separate project running in parallel to this one, managed by the Design Against Crime Solutions Centre³. The ThinkCrime project was a collaboration between the universities of Salford, Manchester Metropolitan, Central Lancashire, Huddersfield and Northumbria, supported by the Social Development Fund supported, and involving crime prevention practitioners from those regions in discussion and development of opportunities for more effective management of crime prevention. The reason the issue of conflicting perspectives is important, is that it supports the case for primary research to be conducted with offenders and ex-offenders, as a future research opportunity. However, even then it is anticipated that the sample would be skewed, in that it would be made up of offenders who had been caught, or who were open about their activities. It might be argued that the most useful personas would be of those creative enough not to be caught.

The interviewing of crime prevention practitioners in the North East also provided an understanding of interagency interactions, and informed how the crime prevention system functioned. The researcher carried out primary and secondary research in parallel, referring not just to the previous project reference list but carried out a new search using keywords from the two crime brief areas. Among others, these texts included: Budd (1999) for Burglary, and Macdonald (2001) for Graffiti, which the researcher found particularly useful in developing the contexts for designers.

An additional ethnographic approach was taken, where scenes of crime and potential sites for crime were visited and photographed, including vandalised alleyways and graffiti sites. The researcher also entered an Internet forum on graffiti under a pseudonym, and gathered information from a range of sources. A number of websites also provided useful information to support the interviews, including the sites of: Northumbria Police, Home Office, Crime Stoppers, Crime Reduction, and Vandal Squad. In the final stage of the development, the researcher returned to her designer role, sorting and formatting the most salient information into criminal persona cards. With peer review from the project network she was able to select the four most valuable personas from each of the ranges she had developed, for burglary and graffiti. Each of the card pairs, for 'Data' and 'Context', were then produced to the same format.

Figure 1a shows a persona data card for the opportunist burglar. The typical age, sex and history, enabled the designers to begin to visualise 'their' offender. This was aided by the description of character. However, the most important section on these cards, relating to the 'creative prompts', was how the offender operated. The designers were encouraged to add to these notes any further considerations which came out of their own experiences in investigating and using them. Figure 1b provides some contextual visual support material for typical scene of crime.

³ e.g. Andrew Wootton and Caroline Davey of the Design Against Crime Solution Centre, The University of Salford, and Mike Hodge of Greater Manchester Police

Figure 1a. Opportunist Burglar Persona Data Card

Opportunist
The amateurs of the burglary world...

Age band 18+
Sex Male
History
* Has been implicated in over 25 walk-in burglaries.

Character
~ He's a bit of a chancer!
* He thinks that 'if people are stupid enough to leave doors open then they deserve to be burgled'.
* He's easily led and influenced by peers.
* Sees stealing as a quick and easy way of getting cash.
* Gets a rush from doing it.
* Doesn't think twice about taking your stuff ...he'll only get a police caution.
* Little structure in his life...lives a day-to-day existence.
* Takes recreational drugs.

Tools of the trade
* Alert to an opportunity.

How he operates
* Takes anything that will sell.
* Looks for open doors or windows or poorly maintained properties.
* He surveys properties looking for things left on display...computer on desk facing onto the street, etc.
* Acts spontaneously...May burgle a property on his way home if an opportunity presents itself.
* Is versatile in his approach to an opportunity.
* Sells on goods to friends in the pub or keeps them for himself.
* Will carry what he can but will also stash goods to collect later from a wheelie bin etc.
* If he discovered a property that is favourable to a brake in he'll come back that night and burgle.
* He may wait until students are away on summer semester and try and get into a house.
* Operates fairly close to home.

(Note: The card also features a central graphic of several fingerprints.)

Figure 1b. Opportunist Burglar Persona Context Card

Opportunist

The opportunist burglar was delivering leaflets and found the door was left on a chain...all it took for him to gain entry to the house was to reach his arm around the door and unfasten the chain.

A poorly maintained gardens can act as a screen to allow burglars to access property without detection

Open ground floor window...

Ladders left out...

Open or damaged doors

(Note: The card features several photographs illustrating these burglary contexts: a person at a window, a garden, a ladder, and open doors.)

Figure 2a shows a persona data card for the prolific tagger. Again the character description helps each designer visualise their offender, helping them get into character; but the most important data are the

descriptions of how the offender operates. Figure 2b then provides example visual context for typical crime scenes.

Figure 2a. Prolific Tagger Persona Data Card

Prolific Tagger

A tag consists of the sprayers name in stylized letters that are gathered together in the form of a logo.

Age band 17-30
Sex Male
History
 * No previous convictions.

Character
 * *"I did it for the fame. That was about it basically"*
 * His aim is to be the next INCH, the next graffiti 'King'.
 * Has a fierce drive to earn his profile...get a reputation.
 * His ambition is to go all city and get his 'name up' on the whole of the metro system.
 * Wants fame... his 'claim to fame'.
 * Wants respect and recognition from his peers.
 * Uses graffiti to prove his masculinity.
 * This is his chance to be autonomous and be somebody else.
 * Likes to assert his adopted identity.
 * Is committed to graf and wants to progress up the hierarchy.
 * Finds it rewarding when he sees his name up everywhere-is proud.
 * His tagging gives him a sense of achievement.
 * Graffiti has become part of his lifestyle.
 * Likes the rush he gets from doing it...Exciting.
 * Likes the element of risk.

- * Enjoys the whole experiences of graf spraying.
- * Likes to mix with like-minded people, be part of the sub culture, be part of a collective.

Tools of the trade

- * Spray cans.
- * Bag to keep cans in.
- * Dark clothing and something to hide face.
- * Paper & pencil/pen.

How he operates
 * *"...the more tags you have up the more respect you get."*

- * Usually tags in spray paint.
- * He has created his own identity and decided upon his tag name...AMOR or FIGGS.
- * Designs and practices his tag design on paper.
- * His underlying rule is just to 'get up', put your name everywhere, do as much as possible.
- * Is devoted to graf and goes out to tag every night.
- * Focused...considers where to tag to get the most exposure.
- * Will go out alone at night or with a few mates to spray.
- * Knows the scene and the crews.
- * Tags for his peers and not the public.
- * Is aware of CCTV cameras and security.
- * Is aware of the implications of his actions.

Figure 2b. Prolific Tagger Persona Context Card

Prolific Tagger

Without the use of the personas and the C4 process the designers would likely fall back on what experience they had and a number of assumptions, which would only be countered if they sought experience from crime prevention officers, to better inform the design process. But even then some designers might not be as effective in testing and reviewing their proposals, instead forming 'favourites' earlier in the development process.

To support these cards, guidance was also provided for applying the personas and carrying out the C4 process. The guidance included some simple drama exercises to help team members get into their characters, and this was aided by a suggestion of props and sources of further contextual information.

This approach enabled designers to take on their given persona and apply that certain type of criminal thinking to each stage of the design process. The designer, having taken on the criminal persona would be more aware and able to ensure that their design proposal anticipated the potential for crime, maintaining user friendliness but simultaneously making designs 'abuser unfriendly'. This design strategy has sought to introduce design changes, making offending actions less attractive to the offender.

Personas were selected on the basis of maintaining an effective range of 'types', which could be readily engaged with and contribute to creative and critical thinking. It was found to be essential to the success of this project that adequate research time was dedicated at the development stage to ensure that the information gained was accurate, to avoid inappropriate typecasting.

Time planning was essential for the investigation, having to consider: the question phrasing for effective elicitation of knowledge and later analysis; identifying the right practitioners to interview; interview timing and travel; support photography; and some margin for new interview and development opportunities which could arise as the project progressed.

The process of creating the persona cards started with analysis of secondary data and then advanced to the acquisition of indirect primary data through the crime prevention practitioners. Varying research techniques were used to compile the intrinsic data required.

The information gained from in-depth interviewing, following the ongoing establishment of a project network, was invaluable in obtaining 'real life', rich detailed information. Face-to-face interviews offered the possibility of modifying ones' line of inquiry, following up interesting and unanticipated responses and investigating motives, providing a level of insight not found in the public reports or books referred to. The ethnographic data obtained when interviewing and when photographing environments helped to bring a sense of reality and substance to the development of the persona cards. Preconceptions and generalisations were replaced by actualisation. Beliefs, attitudes, experiences and motives were used to help define the persona 'types'.

It was found to be important to invest time in setting up face-to-face interviews as opposed to telephone interviews. There was a greater sense of trust between interviewer and interviewee when eye-to-eye contact was possible. The issue of 'trust' was also highlighted by ThinkCrime as a communications problem between practitioners that may influence effective crime prevention management. So, developing a rapport with key research respondents was vital to informing and developing criminal persona content. It was necessary to draw information from a number of parties linked to offending to enable varying viewpoints and alternative perspectives to be considered and analysed collectively to try and maintain a degree of objectivity.

On reflection the interviews proved to be an effective and powerful tool, the only drawback being the duration of time it then took to process the qualitative data, clarifying and illustrating the implications of the findings. However, the ethnographic research was a crucial information source used in the creation of the persona cards. The researcher carried out site visits to develop a greater understanding of context and this helped to redefine the way she saw things as a designer. It was proposed as a useful experience for designers involved in crime prevention.

It is important that the design practitioner, or academic, intending to use this criminal persona development methodology to inform the C4 process, should approach it with an open mind. They must jettison personal perceptions and values associated with offending, as this may lead to response biases of various kinds, which may counter the effectiveness of the creative and critical thinking. It is difficult to engage prejudice-free, which re-enforces the need to amass a wide range of information from different 'sides' of the debate.

Conclusion

The intent and approach (to describe by example the development of criminal personas, their cards and other support material for designers) has, on review, great potential for success. The research informed the development of clearly presented personas and user guidance enabling the design practitioner or academic to avoid applying stereotypical and standardized data within the design process, which would potentially result in ill-informed design outcomes.

Where some professions have already employed persona development to engage their creative processes more effectively with their market types and needs, C4 seeks to engage designers with their market's competition. The nature of critical intellectual attack carries motivational issues, yet we believe the role-play approach to persona ownership with C4 can overcome much of the reluctance to engage with such a proposition.

It is anticipated that users of the C4 process, especially those who engage with the active development and maintenance of the personas, will

experience a change in mind-set, enabling more effective development of 'competitive' crime prevention product/process/service solutions.

In conclusion of this stage of the project it was proposed that there should be benefit in direct primary research. Such an approach would avoid conflicts which may be noted through indirect primary research, because of different perspectives held by some crime prevention agencies. While it would seem preferable to conduct primary research with 'practising offenders', to build up an even greater understanding of offending behaviour, further investigation is needed to compare effectiveness of directly and indirectly researched personas to qualify this point.

Acknowledgement

We would like to thank Joanna Ward and her colleagues at the Community Safety Unit, in Newcastle's civic centre, and Northumbria Police crime prevention officers and associates, who have provided invaluable support informing the development of the personas for this project.

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