

71 Role-playing

Acting the role of the user in realistic scenarios can forge a deep sense of empathy and highlight challenges, presenting opportunities that can be met by design.

Role-playing consists of exercises whereby the designer takes on the role of the user, assuming the routines and behaviors that he or she might experience in actual scenarios of use. It is a relatively low-cost, low-investment method; however, a certain amount of work is necessary to make the role-play credibly connected to the real lives of users.

Members of the design team have to be willing to participate and play along realistically. On the other hand, caution sometimes needs to be exercised, as people may become so immersed in the role that social exchanges can lead to hurtful or upsetting actions, words, and responses. In fact, the criticisms of role-playing and simulation highlight the need for finding an appropriate balance: the exercises are critiqued for being not realistic enough, and for being too realistic, depending on the situation.¹

The setup for role-playing is typically easy, and may need nothing more than the people in the room. If more sophisticated environmental props are deemed necessary, then simulation exercises should be considered instead. If more elaborate acting targeted toward creative concept generation is called for, then bodystorming methods should be conducted instead. The role-play or acting out of user scenarios is usually guided at least by describing a general situation or suggestions for actions to be performed, tasks to be accomplished, or goals to be reached. The players then begin acting their various roles, including those of the user and supporting stakeholders for the situation. Because role-playing attempts to approximate real-life situations, improvisation is expected and encouraged.

Role-playing is difficult to document by the actors involved, so it is useful to have other team members record the sessions using photos and notes or video. To make sense of what occurred during the exercise, and to assess genuine feelings that may have resulted from the session, a thorough review of role-playing after the fact is critical.

Mock activities through role-playing are particularly useful when direct observation is not feasible or ethical, for example, for personally sensitive situations or where access to the users is restricted. However, wherever possible, role-playing should still be built upon realistic scenarios and user behaviors, either through collecting enough information to guide the exercise, or at least by comparison to real users and situations later, through other research means such as interviews, contextual observations, or secondary research.

1. Sommer, Robert, and Barbara Sommer. *A Practical Guide to Behavioral Research: Tools and Techniques*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Further Reading

Burnette, Charles. "A Role-Oriented Approach to Problem-Solving" in S.A. Olsen, *Group Planning and Problem Solving Methods in Engineering Management*, New York: John Wiley and Sons, 1982.

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Behavioral
Attitudinal

Quantitative
Qualitative

Innovative
Adapted
Traditional

Exploratory
Generative
Evaluative

Participatory
Observational
Self reporting
Expert review
Design process