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# Lived Scenarios

## Combining Role-playing and Design

*There are so many bright minds in the world. All the people of the everyday life. Yet, there are the very few, who design and create the world we live in. How to give stronger voice to the everyday people? How to provide* scaffolds *that enable people to participate in the making of today and tomorrow?*

This article provides a short description of the role-playing -oriented Lived Scenarios[1] -project, conducted at the University of Art and Design Helsinki (UIAH), and related research. The project, conducted during Autumn 2004, was built around a course called "Introduction to Future Media Scenarios through Role-playing". The optional course was held in Helsinki Polytechnic, and was open to all of the students in the school. The aim of the Lived Scenarios -project was to **develop concept design methodology** within the course and to **explore** the forms and possibilities of using **role-playing as a way to create video scenarios**.

The main sources of inspiration for the project were **everyday creativity** (Sanders 2003), **co-design** (Botero et al. 2003), **immersive stories** (Kim 2004), and **using stories and acting to develop product ideas** (Lehrdahl 2002). From these ingredients, the methods used in the Lived Scenarios -project have been evolved as a process that has continued during the whole project.

During the course process, six stories were written by students, who drew inspiration from a set of scenarios describing possibilities of using media in the future. The stories were then evolved with improvisational acting by the participating three students. This eventually resulted into five video scenarios describing the personal views of the students on what the media practices should be in the future.

## Role-playing

What kind of activities can be called role-playing? There have been efforts to define role-playing games (RPGs) for many years (e.g. Mason 2004, MacKay 2001, Fine 1983). For this particular book, writers were asked to distinguish e.g. between table-top role-playing and live action role-playing (Larp). However, as the applications of role-playing increase, these boundaries may become inapproriate. Particularly, trying to categorise the Lived Scenarios -project between theatrical acting, Commedia dell'Arte (Rudlin 1994, Tuomola 1999), improvisation (Routarinne 2004, Johnstone 1979) and role-playing feels quite fruitless. For clarity, however, this paper considers role-playing as an activity that engages the participants to act and reflect on predefined themes, from the first person point of view.

Participative acting has been used for a long time as a means to design change. Maybe Commedia dell'Arte already caused change during the Middle Ages. More intentionally, however, Augusto Boal (1995) introduced **forum theatre** – a participative theatre method focusing to solve societal problems. In Finland, it has been used, for example, by theatre groups to conduct interventions in elementary schools, on issues such as teasing and mobbing. Within the product development context, there is an ongoing exploration (Kolu et al. 2003) to use participative theatre in user-centred product concept design.[2]

In product development research, there has been many experimentations that involve story writing and acting. As already mentioned, Lehrdahl (2002) used **fantasy writing** and **science fiction role-playing** to brainstorm product ideas. He used a process of mental visualisation, group storywriting, and scenario play – prior to a brainstorming session for product ideas. In the EU-IST Maypole project (Mäkelä & Battarbee 1999, Maypole Project Team 1999), several simple **mock-ups** were given to children. Using the mock-ups as inspiration, the children played and showed by acting the ways they would like to communicate.

Mazé and Jacobs (2003), on the other hand, have been interested in **games** as a way to engage users' imagination for product development. The game with strongest relationship to role-playing was a superpower prototyping game, where various props were used as superpowers. Each team of players used their powers in combination to solve problems in the treasure hunting they were asked to play in the city.

As a way to elicit user feedback on products that do not yet exist, Salvador and Sato (1999) developed focus group into a **focus troupe**. The method involves live actors that present scenarios of potential products to a focus group that then discusses the scenarios. Iacucci et al. (2000), on the other hand, have used both **table-top role-playing** and **SPES**, Situated and Participative Enactment of Scenarios, to emphasise the role of the participants in acting and generating ideas.

## Design

How people might use things? How people see themselves as users? These are questions of **concept design** (Koskinen & Battarbee, 2003) that aims to search for ideas and concretise those ideas into concepts of products, services and systems[3]. According to Keinonen et al. (2003) concept design searches new, innovative solutions, concretises the alternatives and charts the future. They also emphasise that, unlike product design, concept design does not create concepts directly for the production or for the markets. Where concept design ends, product design begins; a few of the concepts are selected and then refined into solid products.

In concept design, it is typical to use **scenarios** (Keinonen, 2000) as a way to communicate and evaluate the concepts. A scenario is a story about the use of products. It describes the people, who use the product, the environment where the product is used, the ways to use the product, its functions and the benefits that the user gets from it. It is not mandatory to describe the specifics of physical devices and/or user intefaces in the scenarios; the product can be clearly shown, or instead, the focus can be in the context – letting the environment and action speak for itself. According to Ylirisku (2004), scenarios can explain the purpose of the product in a brief, concise and engaging way. They are good for communicating causal relationships, as they describe events happening over time. While probably the most straight-forward form for scenarios is an illustrated story, they have been also created for example as comics and animations.

Video scenarios have been used for quite some time to envision the future (Tognazzini, 1994). In fact, many scifi movies, such as the Metropolis – made in 1927 and Minority Report – made in 2002, could be thought as over-large video scenarios with wide focus. More participatory scenario making has been practiced by for example Ylirisku (2004), who used video scenarios in the development of a computer system for a bank.

## The Project

The Lived Scenarios -research project draws in ideas from the fields of theatre to role-playing, and applies them into concept design. This has resulted into an idea generation method that emphasises participation through mental and physical personal experience. The following key characteristics that, when combined together, describe how the project contributes to role-playing and design.

Instead of creating product concepts, the project is involved in the **co-design of everyday practices** (Botero et al. 2003). It is part of an overall effort in our ARKI research group at UIAH to describe the **desirable future of media** and related tools. In order to define what is desirable, our research actively involves everyday people to discuss and brainstorm, what kind of future they would want to have for themselves.

The attitude of emphasising the "voice of the participant" is loosely related to the empowerment in the field of scandinavian participatory design. The field aims to enable, through participation, the workers' influence in their working environment (Ehn & Kyng 1991). During the process in the Lived Scenarios -project, students were frequently reminded to **create stories that were meaningful** to them **personally**. The stories did not have to be focused on the students themselves, however. It was enough to think that the story could involve a person close to the student.

A **prepared context** facilitates the forming of a common language for the participants (Iacucci et al. 2000, Lehrdahl 2002) and inspires participants to open their minds to unexpected possibilities. This can be thought as a way of building scaffolds, as described by Sanders (2003). The Lived Scenarios -project used the prepared context, a set of 9 excerpts, as a starting point for the idea generation. The excerpts were brief stories based on the work in Mediaspace scenarios, a sibling research project in the ARKI research group. The two projects had natural synergy between them, as the aim of the Mediaspace scenarios -project is to explore and visualize the potentials of media practices in the future.

In the Lived Scenarios –project, the students' **stories were evolved into video scenarios through acting**. During the first half of the process, the focus was on iteratively writing and discussing the stories. In the second half, the stories were acted out in several variations with almost fully improvised dialogue. The intention during the whole process was to describe and then rethink the desired media practices.

## The Process and Larp

The process in the Lived Scenarios –project was not same as the process in a typical larp game would be. However, some elements of the process were more similar to larp than others, and are elaborated here further.

In the first phase of the process was started by introducing the prepared context to the students. This is similar to role-playing games (RPGs), in which **the created world** is described or explained to the players. The world introduces the environment and means of interaction to that environment (Fine, 1983), which makes it easier for players to have an engaging gaming experience. Unlike many RPGs (MacKay, 2001), the Lived Scenarios -project did not define detailed rules to structure the action within the game. This was because, in the project, the world was defined as being only three years into the future, i.e. 2007. To describe the relatively familiar world, it was deemed appropriate to use the small excerpts.

The first phase of process continued with students discussing their ideas that the prepared context had inspired. The ideas were then refined into stories and eventually narrowed down into a few, consise, written stories. Each story had two students as main story- and character writers. The aim was to keep the amount of characters small (2-4 per story). However, one scenario (the school assignment) had eight characters that were eventually acted out by three persons. Similarly to larps, dialogue was not written out for the characters. The **characters**, that is, the roles that participants play during the game are, of course, central also to the RPGs (MacKay, 2001). Depending on the larp, the characters can be written by the organisers of the larp (Enghoff, 2003), or by the players themselves. For an engaging game, it is important that the characters have written relationships between themselves.

In the second phase of the process, **props** were selected to identify the characters, similarly to many larps. The selected props included hats, coats and a fake beard. No attempt was made to make the props convincing or realistic. The aim was to help the interaction between the players, the rest was left to imagination. In larp, on the other hand, the quality of the props vary. Some games aim for high realism while others use vey low-fidelity props.

Contrary to many larps, there was no **game master** in the Lived Scenarios -project. The only remotely similar role was that of the movie director, that is, the person who recorded with the digital video camera and gave directions for the acting students. This was the point of the strongest divergence to larp – the role-playing in the project was not continous. Instead, the acting was recorded in pieces, similarly to movie takes. While this often undesirable for a RPG, it suited the purposes of the project. The focus was in creating engaging, well-thought video scenarios. That necessiated many iterations and tries, instead of long uninterrupted plays.

## The Video Scenarios

During the process, altogether five video scenarios were created, based on six finalised stories. One of the stories, "Digital Diary", was left out, because the students felt it was a little bit too close to the other stories and was the least interesting to act out.

The video scenarios were:

- **Two friends**, showing a possibility of listening again songs that had been played in the radio.
- **Accident**, exploring the possibilities of using pictures and video to communicate first-aid instructions to a passer-by at the accident site.
- **School assignment**, where media devices were used by school kids to record the visits to a lamb farmer, a textile designer and a clothes shop and then share the experiences with the class.
- **Night of the arts**, showing two art-liking city dwellers use close proximity digital contact cards as a way to advertise and share.
- **Safari**, where two grand-children used a "magic thing", to communicates with both the camera of the tour car at the safari and the television at grandma's home.

In addition to the five video scenarios, three smaller half minute long video clips were recorded. The aim was to explore and to reflect further in the prepared world that was now very easy for the students to relate to. The video clips consisted of **quick improvisations**, based on the characters of the school assignment scenario.

The three clips described:

- The possibilities to share music while speaking on the phone – one of the school girl characters.
- The use of laptop as a VCR – the teacher character
- The cooperation with several lamb farmers on wool orders – the lamb farmer character.

## Discussion

The preliminary evaluation of the Lived scenarios -project, based on the feedback from the students and the fellow researchers, has identified some of the strengths and challenges in the used method. They are summarised in table 1, and compared to the findings of another project using video scenarios (Ylirisku, 2004). The project focused on a case for developing knowledge management systems for a bank.

| | The Lived Scenarios -project | Ylirisku (2004) |
|---|---|---|
| Strengths | **Concrete, engaging, physical** and **mental experience**. | Acting and scriptwriting can be highly **motivating** for the participants. Participatory video scenarios were used to co-design with users in an **efficient, effective** and **engaging** way. (page 13) |
| | **Shared language** between participants, possibly easy to convey ideas to others as well. | The scenarios can **communicate** media practices to uninformed people without any additional explanation. (page 12)<br>Well created video scenarios can convey a message in **rich, specific and emotion-evoking** way. (page 4) |
| | Taking the ideas to the level of **action** makes visible the **details**, thus enabling to solve, while acting, the potential problems that arise. | |
| | Once familiar with the method and the defined world, it is relatively easy and **quick to act out and develop** any ideas that arise. | |
| Challenges | Acting raises the demands to **trust** all participants and not to lose one's face | Creating video scenarios requires **willingness** from the participants to act, which in some cases will require facilitation and practicing. There must be a way to withdraw without **losing face**. (page 13) |
| | Acting by it self does not necessarely make the resulting scenarios easily **understandable**. | Making video scenarios needs **skills** similar to making movies: shooting, lighting, sound recording and directing. Those are required to make quality videos.<br>Also, skills in **storytelling** are required to make the video scenario engaging and understandable. (page 4) |
| | **Post-processing** of the videos can be time-consuming, especially if original audio/video quality and content do not fit the needs of the final video scenarios. | Participative scenarios can be made relatively quickly, however editing the final video scenarios can take a lot of **time**. (page 4) |
| | Getting used to improvisational acting can take some time to learn. | |
| | A relatively straight-forward and transparent process, from an idea to the scenario | |
| | The participants' "voice" is quite visible in the resulting scenario. | |

*Table 1: The comparison between two projects utising participatory video scenarios.*

In summary, the Lived scenarios –project was successful in using role-playing to create video scenarios. The resulting scenarios represented the opinions of the partisipating students on what the desired media practices of the future should be. The method used in the project is engaging to participate in. However, it requires many special skills, such as shooting, lighting, sound editing, directing and storytelling. Also, the participants many need to be facilitated in order from them to get familiar with acting.

What about future? Mason (2004) briefly mentions *free-form* as a style of larp that does away with many of the constraints that typical larps have. Could this new style of larp have something that would contribute to the concept design methodology?

Recently there have been also several major publications in user-centred design, such as the dissertation on interaction as performance (Jacucci, 2004), and the dissertation on co-experience (Battarbee, 2004). Exploring deeper into these views will give new insights into how role-playing and design can merge.

*[1] The Lived Scenarios -project is funded by the Mediaspaces -project of Medialab, University of Art and Design Helsinki. http://arki.uiah.fi/*

*[2] An Academy of Finland -funded project: DRAMA - Scenario Methods for User Centered Product Concept Design. http://www.hiit.fi/fuego/drama/*

*[3] In addition to products, also services and systems can be designed. These are not, however, explicitly mentioned from now on, to maintain brevity.*

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