THE FUTURE-ESSAY AS A DESIGN TOOL

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this paper is to present scenarios, photo-essays and future-essays as tools in communication, and as tools for clarifying the use of products in the future and the aesthetic qualities in the programme. In the design process, the programme is a description of the function, the conditions, and wants from the producer as well as wishes from the user. It is the approach to and plan for the development of a project.

We talk about one coherent tool or three independent tools for the future description:
1. Scenarios – qualitative sceneries for when the product is introduced to the market and 10 - 15 years later.
2. Photo-essays – composed illustrations which give the reader a feeling of the expected context and/or the mood around the use of the product.
3. Future-essays – short image descriptions in which reports about the user's experience and relations to the future product contribute to notions about design and quality of the future product.

This paper discusses the methods as well as the strengths and weaknesses of the three tools when used separately and when used together.

Keywords: scenarios, photo-essays, future-essays, design.

1   INTRODUCTION

Usually designers are good at articulating themselves visually, but rarely linguistically – and therefore they often run into communication problem with assigners?, since unclear expectations can lead to disagreements, if the final result does not match the expectations.

The unclear expectations often originate in the designer's misunderstood dilemma between wishing to prevent inappropriate locking of the solution and the need to clarify the expectations to the solution already in the programme. In practice, designers resort to using short image creating texts as a supplement to the design specification in order to give information about the product's aesthetics qualities, but a proper methodical approach does not exist as far as we know.

Journalists are capable of making short fitting descriptive texts, which are often supported by press photographers' well-angled and well-cut photos. Therefore, we look for usable working method in the world of journalism and discovered the essay and the

photo-essay. The essay can be an eye opener that assesses and makes suggestions for an understanding of an issue without completely locking it in place.

Similarly, we have observed that designers look for qualified statements about a product idea's possibilities 10 to 15 years ahead and for any change in the future use among people who are concerned with futurological research. Thus, there was a need for simple methods for the clarification of the future of a product for use in design practice, in which there far from always is financial basis for involving futurologists. The observation is based on designers' interest in taking part in lectures at the Copenhagen Institute for Futures Studies.

2   SCENARIOS
In education we use qualitative scenarios, which are based on qualitative and subjective assessments, estimates and norms [1, 2]. This technique focuses on giving realistic, coherent descriptions of several equally probable descriptions of the future. The scenarios are based in the concrete issues of the project and focus on signals which affect the interests of the target audience and the development experienced by the producer. An example is the request to set up scenarios within the theme of leisure: Set up at least two scenarios for the circumstances of your product when it is introduced to the market and when it has been on the market for eight years

Choose some tendencies central to your group's product idea. Consider:
- the tendencies apparent in leisure activity.
- if the creative people have got other interest.
- new tendencies in related areas such as exercise, fringe benefits and others.

With the basis in the mega trends 'increasing prosperity' and 'immaterialising with focus on experiences', a group set up the following alternative scenarios for the situation of their product 'SeaRIDER' when it had been on the market for eight years.

2.1   Scenario no 1
The product is mass-produced in about 8000 pieces per year. SeaRIDER is rented out at many locations along the Danish coast and is used by playful people with an active lifestyle. SeaRIDER is used as an exercise machine on which the users challenge and compete with each other. The product is for sale in sports stores and it is also exported.

2.2   Scenario no 2
The production rights to SeaRIDER have been sold to Active-Care who establishes activities centres. Active-Care helps people with rehabilitation and offers customized activities to companies that want to do something for the health of their overweight staff. Active-Care also sells the product to amusement parks, but not to individuals. The product is produced in a quantity of 2000 per year.

The choice between the two scenarios can be essential for the design of the product, for if scenario no 2 is to become a reality, is it necessary to design specifically for physically weak and overweight people. The opposite is the case if scenario no 1 is realized; here the target group is people who already have an active lifestyle and are good physical condition.

In order to choose between the equally plausible scenarios an identification is made of critical uncertainties. They are paired and placed at the ends of two crossing axes. The figure that is formed is called a cross-scenario [3]. In the four quadrants the consequences for the future of the product is added. In the example with SeaRIDER 'direct access to rent or buy SeaRIDER' against 'access with support or instructions' on the vertical axis and 'overweight in poor physical condition' against 'active in good physical condition' at the horizontal axis.

Table 1 Cross-scenario

Cross-scenario	Quadrant	Consequenses
direct access to rent or buy 2 ↑ 1 poor–physical condition-good 3 ↓ 4 Access with support or instructions	1 2 3 4	The challenge 'practice makes perfect' Severe difficulties are OK. High carrying capacity and easy to use -– physically weak user give up easily Instruction and support demanding are OK, but use must lead to better physical condition. The product may be lacking in challenges compared to people who visit amusement parks.

The cross-scenario show that there are inherent conflicts in scenario no 2 and that overweight people in good physical condition are a target group, who can be reached if the product had better uplift. Based on these findings, the group selected to base their work on scenario no 1.

Setting up scenarios for the product's situation both contribute to future-proof a product and it forces the designer to think of alternative future uses of the product which must be considered during the product development phase. The scenarios also contribute to limiting the solution space through considering the consequences for uncertainty.

3   PHOTO-ESSAYS
The photo-essay can be created in such a way that it shows only acts and atmospheres which are related to the product [4]. It may be based on composed photos or manipulated photos (created from elements from several photos as shown in figure 1.)

The photo-essay can also appear as composed photos in picture friezes or picture mosaics.

The picture friezes are used to show an attitude to the aesthetical qualities of the future product such as material, finish etc. For instance a picture frieze with the title 'Meeting with' in a programme for the design of a reclining chair could contain six pictures
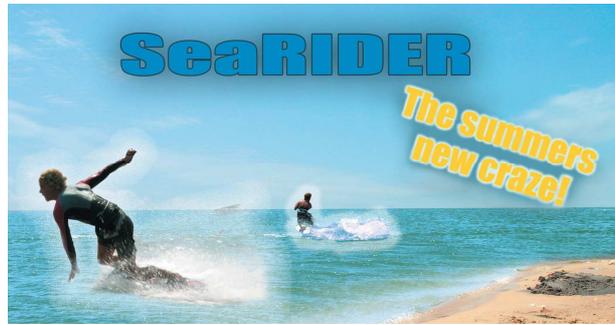
Figure 1 The manipulated photo

which show: The meeting of the back of the chair with the upholstery, the arm meeting the armrest, the back meeting the seat, the upholstery meeting the frame, the chair against the wall and the chair on the floor.

The picture mosaics can show the future surroundings or certain objects which the desired segment surrounds themselves with as an expression of the style which the product is purposed to emphasize.

Composed photos are most often combined with future-scenarios and future-essay and used to visualize atmospheres and to emphasize the message.

4   FUTURE-ESSAYS

The future-essay creates many possibilities in the programme, because the writing process helps the students, who work in groups, to a common understanding of the expectations to the product. The students will also create series of notions about the conditions in which the product will be used, while they are writing concrete reports with imaging words about the experience which the future product makes possible [5]. Furthermore, the essay writing sets up questions about the product's interaction with the surroundings, which the students do not yet understand clearly.

The method of writing an essay takes its starting point in the actual project and Christoffer Scanlan's description of what makes a vivid story which will guide the reader through the essay in spite of the sections of bone-dry facts [6]. This includes for instance:

- to be attentive to the course of the events, not just to results.
- to describe instead of summarise.
- to offer experiences and not just information.
- to make use of the reader's ten senses; the five ordinary senses plus the reader's sense of time, place, characters, drama and meaning.

The students are asked to start answering the following questions: To whom is this project important? Let those people be central for the story. What has to be the most important expression or peculiarity of the project? And to which senses do they appeal? Make sure that the characters talk about, reflect on or discuss these. Consider where the challenge of the project is shown? Let the characters through their acts reflect joy or relief because of the solutions the product offers.

Furthermore, the students are asked to write short notes about which experiences do the users have before they get the product? What experiences do they have after? Consider how the users can express important qualities of the product under different circumstances, so the group can conquer any resistance they may have concerning the product. Draw the plot which shows the interaction between the describing sections of the frame story and the inserted dialogues and facts.

Then write all the text which is typically going to have the same basis structure.
1. In the scenic parts, let the characters do activities wherein the product is used and let them tell in details about their experiences.
2. In the facts parts, propose the supporting arguments.
3. In the frame story, offer further explanations or discuss the arguments.

Add a beginning which draws people's attention, presents the idea of the product and introduces the main characters of the story. The attention getter can be relevant facts that clearly illustrate people's need for the product. Give the reader an ending where your characters sum up on the points of the story or the reader realises the possibilities of your product, for instance by telling at good friend about their dreams for the future in which the chosen future-scenario is a part.

Extract of an essay example: Peter in the Land of Light
The family drives on the highway to get to the holiday cottage north of Frederikshavn which they have rented. The cottage is close to the sea, and after the arrival they decide to go for at quick walk on the beach after the long ride. Peter's attention is caught by something: out on the water, a lot of young people and a few grown-ups are racing around on the SeaRIDERS, they are having great fun. They ride within a limited area so that they do not disturb the people who are swimming. Peter wonders how what makes the craft go - from the distance it is hard to see what is going on. They are moving fastt, but there are no sounds coming from a motor. 'I just have to go and try one of those' he says to his parents and points enthusiastic towards the mystically shining creatures racing around on the water. In the water there is a barge from which the people set off. He walks out to the barge and asks a boy of the same age: 'It looks great when you sail around on those things! Is it hard?' 'No, but it is great fun.' 'Okay – can I try?' 'Yes, you can hire one over there. It's not that expensive' he says and points towards a man in a t-shirt that says 'SeaRIDER'.

5   COHERENT TOOL SCENARIOS - PHOTO- ESSAYS
The project groups combine the three tools by first creating future scenarios and then writing the essay, so that the story takes place in the time between the introduction of the product and the most distant future which the group has created scenarios for. The essay is illustrated with photos as photo essays. Combing the tools makes it possible to attack the same problem in several different ways and to use all the resources of the group. The illustrated essay is especially valuable when it comes to the presentation of the aesthetic qualities which can often be difficult for the designer as well as for the student to express in words. The opposite can be said of the producers and salesmen, who often have difficulties reading the pictures.

6   THE FUTURE-ESSAY BASED ON SCENARIOS AS A DESIGN TOOL

The greatest challenge in introducing these new tools in the design education has been to create a practice for handling aesthetics already in the process concerning writing of the programme and to create a relevant collection of examples.

For the student the difficulties increase with the number of tools introduced. Tools which do not support each other. Surprisingly, the non-illustrated essay has been the easiest one for the students to handle. In the groups where the members take turns writing the text, the essay works well as a means to reach a common understanding of the aesthetic perspectives of the project.

The groups did not reach any important clarification of the idea of the project until the cross-scenario tool was found. In spite of having the help of a photo journalist we managed only to use the manipulated photo as an illustration in the two other tools, but not as independent photo essay. The attempts of the students have not been narrative and can therefore be seen as mood boards.

A certain fear of the new and untested and a fear of defining the solution spacing was quickly overcome by the students through their own positive experiences that the method actually creates better solutions by giving more direction in the working process Searching without plans for the solution was eliminated and an exuberant starting point for choosing the right solution was created.

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