

Speed Dating: Providing a Menu of Possible Futures

Abstract As user experience (UX) design continues to grow and expand, designers often work in areas with few design patterns or social mores. It is easy to make things that people do not want or will not adopt. To help avoid this problem, we developed a method called *speed dating*. This method allows design teams to explore possible futures with target users. Speed dating helps to reduce the risk of making things that people will not adopt. It also discloses opportunities and user needs that design teams might not observe during fieldwork. Over the last decade, we have used this method in many research projects, teaching it to hundreds of UX design students. This article describes the speed dating method, presenting cases to show how speed dating aids UX design.

Keywords

Design methods
Storyboards
Scenarios
Needs validation
Speed dating
User enactments
Reframing

Received November 29, 2016

Accepted August 1, 2017

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The peer review process is the responsibility of Tongji University and Tongji University Press.

<http://www.journals.elsevier.com/she-ji-the-journal-of-design-economics-and-innovation>

<https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sheji.2017.08.003>



Introduction

The massive growth of technology in recent years means dramatic growth in the user experience (UX) design profession. In working to create exciting new products and services, UX designers employ a user-centered process to understand user practices and needs.

Today's UX designers work on a wide variety of projects. These projects often require designers to consider a future situation that we cannot know today. Tomorrow's systems may integrate natural language processing, robotics, machine learning, sharing through a platform, or haptics. Designers may need to design systems that blur the traditional roles of users, customers, and clients, and they may need to design for complex peer-to-peer services and citizen science. Designed systems already push technology across traditional social boundaries, and the future will bring more such systems. These include such systems as driverless car services, wearable data-gathering sensors, intelligent environments, and decision support tools. They also include systems that address large-scale, social problems, including design for the developing world and design for sustainability. As UX design continues to expand into new and less-explored areas, designers often find there are few design patterns or social mores available to help guide their choices, sometimes none. When working on these speculative futures, designers increasingly run the risk of making things that will fail. In this situation, it is difficult to find a clear path towards a preferred future, a future that could be possible and a future that stakeholders prefer. The UX process of understanding user needs provides limited insight into what people might be willing to do and what they desire for the future. At present, UX designers have no effective way to conduct fieldwork on people's future practices that permits designers to anticipate future user needs and desires.

To help address this growing challenge, we devised and developed a design method we call "speed dating." We borrowed the term from romantic speed dating. In the romantic process, single women or men seeking likely dating partners come to a meeting where they experience a sequence of many short dates to make informed choices about preferred partners for full dates.

As a design method, speed dating begins by asking UX designers to generate several concepts. Each concept entails a different future for a given design. The designers then recruit likely target users as participants, offering users a series of samples that allow them to imaginatively experience possible futures, one after the other. Design teams ask participants to critically reflect on what they might be willing to use or do in the context of the imagined futures, probing what they need or want to experience, and what they don't. Speed dating sessions help sensitize designers to cases in which design teams are working on problems or issues of little concern to participants. Speed dates also help designers to recognize cases in which proposed solutions cross invisible, social boundaries. These are two of the common reasons for failure in new products or services. What's more, speed dating experiences often yield insights that allow designers to reframe problems and situations by revealing latent user needs or desires that traditional fieldwork might not disclose.

Speed dating is named after social events designed to help singles find a romantic partner. People spend an evening in a space where they might go on a date and rapidly encounter many potential romantic partners to understand what qualities they want in a partner or mate. Speed dating in design places participants in a familiar situation to experience new product or service interventions that provide a taste of a possible future. Speed dating takes two main forms – the storyboard and user enactment (UE). Both approaches situate a user in a familiar situation to then reveal a technical intervention that implies a new future. Both approaches expose target users to concepts that design teams think users will desire or reject.

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