PUBLISHED VERSION

Aaron Humphrey
User personas and social media profiles
Persona Studies, 2017; 3(2):13-20

http://hdl.handle.net/2440/123312
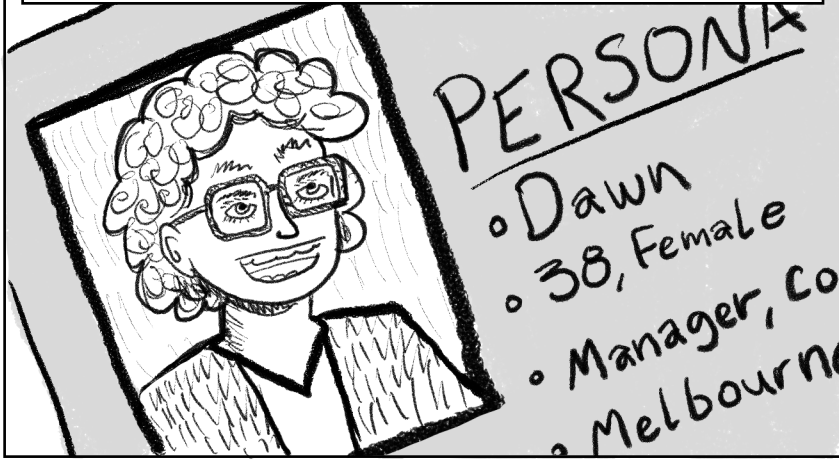
User personas and social media profiles

Dr, Aaron Humphrey, University of Adelaide

In the world of User Experience Design, a persona isn't something that belongs to a person. Instead, personas are created by designers to act as "fictitious, specific and concrete representations of target users" (Pruitt & Adlin 2010 p, 5).

Alan Cooper, who developed this conception of personas, explained that "personas are not real people, but they are based on the behaviors and motivations of real people we have observed and represent them throughout the design process" (Cooper, Riemann & Cronin 2007 pg. 75).
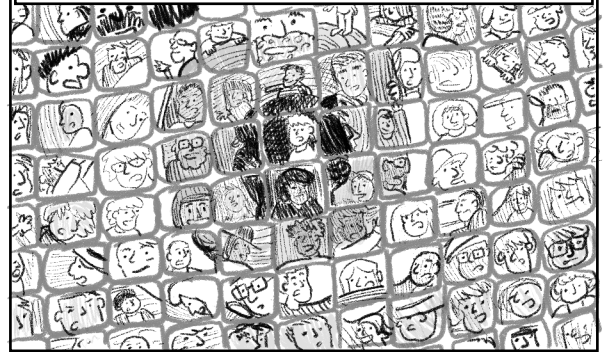
Although Cooper initially popularized personas as a tool for software developers, the technique has since been adopted in other fields, including marketing, business and design.
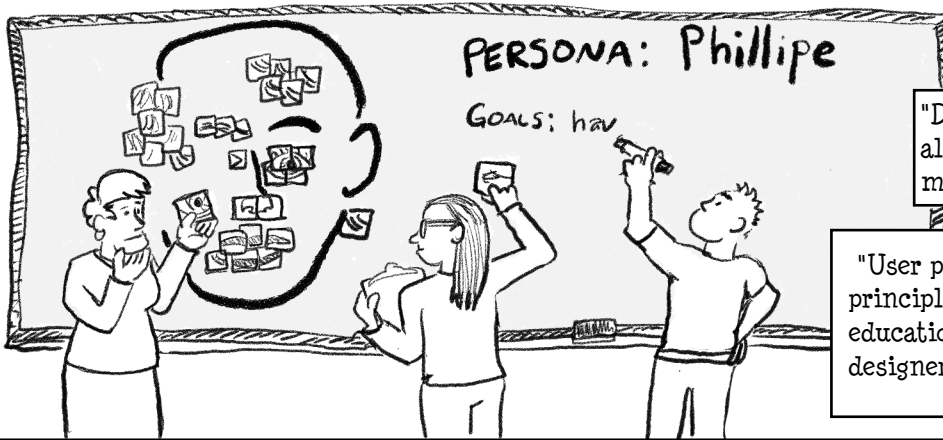
"During the past decade the term has almost become a marketing mantra" (Revella 2015 pg. xx)

"User personas and Cooper's design principles are a critical part of educational curriculum for product designers" (Revella 2015 pg.23)

The theory is that designers should think about personas as if they were real people, referring to their names, imaging conversations with them and advocating for their interests (Ward 2010 pg 478).

I'M WORRIED ABOUT WHAT JULIA WILL THINK.

THAT'S CLASSIC TOM!

WE'VE REVISED THIS TO FIT MARGARET'S AESTHETIC.

In this way, personas are supposed to encourage empathy and user-centered designs.

Cooper enthusiastically explained WHY designers should use personas (Cooper 2002), but did not describe HOW to create them until years later (Cooper, Reinmann & Cronin 2007). The kinds of information that are included in a persona, the methods used to collect that data, and the way it is used can vary significantly between projects.

Researchers tend to argue that personas should be based on qualitative interviews with actual users, and updated regularly to keep them current.

In practice personas are often based on readily available data, demographics or informal observations.
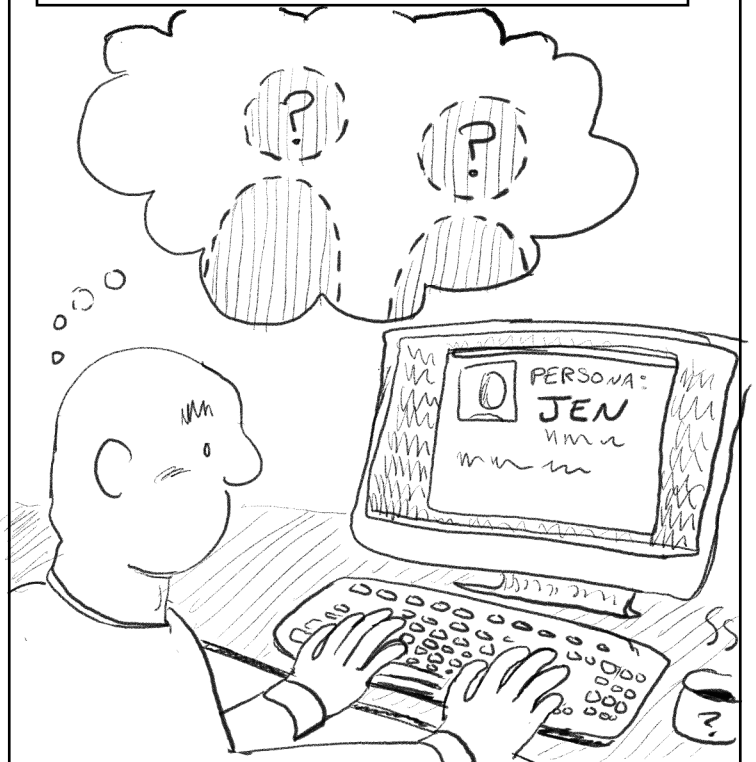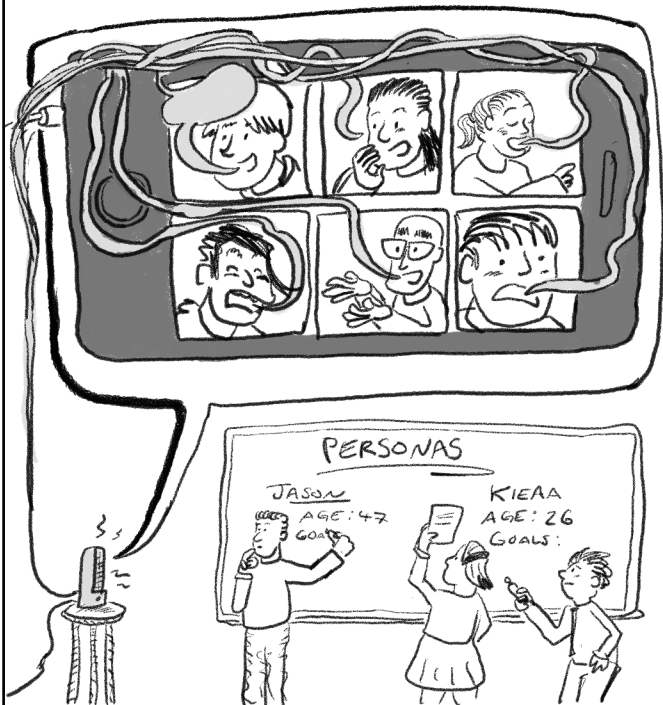
Practitioners use personas in many innovative ways. Pruitt and Adlin (2005) for example suggest creating life-size standees, or candy packages with the persona's details on them to encourage developer buy-in. Coorveits, et al (2016) describes recruiting research participants similar to their persona models in order to test a product.

A google search tends to turn up a more static way of conceiving personas: through a wide variety of templates.


They look a lot like most social media profiles from the past decade.

These persona templates also represent many of the same data as social media profiles.

The difference is that a social media profile is meant to be a representation of an individual, while an audience persona uses an fictional individual to represent a much larger group of people.

Personas pre-date social networking profiles. Cooper's book was published in 1999, and MySpace launched in 2004.
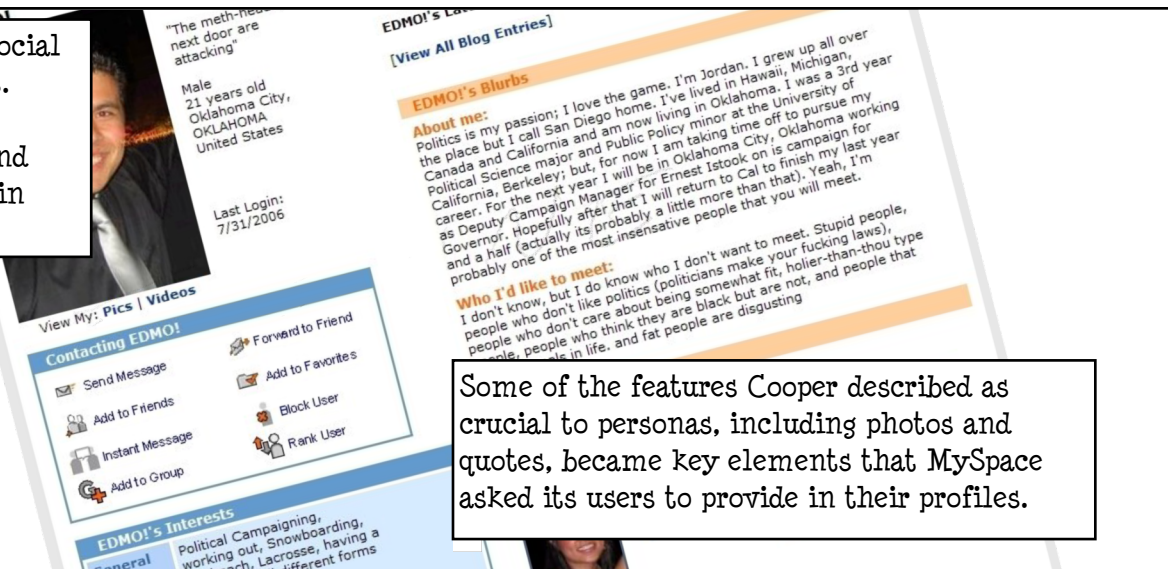
Some of the features Cooper described as crucial to personas, including photos and quotes, became key elements that MySpace asked its users to provide in their profiles.

15

Personas and social media profiles developed in parallel and influenced each other. The personas that Cooper and others used in the late '90s and early '00s are visually distinct from social media profiles. However, Wodtke and Govella (2009) show a template that looks very similar to a MySpace profile. More recent templates seem to draw from the designs of Facebook and Linked in.

Pruitt & Adlin 2005

Wodtke & Govella 2009

Cooper 2002

Ortbal, Frazzette & Mehta 2016

Due to these similar structures, data from social media profiles can very easily be used to inform and build these kinds of personas without the costly (but crucial) work of interviews.

PERSONA: Guadalupe 27, married part-time student "typical quote" GOALS: To live a life of purpose & adventure
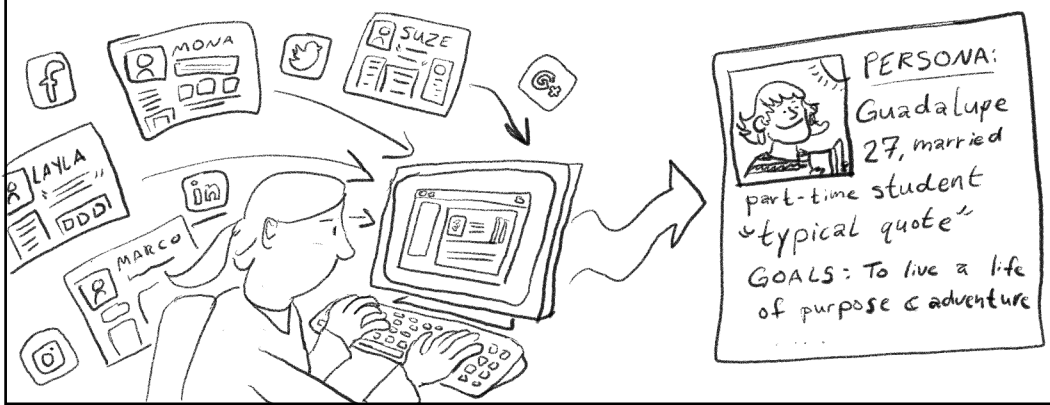
When combined with other data social media sites have about actions that users take on their sites, this tool can become even more powerful.

Indeed, in 2015 Twitter automated this process for its advertising partners, offering the ability to create personas to target (Braydon 2015). Twitter will serve "sponsored posts" to the accounts that match the characteristics of the targeted persona.

Introducing
Twitter personas

College grads   Professionals   >$100K income

Millennials   Small businesses   Seniors

Generation X   Adults 18-54   Business decision-makers

People who are active on social media inevitably create more than their own individual online profiles. In aggregate, their posts and profiles become the fuel that powers the creation of automated audience personas.
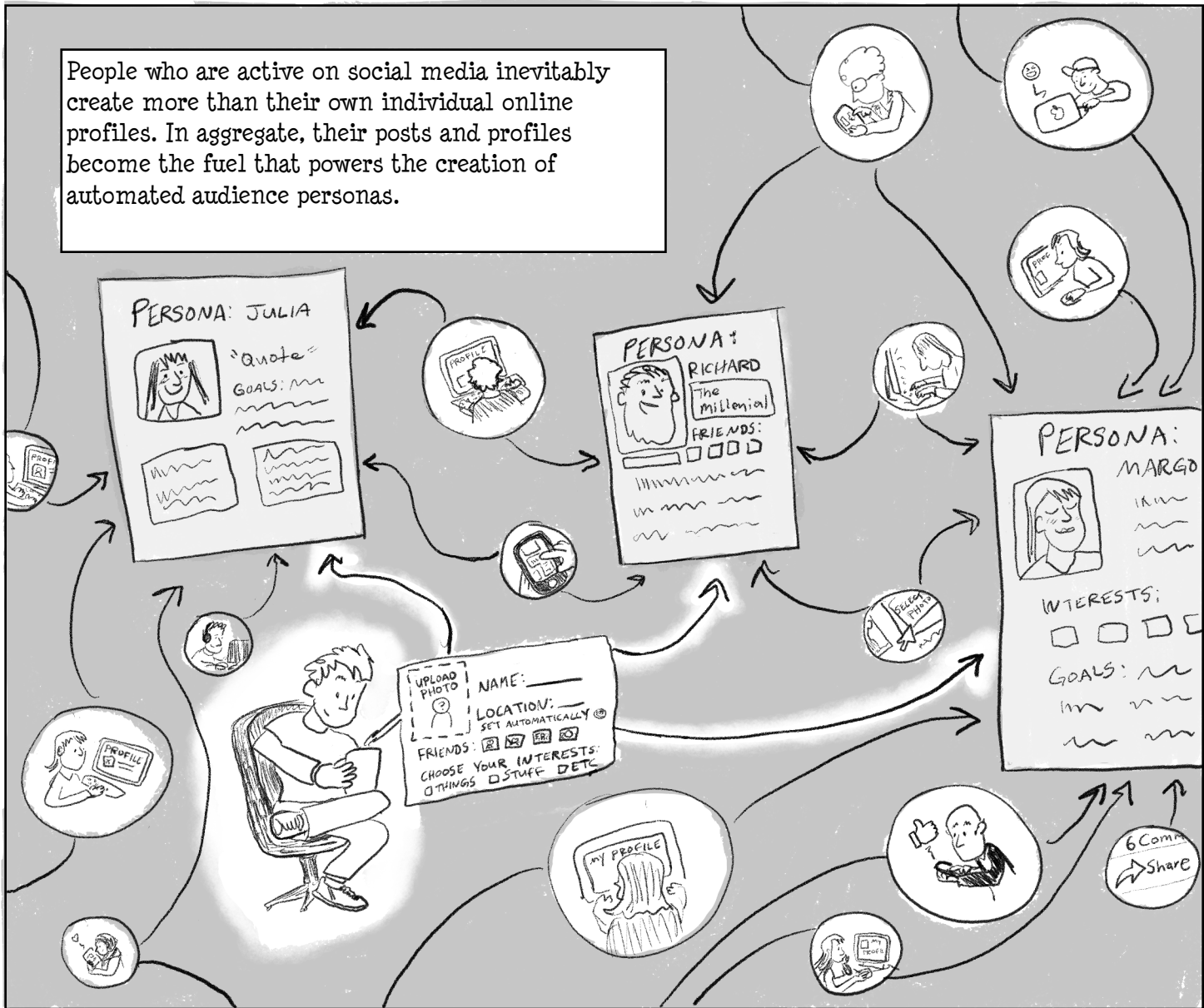
Unlike the interview-based process where persona creation is driven by empathy (Cooper, Reimann & Cronin 2007 pg 81, Goodman, Kuniavsky & Moed 2012 pg 482), deriving personas from profile data is a largely automated process, driven by algorithms developed by programmers who have not met the people that created the profiles their programs are sampling.
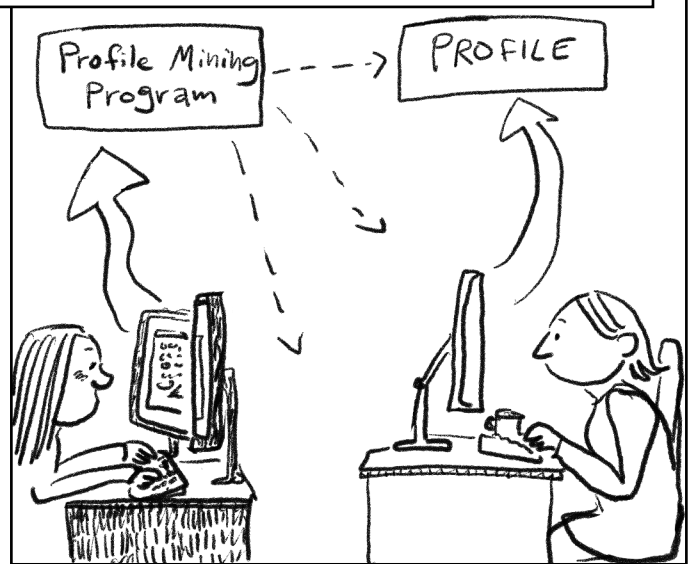
Another way that user profiles and audience personas are similar is that both are constructed representations -- masks designed in the shape of individuals. Both are performances of individuality.

Mildred @ MildyOMMG

Shauna @ sunflower89
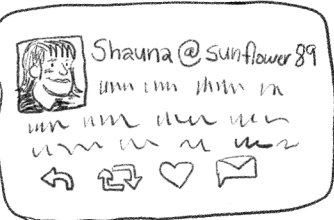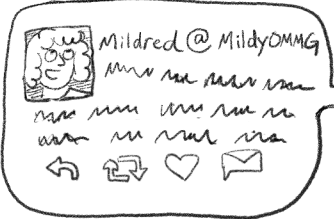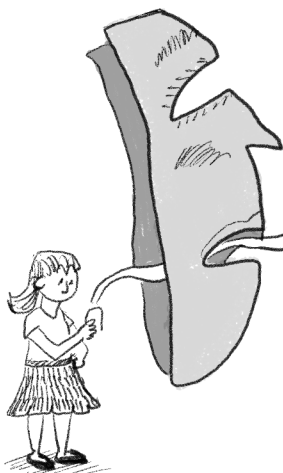
Moore, Barbour and Lee (2017 pg. 4) argue that "the public performance of self" online is "neither entirely 'real' nor entirely 'fictional'", which invites comparison with Cooper's 'fictional' personas that represent 'real' users.

Persona Data
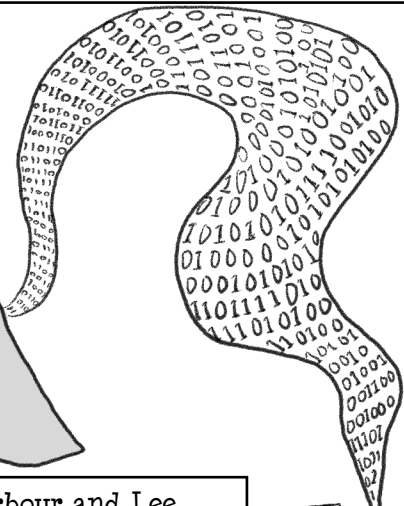
Researchers who draw on user profiles to create personas should keep in mind that profiles, like personas, involve imagination and role-playing, sometimes to a significant degree.
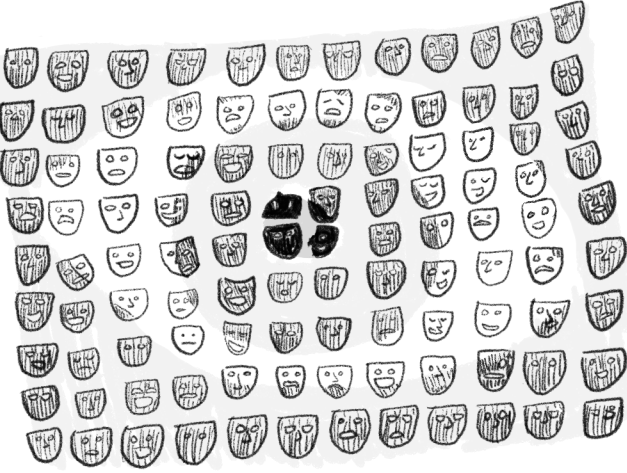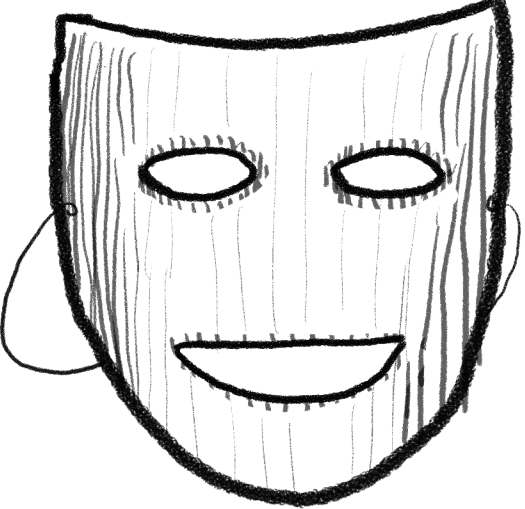
An estimated 48 million accounts on Twitter' (15% of total users) are bots (Valor, et al. (2017), and others are hoaxes or imposters. If personas are automated by algorithms and derived from automated or faked user data, what value do they hold for designers?

In *The Inmates are Running the Asylum* (1999), Cooper argued that programmers had extraordinary control over the design of new technologies and businesses, but often didn't talk to people they were designing for.

THIS NEW FEATURE IS GOING TO BE AMAZING.

OH YEAH, I LOVE WHAT WE'RE PUTTING TOGETHER!

I HAVE NO IDEA HOW ANY OF THESE NEW FEATURES WORK.

IT'S THE ONLY SOFTWARE WE HAVE, SO WE'VE GOT TO MAKE DO.
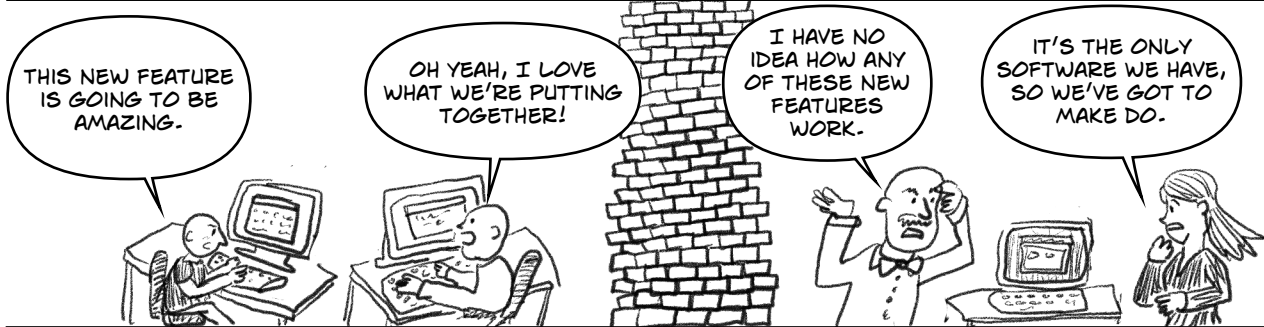
Cooper developed user personas as an antidote to this problem, as a way of encouraging design teams to really understand and empathize with their users.

COOPER SAYS WE NEED TO UNDERSTAND OUR USERS BEFORE DESIGNING ANYTHING.

WE'LL FIND OUT EVERYTHING WE CAN AND MAKE A PERSONA TO REPRESENT THEM!Y

A NEW FRONTIER!

HI, WE WANT TO MAKE A PRODUCT FOR YOU, AND WE WOULD LIKE TO KNOW WHO YOU ARE.

OH, OK ...
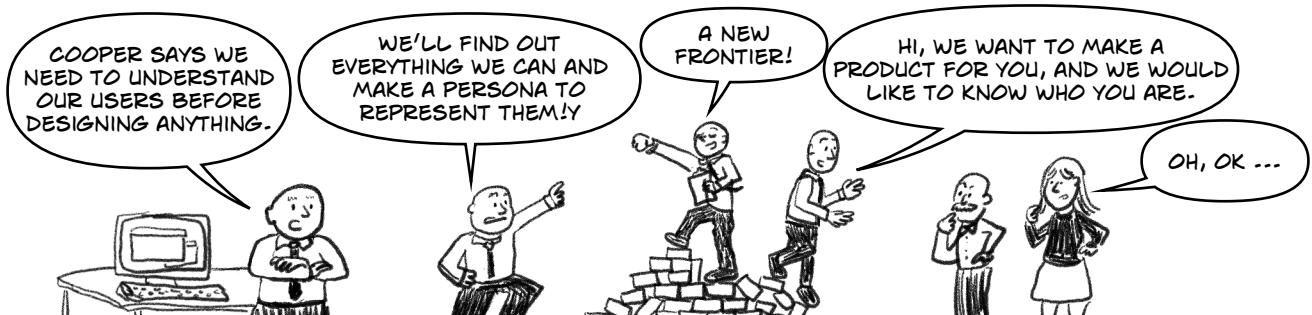
Today, social media profiles can be mined for persona-like information without having to talk to anyone, which may be seen as an efficient way of gathering data without the empathic work that Cooper considered to be central to persona development.

WE DON'T HAVE THE BUDGET TO DO PERSONA RESEARCH.

THAT'S OK, WE CAN JUST PULL FROM WHAT OUR USERS ARE SAYING ON SOCIAL MEDIA.

YEAH, I'LL WRITE A PROGRAM TO PULL THE FACEBOOK INTERESTS OF OUR TARGET AUDIENCE.

WE NEED MORE TRACTION ON SOCIAL MEDIA. CAN YOU CREATE SOME CUSTOMER PROFILES ON TWITTER?

SURE, I CAN BASE THEM ON THE PERSONAS THAT MARKETING COOKED UP.
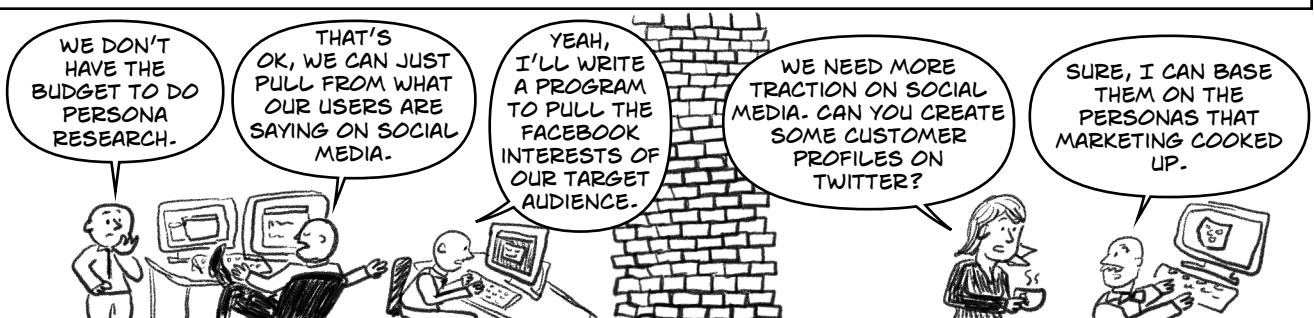
Automated personas based on automated social media profiles would suggest that Cooper's "inmates" are still firmly in control.

HELLO, I AM A COMPUTER PROGRAM AND I WILL COVERTLY MINE YOUR PROFILE DATA TO CREATE AN AUTOMATED PERSONA.

NICE TO MEET YOU. I AM A SOCIAL MEDIA PROFILE BASED ON A MARKETING PERSONA CREATED FROM OTHER COVERTLY COLLECTED PROFILE DATA. I AM ALSO A COMPUTER PROGRAM!

The walls of this asylum look like a house of mirrors.

Works Cited

Bragdon, A 2015, 'Introducing new audience insights for brands', Twitter Marketing, 2 July 2015, Twitter, viewed 22 November, 2017, <https://blog.twitter.com/marketing/en_us/a/2015/introducing-new-audience-insights-for-brands.html>.

Cooper, A 2004, The inmates are running the asylum : why high-tech products drive us crazy and how to restore the sanity, Revised edn, Sams Publishing, Indianapolis, IN.

Cooper, A, Reimann, R & Cronin, D 2007, About face 3: the essentials of interaction design, John Wiley & Sons, Indianapolis.

Coorevits, L, Schuurman, D, Kathy, O & Logghe, S 2016, 'Bringing personas to life: user experience design through interactive coupled open innovation', Persona Studies, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 97-114.

Goodman, E, Kuniavsky, M & Moed, A 2012, Observing the User Experience A Practitioner's Guide to User Research, Observing the User Experience : A Practitioner's Guide to User Research, 2nd edn, eds M Kuniavsky & A Moed, Elsevier Science, Burlington.

Moore, C, Barbour, K & Lee, K 2017, 'Five dimensions of online persona', Persona Studies, vol. 3, no. 1.

Ortbal, K, Frazzette, N & Mehta, K 2016, 'Constructed Stakeholder Personas: An Educational Tool for Social Entrepreneurs', Procedia Engineering, vol. 159, pp. 230-248.

Pruitt, J & Adlin, T 2005, The persona lifecycle: keeping people in mind throughout product design, Morgan Kaufmann, San Francisco.

Revella, A 2015, Buyer Personas: How to Gain Insight Into Your Customer's Expectations, Align Your Marketing Strategies, and Win More Business, John Wiley & Sons, Hoboken.

Varol, O, Ferrara, E, Davis, CA, Menczer, F & Flammini, A 2017, 'Online human-bot interactions: Detection, estimation, and characterization', arXiv.

Ward, JL 2010, 'Persona development and use, or, how to make imaginary people work for you', paper presented at 2010 Library Assessment Conference, Baltimore, MD, 25-27 October.

Wodtke, C & Govella, A 2009, Information Architecture: Blueprints for the Web, second edn, New Riders, Berkley, CA.