

Spicing up public journeys – Storytelling as a design strategy

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Abstract

The paper is based on an ongoing research that aims at studying how storytelling approaches can be applied in designing public customer journeys and service environments. It first introduces briefly how storytelling has been applied in designing service experiences then introduces the research project Spice and its context and approach. Finally, the paper describes and reflects upon an example case and, how storytelling has been applied in gathering and creating stories as well as creating concept ideas.

KEYWORDS: storytelling, customer journey, metropolitan railway systems

Introduction to storytelling in service design

Customer journey and total customer experience are among the concepts used in service business and service design. Instead of looking at an environment as an architectural entity or an individual system, they recognize both the larger units and the fine details in them. This complexity poses a challenge for designers and decision makers to envision and prototype services. One of the IDEO leaders Bill Moggridge (2008) suggests storytelling as a potential solution for prototyping: *"When you put all these things together, with elements from architecture, physical design, electronic technology from software, how do you actually prototype an idea for a service, and it seems that really, it's about storytelling, it's about narrative."*

Jensen's "Dream Society" (1999) and Pine and Gilmore's "Experience Economy" (1999) suggest that the drivers of the current industry are based on stories, experiences and emotions. Information can be conveyed in different ways, but it seems engaging and compelling to tell a story that explains facts (as well as fictions) in an attractive, inspiring and involving way, one, which triggers the imagination and transmits meanings and values.

The importance of stories lies in elements in which others can relate to and, recognise the situation in terms of emotions and experiences. In the visual world, from advertising to art

we face storytelling too, through clues that express, or hint something. However, the story often remains to be guessed and imagined, or, it is consciously expressed in various ways.

Mossberg and Nissen Johanssen (2007) describe how to apply storytelling in service context. Their examples such as hotels, restaurants and leisure centres are places in the core of experience economy as described by Pine and Gilmore (1999). It is tempting to claim that storytelling is related to brands and thematic concepts such as Hard Rock Café restaurant chain. However, we believe that storytelling is more. Storytelling is very basic part of human life. It is engaging; it allows individual interpretations and triggers imagination. It is about identities and meanings and about joining individual details together into a larger entity. The examples given by Mossberg and Nissen Johanssen are creative, humorous and experiential. The hotels where you can feel, hear or even see ghosts, the environments that are attractive because of famous books, stories, historical events or people, are part of the storytelling for service experiences. In these examples stories are created by brainstorming meaningful or triggering signals from the history of the setting, as the following example describes.

Stora Hotellet I Fjällbacka is placed in small community that is mostly populated by tourists in summer time. The hotel needed a story to attract more customers. The story was created around a sea captain Charles Klassen, who was found to be the first owner of the building in which the hotel was later established. Although very little was known about this Klassen, a story about his adventures at the seven seas and various exotic harbours was born in the minds of the service experts. The interior design as well as the whole concept was created to express his exciting life, with different themes according to various harbours in each room. The concept was extended to cover all the touch points including the websites. According to the authors, the formerly summer season hotel turned to be successful throughout the year with this new concept. (Mossberg and Nissen Johanssen 2007)

Saco and Goncalves (2008) also suggest that customer journeys can be designed in an experiential way by applying storytelling professionals such as theatre and movie specialists. The example given is Ritz-Carlton worldwide hotel chain that wants to consider “the total guest experience”. The Ritz experimented using scenographers to direct the scenes and to communicate those with workbooks. The workbooks introduced the “localized service scenes and outlined the key scenes using a series of photos that told an evocative story” (p14). The key objective was to communicate the Ritz brand principles without directing the solutions for each local hotel. The guiding and framing story remains open enough to be interpreted and applied to suit the specific location, context, local service as well as remain sensitive to people involved.

The examples above are about creating memorable hotel experiences. However, similar strategies could be experimented with other services, environments and customer experiences too. The objective of this paper is to introduce an ongoing research in which the main objective is to study how storytelling approaches can be applied in designing urban public experiences. We will first introduce the research project titled Spice and then discuss the context, i.e. metro environment, the case and the approaches we have worked with. Finally, we will describe the preliminary findings.

Spice- spiritualising space project

Spice-spiritualising space project is an ongoing research project in which the main objective is to study how storytelling approaches can be applied in designing public customer journeys including spaces with experiential character and spirit. We are aware that there are various

lines of research on storytelling. However, the concept of storytelling in Spice project has been quite flexible to start with. Gabriel (2000) argues that ‘stories open valuable windows into emotional, political and symbolic lives in organisations’. (p. 3). Furthermore, stories can be said to be ‘part of the sense making process’ and that ‘the truth of the stories lies not in the facts, but in the meaning.’ These quotes form a relevant reference to how we understand storytelling: it is about meanings, lives and sense making. Our aim is to experiment with various ways on how to integrate storytelling or storytelling-inspired approaches in design. Since the research team consists of multidisciplinary professionals from design, scenography, screen writing and sociology the research combines approaches from all of these. We aim to experiment with various applications and characteristics of storytelling during the project.

Spice project looks into stories and storytelling approaches as a tool and strategy for designing public services, focusing particularly in metro (i.e. metropolitan railway system) environment. Helsinki metro system is currently expanding into, and influencing new environments. This provides a fruitful ground for research. As an example of similar context, metro stations in Paris have specific characters of their own. Without reading written signs the traveller knows where he is at simply by the spirit and aesthetics of the environment. On the contrary, Helsinki metro stations carry a rather anonymous and neutral image. They are not designed according to the local spirit of the neighbourhood or reflecting meanings that could trigger people’s imagination and, at best help to create the mental map of the area. Whether at east or west the feeling is the same, although the surrounding environments carry rather different images. Therefore, storytelling approaches have potential in producing unique public service environments.

Spice project starts with a hypothesis that daily urban railway systems have not been recognised as an opportunity to create new uses and environments that support place identities. The objective of storytelling approaches thus, is to identify, strengthen and create a strong place identity in which inhabitants and travellers can relate to. It is also about urban branding, defining the spirit of a place, and building a better place to live. (Fleming 2007) According to Kevin Lynch (1981) the diversity and authenticity of a city emerges from narratives of history and personal memories. Thus, stories and storytelling can help to shape the quality of urban experiences while creating a sense of place. Furthermore, most of the metro areas are lacking a sense of **“good life”**, which could be transmitted and felt through other or supplementary services as well as aesthetic qualities such as sound, illumination, dynamic interactions and other potential design interventions. Storytelling as a design strategy can be utilised to spice up metro experiences. It can also help to map the quality of service touch points and refresh the total customer experience.

As the starting points for experimenting with storytelling we had identified three reasons for considering stories in design. First, stories are gathered from users to inform and inspire design. Often, also interpretations of user data are communicated to design through narratives that leave openness for new interpretations (Mattelmäki et al 2010). Thus, in Spice project, one of the tasks is to gather stories about the local identity to influence design and storytelling, and furthermore, investigate the experiential aspects of public spaces as described by the local people to uncover the local identity.

Second, storytelling is used for prototyping services. It is used as means to formulate design drivers that facilitates the style and overall design of a service system. A story connects as a red thread various details together from architecture and environment design to communication, marketing and customer experience. The logical argument behind the solutions and their connections to the story is not always needed. It can partly remain to be read between the lines but nevertheless storytelling supports making sense of the complex systems. Thus, in Spice project one of the tasks is to investigate what elements in public

spaces can be influenced by storytelling and, what existing and potential design elements and their connections to the stories are. This starting point indicates to service design approach that looks holistically of different elements that create the service experience and service as a process and a system. It looks at architecture and functional issues such as way finding.

Third, storytelling supports creating and managing contexts in which experiences happen. Storytelling is a tool to differentiate from other similar services and to create and maintain an attraction, an experience that triggers imagination. It also focuses on emotionally loaded elements, such locality and how people are attached to it, i.e. 'this is my home station'. Thus, in Spice project one of the tasks is to create and communicate concept ideas that reflect the local identity. We aim at solutions that inspire, that are of aesthetic quality and that support good life.

Metro cityscapes: observations and experiences

To make sense of the context we started by investigating metropolitan railway systems. Observing and experiencing different metro stations in Helsinki and in other countries formed a better understanding of the notions of usability, visibility, imageability and cultural landscape (Lynch 1960). The metro stations differ greatly: there are stations designed to have user-friendly and appealing architecture; or designs of standardized architecture and distinct interior designs of good quality; others are unique and fascinate designs by different architects, designers and artists. Or, one can find impressive metro stations designed as 'palaces for the people' with valuable materials; some others are museum-like stations with remarkable collections of public art.

An excellent example of such is observations in Berlin metro stations. Some of the metro stations were designed around the same time with Helsinki metro, however, the use of colourful surface materials, illumination and sculptural forms give many of Berlin metro stations a particular style and feeling. The stations are vivid and designed in a unique way; they also are vibrant of dynamics and interactions of people at various supplementary services around, such as flower kiosks, grocery stores, bars and restaurants.

Another example is the Underground of London. In the early 20th century the public service provider wanted to promote a sense of "us underground users". Instead of only providing transportation usage, strong design drivers and beliefs were put into action for making a place for all users rich in experiential elements and consistent with a readable cultural landscape and life-enhancing experiences. Usability related solutions were improved, an overall reduction of advertisements and commercial products were made. Underground posters were added and their message in the style of architecture and interior of stations were delivered. Works of art and exhibitions at the stations created new experiences including pleasant sensorial qualities. As an example, an over ground station was turned into the style of a willow-pattern plate. (Watson and Bentley 2007).

Observation in Helsinki mapped design elements in metro environments including the architectural scenes of the stations, illumination, shadows, furniture, details on ceilings and walls, art works, as well as the relationships between the neighbourhood's physical surrounding and the station design. In addition, navigation, functionalities, the use of sounds and advertisements, accessibility, interactions and services were investigated. Illumination solutions for example were found to highlight specific places, and to make them memorable.

The observations could be summarised to three main categories. The first one deals with designing clear cues and contextual signs for way finding. The second deals with means for producing a vivid image of place, a legible cultural landscape rich in essence and local

identity. These two are regarded as drivers for producing “good life”, pleasant, coherent, stimulating urban service context. The third category illustrates the customer journey and metro system touch points including tangibles and intangibles. Mapping small details and bigger elements of the service process and experience facilitated better comprehension of the experiential and design solution space. In the following we will present the example case in which the findings above were applied.

The case: Otaniemi metro station

In addition to understanding the potential applications of storytelling, and studying metro environments Spice project aims to explore and produce a variety of alternative concepts. They are not meant to be implemented as such, but to serve as research through design approach and as a communication platform. Thus, as the Helsinki metro is expanding to the west with seven new stations, one of the future stations, Otaniemi, was selected to be the focus of the research and design activities.

The district is formerly known as the campus of Helsinki University of Technology. Currently it is the biggest campus of Aalto University (i.e. union of three universities: Helsinki School of Economics, Helsinki University of Technology and University of Art and Design Helsinki.) This was the reason to focus on Otaniemi area, and our research questions followed that: how technology, art and design, and economics can be integrated in a service environment that emphasizes holistic customer experience as in service design? How to identify meaningful stories that reflect the local identity? And furthermore, how to concretise meaningful stories in the design of the new metro station and customer experience?

Extensive amount of references exist regarding approaches that consider storytelling methods. Nevertheless, the objective of this paper is to discuss storytelling as a strategy that is applied in various forms throughout all phases of the design process, not to evaluate the applied methods as such. Gathering, interpreting, and working with stories served different purposes as will be explained in the following.

Gathering stories

Mossberg and Nissen Johanssen's (2007) examples rely on creating the stories based on creative imagination or already existing stories. However, we approached the district of Otaniemi with an application of user-centred design, where the key components for the future design are based on user studies, i.e. understanding user and the local identity. In addition, also more subjective observations, studies on cultural history, and imagination were done. Thus, the outcome of the field and user study intertwined with insights from other sources such as books and experiences of personal journeys.

The first reason for considering storytelling in design, as explained earlier, is to collect stories, i.e. insights, meanings, memories etc. from users that inspire and inform design. We applied several methods for gathering stories about the district of Otaniemi, and the metro service environment. We wanted to obtain authentic stories, anecdotes and viewpoints to the local identity, to services, and urban customer journeys. Utilising different methods and perspectives aimed at a diversity of personal and social experiences in relation to Otaniemi and the metro environment. The people, i.e. users engaged were selected based on the mixed uses of the area from students, people working in the industry and research areas among others, and inhabitants in the district. The main approaches applied were:

The story-card tool was applied by the researcher who had background in industrial design. The method is an application of make tools as described by Sanders (2002) and it aims at triggering opinions, stories and meanings with the help of illustrated cards. The story-card tool was used together with a map of the area. It helped to link the actual experiences and visions of the area with the physical environment. People illustrated their current and ideal journey, actions, and characteristics of surroundings, the quality of offerings, and the emotional relation to the conception of Otaniemi.

The gathered data covered topics from activities at the local area, to sociability, access and linkages between the places. Pitfalls in traffic, transit usage, and pedestrian activities were discovered, relating to accessibility, convenience, connections and continuity that play important roles for improving the university campus. Sociability was found to be essential not only for inhabitants and students, but also for visitors and working people. Individuals emphasised the need of third places, and other complementary services that could help to revitalise the area and bring new dynamics, and diverse and welcoming environments. Associations about comfort and image of the place were also key attributes; here the main character of stories were the students' lifestyle in the campus, the use of sauna as a habitual happening and as part of the legible cultural landscape of Otaniemi. Overall, the story-card tool and the map of the area helped to uncover significant touchpoints, experiences at various environments and people's ideal conception of the place.

Interviews were applied as the screenwriter's approach. Screenwriting and screenplays are key elements in film, television and entertainment, and storytelling as well. Screenwriting is a process including envisioning, planning, drama, narration and actual writing. The interviews aimed at looking for themes that can be interpreted as one unifying subject for the main plot, or then as various sub plots for building one story about the local identity of Otaniemi. The screenwriter's interviews followed an open theme dealing with emotions, feelings, experiences and thoughts about the past, present and future of Otaniemi, and focusing on associations, memories, and impressions.

The associations to Otaniemi were various from the uniqueness of students' life to the green colour that represents the local landscape; and to the red bricks relating to landmark architecture. Memories arisen from Otaniemi included childhood experiences in the forest and adventures at the pond. The impressions and description about the place concerned safety issues, activities and services in the area, sense of community and the natural scenery.

Design probes (Mattelmäki 2006) were applied by the sociologist's data collection approach with the perspectives of customer journey and urban practices. On one hand, the method looked into the essence of routes and paths people use and on the other hand, at the habituated ways of the customer journey. The participants were encouraged to make a story of their own by photographing and by reflecting and verbalizing their daily trip to Otaniemi.

The collected material helped to discover elements, both large units and details, in the urban transit environment and in Otaniemi area that aesthetically, affectively and imaginatively communicate to people. These day stories were rich in narrative, illustrating transportation selection, value of services in the journey, relevant touchpoints and places, identities, and finally, own view about them.

Working with stories

Since the main objective of Spice project is to study how storytelling approaches can be applied in designing public service environments, working with stories occurred in various ways. Besides identifying the essence of the area, the gathered stories helped to uncover

public services pitfalls. They provided information about functions, contexts, local identity, characteristics and lifestyle of people related to Otaniemi. In the following we will describe how we worked with the stories.

The stories gathered from users and researchers' observations were used for creating an overall understanding, and a visualisation of the customer journey at Helsinki metro system and its service touch points (see figure 1). They also served for painting a picture of the identity of Otaniemi. Furthermore, they helped to map experiences that occurred in local area including functions, activities, accesses and linkages. This was fundamental for inspiring the design of alternative concepts for the future Otaniemi metro station environment.

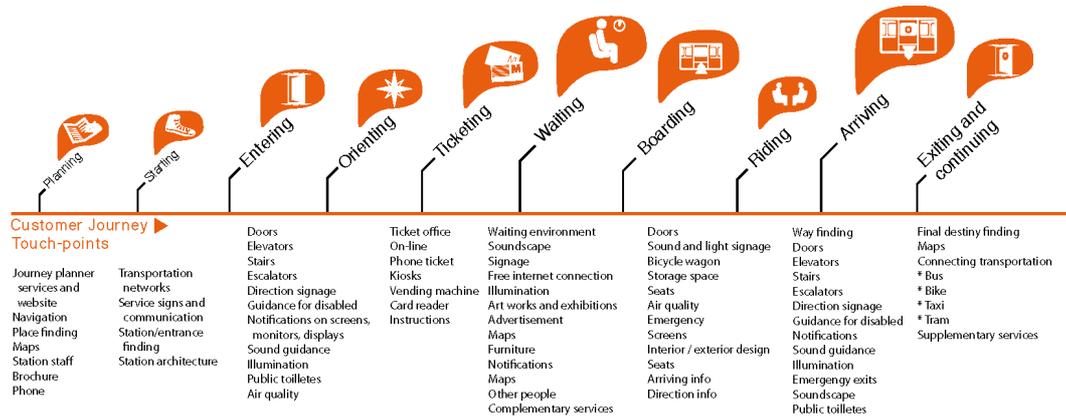


Figure 1. Customer journey and service touchpoints of metro system.

Stories were also developed further and new ones were created inspired by the outcomes. Interpretations of users' stories were, for example, communicated through utilising persona descriptions. They were further developed by using a fictional fire camp like gathering talks in which participants internalise one persona for creating new scenarios in Otaniemi, focusing on the future metro environment.

Experimenting with storytelling continued with creating various narratives, combinations and summaries of stories gathered earlier. During creative teamwork sessions designers and scenographers worked with re-writing stories, i.e. taking the user stories and other materials as inspiration and creating short stories that took place at Otaniemi. The stories were further transformed into design and artistic language, emphasising characteristics and arrangements of stories in the space, the constitution of elements such as colours, forms, material, motion, illumination, interactions, sound, and so on.



Figure 2. Mockups that experimented with concretising story inspired solutions.

Stories were thus transformed into design ideas through several workshops and individual reflections. Transforming the stories in a tangible and explicit way was accomplished in two- and three-dimensional means (see figure 2). The former was done through collage making: visual descriptions for outlining existing and potential design elements and their connections to local identity. The latter happened by composing various materials in the small-scale model of the station. These exercises helped to frame the focus of the study and recognise

experiential opportunities of stories as a strategy in design, Otaniemi metro environment. The sessions were fruitful for transferring textual stories into visual images of design and art.

Finally, as the screenwriter's way of working with the stories, he created his interpretation of the gathered and interpreted stories and about place through writing. He summed up the material into one main story with three sub-stories. This story becomes vivid through rich vocabulary and metaphors and, the ability to form a coherent narrative, complex enough to include all key findings of the local identity of Otaniemi. The outcome was a written script titled 'Take your time' that created a concept plan for Otaniemi metro station. It is a story open enough for interpretations, but including elements that could serve as the red thread for the overall design that was mentioned earlier in this paper.

Concept ideas

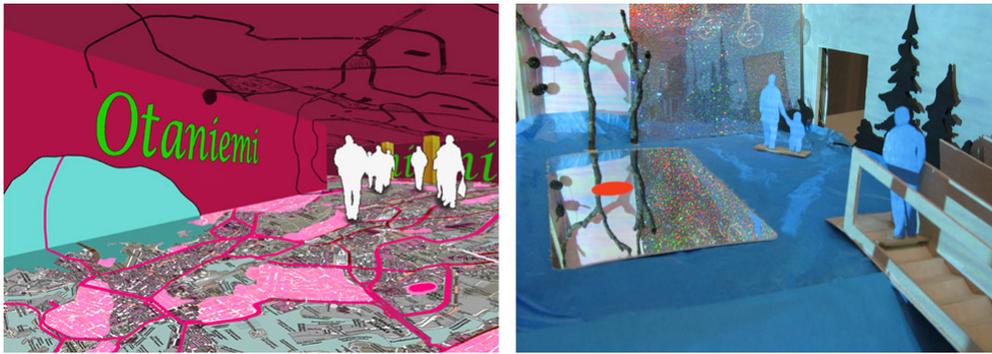
Various strategies in how to apply storytelling were observed during the concept creation phases, too. In the following we will introduce some of the created concept ideas and explain their relationships to stories.

The scenographer's concept idea originated from a transformation of a re-written story into a visual collage. The story was inspired by the anecdotes from the user studies and it combines elements from historical characters and the natural and cultural landscape of Otaniemi, located by the sea and surrounded by nature. The main character in the story is the lady of the Otaniemi manor, who enjoys biking in the woods. The metaphor of the bicycle connects the technological and mechanical side of the university that is located in the area, with the green nature and cultural history. The concept idea becomes experienced in the metro station platform (see figure 3). It covers a variety of units in the overall space, wall and roof elements, interactive features, to trashcans and lightning design.



Figure 3 illustrates concept idea of Otaniemi metro station platform.

Another concept idea by the design researcher addresses usability, way finding, and mental mapping. It connects the existing physical surrounding around the station with the local identity, including landmarks of the local architecture, sea scenery and, the technological image of the campus. Here, story descriptions and the map of Otaniemi can be seen as cues on both sides of the platform's exit doors until the hallways. One way takes to the heart of the university campus where significant landmarks can be appreciated. The concept reflects the vigorous and red brick surrounding in the passage until the hall (see figure 4). The other exit path exposes signs of the sea and natural landscape (see figure 5). The contrasting ideas for the station reflect local identity and orients people in the space. The concept connects themes from user stories with observation on metro environments.



Figures 4 and 5 show concepts about local identity and way finding at the station.

Discussion and reflection

As stated earlier, this paper describes an ongoing research project in which storytelling has been applied as a design strategy. Through the experimenting and based on the reasons for storytelling presented earlier and experiences in the Otaniemi case, we have identified a path that visualises the steps in which storytelling approach appeared or, can be applied in the design process of public service experiences (see figure 6).

First, stories, i.e., memories, meanings, and descriptions were gathered from users to inform and inspire design. Simultaneously, observations with sensitivity to storytelling related elements were carried out. The findings addressed narratives, associations and scenes in which experiences take place. They also supported the mapping of service networks, customer journey and service touchpoints. These activities helped to uncover what people value in the context under study; to understand the quality of existing services, to suggest improvement for existing ones; and, to map opportunities for new service networks. Moreover, elements that are part of the local identity were recognised.

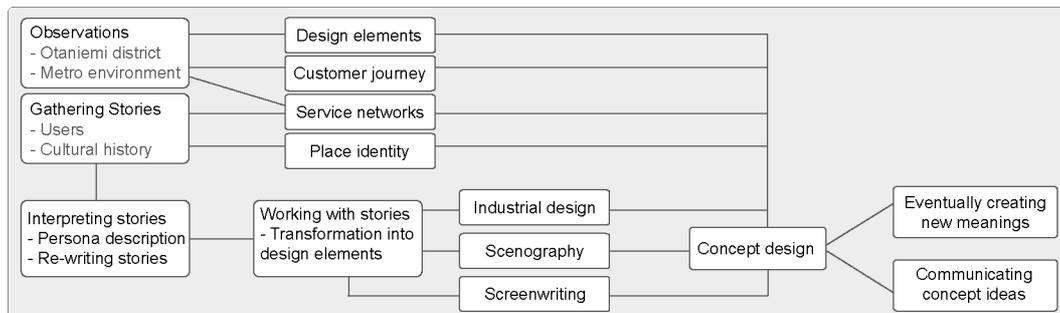


Figure 6 illustrates the path of storytelling as a design strategy.

Second, the stories and information gathered were interpreted and re-interpreted into new stories in creative sessions. Working with stories was also conducted in collaboration sessions with Spice project team members, i.e. industrial designers (i.e. design researchers), scenographers and screenwriters among others. In addition, the team members worked with stories to form various concept ideas individually. In service design context multidisciplinary collaboration is valued. In this project storytelling as a design strategy set a new stage for the application of scenography and screenwriting for design.

Third, storytelling in design was applied for creating and communicating concept ideas. It triggered imagination, which allowed creative design ideation. Storytelling approach was useful in communicating design ideas that have time-related and experiential components.

When starting the project we wanted to experiment how storytelling can be applied in different phases of the project. We did not want to narrow ourselves to define precisely what we mean by storytelling. Loosely, we related it with meanings, experiential and emotional resonances and sense making without necessity for reasoning and facts. We have identified that story-inspired approaches raised our awareness to address aesthetic, emotional and experiential elements and solutions for all the senses. This is rather radical in public service environment in which the focus typically is in functional and generic solutions. Furthermore, storytelling approaches besides functioning as a strategy in different phases of the design process also served as a tool to create and manage the overall image of service contexts.

We have also identified critical concerns when focusing on storytelling approaches. First, storytelling is an open concept that can be applied and interpreted in various ways. How and at what stages these ways are connected to the design processes need to be studied. Second, we have also experienced that people have different strategies in how they consider storytelling as a starting point for design. For a scenographer creating a story is a novel approach, since their work normally starts with an existing story. For an industrial designer, writing an appealing story for brainstorming design ideas is not an easy task while for a screenwriter it is the core competence. Despite of the critical concerns, we see that storytelling strategy has relevance for designing services because stories can address and work with both intangible and tangible qualities of service experiences. A question for further research is how the service users can interpret ideas based on storytelling approaches.

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