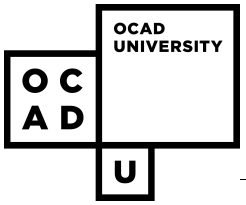

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Developing strategic narratives: Designing services as systems

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Developing Strategic Narratives: Designing Services as Systems

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Designing services as systems is increasingly important. Those in healthcare and government don't have much of a choice. However, envisioning services as systems is a hurdle. The trouble is from commonplace definitions of 'service' and 'system'. But what if they are one and the same? An approach to communicating the designs of services in the form of strategic narratives, involves solving a puzzle to generate the story. The puzzle represents the duality of *system and service*. The "proof of work" reflects the difficulty in designing services as systems.

Keywords:
Systems thinking, service design, methods, strategic narratives

Abstract:
We have to be less innocent about why services fail to meet expectations. The designs of services are becoming more important than ever – as we depend more on more kinds of them. Too small to notice or too big to fail, many services are part of the daily lives and routines of individuals and organizations. Failures have far reaching consequences, affecting even those who don't use the service. The political fallout and social impact often outweigh the financial losses, especially in healthcare and government.

Services fail because of gaps and conflicts in their designs. Some tangible or intangible element in some visible or invisible part, may not materialize in time, fall in place, or duly engage with its counterpart. Services are also contracts that are to pay off well for both sides. Failure is imminent if one party benefits at the expense of the other (Iqbal, 2018). Good designs dependably produce the desired effect: equitable sharing of costs and benefits, in terms of the quality of outcomes, experiences, and prices.

Even good designs are one day no longer good enough. Needs change, alternatives become more attractive, or do-it-yourself more compelling. Keeping customers and users happy is well and good, but if no longer cost-effective, then even governments and nonprofits fold. Even the simplest of services can be complex in the way all its components come together to produce the desired effect. The interest in designing services as systems that adapt and evolve over time, is therefore understandable.

However, the designing of services is still largely based on flow charts, due to the reliance on mapping tools such as service blueprints and customer journey maps. On top of that, simplistic notions about what services are generate superfluous information from even the most superficial inquiries. Even when neatly arranged expansively across studio walls, the enormous amount of detail provides safe haven for clandestine errors. As designer Tim Brown explains (Brown, 2011):

> *"In traditional attempts to design a service, we 'script' the service, creating a 'user experience blueprint' that attempts to describe everything that will happen to the customer during the experience. Attention to all these details leads to a relatively complicated script, which makes us confident that we have covered all the bases. The problem is, even when we get these scripts right, it's amazing how often things go wrong."*

Of course things go wrong. It would be amazing if they didn't! There aren't any systems of equations, assembly charts, bill of materials explosions, CAD/CAM drawings, or instant feedback from physical parts that bend, break or don't fit. The ideal of inclusiveness require the language and format of the design process to be plain enough for everyone. That often means the use of simplistic models that flow left-to-right, top to bottom, and workshop facilitation that aims to minimize frustration.

Unfortunately, that often also means fewer opportunities for the kind of critical reasoning – including dealing with paradoxes, making counterintuitive steps, and taking imaginative leaps – fundamental to solving hard problems in a more open, complex, dynamic, and networked world (Dorst, 2015). How do we put the fundamentals back into the fun?

Historian Yuval Noah Harari suggests we humans are hard-wired with the basic intelligence for stories (Harari, 2014). According to economist John Kay (Kay, 2011): "It is through stories that we best absorb arguments and make sense of a complex world. We prefer to tell stories than to use analytic models, and the best and most helpful models are, at their root, narratives ... but stories can mislead as well as they inform ... they should be based on evidence."

Popular story formats lack the affordances for storing the designs of services as systems. Their dramatic arcs are too flat and short to account for the structures and dynamics: the assembly of parts, the grouping of elements, the unity of sets, or the attainment of conditions of harmonious, orderly interactions (Buchanan, 2017). They cover only parts of a system often at the feature level. Such simple

formats result in the fragmentation of the 'big picture design' at the levels of policy and strategy.[1]

This paper presents an approach for storing designs in the form of strategic narratives. It involves solving a puzzle based on a system of constraints and then using the fixed number of pieces to generate the story. Solving the puzzle requires a deliberative process that is deliberately hard. The "proof of work" is in the story making sense to a diverse set of stakeholders. This is appealing in healthcare and government, where there is a high potential for conflicts of interests, and regulations rule out "moving fast and breaking things".

The puzzle is 4x4 matrix that organizes the group of 16 elements of design found in every service (Iqbal, 2018). A set of four promises define the unity (and integrity) of the service concept. Articulating each promise in terms of *who, why, how and what*, defines the arrangements and agreements – between people and things – necessary for a condition of harmonious, orderly interactions between 32 parts. Designing services as systems is then about increasing the probability of that actually happening. The resulting qualities of outcomes, experiences, and prices, indicate the quality of design.

Services are what Harari calls 'imagined realities'. The strategic narrative of a service is thus a piece of legal fiction written by a design process. Each story has 16 sentences, eight story threads, four *dramatis personae*, and two sides. Each sentence is a declarative statement useful in framing objectives, defining goals, and guiding decisions across groups and teams, at the implementation. Across organizational boundaries, functions and disciplines create, edit, share, send, and receive system-level designs of services, by reading and writing stories, and listening and telling them.

Today's problems come from yesterday's solutions (Senge, 1990). Services are solutions to our problems but problems themselves, as seen lately in sectors such as healthcare, housing, and transportation. The thinking that goes into the designs of services needs to be broader (more inclusive in terms of participation) while at the same time deeper. Making it easier to relate systems thinking to service design is therefore a worthy goal.

[1] For example, the a popular format for the *user story* has a simple structure that is easy to recall and reuse: As a <*type of user*> I want to <*perform a task*> so that I may <*achieve some goal*>. Such formats are prolific under philosophies such as "lean and agile development". But as a policymaker in the Dutch government framed it (2014): "Even if we piece together a thousand user stories we will not be able to reconstruct the original vision."

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