

Stanislavski's 'System': Applying Activity Theory in user-centered design practice

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Design research literature offers various approaches for building creative understandings of users and their contexts. Many of these approaches suggest designers adopt the role of people researcher and directly interact with users. But in design practice this is often not feasible: People research is outsourced, or conducted by experts who are either or not part of the design team, which means that the user-experience data gathered in people research needs to be conveyed to the design team. The richness and basis for building creative understandings is often lost in this process.

A possible solution is to engage the design team in interpreting user experience data – usually pre-structured and pre-analyzed by the people researchers. By reading, structuring and explaining users' stories, team members make the data their own and build creative understandings. Since not every designer is a people researcher, we have been looking for ways that guide design teams in this process. Activity Theory provides a comprehensive framework for structuring and analyzing empirical data and has been widely used for these purposes in human computer interaction. But having a reputation of being 'hard to learn' and 'difficult to put into practice', we cannot expect design teams to adopt Activity Theory in a way social scientists do. More intuitive ways are needed for designers to grapple with AT in interpreting user data. We found Stanislavsky's 'system' to provide these intuitive ways.

Stanislavski's 'system' is an approach to acting, developed in the 1920s by Constantin Stanislavski, a Russian theatre director, to support actors in the process of embodying and enacting a role. The approach has been very influential in theatre – the famous Method Acting approach was based on Stanislavski's 'system' – and has been widely adopted in theatre education. The approach is of practical interest due to the analogy between actors embodying a role in theatre and designers building creative understandings of users. In design research literature, this analogy is well recognized and has been successfully employed in the development of techniques and tools, such as experience prototyping and personas. Stanislavski's approach is also of theoretical interest as there are remarkable similarities with AT. For example, both position people and their behaviour in social-cultural context, argue for a unity of mind and body, and place activity at the centre. This may be due to the fact that Stanislavski and Vygotski were contemporaries. Moreover, it is said that Vygotski was very much inspired by theatre and actually knew Stanislavski.

In a case study in industry, we found Activity Theory and Stanislavski's 'system' to be a powerful combination in conveying rich user experience data to design teams: Activity Theory provided a comprehensive framework for pre-structuring and pre-analyzing data, while Stanislavski's 'system' offered hands-on techniques that enabled the design team (the actors) to interpret the pre-structured data (the script) and build creative understandings of users (embody a role) – implicitly applying concepts of Activity Theory – in an intuitive and playful way (see figure 1).

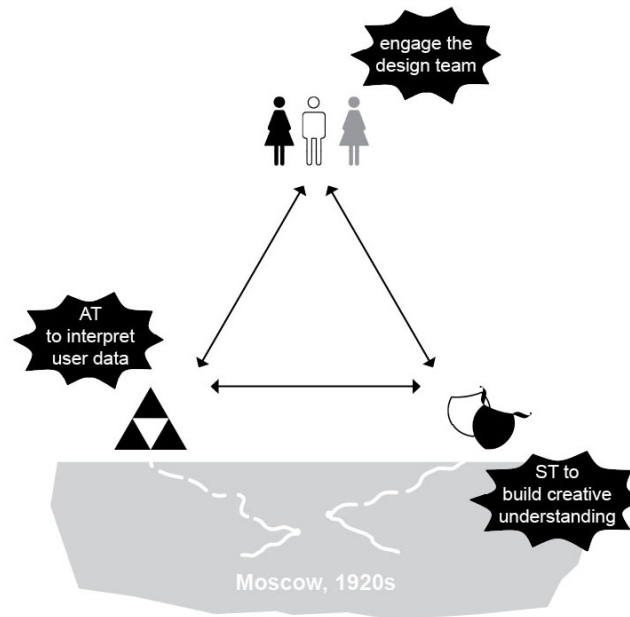


Figure 1 – Creating Socionas

Creating Socionas is an approach that we developed for sharing user experience data between people researchers and design teams. Three theoretical frameworks form the basis of the Socionas approach: First is the framework of trialogue (upper corner), it describes the interactions between people researchers, users and design teams in practice [Postma et al., 2009]. From trialogue we learned that a possible solution to sharing user data in situations of trialogue is to engage the design team in interpreting the user data. Second is Activity Theory. AT provides a comprehensive framework that points out key concepts of social-, and physical context that we need to understand in building creative understandings of users. The AT framework supports people researchers in structuring and interpreting rich user data. And third is Stanislavsky's System. Stanislavsky's System is an approach to play-acting that to a large extent shares its theoretical concepts with AT. What could be said is that if one does Stanislavsky's System, one more less does AT. Stanislavsky's System provides intuitive ways for designers to use AT in interpreting user data.