

EMPATHY AS A

Superpower



Made by SuperTeam 7 - Veerle van Wijlen & Pascalle Ickenroth

Empathic design has proven useful in addressing huge societal and systemic challenges, such as education, healthcare, and organizational efficiency (Battarbee, Suri & Howard, 2014). When designing for UX in the context of healthcare, supporting vulnerable target groups, designers need to be sensitive to the highly specialized and personal values from the users within this ever changing society. This because people within this vulnerable healthcare context are restricted in daily life functioning due to all kinds of mental, physical, behavioral and emotional issues leading to specialized needs (Alper, Hourcade & Gilutz, 2012). In order to support these specialized needs, empathy is key! "Empathy is people's intuitive ability to identify with others' lived experiences such as thoughts, feelings, motivations, emotional and mental models, values, priorities, preferences, and inner conflicts." (Smeenk, 2019, p.15). Using empathy helps designers to understand the user, its context, needs and values and so come to the 'why' of the design in value creation which is fundamental for UX design. In this way empathy is a powerful force (Battarbee et al. 2014) and so a superpower for designers in the field of healthcare, supporting vulnerable target groups when designing for UX.



1. Empathy for social awareness

Different industries and fields of design, can work in different economic paradigms making them co-exist (Gardien, Djajadiningrat, Hummels & Brombacher, 2014). As a designer within a healthcare company's R&D department it is from great importance in the creation of value to be aware of one's position in these paradigms and to move along when needed. This to keep up to date with the role of design innovation in these changing healthcare systems and the values of the users within these changing societies, over time. Therefore, empathy is a great means to gain social awareness by identifying with the changing thoughts, feelings, motivations, values and preferences of the users within the healthcare system.

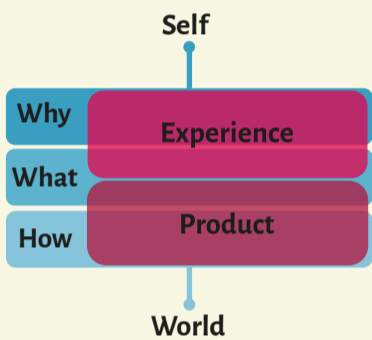


Figure 1. Why, What, How model (Hassenzahl, 2011)

According to Hassenzahl's Why, What, How model (figure 1) for User Experience design, the 'Why' is the essence in value creation and so the creation of supporting user experiences (Hassenzahl, 2011). Designing for UX starts from the 'Why', trying to get a clear overview of the user's needs, emotions, meanings and past experiences involved in an activity (Hassenzahl, 2011). In order, to consider and meet these needs, emotions, meanings and past experiences related to certain 'daily activities' it is important to reach out to the user, stepping in and out of their lives and so gain empathy (Kouprrie & Sleeswijk Visser, 2009). But why gaining empathy and not sympathy? Well, in order to fill the gap between the user's needs, emotions and the design, acknowledgement of what the user goes through is not enough. It does not allow the designer to envision him/herself in the user's situation, disabling to share another's expressions, needs, and motivations (Gibbons, 2019). Empathy, as seen in the model (figure 2), goes a level deeper which allows designers to match with the user's essentials of human experience (Hassenzahl, 2011).

Why empathy for the 'Why' 2.

3. How to gain empathy

In empathic design, designers try to get closer to the experience the user has in a context or when he/she is interacting with a certain product/service/system. This to identify the user's needs in using these products/services/systems. But how can you do this? According to Kouprrie & Sleeswijk Visser (2009), the empathic ability people have and the willingness of people to be empathic plays a role in empathy. However, training and practical experience can increase the empathic understanding of the users (Kouprrie & Sleeswijk Visser, 2009).

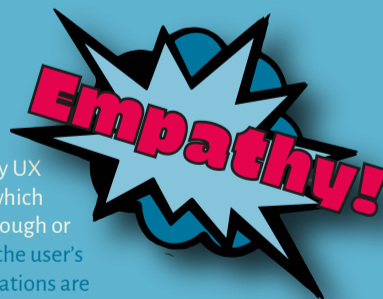
Kouprrie & Sleeswijk Visser (2009) present a framework which can be used by a designer or design team to gain more empathy with the users. This framework contains four phases of empathy which helps to step into the world of the user, walk around for a while and come out with a deeper understanding of their lives and experiences. The first phase is Discovery, which is the first contact with the user either in person or by reading material about the user. Second phase is Immersion, which enables the designer to take the perspective of the user in their context. The third phase is Connection, in which the designer uses his/her own experiences to create an understanding for the user. Final phase is the detachment, where the designer leaves the user's world in order to use their gained empathy for the creation of a solution to the found problems of the user (Kouprrie & Sleeswijk Visser, 2009).

Design teams of IDEO try to gain more empathy with their user to literally walk around in their environment or context. They did, for example, a project for people with diabetes. To experience what it was like to be diabetic, they simulated insulin intake (through shots) for a month. This helped them to identify problems diabetics face when they have to give themselves shots of insulin (Battarbee et al. 2014).



4. Empathy to enable design iterations

User Experience has a time component, is related to time spans, involving anticipated UX (before usage), momentary UX (during usage), episodic UX (after usage) and cumulative UX (over time) (Roto, Law, Vermeeren & Hoonhout, 2011) which means iterative design processes are needed to find out whether the created UX through design is supportive enough or changed over time. Therefore, empathy can be used as a superpower for evaluating UX's that are perceived through the user's design interactions, in time, after usage and over time. This to find out if, and how the user's needs, values and motivations are supported on which designers can build their next design iteration(s).



Empathy beneficial for business 5.

When people in a company can temporarily let go of their role within the company to empathize with others, it can be very useful for their business. When designers empathize with their users, they can identify the user's needs. By responding to unmet needs in new products, it can lead to financial rewards for the business (Battarbee et al. 2014). A reason for this is that, when you meet the needs of the user, the user is more willing to buy and use the product, because the user needs it. Therefore, it might lead to increased purchases of the product and an improved reputation of the company. Furthermore, by empathizing with the user, and thus placing oneself in the context of the user, might not only expose the user's needs, but it can also result in new opportunities for the business (Battarbee et al. 2014), being at the forefront of innovation.

6. Empathy has to be balanced

Once empathy is achieved by designers, it needs to be balanced to function as superpower. There should be a balance between feeling empathy for a certain experience or situation and analyzing the elements of the experience (Smeenk, 2019). It is quite difficult to find this balance of empathy. When you apply too much empathy, you will get too emotional and you will lose focus. When you apply too little empathy, you will not get certain empathic insights and lose depth (Battarbee et al. 2014). Therefore, finding the balance in empathy is very important.

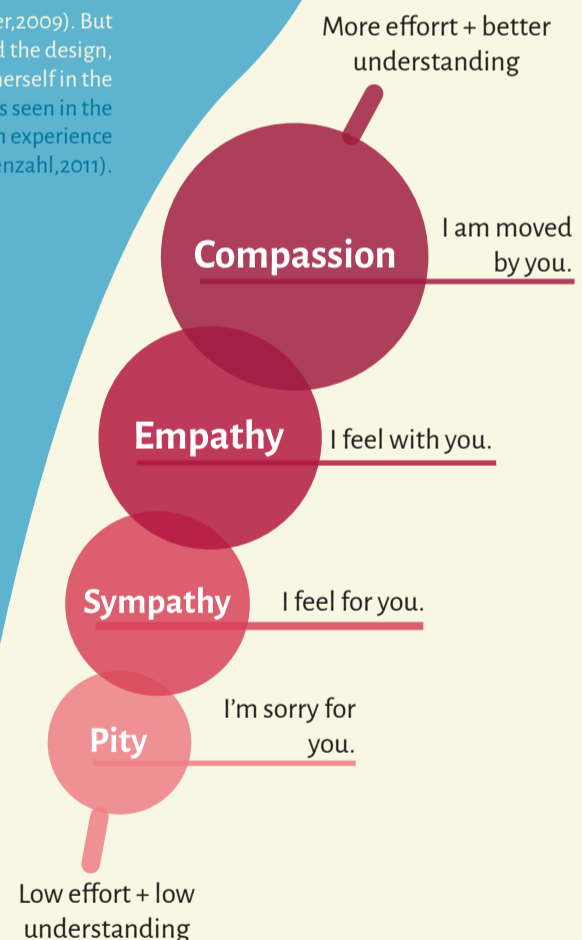


Figure 2. Empathy model. (Gibbons, 2019)

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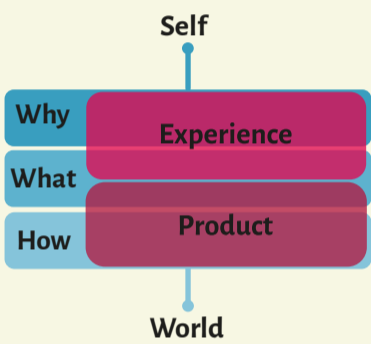


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