

# Personas of AI

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# Personas of AI

Technology is never neutral, or purely functional.  
It incorporates ideas about who the user is.  
Each user has an idea about what the technology is.  
Implicit or explicit.  
Mutual expectations.

# Personas of AI

“Persona” is a simplified, synthetic character with features assumed to be relevant to understand an actor in a particular context.

# Personas of AI

Within larger systems "personas" create "subject positions",  
particular types of identity/agency enabled by the system.  
newbie, user, power user, administor, developer, etc.

# Personas of AI

What are these "personas"?  
What subject positions are created?  
By whom? And for whom?

# Do Artifacts Have Politics?

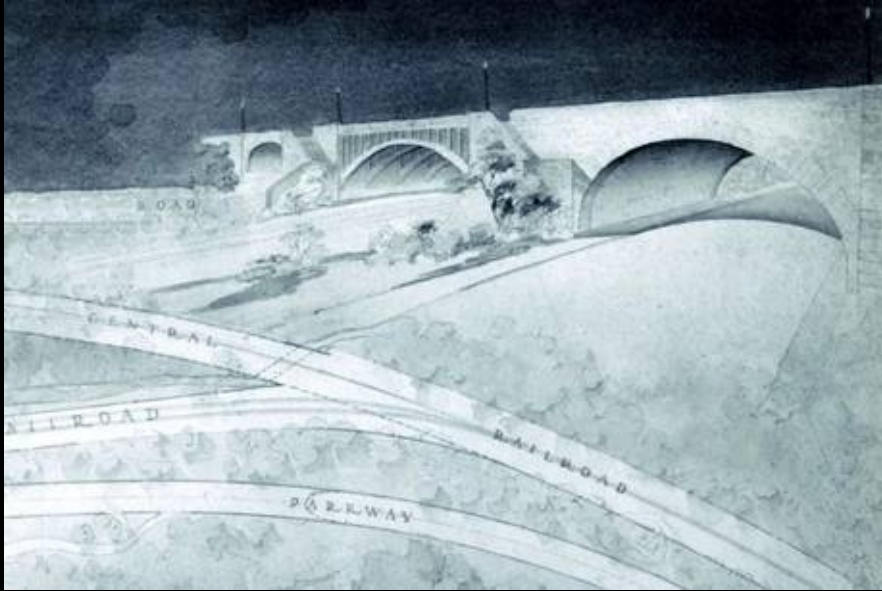
Canonical Example in STS:

Southern State Parkway Long Island started in 1925

Bridges design very low, keep buses out,  
white middle class who could afford cars

Winner, Langdon. "Do Artifacts Have Politics?" *Daedalus* 109, no. 1 (1980): 121-36.

# Do Artifacts Have Politics?



# Do Artifacts Have Politics?

Designer → intention → effect  
Subject → program → long-term practice

“Legislation can always be changed. It’s very hard to tear down a bridge once it’s up.” (Robert Moses’ collaborator)

→ see also: Lessig, Lawrence. *Code and Other Laws of Cyberspace*. New York: Basic Books, 1999.



# Do Artifacts Have Politics?

Never that simple!

Larger context

Many actors (eg. [property owners](#))

Changes over time

Unintended consequences

# Do Artifacts Have Politics?

Bottom line remains: yes, artifacts have politics,  
but like all politics, it's messy.

# The “user” persona (imagined)

Ideal, Implicit or “normal” user

how people normally are/behave.

Often: market research composite, or, mirror image of  
designers/developers.

Assumptions: there is one normal. “We” are normal.

# The “user” persona (imagined)

## Statistical user

User constructed through profiles based on user data

Assumptions: data traces are comprehensive and transparent

& proxies are accurate

Highly dynamic persona.

# The "user" persona (imagined)

Inscription and Scripting:

the normal/assumed way of usage built-into technology  
(Actor-Network Theory / Social Construction of Technology)

# The “user” persona

## Affordances:

“... the perceived or actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could possibly be used.”

(Norman, Donald A. The Design of Everyday Things. 1st Basic paperback. New York: Basic Books, 2002.)

# The “user” persona

Bias (in Data)

Racist Soap Dispenser

Joy Boulamwini: *AI Ain't I a Woman*, 2019, 3”

# The "user" persona (shaped)

Behavior Modification and Habituation.

Creating a new "normal" and new routines.

"First we shape the tools. Then the tools shape us."



# The “user” persona (shaped)

Skill Development and Deskilling

Which skills are favored?

Which are automated? Which are ignored?

# The "user" persona (shaped)

Cognitive and Perceptual Shaping  
Ways of thinking and seeing the world.

# The “user” persona (shaped)

Identity Construction:

Internalization of subject positions

# The "AI" persona (ascribed)

Apophenia:

"Tendency to perceive meaningful connections  
between unrelated things"

Common place cognitive function to replace the unknown with the  
known (things with faces)

# The "AI" persona (ascribed)



Google Deep Dream. 07.2015

# The "AI" persona (ascribed)

## Anthropomorphism

"The attribution of human traits, emotions, or intentions to non-human entities."

Inate tendency of human psychology  
Mental shortcut, reduction of complexity

# The "AI" persona (ascribed)

## Anthropomorphism

Particularly strong when encountering traits that used to be connected with humans (speech, facial expressions, movements, agency)

→ "Intentional Stance" (Daniel Dennett, 1987)

# The "AI" persona (ascribed)

## Authority bias:

The tendency to attribute greater accuracy to statements of a figure of perceived authority, give it greater importance, and delegate responsibility to it. (oncall.masterclass)

Milgram, Stanley (1963). "Behavioral study of obedience".

The Journal of Abnormal and Social Psychology. 67 (4): 371-378.



# The "AI" persona (projected)

(Interface) Design

"Shrink it or pink it"  
(unnecessarily gendered design)



# The "AI" persona (projected)

Narrative context ("framing")

Providing a frame of reference through  
which to interpret a potentially ambiguous  
encounter



# The "AI" persona (projected)

Gendering and racializing of personas  
When is which voice/accent default?

# The "AI" persona (projected)

Knowledge Areas

What is basis for interference?

# The "AI" persona (projected)

## Behavior Modification

Define "characters" through behavioral patterns

[character.ai](#)

# Personas and subject positions

Personas provide people and machines with positions to act  
Frameworks for agency  
Politics of artifacts and people.