

The role of **spokes characters** in contemporary website design



Using illustration and personality to
humanise a service industry web interface

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The role of spokes characters in contemporary website design:

*Using illustration and personality to
humanise a service industry web interface.*

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Abstract:

According to recent literature, character identities employed within advertising have played powerful roles in the creation of many a brands personality. In doing so they have established themselves as a graphic representative for the product/service they symbolise. With the advent of digital technologies the ‘spokes character’ has been increasing in popularity. Particularly with control now being given to the user through interaction.

The web, with consumer accessibility now close to one billion (eMarketer. 2005), still only offers limited download speeds for the user seeking greater infotainment based content, even with the implementation of broadband technology. This presents an ideal platform for the drawn character as compared to digital video due to the smaller file sizes. Additionally, the drawn character has the ability to visually align with a service or products core function, along with the capability to present information through the medium of storytelling.

This research hypothesises that an animated spokes character within the online interface would help humanise the web experience for the consumer. Not only would a character evoke greater pleasure (by aligning story and ease of use), it would be preferable to a targeted user in comparison to a non-character site delivering the same information.

In testing this hypothesis the Chiropractic industry was chosen as the trial vehicle due to limited consumer awareness on the subject. Two semi-functional sites (character and non-character) were designed based on feedback from a CIT (Communication and Information Technology) professional and presented to seven consumer participants within a group interview situation.

Two methodologies employing a divergence/convergence approach were adopted within this study: exploratory research in terms of an investigation into literature and business uncovered key qualities of the spokes character from likeability and gender issues to nostalgia and brand. The purpose was to establish design criteria in the creation of a communications tool and the convergence process. This was achieved by action-based research through design where the character was realised within an industry aligned application (prototype).

Consumer predilection of the semi-functional prototype revealed three benefits of the spokes character site over the same non-character site: a more enjoyable user

experience; shorter learning time involved in assimilating the material offered from the site; and a higher level of trust.

However a group interview of the size used can provide only an indicative result. This thesis advocates character potential within web design; not just as a humanising feature, but also as an integral part of the storytelling process.

Dedication:

To Wani

A character herself, filled with personality and a zest for life. Wani would have loved the opportunity to pursue a career in design.

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Table of Contents

<i>Abstract</i>	2
<i>Dedication</i>	4
<i>Acknowledgments</i>	5
<i>Table of contents</i>	6
<i>Table of figures</i>	8
1. INTRODUCTION	
1.0 Introduction	9
1.1 Central proposition	10
2. LITERATURE	
2.0 Literature	11
2.1 Definition of the spokes character	11
2.2 Likeability and stereotype.	14
2.2.1 Likeability and the spokes character	14
2.2.2 Character and gender	17
2.2.3 Are male spokes characters more effective than female?	19
2.2.4 Archetypes or stereotypes	21
2.3 Spokes character verse spokes person in hedonic/utilitarian analysis within service advertising.	22
2.3.1 Character relevance and trust	24
2.4 Brand, brand equity and the spokes character	26
2.5 Emotion on the web	30
2.5.1 Internet and emerging consumers	30
2.5.2 Emotional expectations	30
2.6 Spokes characters within the interface	33
2.6.1 Human Computer Interaction (HCI) and new media	33
2.6.2 Synthetic stage	33
2.6.3 Social actors	34
2.6.1 Character and social presence	37
2.7 The comic image online	39
2.8 The character from the iconic to the anthropomorphic	41
2.8.1 BMW Mini and psychology	41
2.8.2 Character and online dating	43
2.8.3 Oddcast and developing AI	44
3. METHOD	
3.0 Method	47
3.1 Method in context: Employing divergent/convergent-thinking	47
3.2 Ethical considerations	50

4. DESIGN IN PRACTICE	
4.0 Design in practice	51
4.1 Defining chiropractic care and subluxation	51
4.2 Design and development	53
4.2.1 Creative brief: Subluxation and how to prevent it	53
4.2.2 Prototype in production.....	55
4.3 Interview findings	61
4.3.1 Expert interview summary of findings	62
4.3.2 Group interview.....	62
4.3.3 Summary	64
5. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS	
5.0 Discussion of findings.....	66
5.1 Likeability.....	66
5.2 Alignment and believability.....	66
5.3 Gender and voice	67
5.4 Character and online storytelling.....	68
5.5 Building a brand	68
6. CONCLUSION	
6.0 Conclusion.....	69
Bibliography.....	71
Appendices	77

Table of Figures

Fig 2.1	Multi-national spokes character framework Adapted from Callcott and Lee 1995 (Leckenby et al, 2001)	13
Fig 2.2.1	Energizer bunny (2003). www.energizer.com/bunny	14
Fig 2.1.2	Puck magazine 1898 cover (2004). www.ellisarkerbutler.info/epb/coverart	16
Fig 2.4.1	Marlboro Man 1955. Lorin (2001:73) 5 giants of advertising. Assouline ..	26
Fig 2.4.2	Lovemarks ingredients. Adapted from Roberts (2004)	27
Fig 2.4.3	M&M characters (2004). Global.mms.com/au/about/history	28
Fig 2.4.4	Hello Kitty (2004). www.sangio.com/hellokitty	28
Fig 2.6.1	Oddcast site pal characters (2004). www.oddcast.com	33
Fig 2.6.1.1	Monitoring character (Microsoft's genius series)	38
Fig 2.8.1.1	BMW Mini (2004). www.mini.ca/experiment	41
Fig 2.8.1.2	BMW Mini (2004). www.mini.ca/experiment	42
Fig 2.8.1.3	BMW Mini (2004). www.mini.ca/experiment	42
Fig 2.8.2.1	Margo Says (2004). www.margosays.com	43
Fig 2.8.3.1	Oddcast easy step (2004). www.oddcast.com/sitepal	44
Fig 2.8.3.2	Oddcast character choice (2004). www.oddcast.com/sitepal	45
Fig 2.8.3.3	Stephen King (2004). www.stephenking.com	46
Fig 3.1	Method framewotk	47
Fig 4.2.2.1	Navigational map	55
Fig 4.2.2.2	Concept character development	56
Fig 4.2.2.3	Freeflow character	57
Fig 4.2.2.4	Dr Jody character development	58
Fig 4.2.2.5	Animated splash screen	58
Fig 4.2.2.6	Physical storyboard	59
Fig 4.2.2.7	Character launch and verbal introduction	59
Fig 4.2.2.8	Character and non-character navigation panels	60
Fig 4.2.2.9	Screen example: What is subluxation	60

1. Introduction

Having worked on a range of comic style concepts within the design industry, primarily for print, I have found the comic character to be a fascinating and creative communications tool. Research undertaken within this project has provided me the opportunity to explore the commercial value of the character, to uncover it's historical roots and in doing so speculate on potential desirability within today's interactive marketing environment.

The linear style character grew enormously in popularity over the years reaching a marketing high point by the mid seventies, its greatest growth occurring through the advent of television and animation. However in the later part of the seventies and early eighties the character began to diminish in frequency compared to the thriving position it had held. Claims relating to characters taking on more serious roles in line with a tighter corporate influence were theorised (Dotz & Husain 2003:32). Nonetheless the result was a less entertaining and a simpler style of icon that essentially lost consumer appeal.

In the 1990's a technique referred to as "Retro branding" (Dotz & Husain 2003:33), a term associated with reviving past images, helped bring about a renewed affection for some of these characters. This seemed to rekindle the flame, and together with developing technology, the market for characters appeared to be on the upsurge once again.

The purpose of this study was not just to learn about the history and psychology of character use in marketing, but more importantly to inform the design practice itself when aligning a character to a service using today's technology for today's consumer.

To achieve this, chiropractic health care was seen as an ideal platform to test the value of a character-service alliance. Its purpose is to seek clarification on the actual role chiropractic plays within modern health care. To do this, a web-based information delivery device was developed to a prototype finish in an attempt to communicate the desired message, with a spokes character at its helm.

1.1 Central proposition

The spokes character as an interactive media communicator can through personality, storyline and visual alignment embody the very qualities a service or product may represent. Spokes character representation can help facilitate likeability, consumer awareness, memory and even trust, resulting in an engaging experience for the user.

The research aims to show that:

- Literature and industry regard the spokes character as a valuable marketing tool
- A targeted consumer will prefer a spokes character driven website in comparison to a non-character site containing the same information
- A spokes character within a website interface can achieve likeability and credibility through visual alignment, voice and storyline.

2. Literature

The literature explored within this research sort to establish desirability and effectiveness of character employment within the marketing industry. The exploration was also to determining a set of rules by which character design could be governed within today's media and business environment. Though character appearance in design and advertising has been prevalent for more than a century, it is only in the last 15 years that academia has taken an interest in the subject, with much of this research conducted in America.

Literature investigated at the outset concentrates on key components of the character; stripping it down to the bare essentials in order to determine what makes a desirable communication tool and thus protagonist of effective storytelling. The research first defines the character. Then addresses issues that surround its design makeup pertaining to likeability, gender and stereotyping in relation to providing core ingredients of effective portrayal. Albeit as literature will show, for a character to succeed at a deeper level, relevance, visual alignment, emotion and trust are significant factors in providing communication leading to social engagement.

2.1 Definition of the Spokes Character

Tseng (2001): *The role of advertising characters in brand building*, claims that there are four common classifications given to characters used within advertising: trade characters, advertising icons, advertising characters and spokes characters.

In defining trade characters she considered many aspects of character dimension from animal to non-animal, trademark to non-trademark, fictional to non-fictional, animation to illustration and celebrity to non-celebrity. Tseng (2001:2) cites Phillips (1996) classification of the trade character as “a fictional, animate being or animated object that has been created for the promotion of a product, service or idea”. She notes Phillips (1996) distinction that “a trade character does not have to be a trademark”. This had led to some confusion between the two terms. Moreover the term trade character conjures up images of the past relating directly to trade marking which has roots dating all the way back to Mesopotamia (now Iraq) 3000 BC (Meggs 1998, McCloud 1994, Roberts 2004).

The terms were revised in the 1990's when ‘advertising icon’ and ‘advertising character’ began to appear in publication and books such as *Advertising Age*, Dotz & Morton

(1996) *What a Character*, and Dotz & Husain (2003) *Meet Mr Product*. However, according to Tseng (2001), these terms have seldom been used within academic literature, which may suggest a reluctance by academia to shift from the classic definition of the word 'icon'. Icon is defined by the Oxford dictionary (1999:250) as "a sacred painting or mosaic, a greatly admired person" and only more recently "computing a graphic symbol on a computer screen". Nonetheless according to Tseng (2001) in quoting Sternberg's (1999:4) view, a key factor of the icon today is its ability to generate meaning in a capitalist context: "while businesses and enterprises create an icon, the marketplace, through the media provide its meaning".

Tseng (2001) in citing earlier work carried out by Callcott and Lee (1995) acknowledged that the advertising characters function was to establish a connection with both consumer and the brand through the addition of invented presenter or personality. However the term "advertising character" was thought to be too broad in definition.

The 'Spokes character', in relation to the term 'advertising character' also looks to bridge the divide between the consumer and brand through artificial personality. However as the description 'spokes' accurately signifies; just like a real spokes person, the spokes character *speaks* (figuratively or in actuality) for a product/service, often providing some visual demonstration as well. For this reason within the scope of this research project the term "Spokes character" in describing characters in illustration, animation and interaction is used.

Warren Dotz (2003) a Californian based author and pop culture historian, asserts that the spokes character began life shortly before the twentieth century in America, with the earliest known character "Quaker Oats" taking on a human form that appeared on small food stuff packets. It wasn't long before astute manufactures became aware of the increased promotion caused by these distinguishable images, resulting in greater recognition over rival product (Dotz and Morton, 1996). These characters essentially evolved from early trademarks developed by individuals employed within a manufacturing organisation that attempted to capture the essence of their product or company name within the design (Dotz, 2003:8-13).

In researching character appeal within marketing, Callcott and Phillips (1996) have noted...

the spokes character at its most basic is defined as a fictional persona employed to sell a product or service. Although research suggests that advertisements

employing spokes characters have a greater ability to change consumers brand preferences than other ads (Ogilvy & Raphaelson, 1982), there has been no systematic inquiry into the factors that contribute to popular and effective spokes-character advertising (Callcott & Phillips, 1996:73).

This gap has been addressed by Callcott and Lee (Tseng, 2001:11) who in their 1995 research paper *Establishing the spokes character in academic inquiry* produced a multi-dimensional framework for spokes character definition across physical appearance and media types for non-interactive presentation:

Parameters	Description			
Appearance	Fictitious Human Actors Caricatures		Non Human Animal Mythical Product Personification	
Medium	Print Illustration Photography	Film Animation Puppetry Live-Action	Radio Personas	Merchandise Premium Character Licensing
Origin	Advertising Non celebrity	Non Advertising Celebrity		
Promotion	Active Speak for the product Demonstrate product		Passive Symbolic	

Fig 2.1 Adapted from Callcott and Lee 1995 (Tseng, 2001)

2.2 Likeability and stereotype

2.2.1 Likeability and the spokes character

Callcott and Phillips (1996), paid particular attention to spokes characters and likeability within advertising. Their 1996 study, a qualitative piece of research involving in-depth interviews with seven male and nine female subjects ranging in age from 38 to 76, was designed to uncover the primary dimensions of what makes a likeable and thus successful character.

Likeability and personality

They utilised Walker and Dubisky, (1994) classification of liking as “a global positive response toward an object or idea that has underlying cognitive and affective components”. Their study revealed two key reasons why liking could positively affect a call to action. The first; is if the consumer likes an advertisement they are more likely to remember it, and second, for the longer term associate or link those feelings with the brand being represented.



Four primary dimensions of spokes character likeability were revealed within their research: personality, physical characteristics, humour, and consumer experience factors (Callcott & Phillips, 1996:73).

Fig 2.2.1 Energizer bunny (2003).

www.energizer.com/bunny

The first dimension, ‘personality’, is inherent in the dimension of spokes characters as animate beings (1996:73). Essentially it provides a humanlike value that affects an emotional response when aligning to a marketing pitch. However to evoke a positive outcome it first needs to favourably match the message. A spokes character with plausibility is an essential ingredient in the marketing mix in order to create the desired outcome. The authors use the example of the Energizer bunny to demonstrate an effective match. The bunny keeps on ‘going and going’ thanks to its power cell, the Energizer battery (they both need each other to fill a need, in this case the communication of the batteries endurance). They suggested that if you give the wrong

message (one test subject felt that Bart Simpson was a “snotty little kid”), the consumer maybe left with negative feelings relating to the brand/product represented. Although, the authors also note trying to play it safe (from the marketers perspective) by creating a non-descript style character or personality that doesn’t offend anyone, can lead to a non-memorable response that nobody can recall either¹ (Callcott & Phillips, 1996).

A key assertion made in the study suggested that a good marketing strategy resulting in brand equity is to create “an original metaphor for the brand’s personality”, and the creation of a “distinct identifiable personality that embodies traits and characteristics liked by consumers” is an effective way to do this (Callcott & Phillips 1996:75). Establishing likeable identity traits the consumer can relate too, allows for further engagement to take place.

Likeability and physical characteristics

The second dimension required for character likeability was found to be ‘physical characteristics’. This included shape and supporting props together with an appearance that matched today’s market. The ‘cuteness’ of the design or neotenus shape wasn’t specified as a positive aspect. However within the interview process this attribute as a likeability factor was indicated by character style predilection with subjects opting more for the softer, rounded characters presented to them. Smith (2002:41) described ‘cuteness’ as baby-like features that induce feelings of warmth and protectiveness. Facial expression was also deemed very important, again with a reference to cuteness (Callcott & Phillips, 1996:75).

Test subjects also found supporting props helpful for character brand alignment whether it be costumes or other features included in the scene for visual communication. However props, costume or character style needed to align to today’s society. Callcott & Phillips (1996) noted that, “a contemporary appearance and modern dress seem to be important aspects of a spokes character’s appearance”.

Wit emerged as a dominant factor contributing to Callcott and Phillips study. ‘Charlie Browns’ Snoopy was thought by subjects interviewed to be a strong contender in this area. It was found that wit adds a unique style of intelligence to a message. The humour factor seemed to be a mandatory expectation from the perspective of the subjects

¹ Discussed further in 2.2.3, 2.5.

participating simply because spokes characters are generally cartoon based personalities whether animated or not. As Callcott and Phillips note “these results are not surprising, given respondents’ years of experience associating humour with comic books, cartoons, and comic strips”. According to Vance Packard author of *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957), in the 1950’s when MR (Motivational Research) was the psychological ‘in’ technique, the comic image even then was subject to depth probing techniques for the purposes of advertising. In the late 1950’s a Sunday comic in the US called 'Puck' (in existence since the late nineteenth century) was the subject of a social psychological study which set out to determine the value of its reader to the marketer. It was found that the reading of comics is a "private, almost secret pastime" (Packard, 1957:69). The conclusion reached was that comics offer "a fertile field for any marketer who wants to

play upon our hypochondriacal anxieties" (Callcott & Phillips, 1996:75).

Fig 2.2.2 Puck magazine 1898 cover
(2004). www.ellisarkerbutler.info/epb/coverar



One aspect of the comic approach that appealed to subjects interviewed, was the appreciation of “comic narrative. Callcott and Phillips pointed out that the humour in the comic narrative comes from a continuing story”.

Two other forms of humour were also found to be equally important; incongruity

and humanity. Incongruity added the surprise factor, while humanity focused on the overall fun-like spirit, not the big laugh, simply the enjoyable experience of the whole process (Callcott & Phillips, 1996:76).

Likeability and consumer

The final dimension of likeability is “consumer experience factors and character experience factors” As defined by Callcott & Phillips (1996:77) this dimension considers the prior experience of the consumer and their cultural background. The marketer when designing a character and story, be it animal origin or human-like, must understand their target market before executing creative strategy.

Globalisation versus cultural specificity

De Mooij (1997, 2003) asserts the advertiser must realise, when formulating strategy, that what works well for one culture does not necessarily work well for another. With the move to globalisation the 'one advert for all' approach may not only fail to hit the target market, it could even create a negative response. This may have been the case with Bart Simpson's affect on one of Callcott and Phillips test subjects.

Character experience factors like consumer experience, are also about the consumer's prior knowledge, although the focus is on the character itself and the message of familiarity conveyed. In situations where familiarity creates a recognition quality, Callcot & Phillip's (1996) test subjects expressed a comfortable feeling. But it is also in danger of suggesting an old or worn out message because consumers simply get bored. To counter this, advertisers in the past have moved their client's characters in and out of the limelight (advertised for a period, withdrawn, then advertised again). Alternatively they have reinvented a characters perception without losing any recognition by introducing new elements to it. Leo Burnett did this with the 'Jolly Green Giant' and his smaller sidekick 'Sprout' (Callcott & Phillips 1996, Assouline 2001, Tseng 2001).

In summary, Callcott and Phillips found likeable spokes characters could lead to greater communication effectiveness. They asserted characters help increase the attention span of the consumer. They promote positive feelings transferred to the brand through the function of identity memory cues, which are more easily activated when selecting product (shopping). Finally when faced with similar "low-involving" products of comparative value, emotional factors may engage helping the sale in favour of the characters brand. The intention of their research was to provide the advertiser with a better understanding of likeable spokes character qualities, thus allowing the marketer to adopt greater control when aligning character design values to the product values (Callcott & Phillips, 1996:78).

2.2.2 Character and gender

Although characters, both past and recent, have been developed for likeability resulting in a more light-hearted approach to advertising, have they been promoting a balanced view of today's society, in particular the western world in terms of gender role? According to Peirce and McBride (1999) there have been liberal amounts of research carried out with regard to gender and stereotyping within advertising dating back to the fifties. However, until 1999, there had been no research material relating specifically to

spokes character and gender stereotyping. The focus of Peirce & McBrides (1999) research paper was therefore to establish within the context of television advertising if spokes characters contribute to gender stereotyping.

Peirce & McBride in their 1999 study into advertising conclude that to date, male voices and images have generally dominated the airways. Although with television this concern was not fully realised until the early seventies when researchers truly began to appreciate the disparity between the genders on air. They observe that several studies on the topic have found that overall the male/female ratio was at least two to one (66%) in favour of the male within both business and the entertainment industry, whereas the trend shifted to women only when the product promoted centred on the kitchen or bathroom. In considering children's programmes they cite a study carried out by Doolittle & Pepper (1974), who asserts that at the time of their research the male dominance on air was around 84%. Commercials played during children's viewing times portrayed the male presenter in a position of authority. The commercials that did use women presenters often showed them in a more dependent, supporting or passive role. Where authority was evident with women, the impression usually given was one of being bossy.

Peirce and McBride (1999) citing the work of Pierracine and Snell (1995) found that by the mid-nineties the situation for mainstream television had improved dramatically. Atypical roles replaced the stereotypical. Peirce classified female stereotypes as being "homemaker, nurse, secretary, victim, nag and scatterbrain". Surprisingly however, commercials running during children's programming showed little movement with a high degree of stereotypical activity still present.

Acknowledging Callcott's (1996) research claiming spokes characters have a high recall factor, Peirce and McBride (1999) put Callcott's theory to the test. They hypothesised that characters can be easily recalled and of those recalled, a high percentage would be male as opposed to female. Peirce's method was not to rely on empirical data of character profiles, but rather rely on the recall abilities of research participants taking part in this study. A broad base of undergraduate students of equal gender ratio was asked within a 15-minute period to list as many characters as they could. From there, a smaller group of students determined if the characters were male, female or neutral (majority rule dictated). Ninety hours of videotaped footage were then recorded in which to locate and confirm spokes character gender identity.

Peirce's (1999) hypothesis was supported. From 39 characters recalled only 2 were designated as distinctly female. Interestingly one of the female characters, 'Aunt Jemima' a black woman modernised in appearance over the years, stemmed from the southern image of a slave. 'Aunt' was the name given to female slaves generally entrusted with the care of their owner's children. Nancy Green (her real name and the original character) was actually born into slavery in 1834 (Scope, 2002). Two very popular characters recalled were the M&M characters, deemed by the research students to be both male and female. However where character features were not obviously male or female, students involved in the research were instructed to look for other cues such as their name, voice inflection or given title. For example the Energizer bunny: ...*"he keeps on going... and going"*.

An earlier study carried out in 1994 by Callcott and Lee into animated spokes character use in American television advertising had produced similar results in terms of gender presence stating that 76% of the characters included within their research were found to be male, while only 1.1% were coded as female. The remaining percent were coded as indistinguishable or a male/female mix (Callcott & Lee, 1994:10).

In summary, characters like their human counterparts have contributed highly to an unbalanced portrayal of gender in advertising. However, where this issue of equality had been addressed with human based characters, spokes characters still maintained a high level of male dominance.

2.2.3 Are male spokes characters more effective than female?

Based on their 1999 research into gender balance and spokes characters, Peirce, McBride and England focused attention on the perceived importance of spokes character gender in relation to effectiveness. They questioned if male characters are more effective than female characters when it comes to likeable brand prompting.

The authors hypothesized that more positive results will occur when the spokes character matches the target audience gender for a product advertised. Secondly when targeting one gender, if a spokes character of the opposite gender is employed the results will be less likely to be perceived as targeted to them. Thirdly, spokes characters achieving the highest rating on positive attributes will also be the most memorable (Peirce, McBride & England, 2001).

The action research method employed was to create three versions of each commercial using a male, female and neutral gender spokes character. Three different products that

target males, females and the two genders equally were advertised. The products selected for this research study (broken down from a list of fifty) were golf balls determined to be the male product, vacuum cleaner, as the female product and coffee deemed equally marketable to both genders. Marketing students from the South West Texas University made the product selection (Peirce et al, 2001).

Three commercials were produced, complete with characters drawn for each product. The three characters drawn also had three gender states (asexual, a male and a female version). The coffee character for example utilised a tie and moustache for the male version, high heels and red lips were used for the female. A non-descript asexual version was used for the neutral. The character voice was determined from an audition process in which to select the best female, male and neutral voice.

Nine commercials were produced in all (male, female and neutral version for each product) with questions relating to character gender, product alignment and spokes character recall presented to participants.

Findings revealed slightly higher levels of consumer receptiveness when marketing golf balls to each gender. The female character improved female receptiveness, as did the male character for men. Overall the male character was deemed marginally more appropriate. The vacuum cleaner (regarded by participants as more a female product than male) utilising the female character provided the most significant result with respect to character gender alignment. 82% of women felt they were specifically targeted when the character was female. However with a male character, the receptiveness of female participants dropped to 60% (the non-descript character received a similar result to the male). Coffee as a neutral product produced an even response for both character types. Although the female spokes character was the preferred option of the three gender types for all participants.

Overall the female spokes characters proved to be the preferred. The vacuum cleaner was felt by group participants to be the most appropriate character/product alignment, it was also deemed to be the most likeable and cutest. However in contrast to Callcott & Phillips (1996) research into character likeability, the character that drew the strongest memory recall in this study turned out to be the male vacuum character (the most disliked of the whole group).

Peirce et al's (2001) hypotheses were partially supported. The spokes character gender when matched to the target audience gender produced (slightly) more favourable results

in relation to the perception of the product, although these results were not significant. What was not supported within Peirce et al's (2001) research was that likeability relates directly to recall. The most disliked character was the one found to be the most remembered. In addressing this unexpected result, research conducted into recall, liking and creativity within television advertising conducted by Stone, Besser & Lewis (2000:7) revealed commercials liked by their audience generate greater recall than those disliked. They were also deemed to be the most creative, suggesting that the creative aspect of the advertising may be a likeable factor in its own right. Peirce et al's male vacuum character though disliked still maintained a degree of creativity that stimulated recall.

Peirce et al's (2001) findings also supported Callcott & Phillips (1996) study, where consumers prefer a male or female character in contrast to a neutral non-descript one. Their research also showed the female character to be more effectual in likeability than her male equivalent.

2.2.4 Stereotypes or Archetypes

With balanced gender representation recognised as being both preferred and effective within spokes character presented communication. Patmore (2003:16) asserts that, "all stories are character driven", claiming if there is a story to be told there has to be a character at the centre of it whether it be a toy or a mountain. However to build a lasting presence, a character needs universal appeal.

Stereotypical imagery promoting women characters (comic or real) in disparaging roles is not only derogatory it is also restrictive in terms of providing broad communication. Patmore (2003:17) defines stereotyping, as "localised cultural conditioning that outside of a limited area loses meaning", it cannot therefore fulfil widespread appeal. For a character to build universal recognition it needs to become an archetype. Patmore (2003:16,17) believes an archetype is a character that transcends external forms. It can be classified as good or bad (hero or villain) and there are seven different forms: hero, mentor, threshold guardian, herald, shape shifter, shadow and trickster.

A character as the protagonist of a story, whether it appears short or long term, needs both a personality and a history before it can become believable. The viewer needs to know how the character might react in order to show interest in them (ibid, 2003:17).

2.3 Spokes character verse spokesperson in hedonic/utilitarian analysis within services advertising

Previous literature established that spokes character identities create a positive experience for the consumer when it comes to promoting a product. Albeit, when aligning to a service industry promotion, how does the drawn character compare to a real person. The research presented here, addressed two issues, one of character/person comparison, the other of credibility within two service industry types.

Stafford, Stafford, & Day (2002), have observed that recent growth in the service advertising industry, particularly the USA has seen the need for greater marketing knowledge and empirical research in order to sustain long-term viability and growth in this area. Their 2002 research paper explores characters (both human and comic) and their affect on hedonic (pleasurable experience for the individual) and utilitarian (better for the common good) services advertising from a contingency approach², of which little research has been conducted into the subject thus far (Stafford et al, 2002:1,18).

According to Packard (1957:132), it was back in the fifties (the early days of Motivation Research or MR) that the power of “Testimony” within marketing was realised. Even though this was not a new discovery, it was until then relatively untapped. Jules Alberti was able to offer a systematic approach to this marketing methodology. Quintessentially by way of careful alignment, he matched visual meaning with written and spoken.

Through the importance of a personality or celebrity as was quite often the case (a known identity that the consumer could relate to), positive views attached to a product or service via “testimony and endorsements” proved to be highly successful in providing a desirable psychological link, and still are today. However, (ibid, 1957:132) in reference to *Printers Ink* (a merchandising journal of the 1950’s), in order for a positive association of personality attachment to product occur, there must first be a plausible match between the two (Packard, 1957:132). A term coined for this match is “Source Credibility”. According to Ohanian’s 1990 view, source credibility can be loosely

² Marketing journals in the 70's began reporting what was referred to as “situational variances on purchase behaviour”, or perhaps more to the point as argued in the 90's by Johar and Sirgy (1991) “the effectiveness of advertising variables depends on the product type” Stafford et al (2002:6).

defined as “a communicator's positive characteristics that affect the receivers acceptance of the message” (Stafford 2002: 2).

Stafford et al's (2002:2,5,7) research concentrated on character types³ within service industry advertising. Spokes character and spokes person identities were developed within two purpose-constructed campaigns applied to a hedonic and utilitarian service. A print advertising campaign was conceived consisting of eight adverts, four for each of the two services, one restaurant (hedonic) and one bank (utilitarian) (ibid, 2002:11).

Past experience (Packard, 1957) had shown celebrity use to be a powerful marketing tool in aligning customer's perception to a brand or product and a celebrity personality was chosen from market testing within three business classes (to ensure consistency all characters used within this study were male). Though celebrities are considered affective communication tools, Tom & Carlson (cited in Stafford et al, 2002:2,4) claims human alignment gone astray can cause the perception of the brand/product/service associated with them (as the presenter) to be denigrated also. An example of this was the marketing relationship between Pepsi Cola and Madonna where due to risqué music videos being produced by the star, lost sales to the company were estimated to be in the vicinity of 10 million dollars \$US (ibid, 2002:4).

Callcott and Lee (1995) suggest that spokes characters can be a safer and preferable alternative to the human endorser. They determined spokes characters could create an aura of trust as well as brand equity (as discussed in 2.4). Additionally they can induce an “element of fun” to the endorsement process.

Stafford et al (2002:3) citing the work of Solomon and Gajilan, speculate that the rise in spokes character use over the 1990's within advertising, was most likely due to technological improvements, particularly in animation. However Callcott & Lee (1995) point out that though characters have been used ubiquitously, there has not been a lot of research carried out with adult consumers, and according to Stafford et al, until 2002, no research at all within service advertising (ibid, 2002:5). Their research therefore focused

³ Character types utilised were: one original spokes character design (a comic based character referred to as Cactus Pete) and three spokes person versions (Harrison Ford as the celebrity, one fictitious employee and one fictitious customer).

around characters (human and comic) with regard to advertising two service types (Restaurant and Bank) in relation to source credibility (ibid, 2002:7,10).

Utilising a testing method developed by Baker and Churchill, referred to as the tripartite model⁴, in line with Ohanian's three-part measure of source credibility; perceived expertise, trustworthiness and attractiveness were determined by participating subjects. 173 useable results were obtained from two separate Universities across two States within the US. The subject's ages ranged from 19 – 24 years with 55% of the results obtained from males (ibid, 2002:5).

Five hypotheses were put forward within this research (2002:8-16):

1. Spokes characters, when used for a hedonic service, will elicit a greater degree of source interaction (positive attitudes towards the endorser) than other character types. This was supported in the results in that a buying intention would result from the endorser. This was not supported for any of the four candidates.
2. A retail hedonic service using a spokes character evokes a positive attitude in favour of the advert and higher levels of source credibility of which both criteria was supported.
3. As an endorser a celebrity will have a greater hedonic effect than utilitarianism in terms of source credibility, and favourable response to the advertisement. This was supported. However, though the trustworthiness was higher in the hedonic (restaurant) than the utilitarian (bank), the affective attitude response was slightly higher in the bank advert. The likeability or attractiveness factor was even in both service advertisements.
- 4 and 5 predicted a celebrity would perform better than an employee or a customer for source credibility and positive attitude across both service types. This was again supported with the likeability attractiveness factor clearly being dominant. However trustworthiness and expertise, though supported, were not significant in comparison.

The results obtained from the research indicated that a fun-like service aligns well with both spokes character and celebrity spokes person endorsement. The results provided positive recognition (likeability), with the experience deemed by the participating subjects to be pleasurable. However, both character and celebrity did not contribute highly to the trustworthiness or expertise factor of the equation. As was put forward

⁴ Partitions attitudes into three categories measuring: cognition (mental stimulus of the advert), affect (evoking feeling) and connotation (intention of behaviour of which the advert stimulates).

earlier by Packard (1957), a plausible link needs to be established when aligning an endorser to a product/service. With regard to spokes character plausibility, the same rule needs to apply. To build trust and or expertise it is necessary to establish a believable profile within the area being marketed.

2.3.1 Character relevance and trust

Garretson and Niedrich investigated character trust and its relationship with a brand. Their paper (2004) *Spokes characters: creating character trust and positive brand attitudes*, speculated that characters could enhance the trust factor within a brand experience due to perceived expertise. Their research utilised the services of 144 undergraduate students producing 140 usable results with 37 characters identified. Subjects were asked to match non-celebrity spokes characters with their respective brands through memory recall from recent exposure to a range of media.

The research method consisted of four seven-point (likert style) scales that were matched against a series of targeted questions. They addressed character appropriateness (likeability and relevance), nostalgia, trust and expertise. Key factors to emerge from this research were; the relevancy of a spokes character to product/service was not considered as important as a real spokes person would be to the same product/service (although perceived expertise of a character did affect positive brand attitude). Nostalgia reintroduced the qualities of characters we grew up with as children reinforcing the likeability component. However the main factor to emerge was to do with the brand itself. Spokes characters were found to be a more effective tool with consumers that had little or no experience with a brand in contrast to consumers who were brand savvy and thus unaffected by the character either way (Garretson and Niedrich, 2004:25-32).

2.4 Brand, brand equity and the spokes character

According to literature covered, it has been established spokes characters as communication tools provide value in terms of enhancing the user experience through recognition and enjoyment. However, do characters possess the qualities that allow for roles beyond that of an initial engagement, roles that benefit the brand itself?

Tseng (2001) citing Biel (1992) asserts that brand image and brand equity should not be confused. Brand equity is defined as the benefits achieved beyond the physical product or service (the additional money consumers will part with in order to belong or associate with the experience presented by that brand). However for brand equity to occur the brand must first establish an image that drives a positive consumer perception.

Tseng (2001) claims consumer perceptions include a set of attributes ranging from the tangible to emotion based, such as speed, user friendliness, excitement and trustworthiness. Although for the brand to create a meaningful impression it should be understood on three levels: the image portrayed of the provider of the product/service, the image it portrays of the intended consumer or end user and the image of the

product/service itself. A good example of this is the Marlboro Man (originally created by Leo Burnett in 1954, first appeared in 1955) where the brand image formed was by consumers themselves (Tseng, 2001). Phillip Morris had wanted to get away from the effeminate connotation filtered cigarettes had at the time and the macho American cowboy personality achieved this (Lorin, 2002:66-70). The consumers adopted the image as an embodiment of themselves leading to one of the greatest success stories in the history of advertising.

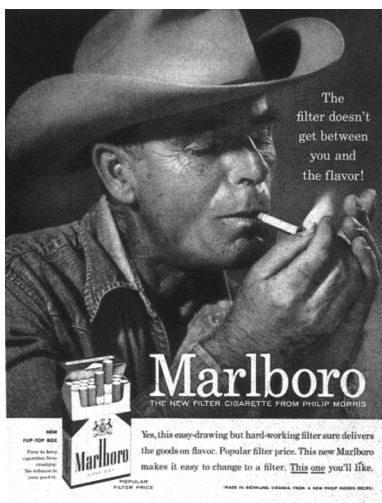


Fig 2.4.1 Marlboro Man 1955. Lorin (2001:73) 5 Giants of advertising. Assouline

Building personality into brands as asserted by Tseng (2001:10) “presents a more varied array of symbols and metaphors that are not restrained by the physical attributes of products”. A personality can encourage participation from the consumer, ultimately providing a more meaningful relationship with the brand.

Tseng (2001) referring to Biels (1992) study claims brands can evoke feelings beyond mere liking; they can induce confidence, excitement and happiness or even boredom if presented poorly. Kevin Roberts (2004), claims brands can even evoke feelings of love.

Roberts (2004), in expressing his views on the future of brand management asserts as Tseng has, that successful brands go well beyond simple recognition or just likeability. A successful brand instils “mystery, sensuality and intimacy” (2004:74). In short brands are a recipe for “LOVE”. He claims brands are not owned by the manufacturer, producer or business, they are owned by the people who belong to the experience, just like the Marlboro man does.

According to Richards (2004:60-74), in establishing a framework for this proposition, a brand must first be respected and trusted before it can be loved.

Mystery	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Great stories - Past, present and future - Taps into dreams - Myths and icons - Inspiration.
Sensuality	Sound, sight, smell, touch and taste.
Intimacy	Commitment, empathy and passion.

Fig 2.4.2 Lovemark ingredients. Adapted from Roberts (2004:77)

Breaking down this mixture, Roberts extols the virtue of a good story claiming it has enormous value within business, and like Callcott and Phillips (1996), Maestri (1999) and Patmore (2003), Roberts (2004:88) also asserts that you cannot tell a good story without both a character and emotion. Past, present and future are “entwined” suggests Roberts, giving the example of the Disney theme park where park goers can experience “fond memories of the past and promises of the future” (2004:91).

Legends have been built on mythical beings whether monsters or magical. As children we are told stories of such creatures and as adults we still crave them. Some would argue that one just has to look at current movie and book sales, Harry Potter for example. Kodak’s George Eastman took advantage of American folk law back in 1900 (Dotz et al, 2003:18-20) by developing the Box Brownie, so named because it was based on little brownie characters developed by Palmor Cox, a popular children’s illustrator/author at the time. The purpose was simply to capture the hearts and minds of a young audience, and it did.



Fig 2.4.3 M&M characters (2004).

global.mms.com/au/about/history

Roberts (2004:99-98) gives a more modern day example being that of the M&M characters and how they were propelled past much of their competition and into as he puts it “iconic heaven”. According to Roberts the success of these characters comes from not only cool graphics but also their “feisty attitude, style, humour, irreverence and plain big kid self centeredness”.

Another example of the character as an icon is Hello Kitty, which according to Pavitt (2000:180) “adorns over 300 products”. This Japanese icon was originally developed in 1974 for greeting cards aimed at children. Small products quickly followed suit with the philosophy behind the brand aimed at putting a smile on the face of everybody receiving a gift. Today Hello Kitty is worth an estimated 9 billion \$US annually.



Fig 2.4.4 Hello Kitty (2004). www.sanrio.com/hellokitty

Retracing the visual

Dondis (1974) claimed humans use pre-visualisation (the ability to visually construct problem solving situations in the mind). He likened this to the plotting of a visual map when deciding how to reach a destination via the best possible route:

Thinking in concepts emerged from thinking in images through the slow development of powers of abstraction and symbolisation, just as phonetic script emerged by similar processes out of the pictorial symbol and hieroglyphics (Dondis, 1974:8).

The evolution of language started with pictures (self-explaining cartoons), then moved to phonetic units ending up with the alphabet. However, much of our communication still centres on the visual, particularly with around 3000 unique languages in the world today. The pictographic symbols developed for the 1968 Olympic games in Mexico and the 1972 Olympic games in Munich, Germany (Meggs, 1998:381-385) addressed language and cultural problems surrounding communication leading to a revolutionary system that retraced to the visual (Dondis, 1974:14).

In summary, a recognisable identity that provides personality, credibility, visual alignment and communication through a story like approach. Can as previously branded symbols have, impart a message that a targeted consumer can relate very quickly too.

2.5 Emotion on the web

Much of the research discussed thus far deals with offline issues surrounding an image design and the emotive message it can evoke within traditional push media (TV and print). According to *Winning on the Web: The Executive Pocket Guide to SMARTER Marketing* (2002:11), exposure to a poorly executed push image can be dismissed without causing significant harm to a brand. However the emotional stimuli expelled through poor branding/design related to the Internet can intensify an impression. Negative emotion encountered online may create a greater and longer lasting adverse reaction because the user is intentionally pulling in content.

2.5.1 Internet and emerging consumers

Jake Pearce, ex pat Brit and cool hunter working in Auckland (1999) utilised a research process referred to as cool tracking (essentially tracking groups of people he feels are trendsetters). Working with kids he referred to as cyber kids, he asked, "Would you rather watch Television or play on the Internet"? The answer came back in favour of the Internet (Admedia, 1999:23). Within four years statistics confirmed (in America) that kids prefer the Internet to other forms of entertainment. eMarketer, Yahoo and Carat North America (July, 2003), found young people in the US spend on average 16.7 hours per week on the internet compared to 13.6 hours per week watching TV and only 6 hours per week reading books or magazines for pleasure. The research was carried out in June of 2003 using 2,618 subjects.

2.5.2 Emotional expectations

How do emotional expectations of the consumer relate to a positive atmosphere on the internet for the promotion and purchasing of product or service? Smith (2002) presented a case for the value added benefits of incorporating EI (Emotional Intelligence) within web design. Smith hypothesized that emotional consideration in design (form follows emotion) is an important ingredient in relation to that of rational design factors (form follows function).

According to Villegas (2001), who undertook a historical review of definitions of emotions with respect to the advertising world (cited in Smith 2002:24), emotions are a response to our environmental stimuli that create an intense but short-term affective state. Emotion is a complex set of interactions among subjective and objective factors,

mediated by neural/hormonal systems. Therefore resulting experiences may lead to feelings of pleasure or displeasure with the creation of emotional relevance and goal directed behaviour being expressed. Form and function on the other hand come from the principles of Gestalt, the perceptual organisation of elements that provide logical clues to it's meaning. "It is the process of making wholes out of parts" (Lauer, 1990:20). The utilitarian approach creates meaning, but it's the emotion that stimulates the senses.

A primary focus of marketing today is reaching the consumers on a personal level and meeting those individual needs include human interactions. Smith asserts that this may be a factor for lost sales on the Internet (Smith, 2002). Web users are expected to reach one billion worldwide by 2005 (eMarketer, 2002; Smith, 2002:15; International Data Corporation, 2002) with a projected estimate exceeding a billion users by 2006 (eTForcasts, 2002).

Though Smith's (2002) discussion centred on the value of EI relative to e-Commerce (online shopping), his research also addresses key issues relevant to this study. In gaining insight into internet use and emotion, 13 distinct criterion were analysed; Emotion, Trust, Colour, Culture and Demographics, Usability, Virtual Agents, Recontextualisation, Speed, Video and Streaming Media, Sound, Graphics, Virtual Reality and 3D, Classification Mechanisms and Core Dimension. Original research carried out by Smith (2002) consisted of a web-based survey/questionnaire directed at the web designer/producer of web content, and a similar style hard copy version distributed to users. The research was designed to determine emotional design needs or values preferred/desired when shopping online with the aim of avoiding missed opportunities or lost sales. The surveys were designed to uncover issues or needs of both designer and user, then apply a comparison analysis of the results in which to determine areas requiring further development at the design level when factoring emotion based consideration.

The sample surveyed was relatively small for both sets of respondents. The completed return rate of the web-based survey aimed at producers of web content (predominantly web designers) produced a sample number of 42 (dictated to some degree by the small population of web site design companies in New Zealand), while the respondents from the users group numbered 32. The results produced contained areas of disparity in terms of emotional expectation between that of the designer and user.

From the research carried out by Smith it became apparent that designers in general were adopting a 'form follows function' approach rather than 'form follows emotion'. In reference to Frog designs philosophy (the product design-company responsible for Swatch), the founder of Frog design Hartmut Esslinger said "no matter how elegant and functional a design, it will not win a place in our lives unless it can appeal to a deeper level of our emotions" (Smith, 2002:36-37).

Smith's (2002) survey suggested 70% of the designers who responded felt emotion was an important feature to factor into web design, and included it. Still what the designer subjectively included and what the user understood the message to be, were not necessarily the same. Gaps existed between emotional stimuli that the designer's stated they were appealing to, and what users report they were actually encountering. Aside from reducing the frustration level or confusion by way of a clear navigation system, users felt greater levels of joy; happiness, delight and fun could be introduced into the web design. (2002:194). Areas of desirability suggested were; sound, entertainment, avatar, digital assistants and colour (ibid:201).

In summing up, no matter what the entertainment or fun factor included in web design might be, when marketing and selling on the web, websites need to establish a level of trust with the consumer, and emotional instinct plays an important role in establishing that bond. On the hierarchical list of what you need when building a website (Smith, 2002:204) trust came second only to usability. However the website user in contrast to the designer expressed an emotional desire for greater interaction encompassing hedonistic fulfilment, with character being a desired ingredient in that emotional mix.

2.6 Spokes characters within the interface



Fig 2.6.1 Oddcast SitePal characters (2004). www.oddcast.com

2.6.1 Human Computer Interaction (HCI) and new media

Berg in discussing HCI (Human Computer Interaction) (2000:347-368) undertook a review of literature with a focus on its relevance to education. HCI began life, helping soldiers better understand weaponry and cockpit displays during World War Two. Later it was used in the notion that the computer is a medium rather than a tool. He sets about defining key elements that reveal HCI in its current forms. In particular it's link to human factors, with animation and artificial agents a key component of his research.

Berg (2000:356), states that within educational interfaces, animation is not used as much as it could be, referring to animation that facilitates user interaction. Animation can add mood to the experience where complex choices are humanised in such a way as to add guidance to the experience. Apart from animation used for navigational purposes such as button and menu systems, artificial agents can be introduced that act as guides both visually and verbally. Agents may lead a viewer through a process in a more natural way.

With the utilisation of artificial agents, particularly the anthropomorphic variety, come two distinct perspectives. One sees the agent as a real personality, while the other sees them as simply programmes responding to preset commands. Nevertheless, literature is optimistic about their implementation into the interface (Berg 2000:357,358).

2.6.2 Synthetic stage

Brenda Laurel's interpretation of Aristotle's definition of theatre is "the representation of action". According to Rosenberg (1993: 66) the position Laurel takes within her book *Computer as Theatre* with respect to developing technology is one of mixing the medium of computer with the qualities of the interactive performance theatre, and in doing so reap the benefits of both.

Laurel views the computer not as a tool but as a medium. Even the term ‘computer user’ clashes with the function performed. Instead Laurel feels the focus should be on the actions people carry out with them. “No one goes to a movie theatre to stare at a projector” (Rosenberg, 1993: 67).

Computers as theatre throws out a challenge to traditional uses of theatre and computer: not to view two and a half millennia of theatre history as a dying art form, but to instead embrace its robustness and practical application, allowing it to merge into a world full of creative imagination.

2.6.3 Social actors

Reeves (2002), identifies two major points of interactive character design: 1. Human-Media Interactions (a redefined expression of Human Computer Interaction) are fundamentally social, and 2. Character interfaces bring social intelligence to online interactions:

Reeves’ study focuses on the benefits of social interaction claiming the same social interaction we experience with human to human interaction can be translated to human to media interactions using “pictures of social actors” (2002:1,2) that display natural emotion and expression which create a more engaging experience for the user whether it be related to sales or education. Reeves created a ten point definition of what he asserts are beneficial to the consumer through the use of character interface interaction.

1. Characters make explicit the social responses that are inevitable (Reeves, 2002:2). Reeves claims interfaces can interact with the user, expressing emotion and therefore actively help the viewer in achieving their desired objective in a more humanistic fashion.

2. Interactive characters are perceived as real social actors (ibid, 3).

Common sense suggest that computer generated characters are not real. However a character can still cause automatic social reaction such as experienced when viewing a film (even as in this case where no interaction is involved). With greater interaction and growing technology relating to pictorial image quality, the user experience can only be improved. According to Reeves (ibid, 3), “even a faint hint of two eyes and a mouth is enough in classic psychological experiments to stir a human related response”.

3. Interactivity increases the perceived realism and effectiveness of characters (Reeves, *ibid*, 4). For an interactive environment to function effectively Reeves asserts (*ibid*, 4) that the interaction should change based on the user input. In terms of character involvement they appear to acknowledge the user “hear and listen”, then respond to that interaction accordingly creating an element of realism. For this to be effective, Reeves listed four criteria; (1) the ability of the user to modify their own personal content, (2) executed in real time, (3) not just one standard response but rather a range of responses, and (4) frequently during the course of the engagement.

4. Interactive characters increase trust in information sources (Reeves, 2002:4). Reeves states that human relationships are built on trust, particularly when involving important issues relating to doctor-patient, teacher-student, or financial services. The interaction with the representative of the company/service whether it be a clinic/hospital, educational facility or bank gains credibility due to a social intelligence. Reeves describes this social intelligence as having the ability to above all other attributes emphasise; “credibility, reliability and objectivity”. The organisation through this relationship may either gain credibility or lose it.

5. Characters have personalities that can represent brands (*ibid*, 5). Personality has featured as a prominent factor within spokes character design, stemming from traditional advertising both static and animated as established by Callcott & Lee (1996), Callcott & Phillips (1996), Dotz & Husain (2003), Dotz & Morton (1996). When source credibility is well matched to a personality ‘the social actor’, the user has a better understanding of how the character will behave, and according to Reeves (*ibid*, 5), this predictability “is a key factor in allowing people to understand and feel comfortable with communication partners”. One area of concern with regard to evolving AI (Artificial Intelligence) personalities is to do with the creators of the characters themselves. Too many competing personality types, due to marketer and technologist influence within the programming stage, could compete with each other causing a personality conflict.

In relation to source credibility, characters can also be created with what Reeves refers to as a “backstory”, a process that establishes a history in which to explain their personality type. This can be an important ingredient when aligning a character to a corporate brand. Moreover, as discussed previously (2.3), characters do not deviate from a script or make music videos unintentionally risqué.

6. Characters can communicate social roles (ibid, 6). Social roles should define that which needs to be communicated, such as a character that sells in comparison to one who conveys information (teacher or service representative). According to Reeves (ibid, 6) the role the character plays should be clearly defined and immediately obvious. As discussed earlier (2.2.1), Reeves also places weight on visual props used such as the clothing or costume characters wear. For a technical service site this could entail the wearing of a white coat or uniform of equivalent value in accordance with the task being carried out.

7. Characters can effectively express and regulate emotions (ibid, 6,7).

EI (Emotion Intelligence), as discussed previously by Smith (2.5.2) is a critical component of interactive character design. Reeves (ibid, 6,7), refers to the incorporation of EI as “action readiness for responses appropriate to the moment that can influence attention, memory, and behaviour”. Reeves (2002:7), asserts that a bad emotional experience can leave a stronger impression than a positive one. Additionally, to ignore it’s potential is to miss a tremendous marketing opportunity. With regard to character design and interaction, Reeves maintains a greater emotional interchange may take place as opposed to no character used, simply because a character can appear to be actively involved in dialogue or in Reeves own words, “paying attention”.

8. Characters can effectively display important social manners (Reeves, 2002:8,9).

Like any social interaction, manners and general politeness need be present. However, politeness, particularly when the interaction targets a large demographic involving multiple cultures (grasping to wide a net during a single interaction), the message could be interpreted quite differently by one culture as opposed to another. While one social interaction is experienced as calm and respectful by one culture, the same behavioural interaction as viewed by another may appear to be somewhat phlegmatic or even disturbing. Roberts (2004:110) uses the Japanese as an example who find “extravagant arm gestures of Europeans to be alarming”. He asserts; “the consequences of failing to consider cultural differences are as true for technology as they are for people”.

Reeves (ibid, 7), describes basic manners as, “appropriate greeting, deference, gestures, and tone of voice”. Additionally required are: responses that show an understanding of the conversation as well as the timed pauses that give consideration to the questions asked and therefore a human quality necessary for credibility. Gordon (1974:66-79) refers to this process as ‘Active Listening’, a process that verbally rephrases what was interpreted by the listener or social character as in this instance.

9. Characters can make interfaces easier to use (ibid, 8), Reeves (ibid, 8) claims that people when confronted by technical problems prefer not to consult a manual if there is a nearby person available who contains the knowledge necessary to complete the task at hand. My own experience supports this point having taught computer software within a class situation.

10. Characters are well liked (ibid, 8,9). From childhood we learn social skills that aid us in learning, pleasure and business. Reeves (ibid, 7,8) states this learned social interaction, is; “not only convenient and often necessary, it’s also desirable”, further adding that these same qualities are also preferable to the majority of consumers when interacting with a computer interface. 90% of users would rather interact with a character than not at all. Reeves claims five characters are usually enough to satisfy user choice, asserting that characters are not only limited to kids and beginner levels, though he does stress that casting for a role needs to be inline with an intended purpose. Reeves also acknowledges, that there will be the user who (no matter with what technological level is presented to them) prefers no character at all. Therefore to accommodate them the option to interact within interface alone should remain available.

All of these aspects support a strong case for the use of spokes characters within a web environment. Web interaction like social interaction can provide the user with an experience they are both comfortable and can relate too.

2.6.4 Character and social presence

Earlier research carried out by Reeves and Rickenberg (2000: 49-55), had revealed characters, like humans could also create social presence. Their research had stemmed from the question “Are characters within the interface good, bad, useful or useless”? (2000:49). Reeves and Rickenberg’s investigation was considered important given the increase in characters being used online; from search engines to virtual employees within commerce transactions.

Their study focused on two types of users when conducting web-based tasks; users that believe they control their own destiny (internal orientation) and those who believe other people or outside influences control their success (external orientation). 2000:52)

The experiment utilising three online web interfaces; a non character environment, a character that ignores the user and a character that monitors the user when they perform

set tasks. The basis of the exercise was to determine if a character could create an element of anxiety affecting user performance. The three conditions, no character, idle character and monitoring character were measured against; user anxiety, accuracy of work completed, likeability of character, ease of use and trustworthiness.



Figure 2.6.4.1 Monitoring character based on Microsoft's genius series (Reeves et al,

The results showed externally orientated user anxiety levels rose significantly with the introduction of the monitoring character, whereas internally oriented user levels rose marginally. Accuracy levels dropped dramatically with the external user and only slightly with the internal. None of the users liked the character observing their work, particularly the external user. However what proved interesting was the trustworthiness factor. The presence of character for both groups significantly improved the level of user trust within the website. (Reeves & Rickenberg, 2000:53-55).

In summary, even when a character is presented in derogatory fashion it can still provide a redeeming factor as was evident here with trust. However, it also presents a case for working with the interface and not against it.

2.7 The comic image online

Reeves (2002) discussed the character in terms of its interactive social abilities, whereas this discussion focuses more on the qualities of the character itself, its elemental make-up, narrative nature and shift into new media.

Animation in essence is simply a series of still images placed together in sequential order in which to create the illusion of life. (Cited in Withrow, 2003) Deitch defines animation as:

the recording of individually created phrases of imagined action in such a way as to achieve the illusion of motion when shown at a constant, predetermined rate, exceeding that of human persistence of vision (Withrow, 2003:11).

At the heart of this illustrated illusion of motion is an architectural framework of line shape and form that when brought together within orchestrated cohesion creates a reflection of humanity. Scott McCloud, lecturer and author (*Understanding comics*, 1994; *Reinventing comics*, 2000) discusses the influence of the comic image within society, where pictographic representation led the way from Mesopotamia to Egypt and the present (McCloud, 1994:131).

McCloud (1994:31-37) asserts, that one of the most powerful features of the comic is the simplified character. “If you look at a realistic drawing of a face you see it as a face of another, when you enter the world of the cartoon you see yourself”. The character can be broken down into the raw elements of communication that reduce clutter pertaining to the message sent; line, shape and form evoke a viewers emotion (1994:125).

Wassily Kandinsky in 1912 became interested in the power of line, shape and colour, their ability to unite the inner senses of the artist and in doing so unite a range of art forms, a concept he referred to as “synaesthetics” (Filk, Lommel & Sandbothe, 2004; Késenne, 2004; McCloud, 1994:123). McCloud’s *Understanding comics* (1994), is in part about revealing inner expression within the clarity of comic style representation, both as a communication medium and an art form.

However, it is McCloud’s second book *Reinventing Comics* (2000) that re-explores the definition of the comic image within new media, where the static image is taken off the printed page and reorganised into a plethora of digital options utilising text, sound, accentuated visual and interactive enquiry within online storytelling.

Gutenberg's (in 1438) invention of the printing press created the beginnings of a 'single order', a society dominated by the printed text. A "second order" saw the development of radio and television (electronic and analog-based moving pictures), where linear based entertainment and information filled the airways (Norris et al, 2001; Postman, 1994). Although this second order developed quickly, reaching social saturation within a comparatively short time, text based data retrieval still remained the predominant player (Norris et al, 2001:22).

With digital technology allowing a merging of mediums: computers, telecommunication and broadcasting, that until recently has been technologically incompatible. A "single order" is not only resuming, but packing a punch also. Text, sound, image and motion all travelling through a single data stream allow a greater variety of pull technology and therefore greater user choice (Norris et al 2001:22).

According to Roberts (1997, 1999), with a plethora of options offered to the consumer, in order to achieve informational relevance you need context over content, "where understanding triumphs over information". McCloud (2000) asserts the comic image is an ideal medium for this convergence of text, sound, image, motion and interaction, allowing the senses through synaesthetics to be stimulated. The comic, like the book is not fading into obscurity, but rather, through the advent of interactive technology, expanding in communicative form. The static and animated image can merge within active story telling allowing the reader/viewer/user to participate and explore beyond the limitations of the printed page.

2.8 The character from the iconic to the anthropomorphic

This final section looks at the operation of the character within business. From a simplistic communications tool relaying a message through psychological association; to a strong personality type, that attempts to humanise an online experience, and finally, interactive communication through developing character based technology. Although spokes character appearances within interactive environments are becoming more prevalent, according to Reeves (2002) and Communication Arts' (2004), they are also becoming more effective. The purpose of reviewing selected samples from industry was to establish character validity within the market place.

2.8.1 BMW Mini

Byron Reeves (2.7) claimed a faint hint of two eyes and a mouth is enough to rouse a human related response. Adding fuel to this BMW Mini created a successful online advertising site in 2004 employing the services of a character that in most instances used no facial attributes at all. Moreover, it doesn't need to speak; the voice over narration takes care of that.

Showcased in the Communication Arts' (2004), interactive edition, and also available online, Mini produced an interactive psychological test utilising a simple character icon that represents you as the viewer.

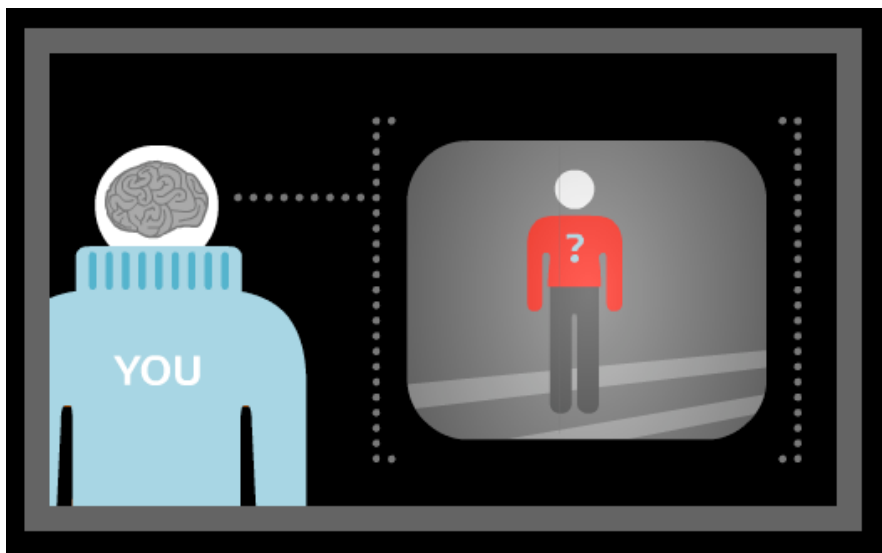


Figure 2.8.1.1 BMW Mini (2004). www.mini.ca/experiment

Targeting a younger demographic, an interactive inkblot style psychological quiz was developed in order to exploit the subconscious in quite a unique way. The objective of the quiz like test was devised ingeniously to divide the consumer into two categories, those interested in value (space and general convenience) and those interested in performance.



Figure 2.8.1.2 BMW Mini (2004). www.mini.ca/experiment

Humour, music and voice-over were integrated into the experience to both entertain and soothe the viewer. Steve Mykolyn, creator of the site (Communication Arts (2004:115)), commented that the users were spending four to five minutes completing what in reality without the entertainment factor would only take about five seconds.

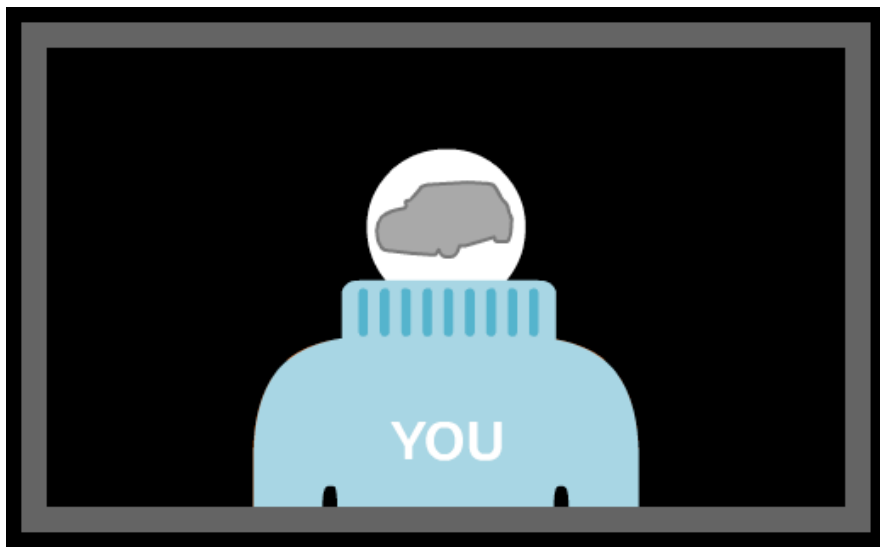


Figure 2.8.1.3 BMW Mini (2004). www.mini.ca/experiment

The BMW screenshots provided within this discussion, demonstrate that it is the design of the site that is the captivating factor, and the presence of character plays a major role in the visual construction. The viewer through the experience of sound, animation and even a bit of silliness thrown in is psychologically set up for the serious marketing questions. The function of the character icon was to provide a human touch, an emotional link. Users experiencing the animations were able to identify themselves in the character identity, just as McCloud had previously claimed they could (2.7).

2.8.2 Character and online dating

Personality, appearance, social actor and believability (Callcott & Phillip, 1996; Garretson & Niedrich, 2004; Reeves, 2002; Roberts, 2004; Teng, 2001); this spokes character pulls it together in creating a unique user experience close to life. Complete with a 'New York' Brooklyn based accent, the slightly eccentric matchmaking busybody adopts key ingredients previously discussed within literature.



Figure 2.8.2.1 Margo Says (2004). www.margosays.com

Margo, virtual matchmaker and spokes character personality takes the lead role in running an online dating service. Admittedly she's only an interactive animation and for a smooth site flow you need to have broadband access. Nonetheless, once loaded, the experience takes on a humanistic quality introducing complex issues and choices with apparent ease. Although the front-end interface adopts a retro graphic style that is simple to navigate on the surface, the actual complexity of the site, complete with backend

database, took eighteen people fourteen months to build (Communication Arts, 2004:113).

Humour is a major component in the design process, as is incongruity (the surprise element). The 'Hide Margo' feature included in the interface isn't to get rid of the character because the user doesn't like it (the character is the whole point of the site). It's there to instantly replace the screen with a business style screensaver just in case you're viewing this site at work and the boss walks in on you.

One of the simpler areas of the site, yet one of the most important is the backstory animation. The linear animation within the site introduces the character and her personality, and in doing so provides a believable history setting the mood.

2.8.3 Oddcast and building your own interactive character



Figure 2.8.3.1 Oddcast easy step 1, 2, 3 (2004). www.oddcast.com/sitepal

Oddcast was founded in 1999 for the purpose of developing conversational character software for easy consumer access via the web. Oddcast's flagship tool 'SitePal' is an online application offering companies a virtual employee (for a price), that helps their business relate to the consumer in a more humanistic fashion. Research conducted by Reeves (1996, 2000, 2002) has played a significant part in establishing the

developmental process of the design and programming of their interactive online characters.

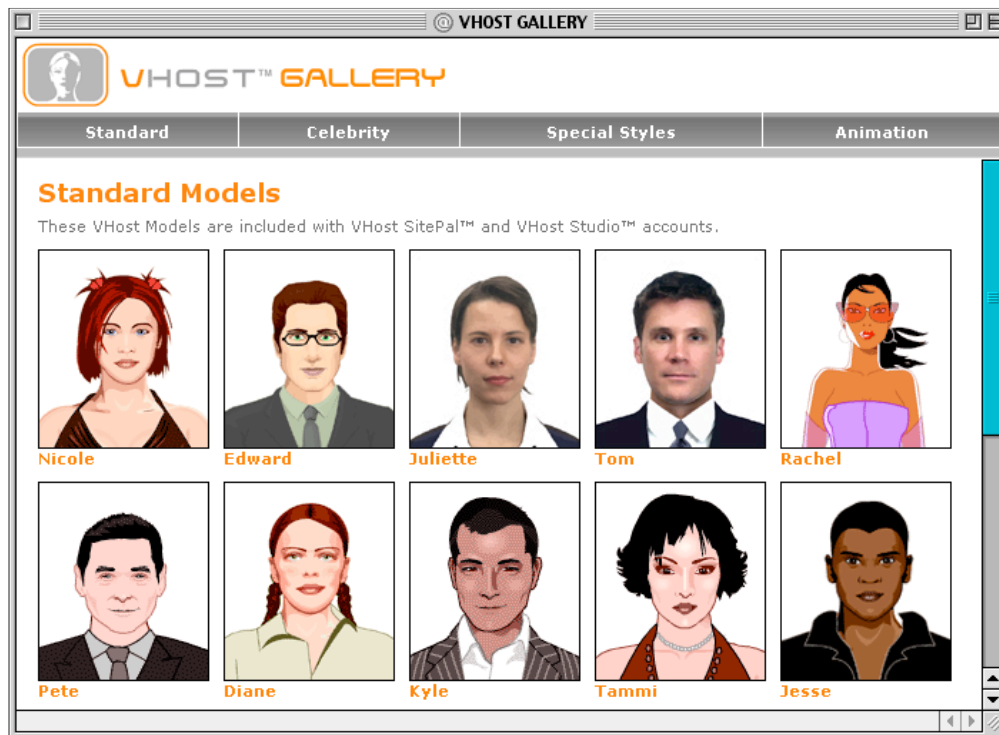


Figure 2.8.3.2, Oddcast character choice (2004). www.oddcast.com/sitepal

VHOST SitePal allows any company to contract a virtual employee for a set period of time (a little like working with a temping agency). Using an easy three-step method, a business wishing to host a character can select from twenty default models in order to put a recognisable face to their web site. You can age your character; alter the clothing, hairstyle, skin, eye colour and even make-up. SitePal also allows you to use a range of auto lip-synched voices from your own-recorded voice through to a selection supplied from SitePal. You can also write any text you wish and apply a choice of voices using a Text to Speech engine (TTS).

Moving beyond default characters that merely present information such as a standard greeting call, Oddcast teaming up the A.L.I.C.E. (Artificial Linguistic Internet Computer Entity) AI foundation (www.alicebot.org), also offer businesses logic-driven characters that reply in real-time to questions put forward to them by consumers. Web site editors have access to easily update or add to the characters backend logic engine without the need to understand complex coding.



Figure 2.8.3.3 Stephen King, Author (2004). www.stephenking.com

One problem when using a standard character is matching the style to your current website design, additionally the relevance of a character needs to be considered, such as how will it fit into the overall business philosophy or corporate look.

Stephen King, employing the services of Oddcast, has taken this one step further by commissioning the design and construction of a character based on himself. Where standard artificial characters come with a limited identity and no history or backstory to establish their reason for being, King comes with several strong back-stories for belonging.

In concluding this chapter, literature has shown that the spokes character has played a major influence within past marketing. Developing interactive technologies, particularly AI, suggest character personalities within website design, primarily for navigation purposes (customer focused help) looks set to continue. However, for a character to gain credibility and therefore trust it requires more than just the right look, as Stafford & Stafford (2002) discovered. A character requires a history; a well-aligned self-explaining story that builds a relationship around the presenter of information and the product/service being promoted.

3. Method

This research project employs two methodologies. For design and through design in determining spokes character desirability within a website. The methods of evaluation sort to address two key areas:

Character/non character consumer predilection

User experience factors: ease of use, visual alignment, likeability and credibility, narrative and memory retention, and brand recognition.

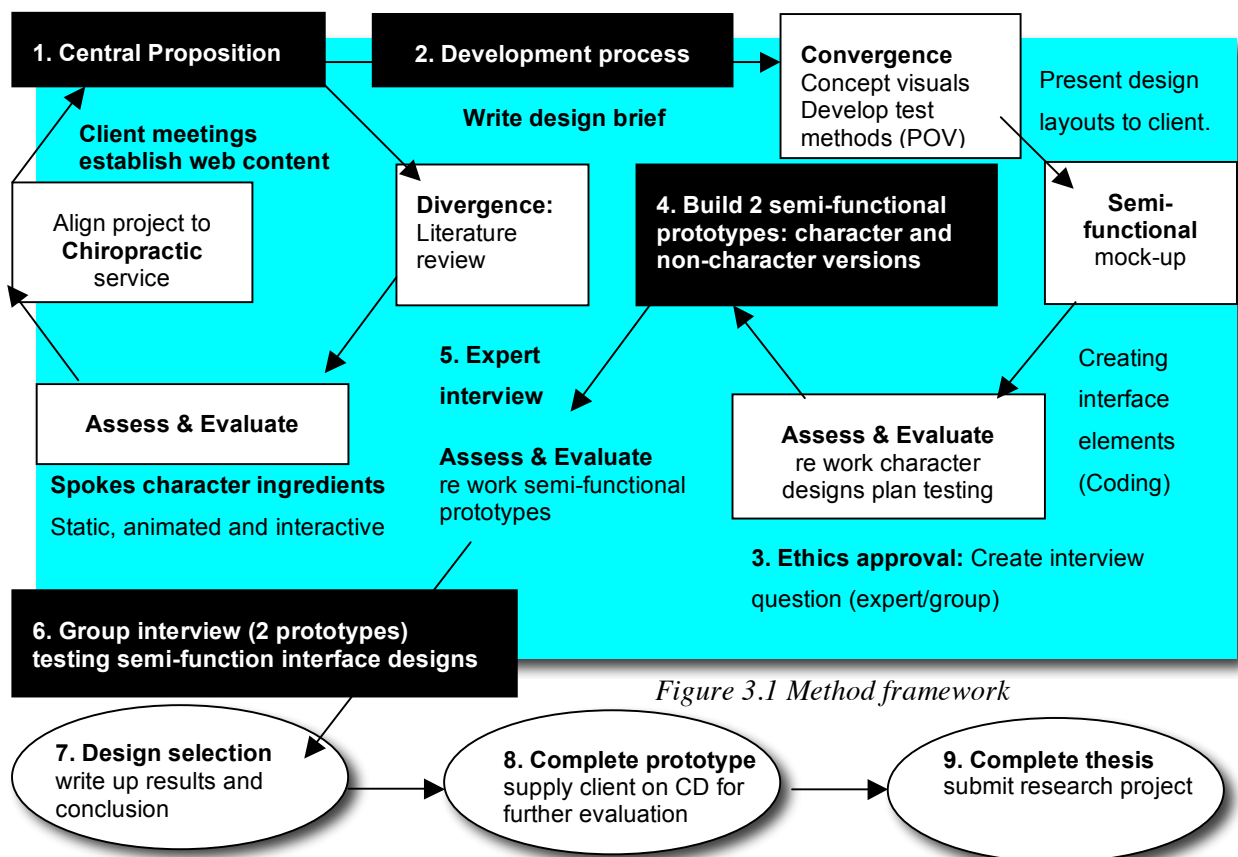


Figure 3.1 Method framework

3.1 Methods in context: Employing divergent/convergent-thinking

According to Downton (2003:17), the term ‘research for design’ is the process that design itself goes through in the support and formulation of an outcome or result. In the gathering of content or ‘research material’ a broadening knowledge explores many pathways. Some of which, due to fast developing technologies, may not have existed a decade prior (ibid, 2003:33). Human nature, as it looks for both a story to be told and patterns to be found, follow directions that provide meaning within the world we live (ibid, 2003:125). In achieving the research aims within this project, a similar journey

was sort where the initial emphasis was to look outwardly, to explore various possibilities before selecting a POV (Point of view) and focusing back inward. The prototype application created through this research project sort to align an information device to a service industry. It was developed in consultation with client, expert in ICT (Information and Communication Technology) and a targeted consumer within a group interview process.

Divergence

Employing divergent/convergent thinking is a process advanced by Darrel Rhea (Laurel, 2003:145-154). The goal is to first develop a unique understanding of the key question, its wants and needs before determining a purpose (ibid, 2003:147). This process requires time to think, to explore, take in and assimilate. Within the scope of this project the key was to first understand the tools of study, the 'spokes character' as a product in it own right, before applying it indiscriminately within an unsuspecting marketing venture.

Divergent thinking within this context takes the shape of literary observations of past strengths and weaknesses, research into spokes character/consumer relationships and current business examples that identify areas of innovation and opportunity. At this point a POV (ibid, 2003:149) is forecast as the journey shifts inward.

Convergence

The converging process makes the best selection focusing on the benefits that define and explain to the consumer. This is the process of putting visuals together and letting the conceptual present itself; it's content and style where emotional and psychological relationships can be formed (Laurel, 2003:150).

In facilitating creative development within the confines of this research project it was vital to locate the problems and solve them. Who is using it, why they use it and how will they use it (ibid, 151)? To refine the image, where it can be adapted or adjusted; this state requires the backer's (clients) approval before user evaluation.

Method of evaluation

Christopher Ireland, a qualitative research specialist (Laurel, 2003:24-25), led discussion into fruitful areas by considering the lifestyle and personality of each participant within the group. Ireland claims focus groups receive the majority of attention because they are so pervasive. They are also the catalyst for other forms of qualitative probing such as

Mini focus groups (five to seven people), One-on-one interviews (Ireland's preferred option), Dyads (Two people, often friends interviewed as a pair) and Triads (Three people who are either similar or dissimilar in specific ways). The focus group sizes generally range from the traditional group of ten to twelve people, up to a super group of a hundred or more participants.

The key to an effective focus group interview is to develop a clearly defined set of questions, a balance between one dimensional and open that are well sequenced, moving from general to specific. Of equal importance is the delivery; a well-structured presentation promotes a conversational and stimulating environment of discussion. However, time and question-allocation within a group setting needs to be carefully monitored (Krueger & Casey, 2000:41-151).

According to Donald Norman (a world leader in usability research and a psychologist turned designer), focus groups provide relevancy of the present, not the future (Laurel, 2002:110,123). For this reason a mini style focus group or group interview was selected as the main evaluation vehicle within the context of this project.

Finally, the working prototype, a functional stage where interactive options allow experiential evaluation through user participation and discussion within a group setting. The objective to verify direction, letting the outcome through user action and debate dictate the solution.

Outline of process:

The research comprises two methods, exploration and action; divergence (informing process), where through literature, ethnographic experience as a practitioner of character design and a patient of chiropractic was determined. The convergence process, this encompassed the creation of two semi-functional prototype applications followed by consumer evaluation and selection.

- **Exploratory:** background literature exploring character in print, brand and interactive design.
- **Service:** Experience, literature search, informal interviews with service practitioners and casual discussion with service users. Knowledge of the service itself through participatory involvement (gained as a patient of over 20 years). The purpose to gauge awareness of service shortcomings and explore design opportunities.

Converging: Action research and qualitative interviews: looking at the opportunities and meeting consumer needs

- Conceptual development aligning character styles to symbolic value/appeal/relevance with benefits of service. Evaluate designs with chiropractic doctors and Massey staff. Maintain emphasis on consumer and service practitioner's needs.
- **Expert interview:** aligning interface and character with ICT (Information and Communication Technology) industry expectations. Interview questions aimed at clarifying direction.
- **Consumer group interview and evaluation:** Employing key questions based on focus group protocol (Krueger & Casey, 2001; Laurel, 2003; Press & Cooper, 2002), create semi-functioning animated character and non-character models for expert and group interview. Gauge user predilection through question and discussion relating to: likeability, memory retention, gender, expertise, and trust.
- Based on findings, select preferred option (character/non-character), adjust/refine, complete fully functional prototype interface for web and CD.

3.2 Ethical considerations: Approved application 05/27

A full MUHEC (Massey University Human Ethic Committee) application was applied for, as group interview participants were all chiropractic patients. However no medical information was required for this study.

In selecting candidates for this research, patients of chiropractic were approached by the clinic they attended due to their interest and experience of the service. An information sheet detailing participant requirements was provided to them (See Appendix:II). At the commencement of the interview process each participating member signed a consent form.

An information sheet was supplied for the expert interview and a consent form was completed for this interview. An example of these forms can be found within the appendices.

4. Design in practice

In putting the central argument of this research to the test, it was necessary to find the right product or service in which to align a spokes character too. A range of products and services were considered before opting for the chiropractic industry. The rationale for the service selection was due to limited consumer knowledge on the subject, even by patients of the service itself. Traditional print and web devices that provide service information to the consumer have not proved successful to date. Before a brief could be written it was essential to gain a thorough understanding of service itself and the role it performs. In achieving this, a review of literature and discussion with chiropractic doctors was undertaken.

4.1 Defining chiropractic care and subluxation

According to Werfel (Mertz, 2003:49; www.palmer.edu/PFCH/FamilyHistory.htm, 2004), the origin of chiropractic care dates back to 1895. It was David Palmer, a magnetic healer living and working in Iowa, USA who realised that the vertebra could, through a range of causes from poor posture to injury, lose its optimum alignment between the brain and the body, causing interference. Palmer put this premise into practice, curing one man of deafness and another of heart trouble. He found that by applying specific corrective forces (chiropractic adjustments) to misaligned vertebra (subluxations), nerve interference could be removed allowing normal bodily functions to resume, including the bodies ability to heal itself.

A subluxation according to the association of Chiropractic Colleges is:

A complex of functional and/or structural and/or pathological articular changes that compromise neural integrity and may influence organ system function and general health (www.echiropractic.net/subluxation_degeneration.htm).

Subluxations are often referred to as ‘vertebral subluxation complex’ or VSC for short. VSC refers to a combination of changes occurring in the body known as ‘components’ that contribute to poor health. These components include soft tissue (histopathology), muscles (myopathology), nerves (neuropathology), bones and joints (kinesiopathology). A fifth component ‘biochemical abnormalities’, or the simply ‘chemical’ describes the process where upon all above components are working in unison against the body (www.echiropractic.net/what_is_a_subluxation.htm).

Dr's Sandra R.H & Kirk Childers describe the term 'subluxation' as a process similar to receiving a poor radio signal while traveling in a car. The experience is not only irritating but it also restricts communication of the message. Restricted transmission has the same effect on body functionality (Mertz, 2003:24). According to Dr Les Whitehead (October, 2004), a practitioner of chiropractic care in New Zealand for over 40 years, a light pressure applied to a nerve equivalent to the touch of a finger, can reduce its ability to function correctly by around 50%. Therefore, in order to operate at optimum performance within an individual's own ability or potential, a well-aligned spine is essential for good health.

Not unlike traditional health care, chiropractic also emphasise the importance of preventative care, such as good posture, regular exercise and eating well. A deficiency in any of these areas can induce deterioration of body performance causing a subluxation to occur. Childers et al (2003:25), claims there are three main factors that affect bodily performance, these are categorized as physical stress, chemical stress and emotion stress:

Physical stress is defined as; stress exerted on the body that is greater than the body's internal resistance. For example: fall, accident or strain.

Chemical stress relates to poor nutrition and exposure to pollutants that cause an internal imbalance such as drug taking, even over medication.

Emotional stress is mental stress, often caused from everyday demands that create tension and anxiety.

Chiropractic claims no magical cure; it merely allows the body to heal itself. As a crinkled hose straightens to allow water to flow smoothly, so does the body's ability to produce a self-healing energy that maintains itself. Consider that within the space of only 9 months a single cell multiplies to produce a newborn baby comprising 100 trillion cells. The spinal cord contains 13 million cells alone that transmit electro chemical signals to all the organs. Our brain contains over 100 billion neuron cells communicating with the body at 320kmph, while the heart beats 10,000 liters of blood within a 24-hour period (Raymond, 2003. cited in Mertz, 2003:79,80).

Randall Jones, D.C (Mertz, 2003:33) asserts the body is an automatic healer. He refers to how the body shivers when it is cold in order to generate heat and sweats to stay cool. Ross, D., Rutkowski, D.C (ibid, 2003:69) suggests that the medication we take may even be disrupting this healing ability. The body vomits, providing an efficient way of

expelling harmful toxins, yet we take medicine to stop this process. Fever kills viruses and harmful bacteria and again we take medication to counter this effect. In the US, 1996 marked an important milestone. Over 100,000 people died from adverse drug reactions, all of which was FDA (Federal Drug Administration) approved (Mertz, 2003:70). Chiropractic simply asks the question: are we over-medicating ourselves, concerning ourselves with sickness when instead we should be focusing on wellness?

The body is a machine that regenerates itself, continually replacing cells. When an individual says, “they’re not the same person they were last year”, they are right! (ibid, 2003:79-84).

According to Palmer (ibid, 2003:284), the medical profession has been concerned with altering the environment to suit the weakened body where chiropractic’s intension is to strengthen the body to meet the demands of the environment.

4.2 Design and development

4.2.1 Creative brief: Subluxation and how to prevent it

Even though chiropractic care has been practiced for over a century, it still suffers from misunderstandings concerning exactly what it is, does and perhaps more importantly, doesn’t do. With an abundance of text-based information available on the subject both print and online, the chiropractic message, according to Dr Les Whitehead D.C (August, 2004), often doesn’t get through.

Currently, chiropractic consumers tend to use the service based on recommendations from others, or after the exhaustion of other traditional health options. The industry requires a vehicle in which to provide informed awareness within a consumer orientated media.

Communication requirements

My client ‘a chiropractic clinic’ wishes to both educate and promote its profession. Subluxation, by no means a modern term (in existence for over a hundred years), should be explained to the consumer so as to inform and be retained in memory. It needs to be reinvigorated for today’s market and media.

To facilitate the learning of subluxation it needs to be divided into four areas: What it is, what causes it, how to correct it and what a healthy unrestricted (non-subluxated) spine means to the user.

As well as extolling the benefits of correcting subluxation, a secondary message should be communicated to the consumer, one of science and technology. Though 'Chiropractic' itself stems from natural origin, it also relies heavily on supporting technology. For example an important requirement for new patients is an accurate X-Ray. Other diagnostic equipment includes: Cine Radiography (motion analysis), Infrared Thermal Screening (Nerve system analysis) together with new developing 3D mapping technologies. Science, technology and an element of caution (beware of subluxation) need to be communicated, together with the natural non-drug facet of chiropractic care. In essence the user through interface communication should be made aware of the humanistic values the service embodies within its profession.

Within the scope of this project, text, image, animation and the service promoted (though separate mediums in there own right), need to amalgamate within the same communication, a 3-way interaction involving service, interface and the user. The resulting design implementation should encourage the user to interact and enjoy the experience, ultimately retaining the information.

Target market:

The target market within the boundary of this research project encompasses both genders within the age range of 25 – 35 years. Its focus is on people wishing to maintain or achieve optimum natural physical functionality, whether it be for sport, or just to stay healthy for an enjoyable and full life. Subjects may be single, married and or parents with a young family.

Production aim:

To produce a functional CD/web-based interface that utilises animation, personality and story to its advantage in providing information to the consumer. The CD/site needs to establish a credible style that visually aligns to the service promoted in order to convey a believable message.

4.2.2 Prototype in production

Conceptual development and design: Subluxation site structure

Working in consultation with representatives from the chiropractic industry, the four divisions identified earlier (what it is, causes, correcting and subluxation free) were structured within a navigational framework.

A fifth division is also added to the site structure. Its purpose was to enable users the opportunity to gauge their knowledge with a short ten-question quiz that could be taken anytime during the online experience. The XML (extensible mark-up language) based databank of question could be changed on a regular basis.

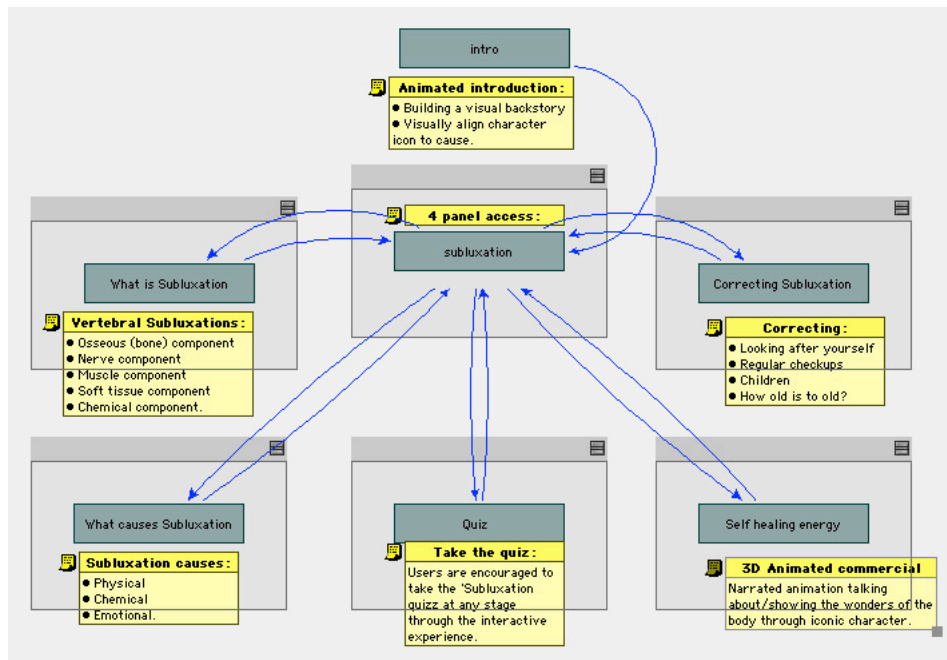


Figure 4.2.2.1 Navigational map

Set within the requirements of this research, the prime focus of the web interface design was to determine if a character presenting it would facilitate greater user awareness than the same interface without. Character development was therefore initiated.

Concept development of characters

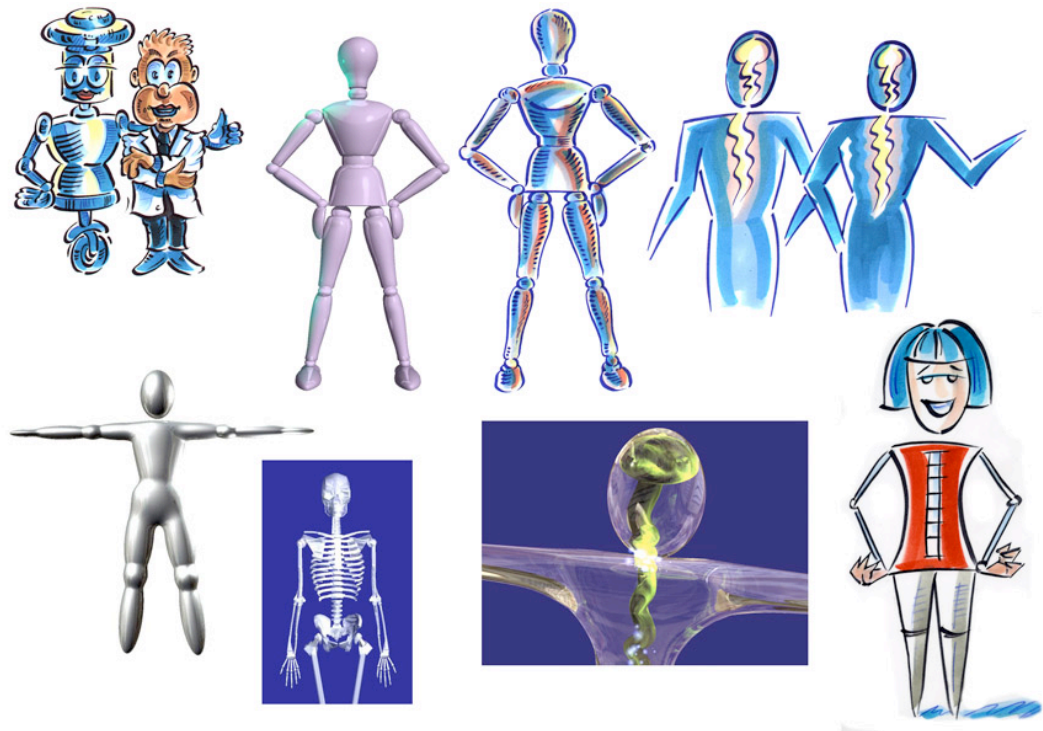


Figure 4.2.2.2 Concept character development

A range of character concepts exploring comic, shape, two and three-dimensional models were developed. After consultation with chiropractic specialists a decision to proceed with the model referred to as Freeflow (fig. 4.2.2.3) was initiated. The criteria determining this decision were two-fold. 1. A key principle of chiropractic care is to achieve an unrestricted energy flow, which passes from the brain through the spinal chord to organs and in fact every cell in the body. 2. The pictographic form based on Olympic character symbols removes visual clutter and thus adds to simplicity of communication. In theory this character was the epitome of chiropractic. The life force energy was clearly evident, as was the transparent body graphic lending itself to the connotation of a fragile outer shell (human body). Additionally a visual link with a X-ray was also present.

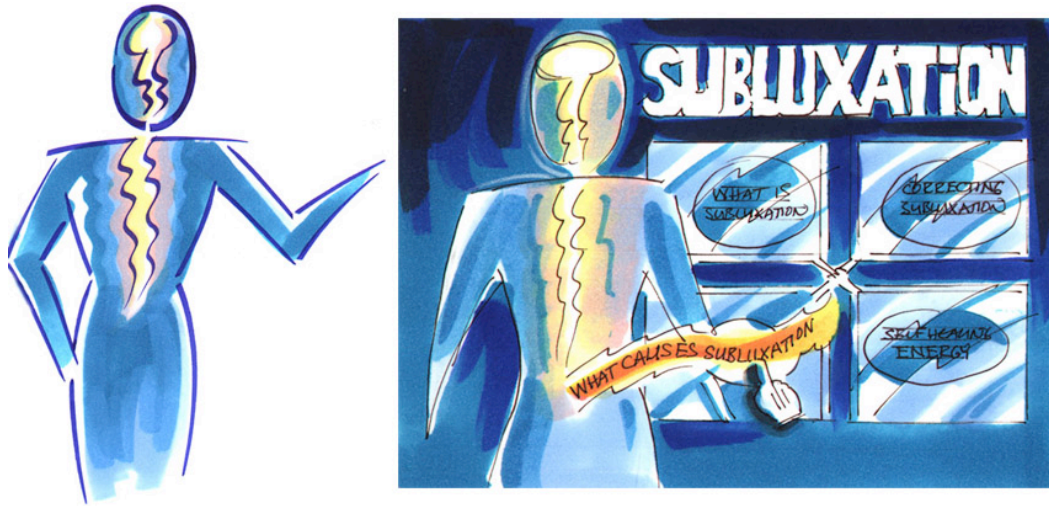


Figure 4.2.2.3 Freeflow character

Unfortunately, within this purposeful alignment to chiropractic philosophy, key principles of character design were misplaced. This became immediately obvious when presenting the concept to staff at the Massey Design School, Wellington. According to earlier research, a fundamental factor for effective character design is to develop a personality. This character didn't even have a face in which to express one. Callcott & Phillips (1996), Peirce & McBride (2001), had also recommended against playing it too safe by utilising non-gender specific characters due to consumers not being able to emotionally connect with them.

Dr Jody, chiropractic spokes character:

A protagonist suitably empowered with personality and empathy was required. Dr Jody's development is based on a real chiropractic doctor and it is her voice the user listens and responds too. When Dr Jody presents information, she, really knows what she's talking about. Starting from a concept visual, the character was developed in 3D and 2D. After client consultation and analysis of character functionality for web, the 2D image became the final selected form.



Figure 4.2.2.4 Dr Jody character development

With the character decided upon, a splash screen was constructed in order to set the stage for both character and non-character interface. The function of the splash screen was to act as a launch pad into the character backstory or, for the non-character version, directly to the main navigational interface of the site.

Semi functional prototype development: Intro to story

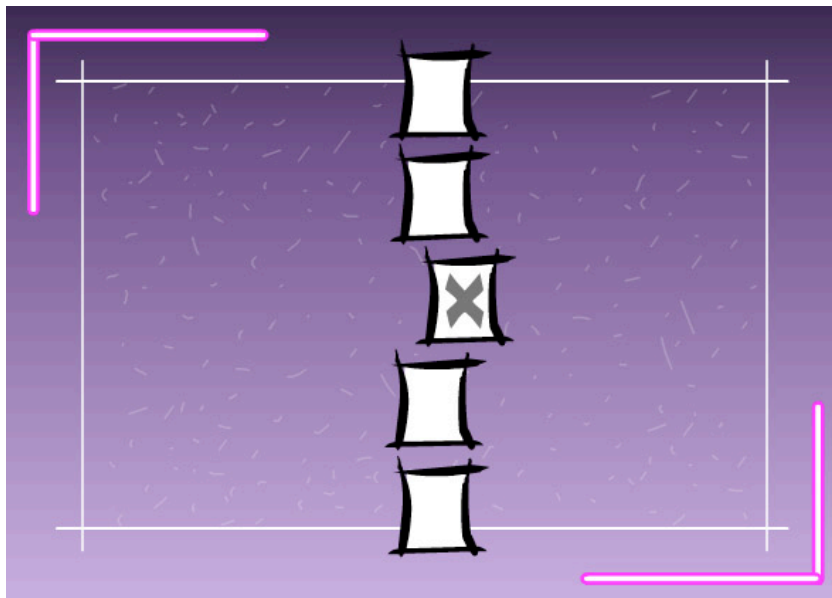


Figure 4.2.2.5 Animated splash screen

Storyboard: Backstory – slideshow style animation



Figure 4.2.2.6 Physical storyboard

The character story used for this prototype, employed one of the most common causes of subluxation, a low impact car accident that on the surfaces produces only minor spinal misalignment. However, as is often the case, over time discomfort and negative effects manifest themselves resulting in ill health. Fortunately within this one minute thirty-second story there's a happy ending. The story is also the launch pad for the character personality.



Figure 4.2.2.7 Character launch and verbal introduction

Navigation interface: character and non-character version

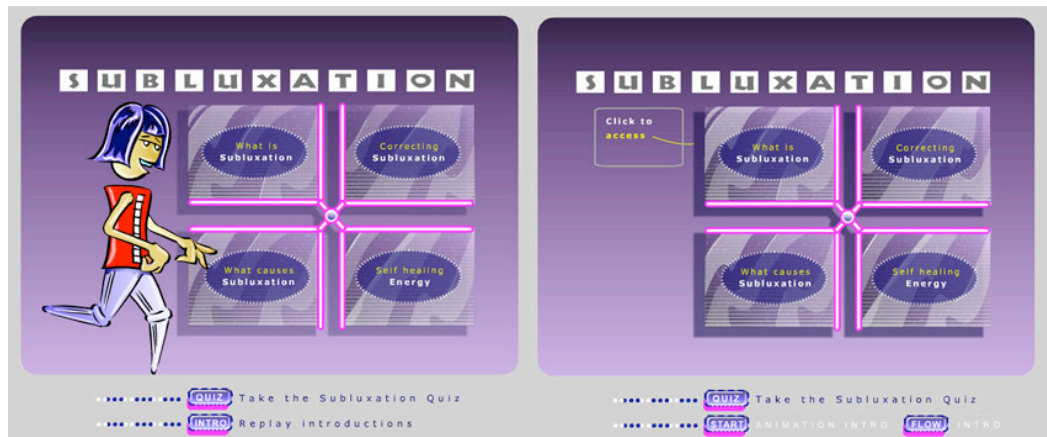


Figure 4.2.2.8 Character and non-character navigation panels

Character and non-character main navigational panels allow the user to jump to any of the four-subluxation screens. The character version presents each section through physical gesture and verbal explanation, whereas the text-based interface utilises text and a traditional rollover methodology only.

What is subluxation



Figure 4.2.2.9 Screen example: What is subluxation

The 'What is subluxation' screen on the main navigation panel, when clicked launches a new screen that zooms out filling much of the users monitor. Once again the character version, through gesture and voice, take you through a verbal/visual explanation of the process. The non-character site employs the same animation and the text modifies with changes in relation to visual graphic animation.

Note: The screenshots supplied here provide only a sample of the overall design process employed within the site.

4.3 Interview findings

The expert interview was conducted with an industry ICT (Information and Communication Technology) professional, who manages a major organisation working on a national and global scale. Seven people attended the group interview (five male and two female) and all were keen computer users in terms of navigating the web. A full list of questions and summary of answers is available in the appendices. The group participants were between the ages of 25 – 35.

4.3.1 Expert interview – summary of findings

The expert interview was designed to elicit an industry professional's opinion. In essence to strip out clutter that added to confusion or was deemed unnecessary for informed communication, yet still providing a positive entertainment element, crucial to the requirements of the project.

The interview questions addressed three main areas pertaining to the design and implementation of the character site: design style, visual alignment of character, gender, personality and believability. This interview, conducted two weeks prior to the group interview, also provided for a more informed group presentation.

Key responses were as follows:

The visual design regarding use of colours and graphics of the interface, particularly with the inclusion of a character were felt to soften the overall technical aspect of the message.

Visual alignment, regarding the employment of character was felt to add an informational contribution to those consumers who might not otherwise have the desire to search out information or read text based material.

A positive aspect of character use within the interface was thought to be the humanistic, fun like experience, whereas from a negative perspective there may be issues relating to ethnic or religious concerns, particularly if the site were to be aimed at a global market.

To help the consumer retain the information in memory, it was felt that the inclusion of a backstory narrative could help the message. It was suggested 'subluxation' as a series of episodes might provide a suitable vehicle. However, the story and character link are key factors in making this work. Establishing an emotional link with the consumer was seen as being vital for this to work.

Believability and or credibility require the right look (image, gesture and voice) and emotional alignment with the consumer. Judy Bailey, TV One's news presenter, was put forward as an example of authoritative yet trustworthy voice, as was the suggestion of an actual chiropractic doctor. A neutral gender voice and character was considered by both industry professional and Massey associates to lack personality and presence. This was also supported in literature as discussed in Likeability and stereotype (2.2).

It was felt gender-wise, a male or female character were equally appropriate. Although a greater level of empathy could be exuded from a female voice and character. Additionally as discussed in literature (2.2.3), male personalities historically, have played dominant roles as characters. To balance gender representation a female character was thought to be desirable.

The expert interviewee, within the context of the market pitched at, found the character-based concept to be more effective than the same non-character design. The message was felt to contain a human face which aided the learning experience. As a final point, the professional interviewed, felt subluxation should be addressed early in web experience in order to establish the purpose for being.

One additional question put forward at the interview was concerning the prospect of introducing an AI (Artificial Intelligence allowing user/character interaction) engine into the site in the near future. This was not considered a priority at this stage by the ICT expert, stating, "build trust first".

4.3.2 Group interview

The group interview, unlike the expert interview, focused more on the user experience. Based on expert feedback two semi function animated models were constructed to a level suitable for presentation to the group.

The interview questions addressed site design, visual alignment, gender, personality and believability as they did in the expert. However, a key component of this interview process was to validate the assumption that chiropractic users do not get their information from text based material. This was an important factor within the rationale of this project as creating a character/story-based site provides an alternative to traditional text based information.

It was interesting to note that not one of the participants read up on chiropractic material beyond a quick skim read of a pamphlet, even though ample material is available

through a variety of sources (particularly the web). Confirming the chiropractors view at the initial briefing stage, patients tend to become interested in the service through recommendation from others (people they trust the opinion of). The term 'Subluxation' was also familiar to participants, but only one person could accurately define it, intimating that there is a need for a better information avenue. A major part of the group's discussion centered on the physical cause of subluxation, rather than the chemical or emotional suggesting a lack of knowledge with the less obvious causes.

The site colours and four screen navigational structure were deemed easy enough to follow for both character and non-character version. The colours were thought to work well utilising the brightness and warmth of the yellow as a positive aspect in contrast to the more serious coolness of the blue. The screen concept (revealing of information, x-ray, hi tech feel) was thought to be effective. However the red warning strip boarder graphics used in the 'What is subluxation' screen at first caused a bit of concern. One participant referred to these graphics as implying a hidden danger. After careful consideration of the question, within the context of the design, it was considered a desirable communication element. Subluxation, from the chiropractic professions point of view is a real hidden danger.

From the perspective of a first impression, the majority of the group indicated the non-character interface (which was presented first) and the spokes character interface both provided a positive experience in regards to relaying credible information. Although it was acknowledged that the character based version did create a more fun-like friendlier feel. A suggestion made to enhance credibility, was to introduce a chiropractic seal into the background. While one participant felt an animated site employing Flash (character or not), reduces seriousness. They claimed a traditional HTML site would be preferable due to greater text control and search capabilities. The questioning participant did acknowledge they themselves haven't investigated chiropractic due to time restraints.

The group as a whole felt the character version (as opposed to non character) was more effective in conveying the chiropractic message, suggesting you as the user can sit back and learn (with less effort). Particularly liked was the story presented at the beginning. This added purpose for belonging and facilitated memory retention. Discussion of storyline within the site produced the most debate of the evening. The further the discussion progressed the more it became a positive component of the user experience.

The same participant who believed an HTML site was the way to go, also suggested the character interface would be well suited in a Mall as an interactive kiosk.

One participant expressed the opinion that it was about time the chiropractic industry had something like this. However, though the entertainment aspect was deemed favourable, a negative aspect arose that centered on the issue of repeatability. The group felt users would not return to the site if the stories were running the same each time. It was suggested site users, through a text entry area, could write their own stories, with a selected few made into animations based on an authors true story. Creating character based stories were also considered by the group to have wider appeal outside of the web environment, such as TV, cinema and even radio.

The characters' voice was thought to be as important as the character itself. The female voice used in the group interview was felt to add value to the experience for two reasons. Firstly it appeared knowledgeable, yet spoke to you rather than down to you. Secondly the voice had a Kiwi accent. In addition, the level of credibility increased substantially when it was realised the voice was that of an actual chiropractic doctor. This would suggest a feature worth promoting.

The topic of gender proved an interesting area of discussion. With a question put forward asking participants their views on employing a female character over a male, the response provided was a balanced one. Participants liked the idea of using both. Reiterating the earlier issue of additional stories, the reply was to employ more animated doctors, male and female. Just like in a real situation individual patients may prefer one gender to the other, here they'd have the same choice. Further discussion led to adding the names of all local practitioners to the site or kiosk. Ironically only credible doctors would be listed.

Like the expert interviewed, the prospect of incorporating AI (Artificial Intelligence) into the interface was not considered an essential design element for the time being. Participants were not fully aware of this feature, but felt it could have possibilities in the future.

4.3.3 Summary

Even with regular adverts placed in Newspapers, posters put up in the surgery and pamphlets provided to patients and would be patients, there still seems to be confusion as to what subluxation is. Based on the group interview all the chiropractic users present felt the service had improved their personal health. However, none had really taken the time to learn more about chiropractic health other than a skim read or simply rely on

word of mouth recommendation, whether from a skilled professional or people extolling the benefits of their own improved well-being.

Participants preferred the character driven interface as compared to a non-character site containing the same information. The learning experience utilising a character was felt to be more enjoyable and memorable than the same non-character interface, due to the story telling nature of the communication.

The character-doctor alignment and graphics style (character and interface design) were felt to add credibility and engagement to the user experience. Utilising a female character and voice proved positive, as did having a kiwi accent. However, participants felt that from their perspective, having a choice of doctor characters would only enhance the experience, particularly over repeat visits when the user wants to try something new. Following on from this, as a design recommendation, the group felt in order to attract multiple visits from the same user, content would need updating regularly. This may involve developing new stories on a continual basis.

One negative aspect of the animated interface design to date as considered by participants was content file size. Participants indicated that at present many users would not have access to fast downloading and therefore the 'patience' to wait for content to load. Participants saw this as a short-term problem; nevertheless it is an issue that needs to be considered.

5. Discussion of findings

Character identity used within past marketing and communication has proved popular over the years, first in print, then animation and now ever increasingly showing its face within interactive environments. The character identity brings with it a wealth of exposure to this medium, where we as children have enjoyed animations and now as adults, many of us still do. The character as a tool may be well worth considering when seeking advancement on current communication methodology.

The transition from 'Dial up' to 'Broadband' web access will provide both designer and consumer with an opportunity to explore additional avenues relating to communication. However, even with broadband access becoming the standard measure of bandwidth, download speeds will still be limited for most consumers at around two megabytes per second (at least for the near future). File size advantages and visual clarity of the drawn image are important factors allowed for within this research project, as are likeability, memory and trust addressed below.

5.1 Likeability

Callcott and Phillips (1996), McCloud (2000) and Reeves (2002), claim that the character, like a real person can produce social qualities that are inherent in the generation of likeability. A character when presented in an appropriate manner through image, action, gesture and sound can create a communication that results in a more humanistic interpretation for the user.

Results gained within this research also supported that view. The group interview participants found the presentation created through character provided a positive experience due to the likeability aspect of the character itself. The spokes character offered participants a humanistic facet that was not normally included in traditional site design, enabling an element of fun or humour within the interactive experience.

5.2 Alignment and believability

Costume, neotenous shape, archetypical qualities and association with message; all these attributes were found to be important traits when aligning the look and feel of a character design to the service/product it represents.

This study adhered to these rules at first, perhaps a little too closely with the initial character developed becoming so focused on free flowing energy from, brain through spinal chord that it lost it's face and thus humanistic qualities so important in terms of character design. The character chosen 'Dr Jody', taking on the role of a female chiropractic doctor (based on a real doctor), provided that alignment more effectively. The design was thought by participants to contain the right visual attributes. However it was the visual, gesture and voice working together that provided the believability.

5.3 Gender and voice

In the past male spokes characters have proven to be dominant players in terms of usage. However as discussed previously within the literature (Peirce and McBride, 1999, 2001), not because they were necessarily better, the male character was employed in advertising design simply because that's what marketers used. Peirce and McBride's research showed the female character to be just as effective as her male counterpart and thus encouraged greater use of her. Additionally, from the research they carried out, she was also the most liked.

Following on from previous studies (advocating gender balance within character design), this research has employed as the primary communications vehicle of the interface the services of a female character. Although group interview participants recommended the inclusion of a male presence (an additional character), using a female character supported Peirce and McBride (2001) position. Dr Jody was generally liked by group participants particularly her voice, that was considered appropriately pitched at the user (empathetic yet informative). Above all, she was considered as being credible in relation to service being presented.

5.4 Character and online storytelling

Patmore (2003) and Roberts (2004) discussed the value of a good story, asserting you cannot tell one without a protagonist at the center of it. All cultures have a story to tell. Stories captivate people and businesses only survive if they can communicate their story to an intended market.

A major focus within this research has been on storylines and how they add value to an online experience. When presenting two versions of the same web interface to participants within a group interview situation (non character and character), the character, complete with it's own animated backstory, supported the assumption that

stories can add value to the user experience. A story also provided a reason for the character to exist.

Storyline within the interface design stimulated the most debate as well as providing the most valuable feedback, which incidentally resulted in the recommendation of additional stories.

5.5 Building a brand

M&M's, Hello Kitty and even Bart Simpson illustrate how a character can command presence, personality and even love. According to Roberts (2004) what else could a brand wish for? Judith Garretson (2004), asserted that once a positive brand experience is etched into the mind of a consumer, a character is not likely to add much in the way additional value. Where the character can add value is the initial recognition process, establishing awareness, converting unfamiliarity to familiarity and with this providing consumers new to the brand a positive emotive experience.

The creation of character and interface was the primary concern of this thesis. However it is also a starting point in the developmental process of establishing a brandable icon, a icon that through its storytelling role as a communicator representing a service can provide the consumer with an experience beyond that of mere information.

6. Conclusion

The research presented within this thesis has explored a broad range of literature concerning the validity of the spokes character within today's media. Previous investigations have revealed ingredients necessary for effective character design from traditional linear use pertaining to advertising design (static and animation), through to interactive social actors employed for online engagement. However, where this study differed from previous investigations was its focus on the middle ground. It explored the area between linear design that merely represents, and interactive design that assists you (like a shop employee would). This study looked at humanising the user experience, where the character comes with it's own pre-packaged relevance, and in doing so adds credibility through storyline. The aim of this research was to establish the rules of character design and apply them to the production of a design specific animated spokes character aligned to a service industry web interface.

Existing research, in terms of the history of the spokes character, has shown their employment within marketing to be a powerful tool. In saying that, like any marketing tool there first needs to be a compelling rationale for character employment and their alignment must be believable within the industry targeted.

The research through a design process resulted in a prototype application that targeted chiropractic consumers within a specific age range (25 – 35 years). Group participants given the choice of a non-character and character based web interface displayed a propensity for the latter providing positive feedback as well as a number of recommendations themselves that could enhance emotive appeal.

As previously discussed, the test group was small in size (seven participants) and can therefore provide only an indicative result. However all test subjects' felt the message being conveyed was effective in delivery. The spokes character based interface was considered to shorten the learning curve, improve memory retention and offer a more engaging user experience through likeability, alignment and storyline. The spokes character version was also deemed to be more credible than the same non-character site resulting in a greater level of trust achieved. Though download limitation would be an issue for many current users, it is important to note the prototype model was created with broadband/CD access in mind.

The prototype CD produced is just a working visual. Additional design work is required before the functioning interface becomes final. Based on participant recommendations,

further developmental work is intended which will run beyond the scope of this research.

Finally, to interested readers, it is hoped that the results obtained within this research may help determine design considerations with respect to the inclusion of animated personalities within future web creations. Just because there may be an element of fun present, doesn't necessarily mean the message is any less credible.

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APPENDICES

<i>Expert information sheet</i>	<i>I</i>
<i>Participant information sheet</i>	<i>II</i>
<i>Consent forms: Expert interview</i>	<i>III</i>
<i>Consent forms: Group interview</i>	<i>IV</i>
<i>Expert interview questions and response</i>	<i>V</i>
<i>Group interview questions and summary response</i>	<i>VII</i>
<i>Character; spoken scripts and screenshots</i>	<i>XII</i>
<i>Interface conceptual development visuals</i>	<i>XX</i>

(Massey stationery)
Printed letterhead
will appear here.

The role the spokes character in contemporary website design

INFORMATION SHEET

My name is Phillip Andrews. As part of the completion of a Masters in Design I am undertaking a research project under the supervision of Jacquie Naismith, programme leader for design at the Wellington Design School at Massey University. The aim of this research is to investigate consumer preference in comparing a spokes character (animated character icon) driven web site to a non-character site when presenting information for the Chiropractic industry.

As an expert in the field of CIT (Communication and Information Technology) your critique of this project and prototype would prove very valuable.

Should you agree to participate, a one-on-one interview will be required at your location: Media Lab, Lexis Nexis Hse, 205-207 Victoria Street, Wellington. Date and time requested for this interview are Wednesday 29th June from 2 - 3pm. The interview will take no longer than one hour to complete. You can refuse to answer any question at anytime or withdraw from the study altogether. Apart from my supervisor and myself, your identity will remain anonymous. At project completion you will be provided with a summary of findings.

In taking part in this study you will also be required to sign a consent form. All forms will be securely archived at Massey University for a period of five years before destruction in accordance with Massey policy.

If you wish to enquire further about this study please contact myself via phone or email: 06 952 7001, ext 70205 during the day. 06 354 3118 in the evening, or email: phill@padesign.tv. Alternatively you may wish to contact my supervisor, Jacquie Naismith at Massey University via email: j.j.Naismith@massey.ac.nz.

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, Wellington Application 05/27. If you have any concerns about the ethics of this research, please contact Professor Sylvia Rumball, Chair, Massey University Campus Human Ethics Committee: WGTN telephone 06 350 5249, email humanethicswn@massey.ac.nz.

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The research process requires both group interview and user testing of online interfaces in order to gauge your opinion and preference.

Participant's Rights

You are under no obligation to take part in this study. If you do choose to participate in a group discussion (focus group setting) you can refuse to answer any question at anytime or withdraw from the study altogether (by or before Monday 11 July 2005). Your identity will be known only to other participants (seven in all) myself as facilitator and one transcriber. You will be provided access to a summary of the project findings when the study is concluded. Outside of the group interview setting you will remain anonymous.

The interview group session will be videotaped for reviewing purposes. Video data will be stored in a secure environment until project completion at which time all material will be deleted. In taking part in this study you will also be required to sign confidentiality and consent form. All forms will be securely archived at Massey University for a period of five years before being destroyed in accordance with Massey policy.

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Massey University

Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa

The role of spokes character icons in contemporary website design

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

This consent form will be held for a period of five (5) years

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me.
My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask
further questions at any time.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature:

Date:

.....

Full Name - printed

.....



Massey University
Te Kunenga ki Pūrehuroa

The role of spokes character icons in contemporary website design

PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM

This consent form will be held for a period of five (5) years

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me.
My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask
further questions at any time.

I agree/do not agree to the group interview session being video taped.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

Signature:

Date:

.....

Full Name - printed

.....

Project title: The role of spokes character icons in contemporary web site design (29 June 2005)

Interview schedule: Expert interview (1 hour)

Questions:

Introduce the interface taking the industry expert through all stages of subluxation. Explain terminology employed rationalising the term Spokes character.

Site general question: Style of site

With today's use of graphic style and colour, do you feel as an initial impression the flavour portrayed within the interface presents an image suitable for a site of this nature?

The graphics and colours do soften the technical aspect of the message.

Character questions: Visual alignment

- With regard to the spokes character interface, do you find the character helps visually communicate the chiropractic message? Fundamentally does it contribute to explaining what chiropractic sets out to achieve?

The character may help make an informational contribution to those consumers who might not otherwise have the desire to search out information or read text based material.

- What do you feel are positive/negative aspects of utilising a character within the interface.

A positive aspect of character use is the friendly fun like connotation expressed. The negative issues could relate to ethnic concerns such as graphic styling, colour, gesture and gender depending on cultures or religions using site.

- Do you feel the visual character icon could contribute to greater memorability of the information communicated?

Yes. Subluxation as an episode utilising a character to tell it's story.

Character questions: personality and delivery

1. Do you feel employing a character as the interface narrator adds a humanistic flavour to the user experience? For example is the character interaction through its story telling alignment in your opinion able to create a more enjoyable experience than a site without one.

Yes minor or major depending on how integral to the character is to the story presented.

2. The intention of creating a design specific character icon for inclusion within the interface is to add an element of personality or like-ability. From your experience in communications technology do you feel a character can achieve this, more specifically does this one? What elements/attributes do you feel are/not currently included?

A shared experience with users could facilitate greater personality and or likeability. Essentially the user should be able to relate to the character on some level through the story presented to them. An emotional link in some way would need to be established.

3. Do you feel a character within the interface adds 'a sense' of believability, perhaps a degree of credibility to the user experience?

Yes it could do. However to give a character credibility you need the right alignment or emotional relationship. For example, the right image, gesture and voice. Judy Bailey 'the news presenter for TV One' as the voice would add sense presence to the characters credibility.

4. Should the character option prove a desirable element, future development may include an AI (Artificial intelligence) engine to further support the character communication (computer and phone access). Although the prime purpose of this site is to establish a purpose specific character that the user of the service could relate too. Do you feel this direction to could be warranted?

Depends on if the character first builds trust through the web experience.

Character questions: Gender issues

- 1 The first character site was put together as a working prototype with the intention of utilising a gender-neutral graphic icon and voice-over in order to avoid stereotyping issues. Do you feel the character is neutrally portrayed or does it have a male/female dominance and is this a good or bad thing?

A male or female character will evoke greater impact than a neutral character and voice, as long as it exudes the right message. Empathy or caring may possibly be more effective utilising a female character. The actual voice of a Chiropractic doctor may add respect or authority to the message.

- 2 As a potential user of the interface would you like to have a caption feature as well the ability to turn the voice off? Alternatively would you prefer no character voice at all?

The characters believability is the focus. If the voice and character work together well, the character option would be preferable.

Closing questions

1. In your opinion what are the strengths/weaknesses of a spokes character interface over a non-character site?
2. Has the site provided you with a quick insight into what chiropractic care is all about and therefore to a degree done its job?
3. What would your recommendations be from here?

The character involves the viewer to a greater degree than a static site. The message contains a human focus, therefore a story can be told rather than laying out copy containing information. The site does aid learning. However the character up front should explain the term subluxation in order to get the user on board as soon as possible.

Project title: The role of spokes character icons in contemporary web site design (13 July 2005)

Interview schedule: Group interview (2 hours)

Introduction

There are no right or wrong answers in tonight's session. The questions presented here are to ascertain your preference in the design of a web/CD based information tool for the local chiropractic industry.

As indicated on the information sheets provided to you, this project is part of a Masters in Design thesis undertaken through Massey University. School of Design, Wellington.

We appreciate your participation tonight, and wish to remind you that you do not have to answer any question you do not wish too and are free to leave at any stage of this group interview process.

Format:

- Establish participant knowledge of chiropractic in general, together with users understanding of subluxation
- Uncover participant avenues of information sort in their decision to proceed with chiropractic care.

Introduce non-character/character site:

- Style and colour of site. 2D/3D character styling
- Visual alignment relating to credibility/visual communication of the message
- Discussion of storyteller personality. Through spoken words, text, image and animation, discuss emotion and memorability
- Gender issues and voice-over type.

BREAK

Ascertain user preference:

- Strengths/weaknesses character non-character
- Preference and recommendations.

Close proceedings

Questions:

Establish participant knowledge of chiropractic service

(7 participants attended the group interview; 5 male and 2 female. Ages 25-35yrs)

- How did you first learn about chiropractic care? What information avenues helped you learn about the service?

Participants taking part in the group interview did not actively seek information about chiropractic care through written means. Instead they relied on recommendation from others through word of mouth. The reputation of the health care proved to be a major factor in the consumer undertaking chiropractic care.

- What is your understanding of subluxation, what it is and its causes?

The attending participants seemed aware of the term subluxation, together with a basic understanding of the chiropractic process. However many of the attendees seemed a little confused with the term (subluxation) itself. One participant did refer to compromised health caused through spinal misalignment, while another thought it was a technical description of the adjustment process.

Throughout the interview process participants were focused on physical causes associated with subluxation (injury through sport or accident). Chemical or emotional causes seemed to be either less important or less understood.

Site general question: Style of site (Character/non-character)

From your initial impression of the interface styling, do colour use and graphic technique applied evoke a serious response from you as the potential user? Essentially do you get the impression or not the interface contains credible information?

Colours and interface layout were thought to be effective, particularly with the warmth and brightness of the yellow (creating a positive feeling) in contrast to the background blue (more serious). Subluxation windows/screens 'what it is, cause, correcting' were visually obvious for front-end navigation purposes and suggested a revealing of information, x-ray or hi tech feel. However the use of red employed within the graphic border strips were initially thought to be a bit of a concern due to its 'beware of danger' connotation, a sort of hidden danger if you will. Albeit 'subluxation' is in fact a hidden danger in its own right. Using these graphics may visually emphasise that point, a sort of implied danger to be aware of.

The information relayed through text and graphic style was felt upon first impression to add a credible visual element to the message communicated. The design though fun-like, particularly with character version appeared to contain serious content from the user perspective. A suggestion was made to place a chiropractic seal in the interface background in order to establish a greater feeling of trust such as 'this is a chiropractic authorised site!'

One participant who commented positively on the character version still felt an interactive animated Flash site wasn't really the way to go for a website, saying traditional HTML would be preferable due to greater text control and search capabilities. However in saying that did acknowledge they themselves have not investigated chiropractic on the web or in print due to the time requirements.

Character questions: Visual alignment

- With regard to the spokes character interface, do you find the character helps visually communicate the chiropractic message? Fundamentally does it contribute to explaining what chiropractic sets out to achieve?

Participants felt the character was able to communicate the chiropractic message more effectively than the same Flash site without a character. The visual and verbal communication mix added to the user experience. The user viewing the site with the character presenting to them can sit back and learn (less effort on their part to decipher the information).

- What do you feel are positive/negative aspects of utilising a character within the interface.

***Positive:** The initial impression was though to be entertaining and informational. The character presented to them was felt to be likeable and alignment with a storyline made the whole experience more interesting, easier to learn and memorable. It was suggested by one participant that a touch screen interactive kiosk within a mall situation would be a better vehicle than the web due to its entertainment value.*

***Negative:** Though the first impression of the character site created an impact, repeat visits to the site were thought to become boring if the same content were shown with every visit. Loading times for non-broadband viewers would be slow and therefore undesirable.*

- In your opinion does the spokes character icon contribute to greater memorability of communicated information as compared to the same site utilising a non-character interface?

It was felt the character-based site (due to the presentation nature of the character) could help the user retain information more effectively than the non-character site.

- The character used in this presentation is 2D (2 dimensional). Would a 3D character be preferable?

Participants found the 2D character to be suitable, suggesting that it didn't matter if the character utilised was 2 or 3D, as long as the character was believable and did their job. The Simpson's was provided as an example of effective 2D storytelling.

Character questions: personality and delivery

5. Do you feel employing a character as the interface narrator adds a humanistic flavour to the experience? For example is the character interaction through its story telling nature more enjoyable to navigate than the non-character version?

Participants felt a character was a good idea with one participant saying it was about time the chiropractic industry had something like this. The character was thought to add a positive humanistic flavour to the online experience and was preferable to the same non-character site. Stories or experiences relayed through the story telling nature of the character were deemed to add value to the user experience. Further discussion arose at this point relating to the use of actual patient success stories being created. One suggestion was to have a text panel whereupon users could write in their own stories. Selected stories could then be made into animations (all based on real examples).

6. The intention of creating a design specific character icon for inclusion into the interface was to add personality or like-ability to the experience. In your opinion is this the case?

The character was thought by the group to add a sense of personality to the user experience. The combination of image and voice-over (especially the right voice) added to its overall attraction. One participant felt the character should have a real neck rather than an implied one (more real-more attractive), although the general consensus of character appearance proved favourable.

7. Do you feel using a character within the interface creates a sense of believability or credibility?

Participants felt the right voice and character image can contribute to a believable persona. It could also lend itself to media vehicles outside of the PC screen, such as cinema, TV or even radio. The voice and character image used for the presentation were found to be effective by the group. However though the character was deemed believable as an image and voice, the credibility factor grew substantially when participants were made aware the voice belonged to an actual chiropractor.

(Should the character option prove desirable) for future development, would you like the ability to interact with an AI (Artificial intelligence) character. In essence converse through keyboard or voice, or even your phone in order to ask and have answered specific questions about the service.

Participants were not fully aware of this feature. However after putting an example forward (re intelligent real time text based interaction), felt it had possibilities in the future.

Character questions: Gender issues

- 3 The semi-functional prototype constructed for this presentation utilises a female character loosely based on a practicing chiropractic doctor. How do you feel about employing a female character and voice as opposed to male?

All participants liked the female character and voice. Character voice was deemed to be as important as the visual design. However, most of the participant felt from their perspective that the option to choose from a range of doctors male and female (at least 2) would be desirable. It was even suggested additional characters be developed based on local doctors within the region, a sort of who's who of chiropractic care. Users could decide who/what character will guide them through the subluxation learning experience (it may prove positive for the user putting a real face to the voice when undertaking actual care).

Further suggestions were that the site or interactive kiosk, contain the names and contact details of all recognised practitioners within the region. After exploring the site, potential users of the service could select from a list of recognised qualified practitioners in which to follow up on. Ironically only credible doctors would be listed on the site.

- 4 Would a female voice create a more soothing (caring or empathetic) affect than a male or are there other factors to consider.

The female voice was considered appropriate, not too sales centred or boring. It was felt to be smooth, caring and informative, in essence a 'talking to you voice' rather than 'talking down'. A favourable aspect of the voice was it had a Kiwi accent, this also added to credibility. Although as indicated prior, from the users perspective a greater selection of storytellers could add value to the consumer experience. Some users will prefer a female voice and some a male.

- 5 As a potential user of the interface would you like the option to have written captions for speech that the user can turn on/off? Alternatively would you prefer no character voice at all (just captions)?

The spokes character option was preferable to the non-character. Speech bubbles or text panels (such as scrolling text) were considered by the group to be a little busy, visually. The entertaining aspect of the spokes character interface was that the character talks to you. The group considered that from the users perspective, having the option to turn sound/speech/caption on/off, though probably not essential might add value.

Conclusion

Even with regular adverts placed in Newspapers, posters put up in the surgery and pamphlets provided to patients and would be patients, there still seems to be confusion as to what subluxation is. Based on the group interview all the chiropractic users present felt the service had improved their personal health. However none had actually really taken the time to learn more about chiropractic health other than a skim read or simply rely on word of mouth recommendation, whether from a skilled professional or people extolling the benefits of their own improved well-being.

Attending participants preferred the character driven interface as compared to a non-character site containing the same information. The learning experience utilising character was felt to be more enjoyable and memorable than the same non-character interface due to the story telling nature of the communication.

The character-doctor alignment and graphics style (character and interface design) were felt to add credibility and engagement to the user experience. Utilising a female character and voice proved positive, as did having a kiwi accent. However, participants felt from their perspective having a choice of doctor characters would only enhance the experience, particularly over repeat visits when the user wants to try something new. Following on from this as a design recommendation, the group felt in order to attract multiple visits from the same user, content would also need updating; this may involve developing new stories on a regular basis.

One negative aspect of the animated interface design to date as considered by participant was content file size, even though broadband users are increasing at the rate of around 2000 per month. Participants indicated that at present many users would not have access to fast downloading and therefore the desire to wait for content to load. Participant saw this as a short-term problem, nevertheless it is a problem to consider for the time being.

Subluxation website script

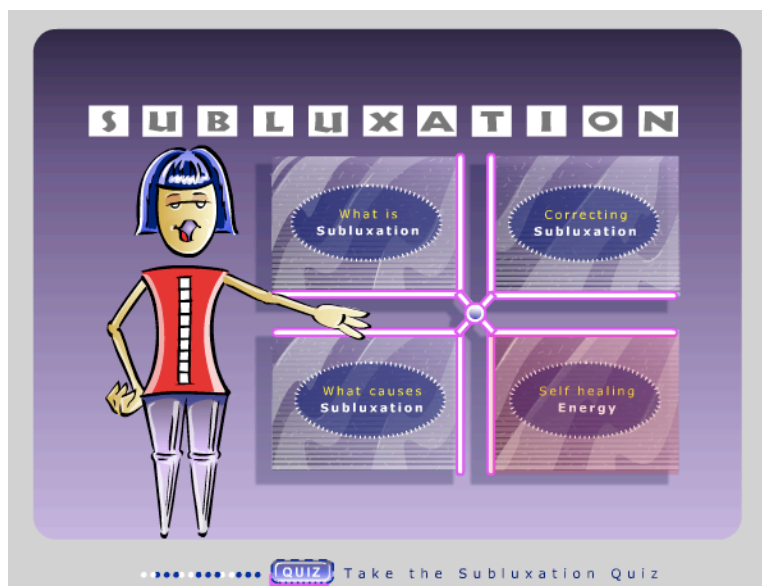


Physical subluxation - Backstory intro

[Stops running: visually puffed for a moment]

The story you've just seen is a typical example of how a subluxation starts, and how it gets put back into its place. Literally!

Hi... I'm Dr Jody. Come on inside and learn a little about subluxation for yourself. You know what they say. "a little knowledge can go a long way", especially if it can help improve the quality of **your** life!



Four panel introduction

Thanks for coming in... To tell you a little about subluxation, I've separated it onto four screens:

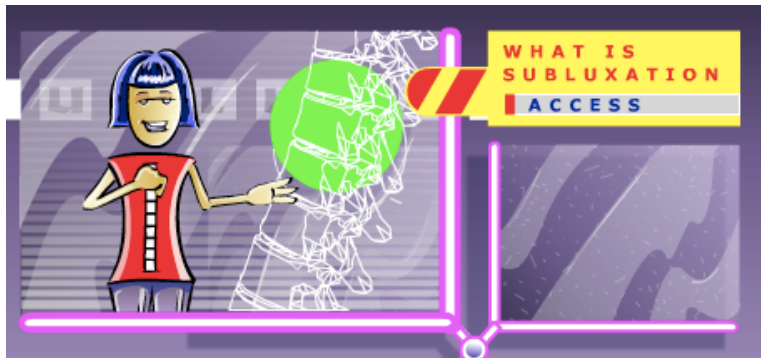
What it is

What causes it

How to correct it

and what a subluxation free spine means for you.

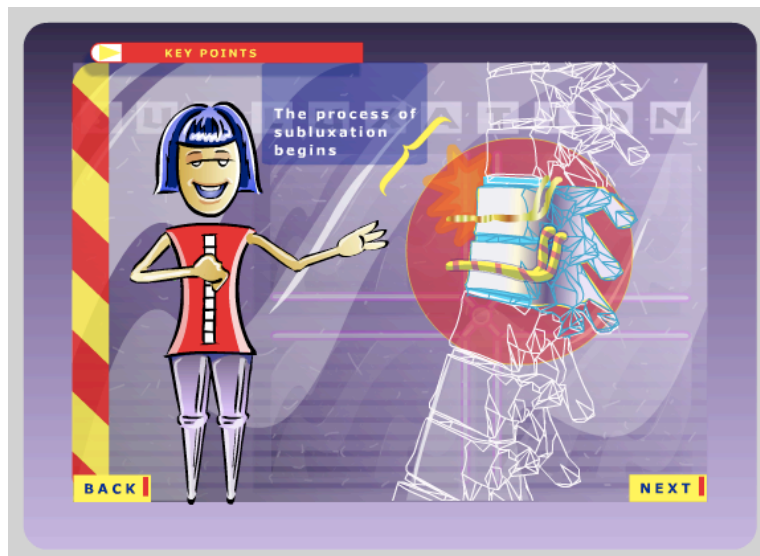
There's also a ten-question quiz to test your knowledge. You can take this quiz whenever you want, and as many times as you want. Try it.



On clicking 'what is subluxation' button (other buttons go directly to their full screen view).

Let's take a closer look.

[access button into what it subluxation]



What is subluxation - Part 1

The twenty-four moveable vertebrae in your body are divided into three areas:

The **Cervical** (the neck area)

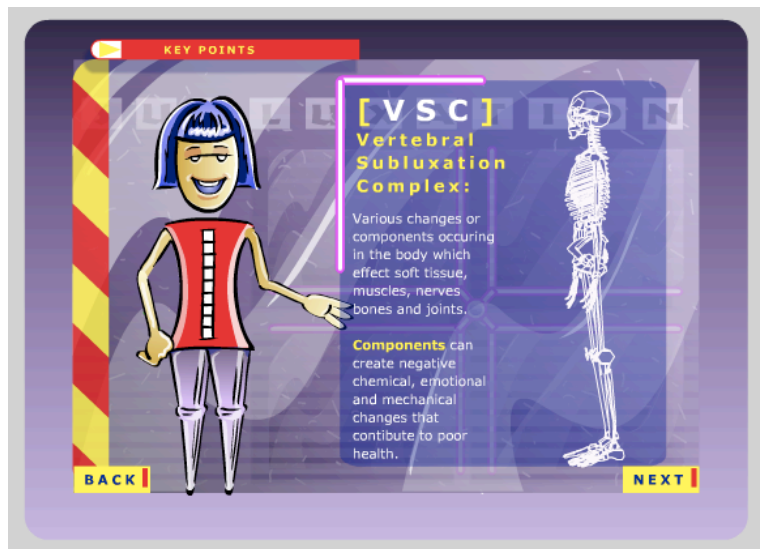
The **Thoracic** (the main trunk part of the back)

and the **Lumbar** (the lower back).

A simple explanation of subluxation is when one or more of your vertebrae move out of alignment putting pressure on spinal nerves.

Spinal nerves come out between each bone in your spine.

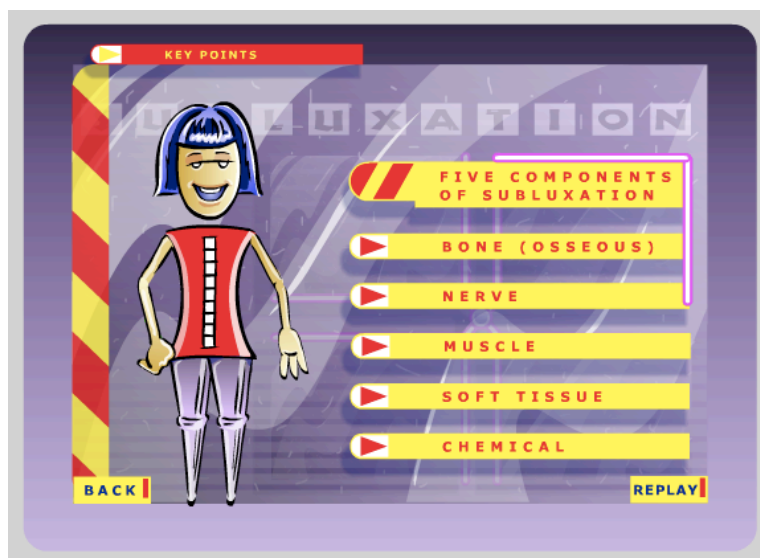
In short, if your nerves can't communicate properly with your body errors can occur. Try talking to someone on a bad phone connection and you'll see what I mean.



What is subluxation - Part 2

Vertebral subluxation complex or VSC for short refers to various things happening inside your body at the same time. These changes 'known as components' include soft tissue, muscles, nerves, bones and joints. The effects can create negative chemical, emotional and mechanical changes that contribute to poor health.

[access button into what it subluxation]



What is subluxation - Part 3

The components are:

The **Osseous** or bone component

The **Nerve** component

The **Muscle** component

Soft tissue component

and the **Chemical** component.



CORRECTING (intro)

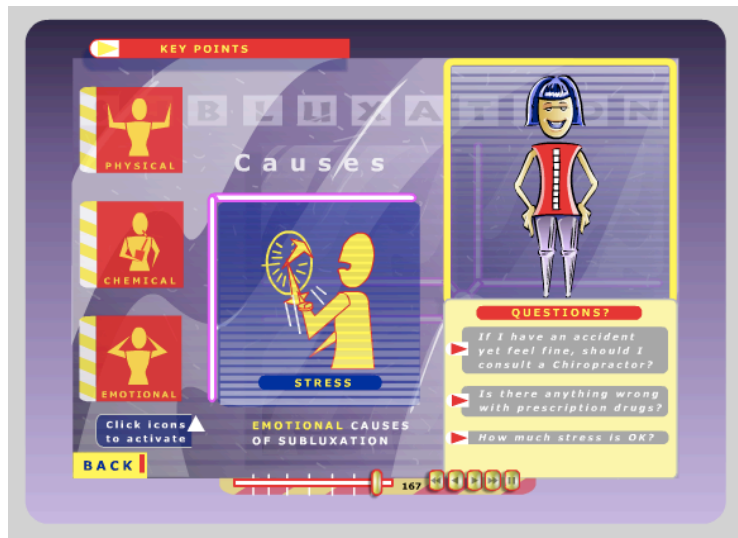
The X-Ray images shown here reveal both a healthy and a subluxated region of the spine.

Image 'B' displays the results of severe subluxation degeneration, which would dramatically reduce quality of life.

The longer subluxations are left unchecked, the greater recovery time required once chiropractic treatment commences.

The best solution is to catch things early.

Click on the topics below and explore each in a little more detail.



CAUSES (intro)

To my right are the three causes of subluxation, click on the icons to access each story.

Below are three common questions.

For an answer to each, click on one of the arrows.

Question physical (text only):

If I have an accident yet feel fine, should I consult a chiropractor?

Answer (requires voice):

Physical stresses on the body, which may cause a subluxation, can be defined as forces greater than the body's internal resistance.

Even if you feel fine after an accident, a check up may prevent a subluxation from developing.

Question chemical (text only):

Is there anything wrong with prescription drugs?

Answer (requires voice):

Drugs can often be a 'quickfix' that treats the symptoms and not the cause.

If symptoms return, you need to focus on the root of the problem.

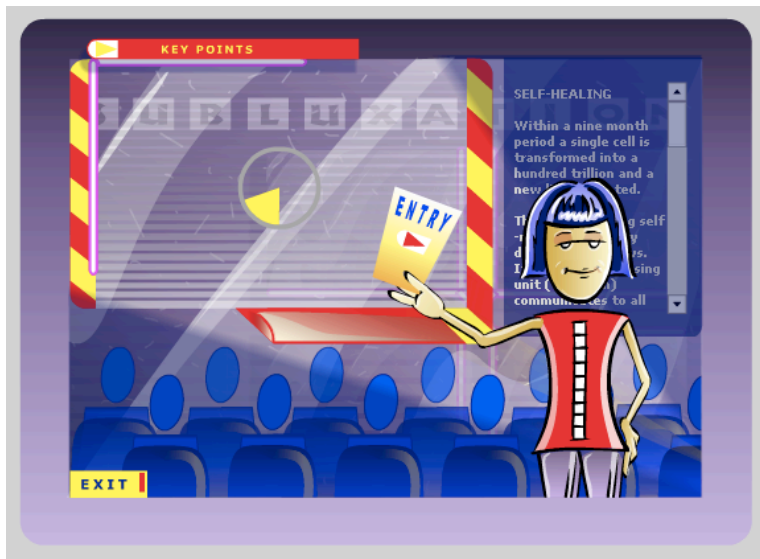
Question emotional (text only):

How much stress is OK?

Answer (requires voice):

Emotional stress is part of our everyday lives and we all deal with it in different ways. However it's when we don't deal with stress, when we bottle it up we have a problem.

Prolonged emotional stress like, like chemical and physical can adversely affect the body's ability to maintain good health.



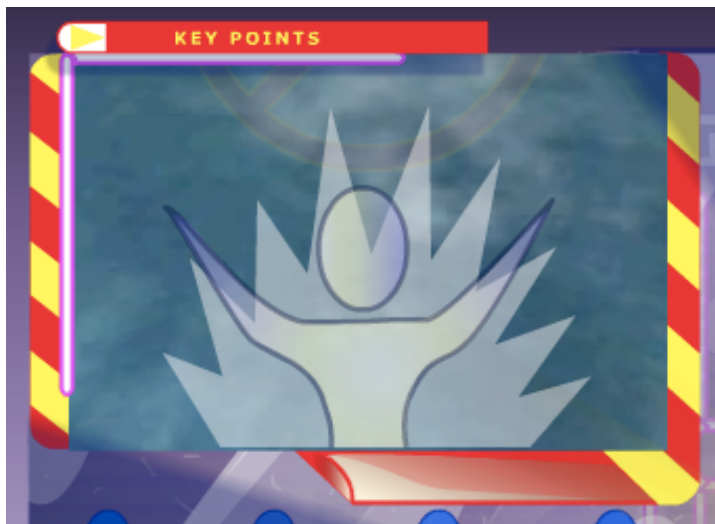
SELF-HEALING (intro)

You! Hold the ticket to your own good health.

The body performing at its optimum is an amazing example of communication and efficiency.

Clear communication between brain, organs, glands and cells is not only fundamental to our survival, it is also essential to a healthy existence.

Click the ticket to play the movie or read the text behind me and discover some of the wonders of the body for yourself.



SELF-HEALING (Picture theater voice-over narration)

Within a nine-month period a single cell is transformed into a hundred trillion and a new life is created.

This self analysing self-maintaining entity develops and grows. It's central processing unit 'the brain' communicates to all parts of the body through the nervous system 'the most complex network on earth' at 320kmph, while the heart beats 10,000 litres of life giving blood within a 24hr period.

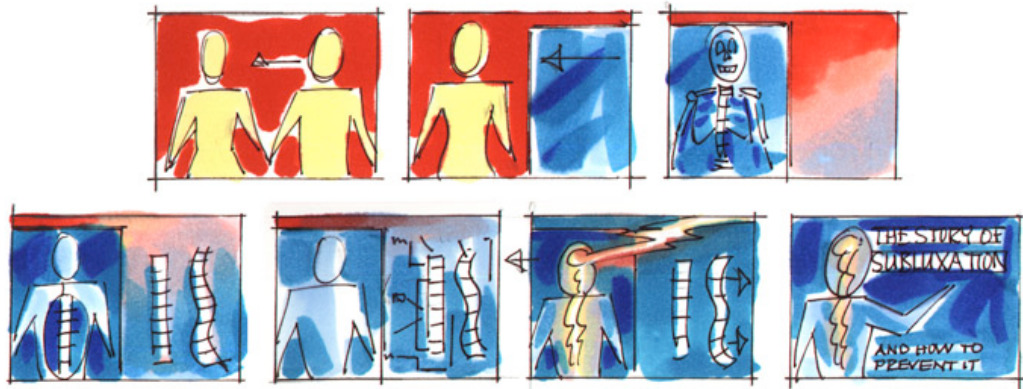
The body is continually under going regeneration. Science as it slowly discovers more about the body's self-healing abilities can only but hold nature in awe.

Chiropractic wellness care, use no drugs and offer no magical cure. What it does do is help allow an open pathway of communication, so the brain can monitor and maintain all aspects of the body through the spinal chord.

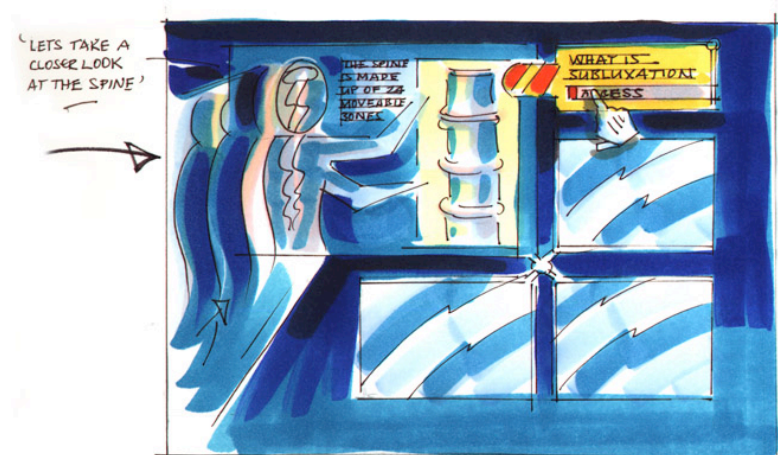
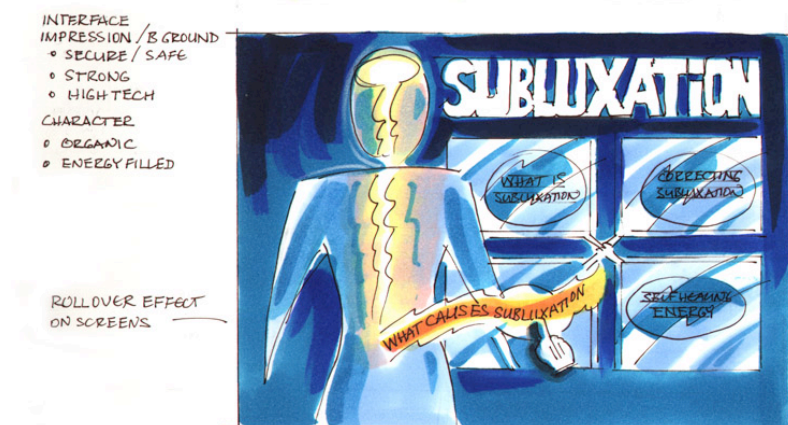
Regular chiropractic adjustments avoid Subluxations setting in by keeping this flow of information from brain to body performing at its optimum. In essence it's you who looks after yourself, Naturally!

Interface conceptual development visuals

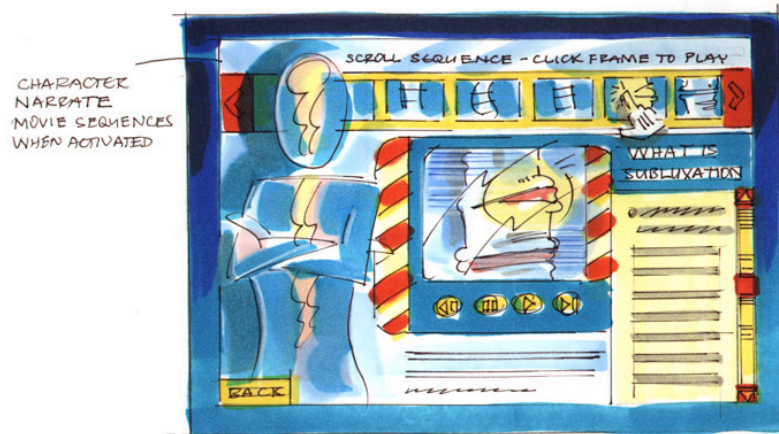
Initial introduction backstory concept visuals



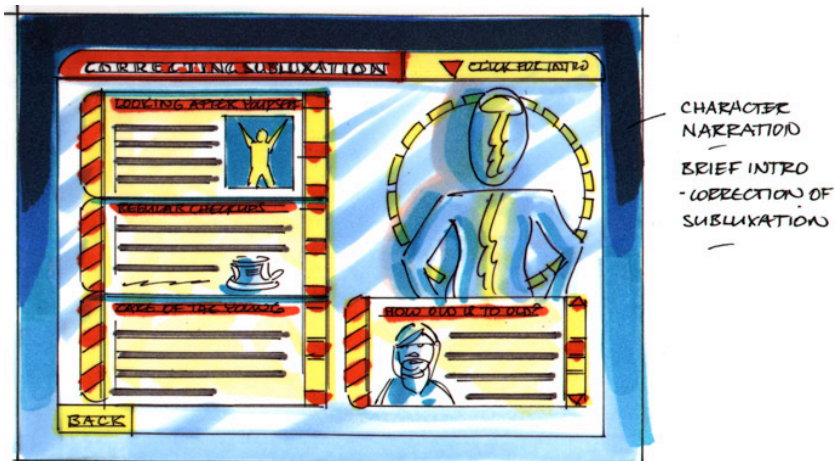
4 screen navigation system. Load 'what is subluxation'.



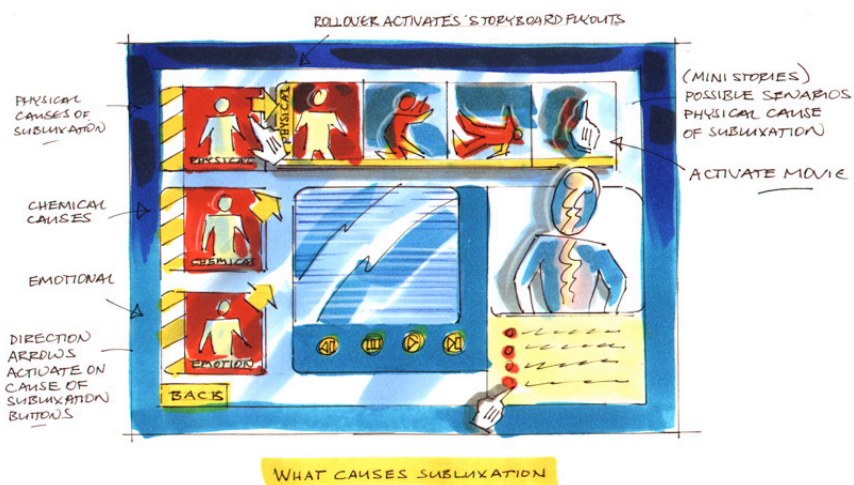
What is subluxation



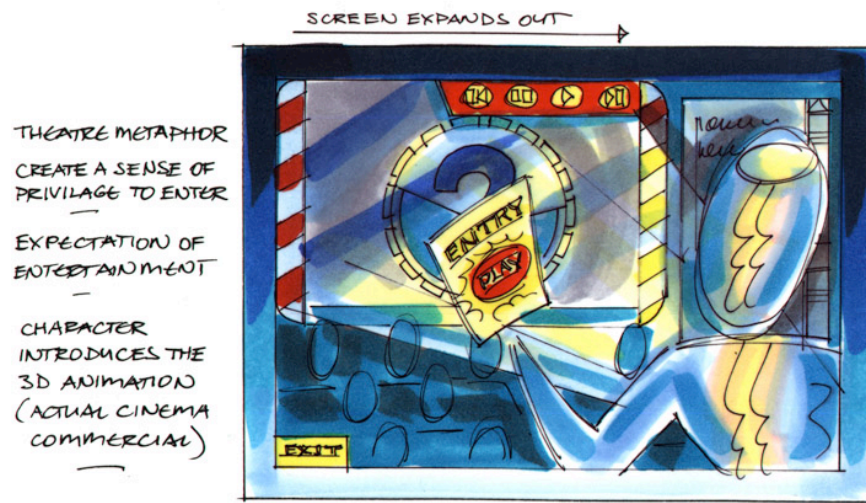
Correcting subluxation



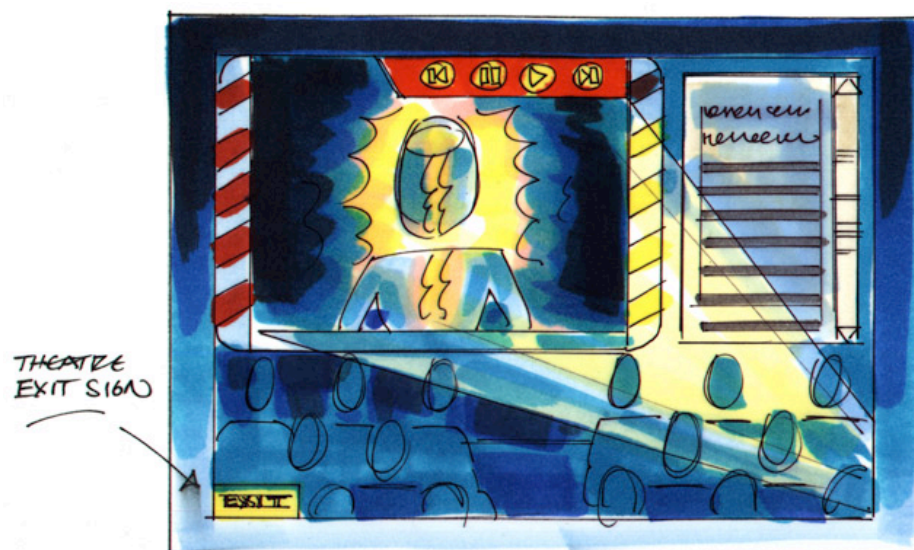
Causes



Subluxation free (cinema scene)



Launch movie by clicking on the ticket



Subluxation free movie storyboard

Employing the Olympic style pictograph, which represents the ultimate in physical being. Quintessentially, be all you can be!

The story evolved from this initial concept. However the focus of the cinema story was on the body's self-healing abilities.



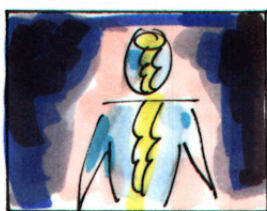
A SINGLE CELL
IS TRANSFORMED...



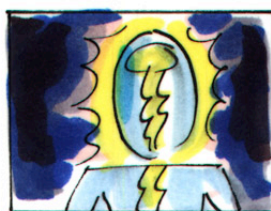
INTO A
HUNDRED TRILLION



AND A NEW LIFE
IS CREATED.



THIS SELF ANALYSING
SELF-MAINTAINING
ENTITY DEVELOPS
AND GROWS...



IT'S CENTRAL PROCESSING
UNIT (THE BRAIN)
COMMUNICATES TO ALL
PARTS OF THE BODY
THROUGH THE NERVOUS
SYSTEM @ 320 KM/PH,



WHILE THE HEART
BEATS 10,000 LITRES
OF LIFE GIVING BLOOD
WITHIN A 24-HOUR
PERIOD.



THE BODY IS
CONTINUALLY UNDER-
GOING REGENERATION.
SCIENCE AS IT
SLOWLY DISCOVERS



MORE ABOUT THE
BODY'S SELF-HEALING
ABILITIES CAN ONLY
BUT HOLD NATURE
IN AWE.



CHIROPRACTIC IS A NATURAL
CARE THAT USE NO DRUGS.
IT SIMPLY REMOVES
SUBLUXATION FROM THE
SPINE SO THE BODY CAN
CARE FOR ITSELF, 'NATURALLY.'

Conceptual development 2

A more fun like character was conceived in order to provide greater personality. Though the character icon was more successful than the first design, the interface construction did not improve on the communication of the first.

The final prototype utilised ideas and elements of the two designs.

