Big Picture

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Phase 3 Design Reflection
UOCD May 2018

<center>Don't Name Your Baby</center>

A few days into phase three, we were at the point where we had decided which idea we would be moving forward with. The temporary name we had for it was "Impact Indicator" -- and we emphasized that this was in fact temporary because we weren't 100% sure we loved the way the name sounded and didn't want to be restricted by it for the rest of the phase. We decided that the first step in our forward-moving process was to plan the interaction map of our product. As a team we cleared off a space on the whiteboard and began mapping out the timeline of how a user might interact with our product. I wrote the word 'start' on the board and drew a box around it. We collectively stared at the board in silence, not really knowing where to 'start'. The silence reflected our inner feelings at that point in the phase. We felt lost and directionless, afraid to start planning the wrong way. Mostly to fill an internal need to be "productive", I suggested we think about overall character and feeling of our product by brainstorming name ideas. We started listing words that related to our elusive product concept. Words like "connection", "impact", "empathy", and "perspective" were added to the list. This process of listing out the product's 'feelings' felt helpful, but it really didn't help us move forward. None of our previous questions had been answered by this exercise. What would our interface look like? What metrics would we use to quantify impact? Where would this be used? Really this activity was just a distraction allowing us to ignore the bigger questions that needed to be answered.

While it may seem easier to jump into the details, it's important to put in the mental energy to tackle the general, higher-level questions. It can seem daunting to make big decisions, but focusing on small points makes it harder for everyone to be on the same page. At a major turning point in the design process, designers will feel the pressure to narrow and select after having grown accustomed to brainstorming and revising continuously up until that point. It becomes easy to get stuck in the cycle of reworking and revisiting ideas, and is therefore

tempting to avoid the inevitable task of making concrete decisions by focusing on smaller questions. This is what we had been doing when we began brainstorming a name before we really knew what our product would be. How could we know the character of our product before knowing what it would do and how it would be used? This approach could be likened to naming a baby before really knowing who they will become. While common in practice, this doesn't allow children to have a name that reflects their own unique personality.

A good practice when faced with tough decisions is to embrace the ambiguity (easier said than done, of course) and begin listing ideas. We eventually were able to push past our mental hurdle by throwing around different ideas of interaction methods and coming up with potential answers to our higher level questions. Doing so allowed us to realize we each had our own versions of how we thought this product would be used. With the larger, open-ended questions we face in UOCD, it is crucial to rip off the metaphorical band aid and begin answering the difficult but necessary high-level questions. This is a top-down approach that starts general and gets more detailed in order to come to a single, well-defined solution. However, in some cases a bottom-up approach may be necessary when there are rigid restrictions that need to be considered. For example, when asking "How will we structure our design review?" it may be more productive to start by listing what artifacts are suggested, and what time restrictions we have to present our information. Identifying these set reasonable boundaries for our ideas.

When there are big questions to be answered, it is crucial that designers push themselves to attempt to generate solutions for these instead of bypassing the high-level information for the more specific, low-hanging fruit tasks. While in the moment these details may seem important, they are really distractions that make it easier to put off the high-level questions and ignore the big picture problems.