Wizard of Oz Prototyping

WHY create a Wizard-of-Oz prototype

You use a Wizard-of-Oz prototype to fake functionality that you want to test with users, thus saving you the time and resources of actually creating the functionality before you refine it through testing. Just like the small man behind the curtain faked the power of the wizard of oz, your design team can fake features that you want to test. Wizard-of-Oz prototypes often refer to prototypes of digital systems, in which the user thinks the response is computer-driven, when in fact it is human controlled.

HOW create a Wizard-of-Oz prototype

Creating a Wizard-of-Oz prototype starts with determining what you want to test or explore. It is often the case that you want to test something that requires great effort to create, like coding a digital interface, but you need to learn more before it makes sense to invest that effort. Figure out how to fake the functionality you need to give the user an authentic experience from their viewpoint. Often leveraging existing tools can be very powerful: Twitter, email systems, Skype, instant messengers, Powerpoint to fake a website, projectors, computer screens repurposed in a new skin, etc. Combine tools such as these with your human intervention behind the scenes, and you can create a realistic prototype. The concept can certainly be extended beyond the digital realm, to create physical prototypes. For example, you could prototype a vending machine without creating the mechanics and use a hidden person to deliver the selected purchases.

A good example of a wizard-of-oz prototype is from the company Aardvark. Aardvark connects people with questions with people best-qualified to answer via a digital interface over the internet. To create the network and algorithm to do this would require significant coding, but the team wanted to test user's reaction to the interface well before the coding was completed. They used an instant messaging system and a team of people behind the scenes to physically reroute questions and answers to the right people. The result is they learned a lot and developed their concept notably without investing coding resources.

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