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Storytelling for Systems Design

Embedding and communicating complex and intangible data through narratives

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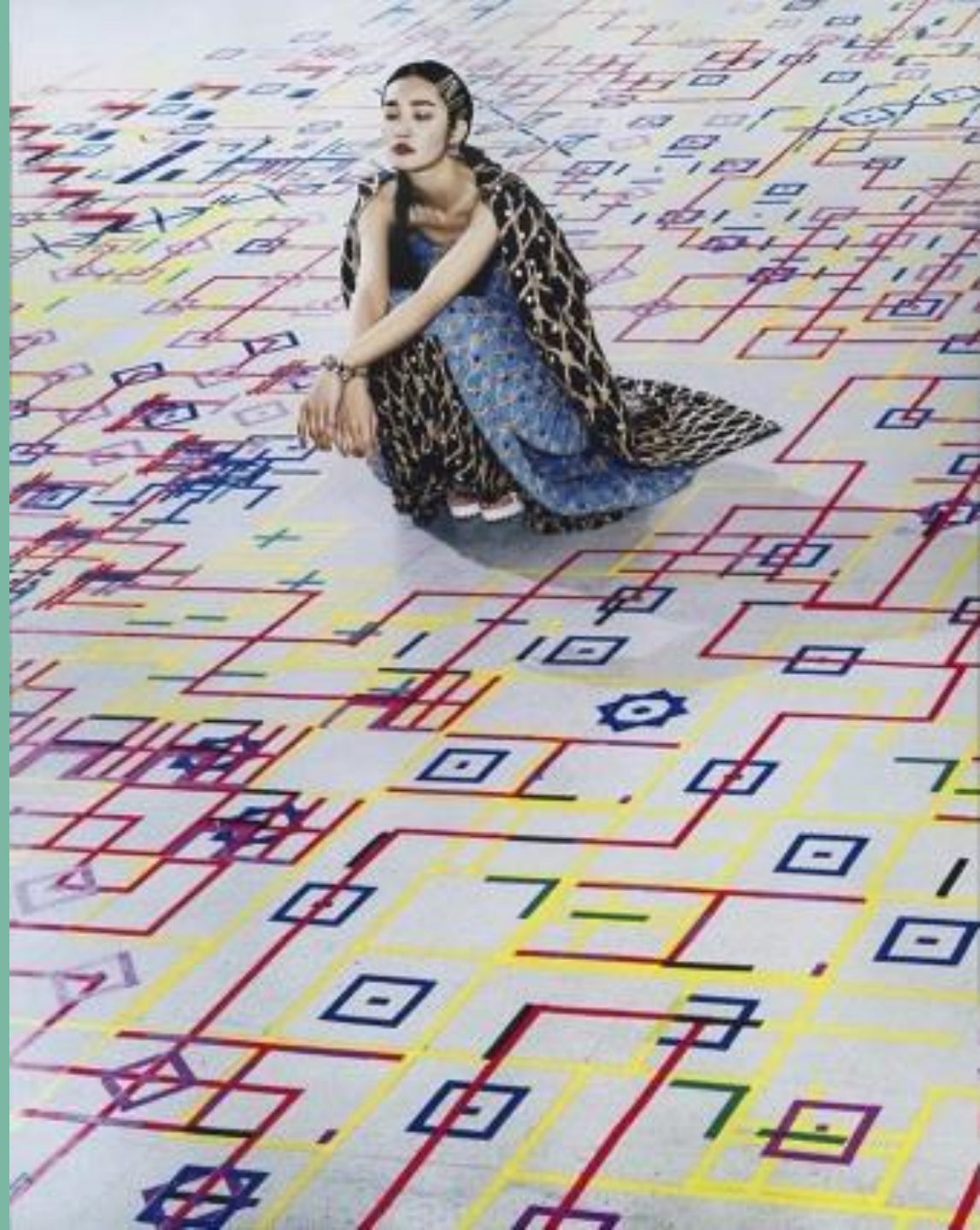
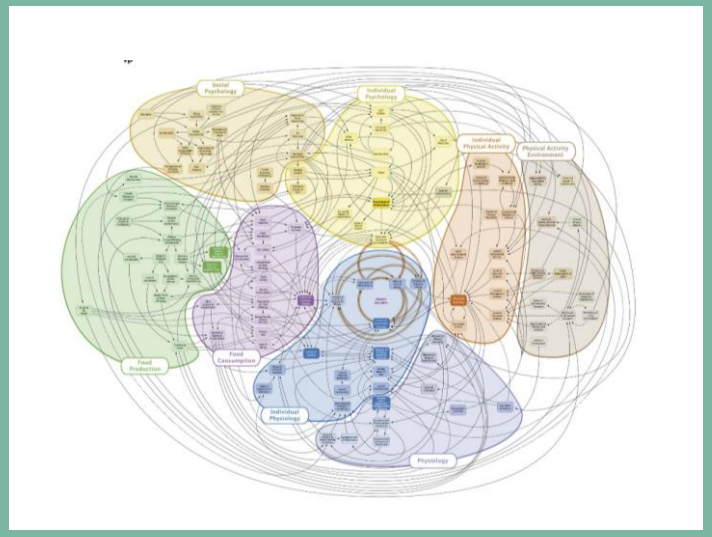


Briony Barr
Experiment 4.1

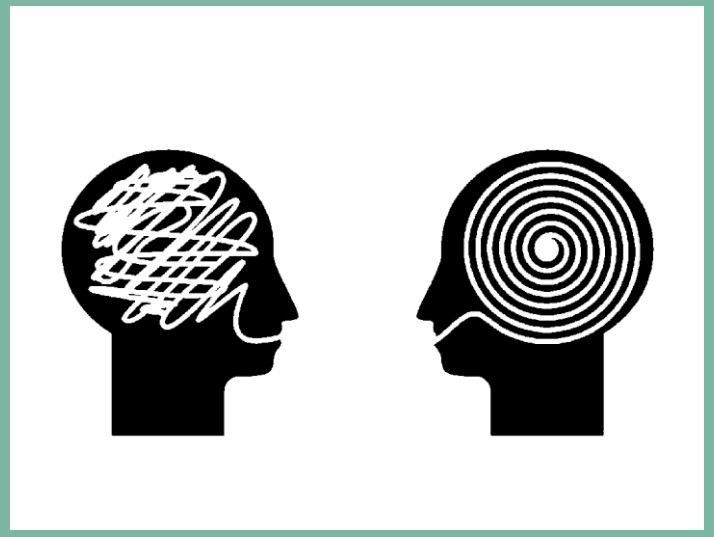
Designing for complex (open, unpredictable) systems

Challenges

Communicate the system's complexity, challenges and leverage points to all stakeholders



Rely on interpretation and intuition to deal with heterogeneous, incomplete, tacit system data



Shift from linear to **systemic mindset (design evolutions** instead of solutions)

Lack of tools applicable in a practice context for e.g. social, organizational or innovation transformation

Research question

How to embed in the systems design process

complexity as well as **intuition, intangible and subtle data**

in a way that is structural and accessible?

Why storytelling for system design

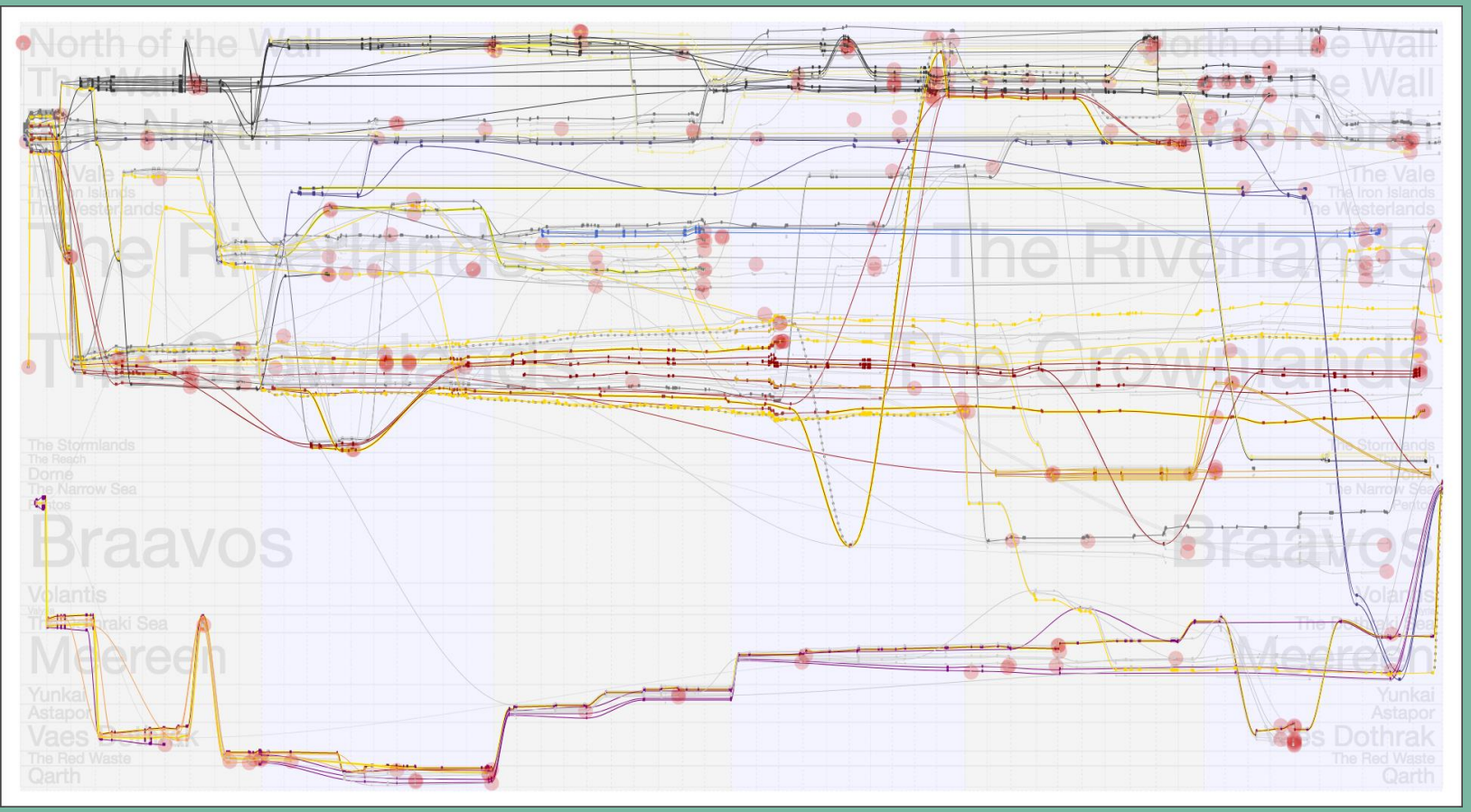
Storytelling stimulates **communication and interpretation of complexity** by embedding contextuality, reflexivity, contradictions, purposes, motives.

Storytelling **unlocks imagination**, brings people out of the logical flow to spark new ideas or perspectives.

Storytelling **connects the whole system picture to deeper structures and dynamics.**

Storytelling **favors collaboration** by transcending cultural divides of multidisciplinary teams and providing a common understanding and vocabulary.

Systemic storytelling



Game of Thrones story map

systemic stories = parallel storylines that ***intersect*** to represent an **interpretation of a system**.

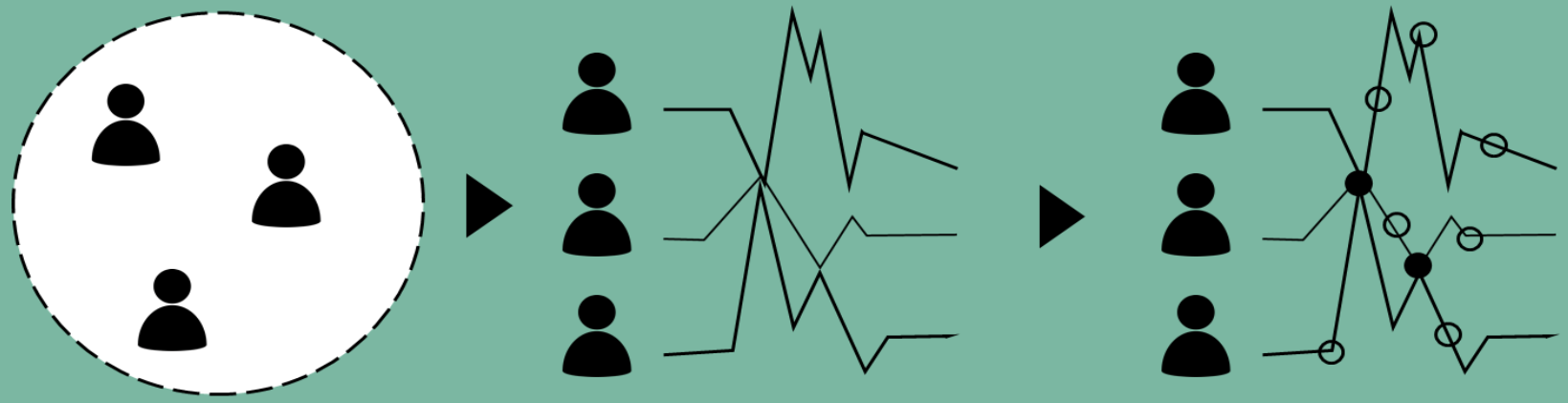
They show different perspectives, a broader perspective than traditional user-centrism.

They are non-linear e.g. can be read cyclically or in parallel.

They zoom in and out, connect the individual experiences to the interpersonal and sociopolitical context and the problems and transformative solutions.

Example 1 – understanding systems

Storytelling of multiple stakeholders' perspectives



Use case

Study of cross-silo collaboration dynamics in a large organization

Method

Role play **+ individual perspective writing & sharing**

Output

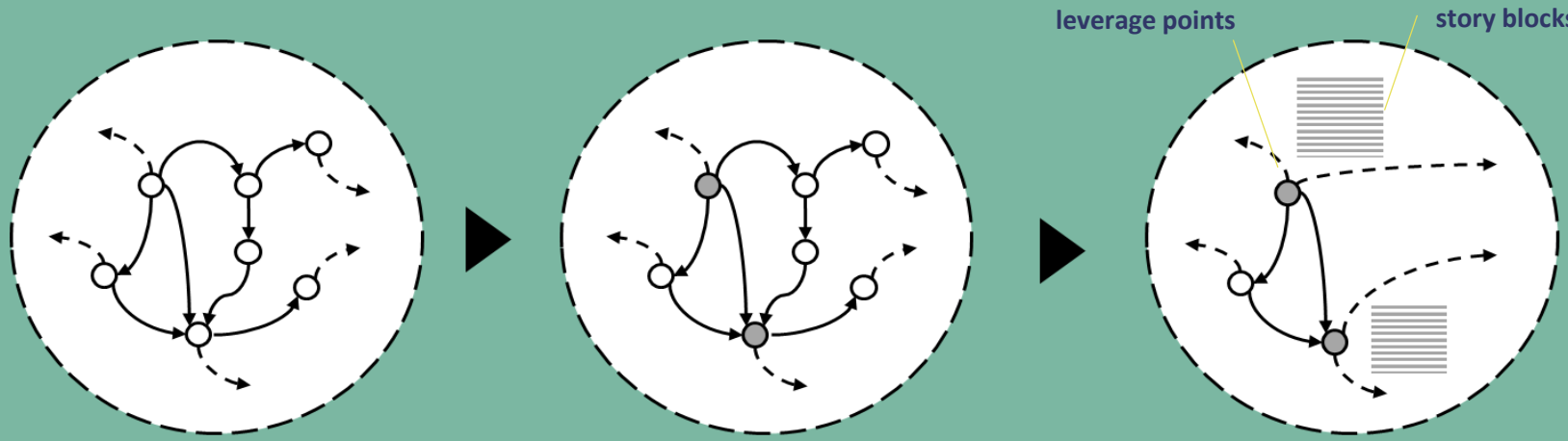
System data:

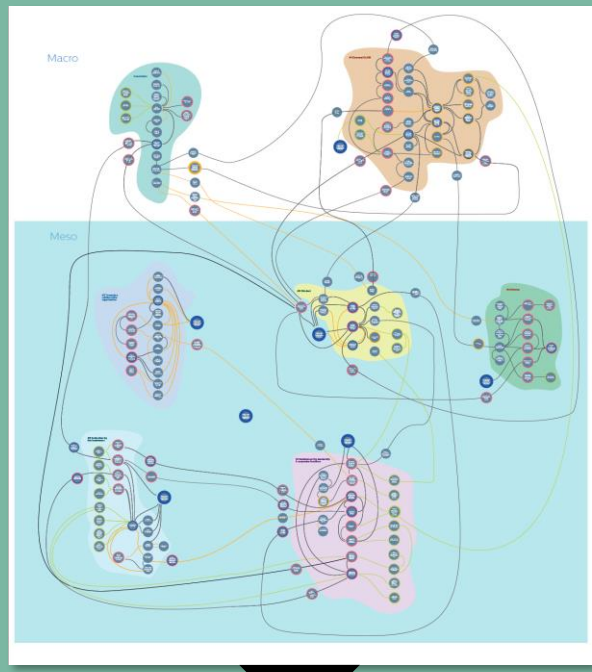
- **Structural and operational challenges and enablers**
- **mental models** for each role
- **tacit information** (insights a deep level such as trust, fear of conflict)

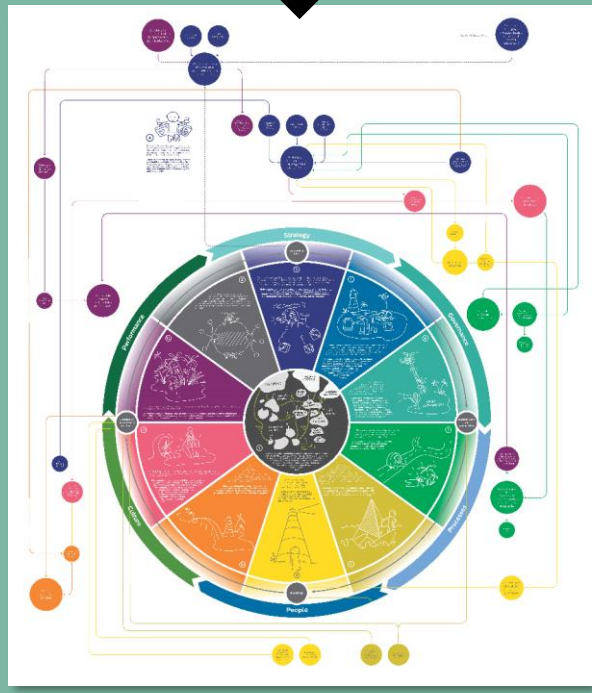
Team building and better understanding of roles and responsibilities

Example 2 – communicating systems

Visual storytelling of system map







Use case

Study of sustainability transformation in Philips

Method

Simplification of system map + **short stories and metaphors expressing details and intangible aspects** (purpose, priorities, mental bias, emotions, relations)

Output

Effective communication of complex insights

Brings awareness on **non-obvious connections and different perspectives**

Conclusion & outlook

By engaging **logic reasoning as well as narrative thought**, systemic storytelling can help in the systems design process for

- **gathering system data**
- facilitating the **understanding of different perspectives**
- **representing and communicating** complex systems
- **ideating** on future states of systems.

We need to **validate** the benefits, explore needs for implementation and develop **practical (time-effective) tools.**