What is a sketch?¹

This slide deck is a very brief synopsis of Bill Buxton’s description of a sketch, as found in:

To set the scene, remember the design funnel.

First, each stage is iterative, where one constantly generates and reduces ideas until resolution.

Second, the granularity of exploration and development is finer as these iterations progress.
Also remember that:

• Sketching is about design.
• It is a fundamental tool that helps designers express, develop and communicate design ideas.
• It is a critical part of the design funnel process: that begins with idea generation, to idea design, to design choices, to engineering.
The attributes of sketches

Quick
- to make

So let's review the attributes of what makes a sketch work in the design funnel, particularly in generating ideas and choosing between them.
The attributes of sketches

Quick

Timely
  • provided when needed
The attributes of sketches

Quick

Timely

Disposable
- investment in the concept, not the execution
The attributes of sketches

Quick

Timely

Disposable

Plentiful
- they make sense in a collection or series of ideas

Form studies for a digital alarm clock

Image source:
The idea of the vocabulary, resolution and concept state really talks about where you are in the design funnel. Initial sketches will be very open ended, with course resolution so that the basic concept is suggested. Later refinements and variations of a chosen sketch may have a more concrete vocabulary and more resolution, but will still show its speculative nature.
Critically, a sketch should never close off design. Rather, it should constantly suggest what could be, and leave room for growth and variation. Indeed, that is what separates a sketch from a prototype.
The attributes of sketches

Quick
  • to make
Timely
  • provided when needed
Disposable
  • investment in the concept, not the execution
Plentiful
  • they make sense in a collection or series of ideas
Clear vocabulary
  • rendering & style indicates it’s a sketch, not an implementation

Constrained resolution
  • no higher than required to capture its concept
Consistency with state
  • refinement of rendering matches the actual state of development of the concept
Suggest & explore rather than confirm
  • value lies in suggesting and provoking what could be i.e., they are the catalyst to conversation and interaction
A catalyst
  • evokes conversations and discussion

Software developers often use sketches and prototypes as synonyms. They are not the same.
Sketches dominate the early part of the design funnel. They have to be cheap and plentiful.
Prototypes appear at the latter part (or even during engineering). They are more refined and perhaps appropriate for initial user testing. There are also fewer of them, as they are more expensive.
Sketching is also about UI design, where prototypes is about UI testing.
Given this context, let's look at the differences.
Ultimately, a sketch suggests but does not limit design. It teases the mind, where it invites ideas and expansion from all involved. A prototype limits design, where it commits to a path.
You now know

Attributes of a sketch
- quick, timely, disposable, plentiful, clear vocabulary, constrained resolution, consistent with design state

A sketch is not a prototype
- difference is a contrast of purpose (always), and form (mostly)

Sketch properties
- evocative, suggest, explore, question, propose, provoke, t

Prototype properties
- didactic, describe, refine, answer, test, resolve, specific, depiction