Research Article

CONVERGENCE

Soft skills, stories, and self-reflection: Applied digital storytelling for self-branding

Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies
2022, Vol. 0(0) 1–21

DOI: 10.1177/13548565221091517
journals.sagepub.com/home/con


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Abstract

This paper documents an analytical autoethnographic approach to the development of a digital storytelling (DST) app for enhancing young adults' employability prospects. Development is rooted in the classical DST approach proposed by StoryCenter Founding Director Joe Lambert. Blending theoretical consideration and empirical user testing (individual user observations and a co-creation workshops), we affirm the value of DST – and classical DST especially – for facilitating critical self-reflection and self-branding. By structuring discussion using Lambert's seven steps of classical DST, we highlight how particular design decisions have promoted enjoyable and effective storytelling, recognizing both user preference and empirically demonstrated usage. This paper is the result of a positive interdisciplinary academic-industrial partnership.

Keywords

Autoethnography, digital cultures, digital storytelling, self-branding, self-reflection, skills development

Introduction

Rhys and Mohamed sat in the library, where they met regularly to socialize. Rhys had been working with a team of friends to produce a web application (app), but development had slowed and the product concept was becoming increasingly more convoluted. 'Maybe you need to think

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differently', suggested Mohamed. 'Who is your target audience? What are you going to offer? Are you going to be a little fish in a big pond, or a big fish in a little pond?' Rhys thought for a moment. 'Neither', he responded. 'I want to be a whale in the ocean'.

WITO – an acronym for 'Whale In The Ocean' – is a commercial start-up built from and around stories. Its core product is a web app wherein users create, store and share digital stories. These stories are the result of users' critical self-reflection about personal skills and experiences that may enhance employability. The target market for this app comprises recent graduates of university and college programs, and those in their final year of study. The core age range of WITO's intended user base is that of Generation Z (Gen Z), generally born from the mid-1990s to early-2010s. While WITO is based in the UK, app usage is not geographically limited.

This paper applies an analytical autoethnographic approach to documenting the developmental process of WITO's digital storytelling (DST) tool. This approach means that the first author, an institutionalized researcher, was embedded in the start-up context, consulting on product and business development while engaging in regular introspection and reflective dialogue with team members (Anderson, 2006; Ellis, 2004). Qualitative data were collected through participation in WITO team meetings and through user research. For the duration of this study, WITO's team included three core members: a data scientist, a user experience designer and an academic researcher with specialism in digital storytelling. A full-stack developer informed the team. WITO has also been supported by academic and industrial advisors from across the UK, as well as by a digital content creator who produces social media and marketing content.

Collaboration between this paper's authors has facilitated WITO's research-informed app development and business operations, and has bridged an intellectual gap between commercial development and humanities scholarship through sustained interdisciplinary and interorganizational discussion. The aims of this project were to understand how DST may be effectively applied in a commercial start-up context, and to develop a socially relevant digital product that particularly appeals to Gen Z. To achieve these aims, our objectives were to (a) document the developmental process for a web app, (b) scrutinize the technical and commercial approaches undertaken by WITO, with keen attention to ethical implementation and (c) practice research-informed app development.

Following a review of relevant literature about DST, this paper provides further detail about the WITO context and then recounts two rounds of user testing in particular: individual user observations and a group co-creation workshop. During these user tests, we evaluated whether the WITO app prompted users to recall and critically reflect on personal experience of skills development. The results indicated that conscious application of particular aspects of what is now known as 'classical DST' is effective for prompting self-reflection in an individualized digital context. More generally, we found that our design decisions clearly influenced app use and reception. In the discussion, we highlight findings' connections to a classical DST framework and argue for DST's positive potential for self-reflection and self-branding, particularly in employment contexts. We propose avenues for future study in the conclusion. Through this paper, we hope to affirm the continued value of classical DST methodologies and to provide a positive example of an interdisciplinary academic-industrial partnership (Henrickson, Jephcote and Comissiong, 2022).

Literature review

Digital storytelling (DST) is a relatively new area of study and practice, and debate about precisely what constitutes DST is ongoing. Published methodologies for DST tend to focus on structured video production workshops wherein participants use a conversational technique called the 'story circle' to develop and refine personal anecdotes related to predetermined topics that are then

conveyed through a film of usually still images with an accompanying soundtrack and voiceover. This model of DST – often called 'classical DST' – has been institutionalized by the StoryCenter, formerly the Center for Digital Storytelling, and is explicated in a book by the StoryCenter's Founding Director Joe Lambert (2013a). This model has been adapted to suit a variety of contexts (Copeland and De Moor, 2018). Some scholars have recognized the democratizing potential of such facilitated models of digital storytelling, focusing on how digital stories may make the personal public, thereby contributing to greater interpersonal understanding (Couldry, 2008; Spurgeon and Burgess, 2015; Thumim, 2009). Others have noted classical DST's potential for self-empowerment and strengthening group cohesion, even when its constrained form may prevent participants from telling their stories in ways they themselves deem most appropriate (Worcester, 2012). In classical DST, stories tend to be autobiographical and told in first-person, although this is not always the case (Hertzberg Kaare, 2012). Some scholars have extended aspects of classical DST to media other than film, arguing that DST may also include other interactive media such as video and computer games, mobile apps and comic book creation software (Goldman and Bullock Zielezinski, 2017; Handler Miller, 2014). These arguments stress current contexts of media convergence and its resultant instances of transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2006).

The field in which DST is most thoroughly documented is education, prompting some scholars to propose that there two types of DST, distinct but not mutually exclusive: educational, used to support learning of school subjects, usually in formal teacher-student scenarios; and social, used to promote self-awareness and interpersonal understanding (Gregori-Signes and Pennock-Speck, 2012). But educational and social initiatives need not be wholly unconnected. Community DST projects, for example, have encouraged members of the public to share their perspectives on material local and digital archives for historical education (The Pararchive Project). Engagement with DST may not just contribute to understandings of self, but may actually contribute to constructions of self by prompting reconceptualization of lived experiences through iterative and/or interpersonal processes (Herreros, 2012).

The term 'digital storytelling' has been co-opted for commercial marketing contexts, though, and as a result now more broadly encompasses any narrative application in a digital environment. Mining companies have used the term in reference to immersive app-based experiences for potential investors (Ross, 2019); real estate agents have used it to refer to the integration of QR codes in property advertisements (Burke et al., 2013); the digital signage industry has used the term in reference to its own practice (Digital Signage Summit, 2018). Research suggests that stories conveyed through video evoke greater emotional response from consumers than those conveyed through text (Pera and Viglia, 2016). Entire businesses are dedicated to commercial DST consultation, guiding usage of video and other digital media (Go Narrative; The Story Mill). In business contexts, DST often refers to the use of narrative techniques to establish a sense of personability through affect and relatability. Classical DST emphasizes community formation through individuals' mindful self-reflection, story creation and sharing; commercial DST emphasizes community formation through story consumption to support individual patronage. The former depends upon community members telling their stories in bidirectional exchanges, while the latter depends upon community members relating to others' stories told unidirectionally.

This distinction becomes blurred in digital social media contexts, whereby individuals and institutions may engage in direct discourse. Most notably, the word 'story' has become a common term on social media platforms like Facebook, Instagram and TikTok, describing a particular form of post: a full-screen, vertical image or short video visible for only 24 hours unless otherwise archived by its creator. Social media stories are more ephemeral than their 'post' counterparts, and tend to show more casual activity than would be seen on curated feeds. Yet stories in these forms

rarely adhere to traditional narrative contents: there need not be a beginning, middle or end; the story is either entirely a climax or has no climax at all. Social media stories are curated snapshots of everyday moments rather than carefully crafted narratives. While 'story' here could be considered a misnomer, the word's use in this context reminds us that stories are everywhere, even in the mundane. Indeed, the ups and downs of everyday life contribute to the story of *you*, and the curation of one's own stories is ultimately an act of asserting personal identity and agency.

Emphasis on personal agency in storytelling has been at the forefront of DST since its inception. In his foundational *Digital Storytelling: Capturing Lives, Creating Community*, Joe Lambert (2013a: 53–69) outlines seven steps of (classical) DST, paraphrased here:

- Owning Your Insights: What story do you want to tell? Why is this story important? Why is this story important *now*?
- Owning Your Emotions: What emotions does your story prompt you to feel?
- Finding The Moment: What was/were the moment/s when things changed? Were you aware of any changes at the time?
- Seeing Your Story: What images do you imagine correspond with your story? Why?
- Hearing Your Story: What sounds, in addition to your own voice, might correspond with your story? Why?
- Assembling Your Story: What structure might help you most effectively communicate your story?
- Sharing Your Story: How might you present your story to others? For example, will it speak for itself, or will you introduce or paraphrase it?

All of these steps are complementary, prompting critical self-reflection and meaning-making within the storyteller through creativity and mindfulness: what Lambert (2013b) calls 'storywork'.

Engaging in storywork is valuable not just for personal development, but also for career development (Robson et al., 2021). As Aimée Eubanks Davis (2020) – founder and CEO of Braven, an organization that supports low-income, first-generation students as they transition from higher education to the workplace – declares in a short video for TED about 'How your unique story can get you hired', '[w]hat I've realized is that these experiences that seem like a liability are actually your differentiating strength. The secret is to transform how you perceive your own story'. She notes that '[r]eframing the hardship in your story can remake your confidence over and over again, but it takes time'. It's like running a marathon. You have to train and practice'. This is where WITO comes in.

The WITO context

WITO is a commercial start-up emerging in the social context of an increasingly digital economy. While manual labor remains a necessary aspect of such an economy, public attention is increasingly shifting away from the production of tangible products and towards services and experiences. Interpersonal skills are increasingly important for the future of work, as observed by both employers (Chhinzer and Russo, 2018) and graduates (Succi and Canovi, 2020). These skills are broadly known as soft skills: non-technical skills related to how we interact with those around us. Some examples of soft skills are leadership, communication, teamwork and empathy. These are skills that one need not develop solely in employment contexts. Through critical self-reflection, one may identify personal experiences of soft skills in a wide range of situations.

WITO has been driven by the belief that storytelling is a powerful means for facilitating self-awareness that contributes to one's relatability and reputability – a belief that has been substantiated

through scholarship (Herzenstein et al., 2011; Pera et al., 2016). Recent 'self-branding' movements are driven by individuals' efforts to curate stories about themselves: efforts that depend upon iterative critical self-reflection (Chritton, 2014). Studies have shown that while young adults (aged 18–40) use social media platforms as means for self-branding, they have varying motivations for doing so, and varying levels of success (i.e. portraying themselves according to their own self-perceptions or desired presentations) (Labrecque et al., 2011). Indeed, as Jerome Bruner observes in his influential 'Life as Narrative' (1987: 13), '[t]he story of one's own life is, of course, a privileged but troubled narrative in the sense that it is reflexive: the narrator and the central figure in the narrative are the same'. Herein lies a paradox of autobiographical storytelling. Without self-reflexivity, there is no story; yet because of self-reflexivity, one's story is always unstable and incomplete. Nevertheless, Bruner acknowledges that stories about oneself are essential. He (1987: 15) writes:

> The heart of my argument is this: eventually the culturally shaped cognitive and linguistic processes that guide the self-telling of life narratives achieve the power to structure perceptual experience, to organize memory, to segment and purpose-build the very 'events' of a life. In the end, we *become* the autobiographical narratives by which we 'tell about' our lives.

In this view, self-reflexivity and conscious crafting of self-narratives are vital because *we are our stories*, both for others (as in self-branding) and ourselves. And, as Joe Lambert (2013a: 15) writes, '[a]uthorship from our own life experiences suddenly forces the questions about what role the story will have in our lives, right now, or in the near future'. WITO's web app encourages users to apply their personal stories to professional contexts, primarily when pursuing employment opportunities. Put simply, we wanted to create a digital storytelling app that was not just useful, but that appealed to the target Gen Z demographic of final year students and recent graduates of university programs.

The research questions driving this work were as follows:

1. What are the correct questions to ask WITO users to prompt them to think of and write a 'good' (i.e. critically self-reflective and comprehensible) story?
2. How might WITO help users identify key moments in their lives to provide evidence of soft skills?
3. Where is WITO's meeting point between the storyteller (user) and story listener (employer)?

Questions (1) and (2) are the primary focus of this paper, addressed by the rounds of user testing detailed below: user observations and a co-creation workshop. Question (1) was also the focus of user testing preceding this research, but continued to be considered here. Question (3) was explored in the co-creation workshop and in a pilot interview with a recruitment professional that is briefly reviewed in the discussion, but shall be inspiration for future study. We have focused on these particular questions for this paper as our efforts to address these questions represent a distinctive stage of our research process, which was linked to a defined period of financial support from the first author's host institution. Additionally, prior user tests centered on earlier iterations of the app that were significantly different from what was tested herein; although some elements from earlier iterations have been maintained, others (e.g. a chatbot) were deemed unsuitable. For clarity and cohesion, we have limited our discussion here to the version associated with this research stage.

The research approaches taken throughout this stage were informed by a loose insider action research methodology (Coghlan and Shani, 2015) wherein action and research were pursued

concurrently through a cyclical process of planning, acting, observing and reflecting; product development occurred alongside research. This methodology sees deep and regular self-reflection as integral to data collection and analysis; the inherent subjectivity of research is brought to the fore. Recognizing our own subjectivity was especially important for this research because, as has been noted above, *we are our stories*. By embracing our own stories and perspectives throughout the research process, we aimed to embody the core purpose of the WITO app: making the personal professional. All work with human participants documented herein was granted ethical approval by the first author's host institution.

Like the classical model of DST, WITO uses a static structure to guide participants through the storytelling process. It is worth noting, though, that elements of classical DST are rarely consciously applied to commercial contexts. Further, DST is rarely applied to individualized contexts; the classical model of DST and its adaptations all depend upon some sort of consistent community involvement (e.g. the story circle and story sharing). WITO adapts DST to a commercial digital context wherein individuals produce stories privately. While users may share their stories on social media platforms (Twitter, Instagram, Facebook and LinkedIn) from the app, they are not required to do so. Still, we found particular value in classical DST's iterative process of self-reflection. By owning their insights and emotions, and being able to identify their precise moments of growth, users could develop confidence in the value of their own experiences: experiences that could be later shared with others when appropriate (e.g. in interview or mentorship contexts) and confidence that could be shared more implicitly through one's demeanor. WITO's method of storytelling is in effect one of self-regulated learning. Users plan and then produce, reflecting upon personal experiences and communicating meaning from those experiences through an iterative process. WITO's intention for encouraging users to practice this process is to support users' preparation for job applications and interviews, with meaningful employment as the end goal. Classical DST provides a tried-and-true framework for reflection and communication that we felt could be effectively adapted from its usual community focus to positively meet the more individualized and specific needs of those seeking employment.

The WITO app is designed to help users with limited employment experience reflect on personal experiences that exemplify transferable soft skills applicable to employment contexts. Screenshots of the app prototype used in the user observation testing documented below are included in Appendix A. Upon creating a WITO account, a user is guided to a digital scrapbook; this scrapbook is a stock image of a physical scrapbook overlaid with four empty clickable boxes. The labels above the boxes read 'Leadership', 'Communication', 'Teamwork' and 'Empathy'. When a user clicks on a skill's corresponding box (e.g. Teamwork), she is presented with a moodboard featuring a short definition of the skill (e.g. 'Collaborating with others to achieve a common goal'), an inspirational quote (e.g. 'Alone we can do so little; together we can do so much'. – Helen Keller), a humorous meme (e.g. an image of multiple dogs carrying a single stick, with 'Teamwork makes the dream work' as overlaid text) and a relevant YouTube video about that skill. The moodboard is intended to encourage users to reflect on how the selectable skills relate to their own experiences. After viewing the moodboard, the user is prompted to '[r]ecall a moment when you demonstrated [skill]' by responding to three prompts: (1) 'The situation'; (2) 'What you did'; (3) 'What happened'. Once these prompts have been answered, the user is asked: 'In one sentence, what did you learn about [e.g. teamwork] from this experience?' The inputted answer to this question is overlaid on a generic stock thumbnail of a mountain landscape, creating a motivational-quote-style image. The resulting motivational image then appears in the user's scrapbook under its respective skill title. The user's digital scrapbook is complete once all of the empty boxes have been filled with such textual images, with the WITO scrapbook essentially offering a selection of curated story moments. Eventually,

WITO intends to give users the option to create a 'digital business card' to supplement a traditional job application with a selection of stories relevant to the job in question. A screenshot of a digital business card prototype is included in Appendix B. This digital business card was proposed in the group co-creation workshop documented below.

It must be noted that, while this is the user journey for the app in its current form, surface changes were made throughout this research process in response to user feedback. These changes were made to enhance user experience (e.g. slight word changes in prompts), with basic functionality of the app remaining largely unchanged. Such changes reflect WITO's use of an agile approach to project development wherein direction is reassessed and readjusted according to research findings and regular user feedback. Through intraorganizational role mobility and product design that responds to changing social circumstances, WITO maintains relevance by developing its product in light of ongoing academic, industrial and policy research identifying actual social need (Aghina et al., 2018).

Prior to the user research studies documented in this paper, the WITO app had seen multiple iterations throughout 2020 and 2021. These iterations have informed the app as described above. For example, while testing earlier protoypes, users suggested that the word 'story' evoked a sense of childishness, and/or felt that a 'story' necessitated a distinctive beginning, middle, and end that had been determined prior to testing, and/or felt that their lives were too dull to make good 'story' material. Given these self-imposed user limitations, we chose to limit use of the word 'story' in user-facing materials for the testing documented herein. Nevertheless, given that the product is deeply rooted in storytelling research and methodologies, we continued to use 'story' in our team discussions and draw from storytelling research. We continue to work towards reintegration of 'story' in user-facing materials to explicitly situate the product within the world of storytelling while respecting users' potential hesitancies resulting from the word.

User observation methodology

The research team adopted a design thinking approach (an approach popularized by the design consultancy firm IDEO) for product development. This approach was manifested through the use of collaborative exercises from *The Design Sprint* (Knapp et al., 2016). A Design Sprint comprises five phases that help define a team's short-term goals and determine developmental direction through a series of rough presentation, prototyping and testing exercises. Each Design Sprint was driven by the team's long-term goals (to understand how DST may be effectively applied in a commercial start-up context, and to develop a socially relevant product that particularly appeals to Gen Z) and a 'Sprint question' (the industrial equivalent of a short-term research question) that was to be answered through prototyping and usability testing. The Sprint question for the first round of user testing documented here was: Will users (final year university students or recent graduates) recall and critically reflect on personal experiences of skills development?

Participants were recruited through targeted requests on relevant student-facing Facebook groups, local classified websites, study recruitment websites and snowball sampling. Prospective participants were required to complete a screening survey to express interest; this survey was used as a filter to ensure that only members of the target audience (final-year students and recent graduates based in the UK and seeking employment) were included in the testing. Following recruitment, five individual user observation sessions were conducted over video calls across one week. One female participant was entering her final year of undergraduate study following a placement year; one female participant was in her final year of undergraduate study; one male participant was completing a year-long master's program; one female and one male participant were completing their doctoral

studies. An interviewer directed each session, while two other members of the research team took documentary notes. Each session comprised a semi-structured interview for context and understanding the participant more personally. Using semi-structured interviews facilitated the collection of standard demographic data (e.g. gender, age, educational experience) while granting us flexibility to ask for clarification or further details as needed (e.g. a participant observes the positive influence of a particular incident on her worldview and approach to work). Semi-structured interviews also allowed us to adopt a more conversational tone that was intended to put participants – most of whom had never participated in formal research interviews – at ease. The interview was followed by observation of the participant using a prototype of the WITO app while speaking candidly about their experience (Gov.uk, 2017). Participants were tasked with following the app's directions to complete a story; the interviewer remained silent during the observation except to remind the participant to vocalize their thoughts and to respond to questions from the participant. The purpose of this observation was to ascertain whether or not participants found the app easy to use and coherent, and if they could identify the app's intended purpose and value without the help of the research team. The session ended with an opportunity for the participant to ask questions and provide additional comments. Participants were thanked for their time with digital gift vouchers whose amounts were set by the first author's institutional ethical guidelines.

Various measures for assessing critical thinking have been proposed, with some depending on multiple choice questions (Watson and Glaser, 2002), others on open-ended questions (Ennis and Weir, 1985) and others on a combination of response methods (Halpern; Ku, 2009). For our assessments of critical thinking, however, we took a broader approach wherein we identified critical thinking through participants' verbally expressed self-reflections; participants were not asked to validate critical thinking through any predetermined measure. To identify critical thinking in the user testing process, we were guided by a definition by Bandyopadhyay and Szostek (2019: 261), who define critical thinking as a three-step process: (1) recognizing relevant context, instructions and details; (2) practicing specific critical-thinking behaviors such as gathering further information, exploring various options and reaching a final decision; and (3) operationalizing these behaviors to satisfy the task exercise at hand. If a participant engaged in all of these steps to highlight personal experiences of skills development in the testing process, that participant was said to have practiced critical reflection, thereby satisfying the Sprint question. To facilitate critical thinking, the prompts used in the app loosely correspond with Bandyopadhyay and Szostek's criteria: 'The situation' with recognizing relevant context; 'What you did' and 'What happened' with practicing operationalizing critical-thinking behaviors, namely reading a final decision; and 'what did you learn about [the selected skill] from this experience?' with an iterative reflection on the critical thinking process itself. Our wording was informed by the results of previous user testing.

User observation results

Users had mixed responses to the skills moodboards. While all of the participants positively responded to at least one element of the moodboards (the skills descriptions and TED Talk video links were especially popular), other elements were considered 'gimmicky' (memes) and/or incohesive. Some users did not understand the purpose of the moodboards, but were still inspired to think about what the illustrated skill meant to them.

Nevertheless, all of the users appeared to understand the assigned task: to 'recall a moment when you demonstrated [skill]' by responding to prompts (the situation; what you did; what happened). Some users suggested alternative phrasing (e.g. changing 'what happened' to 'the outcome') and ordering of the prompts (e.g. putting 'what happened' first) in ways they believed increased clarity.

However, the prompts provided in this prototype appeared to sufficiently ease users into storytelling, with all participants critically reflecting on personal experiences to varying degrees. The participant with the lowest degree of critical self-reflection partially attributed her discomfort and resulting limited self-reflection to the testing environment itself, and noted that she would have been more comfortable completing the task without being observed. It is also worth noting that numerous participants did not feel that 'personal' stories were suitable for this 'professional' tool. These participants felt that employers would find stories not set in workplace contexts unsuitable for evaluating skill competency.

When asked to provide a one-sentence summary of what they learned about their selected skill from the experience they recalled, all but one participant (the participant with the lowest degree of critical self-reflection) expressed a feeling of revelation. This moment of story reiteration prompted users to consider not just the content of their inputted story, but also the personal and continued value of that story.

Numerous participants indicated interest in creating a second story, although it is uncertain as to whether this was a genuine desire or an expectation of continued testing.

Although all of the participants saw value in the prototype as a potential tool for critical self-reflection and exemplifying soft skills, as well as a potential tool to assist with interview preparation, only two of the participants responded positively to the idea of sharing stories produced through the app on social media platforms. Participants noted lack of regular social media usage, general embarrassment and the 'too personal' nature of stories as reasons for not wanting to share. Given classical DST's emphasis on sharing stories, we chose to conduct another round of user testing that specifically explored how we may encourage story sharing from the WITO app.

Co-creation methodology

Previous efforts to support story exchange through digitally enabled story circles have been documented, but have focused on institutionalized social media use. Clark et al. (2015: 934) write about one such effort:

> [A] 'digital story circle' is not just about 'digital' content, but it concerns the social circles within which digital infrastructures are embedded and *sustained* as tools and processes that promote narrative exchange. A digital story circle enables participants to develop a deeper awareness of the complex contexts to which they are contributing. By bringing together the social and the digital, a digital story circle can increase the effectiveness of social networks and transcend, in part, the barriers inherent in traditional institutional contexts.

By encouraging users to share the stories they produced within the WITO app, we hoped to establish a digital story circle of sorts, enabling users to develop deeper awareness of their unique and complex social contexts. The traditional institutional context we hoped to influence with this story sharing approach was related to employment: how might WITO-produced stories be meaningfully integrated into job applications and interviews, allowing users to use stories as evidence of soft skills? This question directed our user co-creation workshop.

A co-creative methodology was selected given the inherent connections between classical DST and co-creation, as well as the success of previous co-creation exercises in DST research (Cunsolo Willox et al., 2012; Parsons et al., 2015; Schmoelz, 2018; Tacchi et al., 2014). From a product

design perspective, co-creation 'emphasizes the collaborative, generative creative participation of individuals in design-led workshops and group practices. […] Design co-creation draws from an ever-expanding range of creative ideational activities employed with appropriate external participants that inform generative ideation, the essential function of co-creation' (Jones, 2018: 10). We aimed to create a space akin to what has been called the 'Arena': a stakeholder-centric setting wherein facilitated dialogue and decision-making drive discovery, problem definition, design and action planning (Jones, 2018). This space was an opportunity for us to listen to participants from our target market as they voiced their needs, hopes and concerns related to the WITO app and to employment more generally, so that we could more confidently ensure the app's current and continued relevance.

As in the previous round of user testing, participants were recruited through targeted requests on relevant student-facing Facebook groups, local classified websites, study recruitment websites and snowball sampling. Prospective participants were required to complete a screening survey to express interest; this survey was used as a filter to ensure that only members of the target audience (final-year students and recent graduates based in the UK and seeking employment) were included in the testing. The eventual two-hour co-creation workshop included three participants within WITO's target user demographic, with one male and female participant in their final year of undergraduate study and one gender non-binary participant having recently completed an undergraduate program; the number of participants was limited by COVID-19 social restrictions. For the first 30 minutes of the workshop, individual semi-structured interviews were concurrently conducted with each participant, during which time participants were prompted to create a story using the WITO prototype in the same way as the user observation sessions documented above, while also providing the researchers with standard demographic data through directed discussion. The prototype used for this session had undergone slight changes following the abovementioned user feedback (e.g. wording adjustments for clarity, reduced emphasis on story sharing), but functionality remained the same. Participants were then presented with a problem statement that simultaneously served as a challenge to overcome: 'How might we present your stories so that you would share them with employers?' To meet this challenge, participants took part in multiple time-limited individual and co-creative exercises to combine divergent and convergent thinking. These exercises included: (1) an individual sketching session to rapidly generate a wide set of ideas around the problem statement; (2) individual presentations of sketches to share and discuss ideas through thoughtful and constructive critique; (3) a group sketching exercise to combine the strongest elements of various ideas into a new idea; and (4) a final discussion to achieve group consensus about common themes and whether the challenge was overcome. Participants were thanked for their time with digital gift vouchers whose amounts were set by the first author's institutional ethical guidelines.

Co-creation results

Although the WITO app was introduced to participants as a tool for those seeking employment, the solution participants proposed in response to the challenge question – How might we present your stories so that you would share them with employers? – focused on employers. In particular, participants highlighted the potential for co-creation of stories within the app, suggesting that employers could list their desired skills and job applicants could then develop and display stories related to those skills. In this way, WITO does not replace the traditional job application, but rather serves as one way to set users apart from other applicants. Participants noted that such use of the WITO app, though, would create additional work for both employers and applicants. This

recognition prompted workshop participants to explore how WITO stories may be effectively shared with employers without demanding extensive extra time or labor from them. Through the co-creative exercises, participants concluded that WITO should replace its social media sharing options with a single shareable link to a user's WITO profile. This profile would serve as a digital business card of sorts, including both static information such as contact details and a selection of user stories selected by the user to demonstrate suitability for the job under consideration. Created stories would initially be stored privately in the WITO app; the user could then select the most suitable three stories for a particular role or organization to be shared on their public WITO profile.

One idea that sparked special interest across the research team related to matching the employer's and applicant's values through the selection of stories to display. In effect, a user would match their own WITO profile with that of the employing organization. This idea emerged from a participant-led discussion about how adherence to organizational values was of greater importance than individual proficiency in technical skills, given the frequent updates and obsolescence of technologies used to complete work tasks. Soft skills, participants felt, aligned more with personal values than technical skills, with one's experiences of soft skills being deeply connected to one's values. Participants suggested that WITO could act as a medium for matching an applicant's personal values with an employer's values.

Discussion

Recall that the research questions driving this research were as follows:

1. What are the correct questions to ask WITO users to prompt them to think of and write a 'good' (i.e. critically self-reflective and comprehensible) story?
2. How might WITO help users identify key moments in their lives to provide evidence of soft skills?
3. Where is WITO meeting point between the storyteller (user) and story listener (employer)?

Question (1) started being addressed in user testing preceding this paper, but continued to be addressed in the user observation sessions documented herein. These user observation sessions, though, were primarily focused on addressing question (2). The documented co-creation workshop addressed question (3). Question (3) was also addressed in one interview with a UK-based graduate recruiter with 22 years of experience, who positively reviewed a prototype of the 'digital business card' – proposed in the above-reviewed co-creation study – that WITO is currently developing for story sharing. Some key findings from this interview are noted throughout this discussion, but it must be noted that this was a pilot interview for a future round of user testing comprising employment industry professionals.

Our discussion here is structured using the seven steps of DST, reviewed above.

Owning your insights

In both of the documented rounds of user testing, users were able to identify relevant stories upon being prompted to do so. Users were also able to express why those stories were important for employment prospects when asked by the interviewers to justify story selection. Adhering to the prompts, users all chose to share stories about their own experiences, rather than stories about others or fictionalized stories. In this way, WITO has promoted self-branding through the iterative critical self-reflection (Chritton, 2014) of storywork (Lambert, 2013b). The creativity and mindfulness that

characterize storywork were especially clear when users reconceptualized their experiences in single-sentence story summaries, moving from mere recall towards recognition of personal growth.

Owning your emotions

Some users asserted that, as WITO was advertised as promoting employability prospects, stories should adhere to subjective perceptions of professionalism. Other users openly wrote about personal events and emotions; one, for example, wrote about consoling a friend following a family death, while another wrote about the death of a family pet. While some users avoided 'personal' stories in favor of more 'professional' stories, however, the recruiter interviewed asserted that for graduates these personal experiences were often of greater value to employers. Such experiences indicate a candidate's broadened worldview and often more clearly demonstrate that candidate's adaptability and ambition. Grades and degrees, the recruiter repeatedly declared, were less important than 'life scars': defining moments in one's life. The recruiter's view affirmed our choice to give the WITO app a more 'personal', light-hearted feel through its 'scrapbook' layout and tongue-in-cheek motivational-quote-style thumbnails. However, greater attention may need to be paid to overcoming users' perceptions of a personal-professional divide. The story of *you*, after all, includes both personal and professional plot twists.

Finding the moment

For most users, the act of storytelling in the WITO app prompted reflection upon how selected moments in one's life have contributed to the development of soft skills that might be transferred to employment contexts. Some participants were aware of the precise moments of self-growth in their selected stories prior to writing the story in the app, while others became aware of those moments in the process of writing their stories. WITO's iterative process of storytelling (first, respond to prompts; then, summarize the lesson learned in a sentence) appears to encourages users to 'find the moment' when things changed for them, regardless of whether or not they were aware of such changes at the time of the story's setting. Through the WITO app, users are encouraged to curate past experiences through short-form narrativization that helps them identify precise moments of personal development. Focusing on moments rather than titled roles (e.g. team leader, shift manager) prompts self-reflexivity about those moments' current and future relevance (Bruner, 1987; Lambert, 2013a). Through this self-reflexivity, users are empowered to recognize the value of their everyday ups and downs for employment prospects, instead of depending on external measures of value (e.g. promotions). This self-reflexivity also supports critical thinking as defined by Bandyopadhyay and Szostek (2019: 261): recognizing relevant context; gathering information, exploring options and reaching decisions; and satisfying the task exercise at hand. The practice of storytelling – and in this case, DST – about soft skills cyclically supports the further development of soft skills.

Seeing your story

Users were not given options for the thumbnail used in the tested prototypes due to technical limitations of the prototyping tool used (UXPin). A generic image of a mountain landscape served as the background for all generated images; the publicly-available version of WITO's app will support image customization. However, participants generally expressed feelings of delight upon seeing their own words presented atop the image; they were inspired by their own inspiration. The digital

scrapbook format – with four empty boxes, gradually filled with generated images as users input stories – offers users a visual opportunity for documenting their demonstration of soft skills. Users see their own stories reflected back at them. In classical DST, this reflection tends to take the form of images or video. However, the textual images WITO uses appear to suit the app's purpose and target market.

Hearing your story

This step was deemed not applicable to use of the WITO app in its current form.

Assembling your story

Telling a story with minimal guidance or prompting is difficult. To ease users into storytelling, the WITO app uses a fixed structure of three prompts focused on context, scene and self-reflection. Compared to previous rounds of user testing not documented herein, users produced higher quality stories more quickly. Versions of the WITO app preceding this research used the STARR (situation, task, action, result, reflection) structure to direct user input. However, while this structure is often seen as a 'safe' interview technique (Sieben et al., 2021), it did not appear to suit the needs of WITO's users, who found it too long and clinical to use for enjoyable and meaningful storytelling. We therefore adjusted the prompts to permit greater structural freedom, while remaining mindful of the need for at least some structured guidance to mitigate uncertainty. The minimal number of prompts (four in total) and screens (seven in total: scrapbook; moodboard; instruction; user input; instruction; user input; completed story review) ensured that users were given such guidance but did not feel constrained. The instructional screens offered users short breaks between the two screens requiring input; the final screen showing the user's completed story in the form of a generated image offered a sense of story completion. The WITO app in its current form appears to be an effective tool for helping users assemble stories that are critically self-reflective.

Sharing your story

Most users said that they would not share their generated images or stories with others on social media. However, numerous users noted that the stories they had inputted into the WITO app could be shareable in interview contexts. For example, if a user inputted a story about teamwork, that story might be suitable for answering the common interview prompt to 'tell us about a time you demonstrated teamwork'. The interviewed recruiter independently affirmed that the WITO app could be a useful tool for interview preparation.

WITO's digital business cards, proposed in the documented co-creation workshop and currently in development (Appendix B), are shareable profiles consisting of multiple stories relevant to particular job applications. We hope that these digital business cards will allow WITO users to share their stories alongside more traditional job applications, showcasing their lived experiences to assert their individuality and self-expression amongst largely standardized templates, keywords and processes associated with traditional job applications. We also hope that these digital business cards will facilitate values-driven employment decisions. For, as Bridgewater Associates founder Ray Dalio (2019) has written:

> It is important for you to know what mix of qualities is important to fit each role and, more broadly, what values and abilities are required in people with whom you can have successful relationships. In picking

> people for long-term relationships, values are most important, abilities come next, and skills are the least important. Yet most people make the mistake of choosing skills and abilities first and overlooking values.

The digital business cards, as well as further efforts to engage employers in the WITO storytelling process, will be the subject of future research; a thorough review of their development verges out of scope for this paper. Nevertheless, it is worth mentioning that these digital business cards do provide a potential meeting point between storyteller (user) and story listener (employer) that is unique to WITO, thereby satisfying our third research question.

Given its emphasis on soft skills over technical skills and abilities, the WITO app is well positioned to support job applicants as they reflect on their own personal values and experiences through DST. While WITO's target audience is currently soon-to-be and recent graduates of university and college programs, especially those in Gen Z, the sharing of WITO stories may indirectly expand WITO's impact to include employers, friends, family and colleagues. Indeed, by encouraging story sharing, WITO hopes to create its own digital story circle of sorts: one that empowers users to recognize the value in their own experiences for meaningful employment.

Future research

The research documented here represents just a snapshot of DST's potential for application and growth. Future research related to the WITO app specifically may adopt a longitudinal approach to explore lasting intrapersonal and/or interpersonal impact of regular app usage (e.g. changes in critical thinking and/or storytelling abilities). More generally, further research is needed to investigate alternative forms of, and user journeys for, DST; such storytelling need not be linear. One of the most significant struggles we have faced throughout WITO's development process is reducing users' cognitive load when engaging with the app, particularly for those users who hesitated upon being assigned a writing task. Such hesitation may have resulted, even if only partially, from our user testing circumstances, but it is nonetheless vital to account for varying levels of literacy (traditional and digital) and self-confidence. Further, some scholars have observed that if storytellers are aware that their public narratives may be used against them in the future, they may adjust those narratives accordingly (Couldry, 2008: 382). Future research related to DST platforms and interfaces may reveal best practice in supporting storytellers' open self-expression.

Effective storytelling necessitates openness and vulnerability. Throughout the research documented here, we strove to maintain attention to the ethical implications of storytelling by respecting study participants' right to respect and privacy; sensitive topics were only integrated into the study if the participant chose to discuss them. We also did not conduct user testing with participants who could be classed as vulnerable or outside of our target market. However, future research may benefit from exploring how the needs of more diverse groups of users (e.g. individuals with neurodiversity, those from a wider range of racial and ethnic backgrounds, those seeking mid-life career changes, those with criminal records) could be met or unmet through developed DST tools. Such research should embrace the available scholarship around 'counterstorytelling': those narratives that may not adhere to hegemonic cultural expectations, but are no less worthy of being shared (Williams, 2004). In the testing documented above, we did not ask participants to disclose their racial or ethnic identities, but such disclosure may have revealed pathways for more specific future research initiatives.

Our pilot interview with a recruitment professional indicated that digital stories could effectively complement traditional job applications. The digital business card proposed by co-creation workshop participants offers one means for allowing applicants to share additional information in an attractive visual format with minimal text. Other digital platforms are likewise exploring

alternative forms of job applications. As one example, TikTok Resumes (https://tiktokresumes.com; at the time of writing, in pilot stage) has users uploading short video resumes in response to posted job adverts. For a more academic user base, the UK Reproducibility Network (2021) is trialing narrative CV templates that shift application emphasis from quantifiable performance indicators towards more qualitative and self-reflective personal experiences and goals. We hope to continue investigating how to establish and maintain meeting points between the storyteller (user) and story listener (employer). Future research may evaluate which digital or physical spaces are most suitable meeting points and why. More particularly, future research should identify employers' motivations, needs and desires associated with recruiting and employing recent graduates. The methods applied for the rounds of user testing documented herein may be adapted to suit user testing with relevant employment professionals (e.g. employers, recruiters, careers counsellors).

Conclusion

When we began developing the WITO app, we were attempting to make a story-based supplement to traditional job applications that helped those with minimal employment experience showcase their soft skill experiences. What actually emerged was a tool for skills identification and critical self-reflection related to employment prospects. Through an interactive process of DST – of owning one's insights and emotions, finding moments of growth and undertaking an interactive process of story development – users recognize the value of their own lived experiences for the development of soft skills. As we have shown in this paper, elements of classical DST may be applied to broadly encourage user self-empowerment in an individualized commercial context, and to more specifically support users' completion of job applications and preparation for job interviews. By using the seven steps of classical DST to frame our app development and analytical approach, we maintained our reason for doing what we are doing: empowerment. Classical DST is an effective way of amplifying individual voices, and we have shown here how it may be adapted from its usual community focus to suit a more atomized context of individual career development.

Despite storytelling being a defining feature of the human experience (Gottschall, 2012), the 'tell us about a time you demonstrated [soft skill]' interview question continues to stump job candidates. The WITO app encourages mindful preparation for those seeking and acquiring employment by centering on users' own lived experiences and insights. In this paper, we have drawn from literature about DST – especially classical DST – to situate the WITO app within a storytelling lineage characterized by self-reflection and interpersonal understanding. We have shown how this lineage may continue to evolve in a commercial context. Indeed, DST can be effectively integrated into contexts outside of community outreach initiatives and educational institutions. By helping individuals 'find the moments' in the ups and downs of their everyday lives, DST celebrates these individuals' soft skills, stories and self-reflection.

Acknowledgements

The authors would like to thank Professor Chris Anderson for his helpful comments on an early draft of this paper.

Funding

The author(s) disclosed receipt of the following financial support for the research, authorship and/or publication of this article: This work was supported by the Leeds Arts and Humanities Research Institute Interdisciplinary Research and Impact Fund for Culture.

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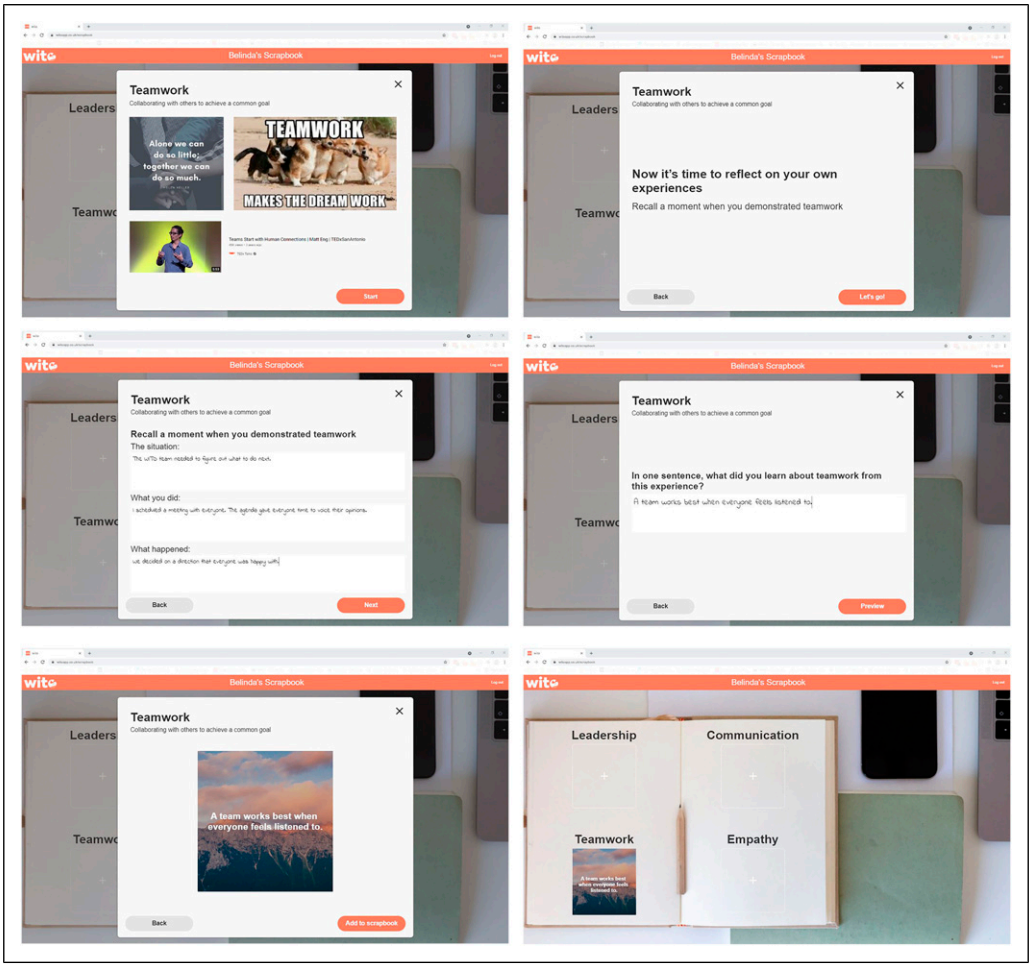
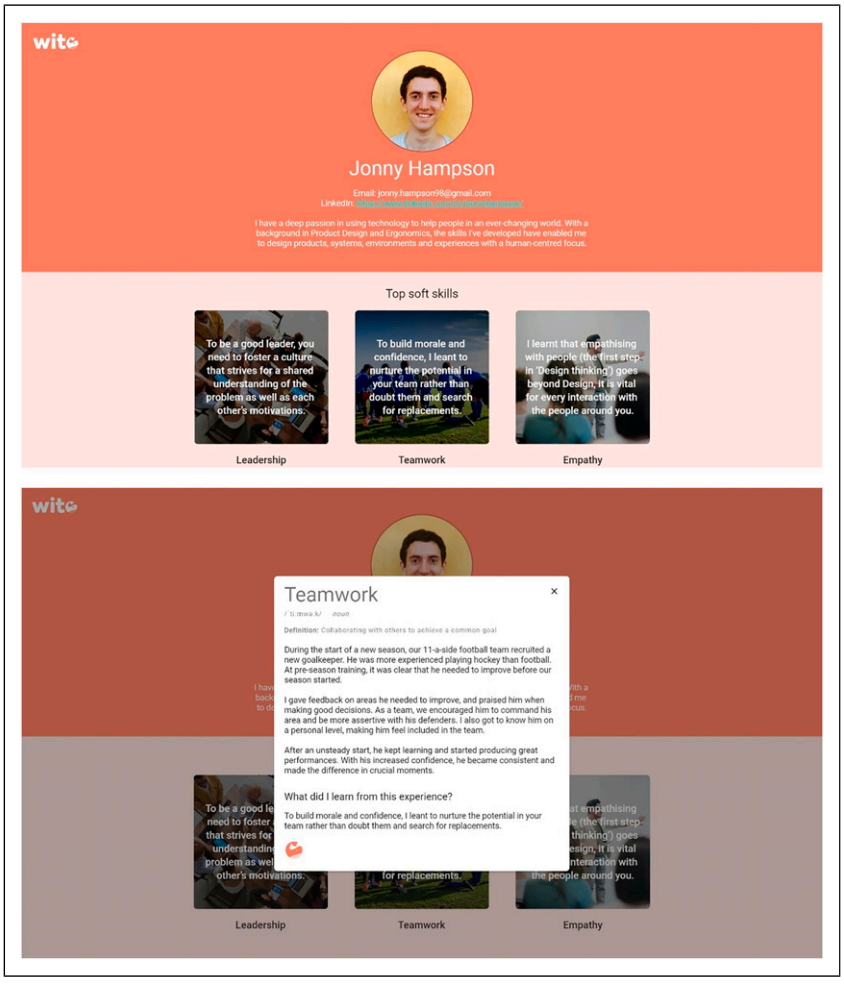
Appendix A: Tested app prototype



Appendix B: Digital business card prototype



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