Evocative of Experience: Crafting cross-cultural digital narratives through stories and portraits

Rachel Clarke & Pete Wright
Digital Interaction at Culture Lab
Newcastle University
r.clarke@ncl.ac.uk, p.c.wright@ncl.ac.uk

ABSTRACT
Storytelling has become a notable part of HCI research on experience, not only as a method of inquiry but also as a focus to design interaction. Much of this work takes for granted that spoken or written stories are an accessible way to engage users in reflecting on and recounting their experiences. This paper outlines exploratory workshops conducted to inquire into cross-cultural stories with vulnerable women. Taking a narrative inquiry approach we co-created digital stories and digital portraits with a group highlighting different perspectives of women’s experiences over time. The approach underlined the importance of crafting and listening to stories as evocative, imaginative responses to rather than representative of experience. The paper is a report of a situated adaptation of experience-centred design methods for working sensitively with users on stories.

Author Keywords
Stories, experience, duration, crafting, narrative

ACM Classification Keywords
H5.m. Information interfaces and presentation (e.g., HCI): Miscellaneous.

INTRODUCTION
Many of us share stories as a sophisticated form of everyday socialization. It is a skill that we have learnt to help us express ideas and feelings about ourselves to others [4]. Stories are the most common form of cultural expression, both reflecting and constructing the way we see the world [14], how we might conceive of possible futures and how we create and maintain social bonds [5]. Storytelling has informed notable parts of HCI research on experience, not only as a method of inquiry to understand people’s felt experiences of technology [11, 17] but also to design interaction for mobile phones and novel computer interfaces [1, 6, 15]. Despite the ubiquity and the potential accessibility of stories, they can however present particular challenges in cross-cultural contexts where there might be multiple languages, different cultures and perspectives coming together [3]. Furthermore previous cross-cultural research on digital storytelling tools have highlighted gaps in acknowledging the temporal and situated qualities of storytelling traditions and how interaction design might be sensitive to this [1].

We report on exploratory workshops, conducted to inquire into creating cross-cultural stories with vulnerable women. The aim of the workshops was to use different approaches to compare sensitive ways of working with women to share aspects of their lives digitally over time. We worked with a UK centre supporting Black, Asian and Ethnic Minority women’s development where women have had experiences of domestic abuse. The centre was interested in working with stories digitally to socially connect women through sharing of life experiences. Taking a narrative inquiry approach [4] women were invited to take part in facilitated workshops to share stories with others. We worked with 6 women over 4 months on 16, 2 hour weekly sessions to create digital stories; audio-visual content based on a personal story from the past and digital portraits; stimuli to encourage photographic and sound presentations of valued experiences from their present lives.

The workshops underlined the importance of crafting and listening to stories as more than digital, textual or spoken representations of experience. Rather the process highlighted opportunities for such approaches to be developed as time-based evocations, that is imaginatively making something anew in response to particular experiences. The paper reports on a situated adaptation of experience-centred design methods [17] for working sensitively with users through stories.

CRAFTING NARRATIVES
There is a perceived value in the co-construction of stories digitally in cross-cultural contexts where difference can be highlighted and negotiated through creative imaginings and shared dialogue over time [12, 16]. However existing commercial technology design, does not necessarily support sustained focused time required for the crafting of stories digitally requiring much more specialized interfaces [1,6,15]. As outlined by [13] existing technology relies on particular assumptions about production and consumption, efficiency and functionality. These principles are often at odds with the practice of spending valued time with people, and have influenced the social, creative, leisure experiences we might expect to have when engaging with technology.
We therefore took a narrative inquiry approach to slow the process of making stories down and also using it as a way of evaluating how the approach supported different forms of participation in the process of constructing stories. We believed this was an appropriate starting point in paying attention to particular situated and temporal qualities, giving us a practical and theoretical vocabulary for working with duration. This highlighted tangible frames of reference to situate past, present and future as pointing to significance, value and intention as temporal modes in people’s stories. We evaluated aspects of the processes through paying attention to a) *chronicles*; lists of linked events, b) *narrative*; events with structured meaning and c) *re-storying*; the possibility of situated change within in a story [4]. These frames enabled us to reflect on the process of working with the women rather than just producing a set of stories as end products in themselves. Practically we chose to do this through adapting two existing processes of storytelling within HCI; digital storytelling as an alternative to the interview and digital portraits as an alternative to the cultural probe.

**Digital Storytelling**

The digital storytelling format is an audio-visual story. It is a particular genre of vernacular media making and facilitated user-generated content that has been used in different cross-cultural contexts [1,6,12,16]. The process suggests benefits for individuals and communities in creating and sharing stories digitally in supporting self-identity, social recognition, shared values and self-advocacy [2]. This is achieved through supporting participants to construct stories in their own way. The form and theme is personal and chosen by participants from their previous life experiences. Stories last for between 2-4 minutes and involve adding digital content, such as photographs, animations or drawings to recorded voice and sound. The finished films are often showcased online as well as in small groups for celebration events.

**Digital Portraits**

We developed the approach for digital portraits from Gaver et al’s [7] original cultural probes. While Gaver’s original approach was developed from an interpretation of Situationist arts practice and acted as a Marxist critique of capitalism with a particular focus on the psycho-geography of the city, we recognised that our research agenda was different. Building on social connection through telling stories at the particular centre meant a more appropriate starting point was needed. Our digital portrait approach therefore draws on arts discourse located in feminist and intercultural cinematic practice [10]. From these perspectives the portrait has a tradition as a self reflective, fragmentary framing device that challenges the tradition of the portrait as a coherent singular static representation of self. We therefore focused on the portrait as presenting self through social relations, sensory experiences, places of significance and symbolic objects. We chose the term ‘portrait’ rather than probe pack for this purpose to encourage the group to interpret it in a way that best suited their own individuality and distinguished it from a more structured ‘story’ allowing us to work out from a different starting point.

![Digital portrait pack and inspiration tokens](image)

**WORKSHOP APPROACH**

In delivering the workshops we used different digital tools to form an assembly of tools; laptops, projectors, speakers, printers, scanners, microphones. We tried to incorporate these tools into the environment so as to create a relaxing, trusting and convivial atmosphere. This sometimes included turning rooms into pretend cinema spaces, also sharing printed and digital photos with laptops while huddled on sofas. We also sought out intimate spaces to record stories quietly.

In the digital storytelling workshops our group took part in story circle games. To build trust and rapport we introduced each other and compared ten things we liked and disliked. We watched other digital stories and shared digital and printed photographs about past lives. Some of the group created a script at home and some told their stories with other women and staff helping to translate while facilitators scribed. Stories were read out in the group and edited collectively after group feedback and discussion. The women recorded voice-overs, which were edited in video editing software on laptops with photographs in collaboration with the facilitators and burned onto DVDs.

In the digital portraits’ sessions each woman was given a velvet bag (Fig 1.) with a digital camera, a sound recorder, an oval portrait frame and a set of tokens for inspiration. A set of instructions asked them to photograph or record sounds of things, places, people and senses that were important in their lives. The group informally discussed and shared their images with each other on the cameras or brought a selection of pictures they had already taken. Some transferred their images onto the computer to share on a bigger screen. We printed the images and discussed ways of presenting them, placing them in sequences, adding words and sounds from selected recordings. These were then edited by researchers in video editing software, made into short video sequences (Fig. 2) which women shared and discussed with their families, and with the group before burning onto DVD.
**FINDINGS**
The group did not want us to photograph or video record the sessions, especially while they were presenting and discussing personal stories that they did not use in their final videos. They preferred us to have the digital content they produced as their articulations of experiences. In respecting this decision we relied on our own journal accounts and recorded interviews with members of staff and discussions with the women. We analysed this using the framework of chronicles, narrative and restorying to write particular storied moments in the workshop process. This highlighted how the story and portrait approach supported different qualities and articulations of the women’s life experiences over time. We present a brief storied overview of the process and some of the stories and portraits created from four of the women.

**Making sense and sharing the past, present and future**
When making their stories, Saeeda, Zahrah and Huma were very clear from the start what they wanted to focus on. Saeeda wanted to focus on being a strong woman, like some of the centre staff she knew. Zahrah wanted to make her story about her life after marriage in the UK. Huma focused on the social connections she’d made at university that she maintained online with friends all over the world and how this gave her positive strength. Saeeda and Huma confidently wrote their stories at home. Zahrah was less confident and asked if she could tell her story to us, while we scribed and typed it with her. The following week Saeeda, Huma and Zahrah read their stories out in the group. Saeeda said she thought Zahrah’s story was too long and there was too much detail. She said it needed to be shortened down to make it into a good story. Zahrah asked Saeeda if she would help her do this and she said she would.

Saeeda and Huma were able to construct the meaning of their stories to form narratives quite independently. For the rest of the women such as Zahrah, they initially created their stories as chronicles, linked events that weren’t related to the overall meaning they wished to share. Zahrah initially had a clear personal sense of what her story meant for her, but like most of the group she worked with staff and other women to create a story that was both meaningful for herself but also made sense for others. This involved several repeated stages in crafting the words and images in a process of re-readings and edits.

**Responding to the present, preparing for the future**
When making her digital portrait (Fig. 2) Huma described how she had a very specific idea in mind. She wanted to use nature to express how she felt and at that particular time she felt very unhappy with how her life was going. She described how she had been inspired by some of our conversations and how she wanted to animate a tree without branches with one green leaf that would turn yellow and then fall. She said this highlighted tragedy and sadness for her especially as it was becoming winter. It was to be her first winter in the UK and she was not looking forward to the cold. She said she did not want us to show the other women since they might make tease her. After we animated this sequence she added additional pictures and text to make the sequence more hopeful describing how she was now happy to show the others. We asked why she wanted to change the video and she described how she felt things would get better in her life now and she felt differently to how she had been originally feeling when we had started.

![Figure 2. Still images taken from the digital video portrait made by one of the participants](https://example.com/image.jpg)

Huzna photographed parts of her new house, her arts and crafts activities and the refuge where she had stayed when she first left her husband. She made a sequence that combined her current photographs with pictures of when she was young before she was married. She used some of the photographs of her arts and crafts activities and described how in the future she would like to teach others some of her making skills. She described the sequence as her life journey.

Working with the portrait approach, where stories were not the primary focus, encouraged the women to expand and make room for multiple meanings to be constructed from the photographs they had taken. Rather than focusing on structured meaning making based on reflections of the past, the portrait approach encouraged time for participants to re-story their existing content over time. This developed additional enriched meanings and ideas about the women’s lives from people, places and concepts they felt were of particular value to them in the present and that they intended to move towards in their futures. In Huma’s case this was more metaphorical and highlighted how her feelings had changed during the workshop process. For Huzna her portrait was more explicitly personal and highlighted details of individual value across her life-time.

**DISCUSSION & FUTURE WORK**
Our exploratory workshops so far have indicated potential in our approaches for evocations of participants’ experiences co-created over time. Our exploratory workshops so far have indicated some possibilities in adapting design methods to be both sensitively situated within the context and responsive to people’s individual needs. However we recognise that we have only worked with a small group so far, due to the intimate nature of the
process and the focus on slowing storytelling down. We therefore provide preliminary insights to inform future studies to focus on an understanding of supporting social collaborative storytelling technology spaces for future design.

Previous cross-cultural research in HCI have highlighted the importance of understanding how stories might work within particular cultural contexts [1,6]. We found in our study that the framing of ‘storytelling’ and ‘portraits’ within the context of the centre was significant in creating two possible ways of co-constructing storied media content with the group. While the digital stories relied on creating narrative form through written and spoken language at the start of the process, the portrait process with the visual symbolism of the stimulus material and photographs encouraged working metaphorically and literally much more on future hopes where evocative restorying of experiences could take place.

There were however other factors that informed the process that included the social dynamic of relationships, participants’ previous experiences of technology use and the accumulated time spent in sessions working together [3]. Further contextual documentation of the process and a vocabulary to describe the social dynamic of spaces, materials and meaning drawing from theories of multimodalities [8] in different cultural contexts would further help to increase awareness and design for engendering sensitive and supportive collaborative social spaces through technology for future use in such contexts.

While [6,9,15] have highlighted the importance of social and collaborative activity around technology interfaces when designing for storytelling, the process often involves individuals making content to share with others as a two stage process. Our study highlighted the potential for several additional stages in a process that could engender social and collaborative activity where changes and group reflection could take place over longer periods of time.

CONCLUSIONS

Using two different processes; digital stories and portraits, slowed down the process of sharing stories, which was useful for acknowledging the distinctions between a structuring of narrative and the possibilities for restorying of narrative to take place. This highlighted the necessity of spending time crafting and listening to stories to encourage evocations of different time periods in the women’s lives and opens up future possibilities for experience-centred design methods. We found that paying particular attention to the durational qualities of stories with a narrative inquiry approach could be further enriched through closer studies of the social dynamics of the workshop environment.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We thank the women who were kind enough to share their time, stories and portraits with us and staff and volunteers who supported the research. The project was supported by the Research Council’s UK Digital Economy Research HUB on Social Inclusion through the Digital Economy (SiDE).

REFERENCES

5. Frank, A. Letting Stories Breathe: A Socio-Narratology University of Chicago Press. 2010