



DESIGN AND NARRATIVE ENHANCING WELLBEING THROUGH OUR STORIES

Patrick W. Jordan¹, Andy Bardill¹, Kate Herd¹ & Silvia Grimaldi²

¹University of Middlesex, The Burroughs, London, UK

²London College of Communication, Elephant and Castle, London, UK

Abstract

Psychological wellbeing is profoundly influenced by the extent to which our narratives about our lives match our values and aspirations. Products and services that we own or use can play a role in these narratives – the car that says 'I am a success', the toy that says 'I am a good parent' or the customer-care that lets me know that 'I am not important.' Forty-two case studies are analysed of products

or services that influenced people's wellbeing through enabling, or failing to enable, a desired narrative. We identify six different ways in which a product or service can enable a narrative and explore the implications for user research and design.

Keywords: narrative, wellbeing, design, archetypes



Introduction

At Khoo Teck Puat Hospital in Singapore there are 10 'Lily Rooms' where people who are beyond medical help go to die. Away from the activity of the ward, they can spend time with family and friends, listen to their favourite music and watch their favourite TV shows. But the last days in a Lily Room go deeper than that. The nurses that tend to the dying are trained to enquire about their lives and help them build a positive and meaningful life-narrative. They see this as central to dying well – a person can look back on their lives more contentedly and face death with greater acceptance if they can come to see their life as a coherent story that reflects their qualities, strengths and values.

To help build the narrative, friends and relatives are encouraged to bring pictures showing meaningful people and times in the person's life, but also things, or pictures of things, that are important to the person.

There is evidence that having a coherent life-narrative enhances wellbeing at any stage of life (Alder, Lodi-Smith, Philippe and Houle 2016) – making people happier and more resilient (Bauer, Mcadams, and Pals 2008). As the hospital understood, the benefits of a strong, coherent narrative are particularly pronounced at a times of anxiety (Vanden Poel and Hermans 2019).

Much research (summarised in Hamblin 2014) suggests that acquiring large amounts of material possessions tends not to be a lasting source of happiness for people. However there is also evidence that most people will have a small number of possessions that are particularly important to them and that if they focus on these significantly enhanced wellbeing can be achieved (Lui, Dalton, Mukopadhyay 2017). From the buyer's point of view a difficulty when making a purchase decision is predicting what will make us happy – something which we are often a poor judge of (Gilbert 2007). From a designer's point of view a question is how do we design for

our users products and services that will have a profoundly positive impact on their lives, rather than just bring fleeting pleasure – helping people to enable desired life-narratives can be part of that.

Previous Work

Previously (Jordan, Bardill, Herd and Grimaldi 2017) we used Jung's archetypes as a means of segmenting types of narratives that people want to have about themselves. We reflected on the narratives that are important to us (the four authors) and the role that products or services played in helping us to achieve those. We differed in the narratives we desired, the consistency with which this applied across life areas, and the degree with which the products we owned contributed to our desired narratives.

Table 1. Jungian Archetypes (adapted from Mark and Pearson 2001)

Archetype	Goal	Strategy
Innocent	Safety and happiness	Doing things in the right way
Sage	Truth and wisdom	Seek information and reflect
Explorer	Authenticity	Exploring the world and exploring new things
Outlaw	Disrupt and shock	Challenge what is wrong in society
Magician	Make dreams come true	Develop vision and live it
Hero	Courage and mastery	Develop strength and competence
Lover	Intimacy and sensual pleasure	Become more attractive in every way
Jester	Have fun and lighten the world	Play, joke and be funny
Everyman	Belong and fit in	Develop ordinary values and common touch
Caregiver	Help and protect others	Do things for others
Ruler	Safety and happiness	Take responsibility and exert leadership
Creator	Innovation and creativity	Use imagination, skill and creativity

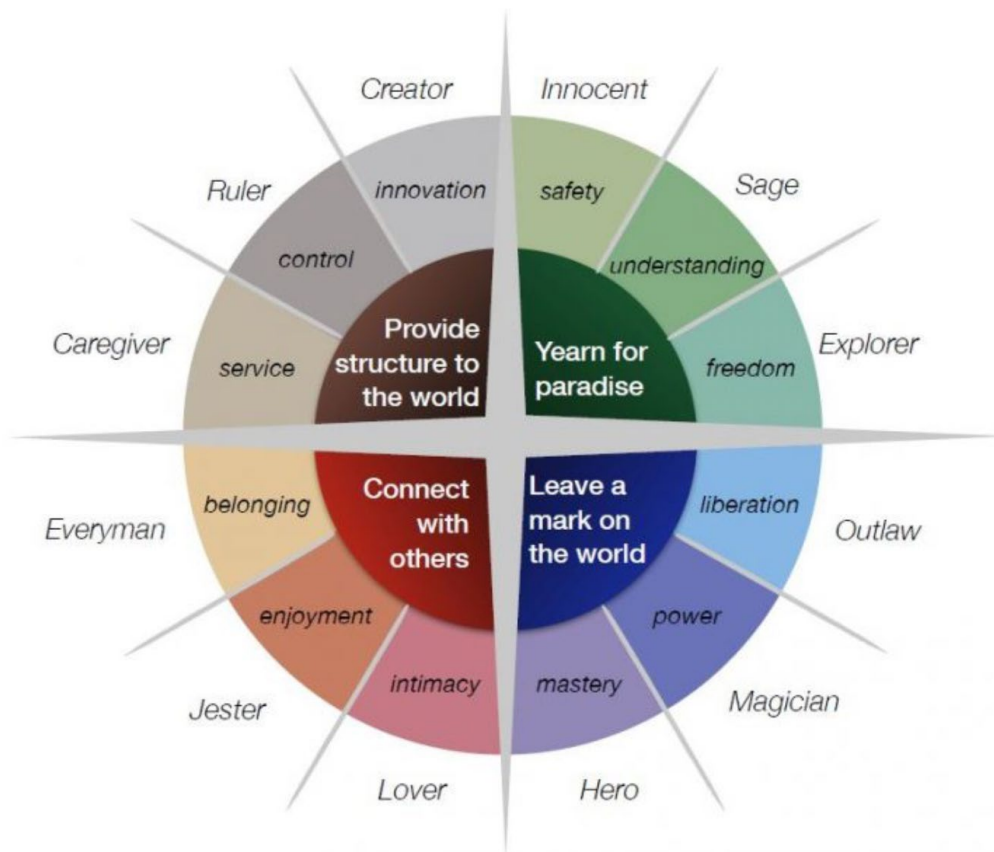


Figure 1. Universal human desires and their associated archetypes. (Hean, 2014)

Andy (Bardill) selected the Hero archetype as representative of his desired narrative type across life areas. The products he submitted for analysis – his car and a previously owned washing machine – had both helped to contribute to this narrative because he had been able to affect repairs to them that kept them working against all the odds, bringing acclaim from his family and others. His car story starts with him buying a used Mitsubishi Pajero, collecting it with his family and driving home in the rain. The family fall in love with it. They have fantastic trips in the car, both in the UK and abroad, and bond with it, giving ‘her’

the name ‘Old Betsy’. Many happy years later Old Betsy starts to develop severe problems. She seems beyond repair. Andy is resigned to getting another car, but the family can’t bear to part with Betsy so he sets about trying to repair her. He works day after day, drawing lots of attention from his neighbours. Eventually the time comes to see if she works. Neighbours and family gather in the street, others look from their windows. Everyone is tense as Andy turns the key. Nothing seems to be happening but Betsy suddenly roars into life. A huge cheer goes up. Against all the odds Andy has saved her!



Figure 2. Old Betsy (author’s image) and Pat’s Q7 (author’s image)

Pat (Jordan’s) car, on the other hand, a new Audi Q7, was not bringing him joy despite the high-status associated with it. Discussing his car history, those he most enjoyed talking about were funny in some way – the rusty Wolseley whose seat fell through the floor when he was driving on the motorway; the Maroon Jaguar that got compliments from older men; the Rolls-Royce that was so expensive to run that he went everywhere by taxi; the cartoonishly excessive supercharged Range Rover. He enjoyed laughing at his memories of them and enjoyed others laughing when they heard about them. The Q7 wasn’t bringing him pleasure because it was a Ruler’s car and he wanted to be a Jester.

The focus of this paper is on how designers and researchers can understand people’s desired narratives and how these can be facilitated through design.

The Study

To address this question an empirical study was carried out involving undergraduate design students in the UK in their early 20s (21 participants, 9 female) – an age where narrative is particularly important to wellbeing (Waters and Fivush, 2015). Participants were given a seminar on narrative and design, including a description of Jung’s archetypes as a basis for segmenting narratives. They were asked to describe two situations from their experience – one where a product or service helped them to achieve a desired narrative and one where it didn’t and to explain why.

Results

The selected archetypes and products/services are summarized here.

Table 2. Archetypes and products/services of participants.

Desired Archetype Enabled		Desired Archetype Not Enabled	
Archetype	Product/Service	Archetype	Product/Service
Explorer	Boxing Gloves	Everyperson	Smartphone
Creator	Wireless Mouse	Creator	Digital Drawing Pad
Magician	Bicycle	Ruler	Personal Digital Assistant
Ruler	Fashion Boots	Creator	Graphics Editor
Hero	Basketball Socks	Creator	Watercolour Brushes
Explorer	Language Course	Creator	Sewing Machine
Creator	Film Camera	Everyperson	Smartphone
Explorer	Car	Innocent	Agenda
Creator	Oil Diffuser	Ruler	Wallet
Everyperson	Smartphone	Ruler	Backpack
Sage	Smartphone	Ruler	Headphones
Creator	Laptop	Everyperson	Headphones
Hero	Gym	Everyperson	Headphones
Sage	Markers	Magician	Replica Lightsaber
Everyperson	Headphones	Explorer	Headphones
Creator	Laptop	Ruler	Football Boots
Explorer	Gym Equipment	Caregiver	Laptop
Jester	Games Console	Outlaw	BMX Clothing
Creator	Acrylic Paint	Everyperson	Car
Explorer	Online Talks	Ruler	Training Shoes
Explorer	Football Boots	Everyperson	Smartphone

Discussion

Perhaps not surprisingly, given that they were design students, Creator (mentioned 10 times) was the most commonly desired archetype. Explorer (7), might also be associated with creative people. Everyperson (8) being selected so often might reflect younger people's desire to fit in. Meanwhile Ruler (7) archetypes may reflect this being an ambitious, motivated group. Between them these accounted for 76% of desired archetypes.

How Narratives were Enabled (or not)

Narrative by Association

The idea of using archetypes as models for products, services and brands is well established (e.g. Mark and Pearson 2001). Some approaches assert that people will select products and services with associated narratives similar to the ones they aspire to. For example, if someone wants to be an Outlaw, they will buy an Outlaw product, such as a Harley-Davidson motorcycle. Or, if someone wants to be a Ruler, they might buy a Ruler product such as a Rolex watch. In our sample, the participant desiring an Outlaw narrative selected clothing that had been branded that way. Similarly, those who

described laptops chose a brand that was promoted using Creator narratives.

Showcasing Strengths

This was most commonly associated with Ruler narratives – situations where participants hoped a product would enable them to demonstrate superior abilities or tastes. Ironically, in all six cases where participants hoped to showcase their strengths it didn't happen. One participant bought bright orange football boots hoping that it would help him stand out and put his ability in the spotlight. Unfortunately he didn't have a good game, leading to mockery of his boots, which had indeed put him in the spotlight but not with the desired outcome.

The flipside is exposing weaknesses. The participant with the car desiring an Everyperson narrative wanted to fit in with his friends, most of who had passed their driving tests, but became the focus of ridicule as he took nine attempts to pass, then crashed soon after.

Enhancement

This is where a product or service enhances performance. Examples include the mouse and the oil diffuser. Both enabled Creator narratives through, respectively, helping a participant to work longer (being less straining to use) and facilitating a creative mind-set. On the other hand the digital drawing pad and the graphics editor didn't enable enhanced performance and a Creator narrative – lack of usability being the issue in both cases. The same was true of the sewing machine, which was bulky so got left at home rather than being bought to university.

Transformation

An example of this was the fashion boots that enabled a Ruler narrative. She felt a different person when wearing them – more “assertive and forceful”. A bold design and extra height afforded by the heels enabled

this transformation. The participant with the basketball socks was also transformed having become a much more “aggressive and effective” player when wearing them, enabling a Hero narrative.

Opening Up New Worlds

This was mainly associated with Explorer narratives. The boxing gloves enabled a participant to get into a new sport – one that challenged her and helped her make new friends. An English course sparked a love of both the language and the country leading to a participant leaving home and coming to study in the UK. Opening up new worlds could also be associated with other narratives. For example, one participant's purchase of a games console enabled him to enter a world where he could be funny and create a Jester narrative.

In Opposition

In the case of the participant discussing the bicycle, the Magician narrative was enabled by it being too big for her (she was a child at the time) and amazing people by riding it anyway. This is an example of the narrative being generated by overcoming a limitation of a product – it was the only example in this sample. However it could also be argued that Andy's Hero narrative was reliant on his car's faults and Pat's Jester narrative was dependent on the unsuitability of his vehicles. Despite these ‘flaws’ all three were positive about the products they described. However, it is conceivable that positive narratives could be created in opposition to disliked products – a Hero narrative through campaigning against environmentally damaging products for example.

Implications

Segmentation

Desired narrative could be used as a variable in segmentation. Currently segmentation, or user grouping, is usually

done using variables such as demographics, lifestyle, and context of use. To these variables we could add desired narrative types. So far we have been using Jung's archetypes as a basis for this, but other frameworks could be explored.

A complicating factor for narrative segmentation is that people may aspire to different narrative types in different contexts. In our study, only one participant was hoping for the same narrative type in the two situations they described. It would, then, probably be prudent to regard it as a context specific variable, similar to, for example, what they would use a particular product or service for, rather than a personal characteristic, such as age or socio-economic status.

Despite contextual variation, it may still be possible to determine useful information about narratives most commonly desired by particular groups. If, for the sake of illustration, we take our sample as being representative of a segment called 'Young Creatives' we can see that (not surprisingly) Creator narratives are important to them, but so are Everyperson, Explorer and Ruler narratives. When designing for them, we might try and create a product or service that can enable a combination of all or some of these narratives, or we might focus on one in particular depending on what we expected to be of most relevance in the context of the particular product or service we are designing.

Research and Design

There has already been considerable work done in the area of narrative by association. Mark and Pearson (2001) give examples of this for every archetype.

Other approaches to enabling narratives may be more complex and require specific research about the particular users that we are designing for. For example, if we are helping people to showcase or enhance their strengths, or disguise or mitigate their weaknesses, we would need to know

both what the strengths and weaknesses of the user group are in the context of the product or service that they were using, and the extent to which these feed into life-narratives that are important to them. In the case of the participant who kept failing his driving test, for example, he felt humiliated because he wanted to be an Everyperson – had he wished to be a Jester in this context, the failures might have been seen as a source of funny anecdotes.

To achieve a narrative through transformation requires a product or service to enable a person to think differently about themselves and their qualities and abilities. This might be through strong cultural associations or by enabling something that they had previously thought beyond them. In our own self-studies, for example, Pat recalled how successfully carrying out some home maintenance – something he hadn't previously considered – made him feel like an Everyperson within a particular group of friends.

This example might also be associated with opening new worlds – it didn't in this case as Pat did not become generally enthusiastic about home maintenance. Entering a new world can be facilitated by making that world seem attractive and the barrier to entry of it low. Had the English course been too difficult, for example, maybe our participant would never have come to the UK.

In these situations, whether the product or service enables a positive narrative is also dependent on whether the world the person has entered is one that they find rewarding. If our participant hadn't enjoyed boxing or made friends with other boxers, the gloves wouldn't have enabled a positive narrative no matter how good they were.

The scenarios that might be most difficult to address are those where a positive narrative is formed in opposition to a product or service. Designing bicycles to be too big for their users or cars so that their floor collapses while driving at speed

on a motorway are probably not sensible options! There may be situations in which gamification can be used in these contexts. Designing difficulty into games would be the most literal example.

Conclusion

Within design, the impact of products and services on wellbeing has been little explored. While much has been done on designing for positive affect, the focus has been on more ephemeral aspects of enjoyment and pleasure.

This exploratory work highlights the potential of products and services to enable narratives that profoundly affect identity.

For design to contribute, we need to understand and classify desired narratives and to understand how they are enabled. Jung's archetypes are a potential facilitator of the former, while there are at least six ways to approach the latter.

If achieved, design can enable products and services to become part of cherished stories that last a lifetime.

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