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# Flash Fiction Exploring the Blurring of Work and Life

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## Abstract

In this short paper, we present some reflections after a workshop exercise where flash fiction was used as a method to both encourage creative thinking around technology use, and to probe and reflect upon empirical data. The workshop was part of a project exploring the unique ways in which people develop strategies for balancing and/or blurring work and life demands. We describe how we used flash fiction to run a creative exercise with participants and, based on our experience, discuss the potential of this technique for developing interaction scenarios and design concepts, and for reflection about empirical data.

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## Author Keywords

Design fiction; flash fiction; work and life.

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## Background

In recent years, a group of HCI researchers has explored the potential of methods and techniques commonly used in creative fiction for imagining and discussing novel design and interaction concepts. Design fiction, for example, has been examined as an approach to explore both technical and interactional aspects of prototypes, and issues and open questions around technology use (Blythe, 2014; Hales, 2013; Linehan et al., 2014). Inspired by this body of work and also by our interests in how to communicate ideas and encourage reflection in collaborative, data-focused workshops, we designed and conducted a creative exercise as part of a project we have recently completed that explored human practices of blurring and/or balancing work and life demands and of using

digital technologies for these purposes. After having conducted an interview study with 26 participants collecting empirical data on such practices, we disseminated a summary of our results as part of a one-day workshop called "Managing Technology Around Work and Life" and involved the audience in a creative exercise that adopted the technique of "flash fiction".

## The Flash Fiction Exercise

Flash fiction (Galef, 2016) is an approach to creative writing where the author responds to one or more short prompts by creating a brief story in a short time frame, usually within one hour. Flash fiction is seen as both a way to maintain writer's creativity and flow of ideas, and to generate fiction that captures illuminating thoughts and reactions despite its short length and short preparation time. Creative writers experimenting with flash fiction usually rely on prompts: flash fiction prompts can take a variety of forms, from specific instructions or directions (e.g. "Write a short story about a lonely child who finds a friend"), to out-of-context sentences or phrases to be extended and elaborated ("He was such a lonely child...He couldn't believe it when he realised that he had found a friend"). A number of websites, mailing lists and online groups offer daily prompts to subscribers. Examples are 3AM Magazine (http://www.3ammagazine.com/3am/), Everyday Fiction (http://everydayfiction.com/), Nano Fiction (http://nanofiction.org/category/weekly-feature/writing-prompts) and Brevity (http://brevitymag.com/).

For our project's creative workshop, we decided to design our own prompts on the basis of the empirical data that we had collected in our interview study. We briefly describe the study to provide an idea of the type of data we gathered and its themes. The interview study involved a sample of 26 people of working age (over 18) in knowledge-intensive roles in high employment sectors in Sheffield (education, IT, creative industries, design and engineering). 12 participants were women and 14 were men; the youngest participant was 24 and the oldest 62. Occupations included: Education/training consultant, Business Development Manager, Senior Producer, CEO, Information Officer, Strategic Development Manager, Knowledge Transfer Researcher, Designer, Librarian, Lecturer. The interviews were semi-structured. Participants were asked questions about themselves (educational background, professional role, etc.), the work that they do, some aspects of their private life, and about how they deal with the challenges and demands of work and life. They were also asked about their use of digital technology for managing their time and multiple demands. The interviews were audio-recorded and lasted between 40 and 90 minutes. The study captured a set of lived practices around work, life and the role of technology and the interviews provided detailed insights of the participants' perceptions, decisions and strategies.

In the workshop, excerpts from the interview material were used from the data as flash fiction prompts. The excerpts were slightly edited to make them work as prompts. The rationale was to select excerpts from different interviewees that could be thought provoking, hold multiple meanings, or lead to multiple interpretations, to see which aspect the workshop participants would choose to focus on and develop, and in what way. Four groups of three people were formed, and each group was assigned an initial prompt by the

facilitators; after one hour, the groups were asked to choose a second prompt from a selection. They could either choose a prompt that pushed their story in a different direction, or provided a "twist", or a prompt that supported the storyline they were developing. The groups were given two hours overall to complete the story.

Examples of the 18 prompts we generated were:

- *"We've been in a variety of deserted desert islands with no electricity yet still been working, which is not ideal but these things do chase you around"*
- *"I just made sure that in that week I got a little bit of work done and I've sent emails to give the kind of the appearance of doing work"*
- *"Sometimes I physically feel like I want to and I have to stop myself"*
- *"I don't have any of my devices set up to notify me that new emails have arrived. I have to actually go and check, so it's on my terms, not the device's terms"*
- *"If I'm on holiday and I am not gonna look at anything work-related, then I'll pay the penance on the other side"*

The workshop participants were briefed on flash fiction and on the modality of the exercise. The brief stated that each story had to feature interaction with technology that is not limited to what is technically possible or already existing. Participants could be as creative or speculative as they wished. The groups were given notebooks, sketching paper, pens and post-it notes to help them discuss and organise their story.

Each group chose a very different "register" to tell their story. In responding to prompt 1 ("*I need people to think my business is bigger than a one man band so I never have my office hours on my signature")*, Group 1 devised a surreal and fantasy-laden story titled "Armorgeddon: There is a Rhino Loose in the City": "Armorgeddon" took aspects of work/life demands and blurring to extreme and thought-provoking paradoxes.

Group 2 responded to prompt 2 (*"If I don't focus on work when I'm at work, I could kill someone!")* with "Under Pressure", a story set in 2019 about the crew of a deep-sea nuclear submarine stuck under the Polar ice cap in the dead of Winter. As the ice is too thick for them to surface, they are stuck with limited provisions. The boundaries between life and work completely dissolve, although the professional roles that some of the crew members have (for example the medical officer) make them decision-makers for issues to do, for example, with rationing food. Group 2 also selected background music to accompany the recitation of their story: the song "Under Pressure" by Queen and David Bowie.

Group 3 worked from the prompt *"We've been in a variety of deserted desert islands with no electricity yet still been working, which is not ideal but these things do chase you around".* Their story is written as a set of log entries and automated notifications from a "smart home" system, and plays on how life-related interruptions in an "extreme" work setting might be interpreted and dealt with.

Group 4 worked from the prompt *"Social media lets us unlock lots of different identities...And I find it strange to try and bring these together. I think I am a different*

*person to different people".* It was written in the form of three diary entries from the perspective of the main protagonist, Crosby, a transgender man who is now a successful entrepreneur and happy with his life, and who encounters someone from his past who threatens to make his history of transition known to the public without Crosby's consent.

At the end of the exercise, each of the four groups read the story aloud for the other participants and a concluding debate followed.

## Reflections

All groups keenly engaged in the exercise, and while at the beginning they felt that the time they were given to write the story was quite short, once they began working on the prompts they were able to develop ideas and agree on the story fairly quickly. Interestingly the four stories that were produced elaborated more on issues of *impact* of technology on work and life and on challenges emerging when work and life blend, rather than technological scenarios. This could be due to the earlier part of the workshop, which focused more heavily on the results of the interview study. However, interestingly, the flash fiction exercise seemed to work well to go deeper into some of the issues that had emerged from the data. In other words, they not only generated ideas for future scenarios, but creatively explored and developed some of the themes from the empirical material. This was our first time using a fiction technique for this purpose, and, subsequently, using flash fiction. We found the phrasing of the prompts to be key in shaping the development of the story and its tone. The fictions that were produced highlighted certain dimensions of the empirical data, and the participants commented on how the exercise helped them to gain a deeper understanding of issues surrounding the subject area. They particularly engaged with issues of isolation, pressure and frustration.

This exercise was useful in exploring the potential of flash fiction as a particular technique: the rapid response and short frame for the stories pushed the participants to choose which themes to develop, but also freed their creativity. We plan to develop our use of flash fiction as a technique to generate other kinds of creative design scenarios.

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