Autonomous Project

Stef Kors
17 October 2016
stef.kors@gmail.com
www.stefkors.com

Interview 1 - Victoria Douka-Doukopoulou

Most students, artists, designers and researchers are using software that isn't optimised for their way of working. The most important thing: the connections between every step of their creative process, now has to be made visible by descriptive texts and formal documents. Writing these connections during the project is disruptive. Having a tool that supports the process in such a way that it makes these connections visible without user curation will improve the project results by letting the user focus on their work.

When I heard the idea my client Victoria Douka-Doukopoulou had I was immediately interested. This problem seems like a challenge all creatives have. Keeping track of your own process, the research you collect, the decisions you make and the notes you write. Without it becoming a incoherent mess seemed like a big challenge. Because the ideas for the app were quite well defined I chose a different way or organising the project. With a iterative process and user-research I want to achieve large goals in a limited timeframe. This document is structured in blocks each containing one iteration. Each iteration starts with a user interview and is followed by my notes, decisions, thoughts and results.

The first iteration starts off with an interview to identify the main goals for the project but also manage expectations of all stakeholders (the client and the design studio) and get a personal feel for the project. This interview will be with the client. To prepare for the interview I looked up what needs to be known to write a project debriefing. Having this information will give me the direction I need to steer the conversation to have the required bits of information. I used previous debriefings as a base structure for the new one. Find below the debriefing.

Client

Victoria Douka-Doukopoulou lives in The Hague (NL) where she studies at the ArtScience Interfaculty and plans to attain a degree in 2017 ; She almost finished her degree in Environmental Design & Graphic Design in Maryland Institute College of Art (US) and sat on the back of auditoriums when auditing courses in Social Anthropology at Pantheon University of Social and Political Sciences (GR). As a filmmaker, she gathers and assembles the invisible, the unthinkable and the unappreciable and

usually turns them into films, sometimes into bio-things. her work grows and moves, literally —

Framing the design challenge

A productivity tool that keeps your research materials and process accessible for you to be able to manage large scale projects.

The problem with tools that are currently available to store your research, ideas, inspiration and clippings is that each piece you save is independent to each other. However if you use these tools to document your project, each piece is a step in the creative process. You go from a link, to a image, to another site and finally to a paper. The productivity tool should be able to showcase the path of the creative process.

Formulate a quick description about the app

A productivity app that keeps your research, ideas, and inspiration handy and accessible for you to be able to manage large scale projects. A research tool aimed for organising and archiving links, images, notes and ideas to be accessed later or to be shared. Think Evernote, think Raindrop, think a notebook but better!

So why isn't Evernote, Raindrop, or Pocket not a good way of organising your project?

Well because they lack a way to showcase the process and the continuity of the research process, you work for like a paste border, rather than a modular way of collecting information, references, notes etc. Also the Mindmap structure is very ideal to showcase research advancement as well as steps in your creative thinking/ research process

So it's about keeping track of research, ideas, inspiration for large scale projects that also lets you show the steps in your creative process.

So the unique selling point is: Showcasing the steps of the creative and research process

Yes, it is also very important to keep track of all your research, not getting lost in links, and notes, and screenshots! (that happens a lot in other apps) also archive research, and easy go back and access it

The first creative I interviewed was Eline Benjaminsen. She is a photography student at the KABK. The goal of this interview was to get a look into how a creatives process is shaped.

The interviewed was setup in an unstructured, exploratory manner. I chose to shape the interview this way so I could be led by Eline's thoughts. Letting her guide me through her creative process.

The Interview

When I asked about how her work process, she immediately pulled out her notebooks. Eline works with 2 two physical notebooks and a digital folder on her laptop. You can divide her process up into three phases. A research phase, a curation phase and an photography phase. These phases aren't hard lines or clearly defined. During her process she also switches back and forth between the different phases. However each phase is a distinct way of working.

Research

During the research phase she is collecting photos, documents and information. All the interesting materials are saved in a folder locally. The digital folder has no specific structure. One of the downsides, she admits, is that information inside of the more information dense research papers and documents are read but forgotten. She suggests that the app should find a way to make this information more accessible. When she finds materials that are interesting, valuable or important she prints it out and puts it in her notebook.

Curation

In the research process Eline starts to take notes in her notebooks. Depending on where she is working (school, cafe, library or at home) she uses either her big A3 sized notebook or her smaller pocket sized notebook. In the notebook she designs each spread to have a specific purpose. For example she had an page spread with photos of country borders. Each could contain printed photos, text, written notes and magazine cut-outs

Photography

This phase starts when Eline moves from research and curation to taking photos. at this moment the input for her project moves from works by other people to her own photos. After each outing she makes to

photograph for her project she also prints these photos to use in her notebooks. Together with handwritten notes she uses these photographs as stepping stones in her creative process.

Eline's thoughts about her own process

When I asked Eline about why she works with physical notebooks. Eline told me using an notebook serves as a key point in her process. Writing notes down and actually printing out materials serves as a way to structure her thoughts. She explained that the reason why she doesn't does her curation phase on the laptop is because the programs and tools she tried are too finicky.

They way this interview was setup really worked out. The unstructured nature of the interview allowed for a relaxed conversation. It helped Eline steer the interview to things she though was important. I still had enough control of the conversation to get the information I needed.

In the next iteration of the interview I want to have a more structured setting. Using a more structured environment will be more supporting for getting specific learnings. My main goals for the next interview is to learn more about how other creatives structure their process. If the use specific phases. How their decision making process works.

Interview 3 - Victoria Douka-Doukopoulou

Keeping in mind that this tool will be used by creatives. I used co-creation sessions to iteratively shape and improve the User Experience of the tool. By leveraging the mind and experiences of other creatives. I want to collaboratively shape the features and design of the product.

To prepare for my first co-creation session I used the IDEO Field Guide to Human-Centered Design, which states that:

> "(…)The purpose of a Co-Creation Session is to convene a group of people from the community you're serving and then get them to design alongside you. You're not just hearing their voices, you're empowering them to join the team. (…)"

The field guide also suggests using techniques to get the participants warmed-up. With this guide and using the insights of the interview with Eline I shaped the session. The session consists of three parts. The invitation, an short interview and the co-creation.

Session setup

Starting with the interview invitation wherein I will ask the recipient to bring their notebooks, pictures of their creative process and other things that might Illustrate how they work. I will also quickly describe how the tool should help creatives, the structure of the session and the amount of time the session should take.

The questions during the interview part are very loose and open, allowing the interviewee to explain and take some control over the interview. This will prepare the interviewee to be more open-minded and warmed up during the co-creation part. In the co-creation session I will supply the interviewee with an big drawing surface, markers and post-its.

About their current design and research process

Having the interviewee show me their process, looking into their notes and folders, asking them about why they structure their work this way, their problems with each technique they use and how they have improved their workflow over the years.

About how they are keeping track of the links between documents and multiple projects

Because the client is specifically looking for a tool that connects all materials and documents in the creative process. I'm especially interested in how the interviewee makes and saves these connections, how they structure their materials so they know what their process was like, how the creative decides which materials are important and which are not.

How do they envision the tool should work?

At this stage the interview will move into co-creation. The co-creation part gives the interviewee the space to dive deep into explaining how they think the tool should support their own creative process.

This part starts with me mapping and sketching their current creative process as a timeline. I will have them participate in this to create a realistic image of their process and to have them warmup for drawing and writing on the paper. This step will give me a visual view of the way they work. It will also foster the goals the IDEO handbook gives; to make the participant an member of my design team. After this task I ask the interviewee to map out on a second piece of paper how they envision how this tool will work. Sketching Interfaces, small features and solutions to ideas and problems identified in the interview part of the session.

Session with Victoria Douka-Doukopoulou
About her current design and research process

Victoria usually works on projects that involve a lot of research. Her projects start with a note or several ideas. As an example of process she used the project she is currently hoping to develop further a "camera-less digital film". She started with doing research into how digital cameras work. This research contains, website links, pdfs, videos, photos and drawings. Inside the pdfs are highlighted texts, pictures and diagrams. Victoria notes that it is easy to lose information in these pdfs. The tools should make this more accessible or visible. She also keeps an list of links as bookmarks or in her reminders. The also tries to keep an list of books, so she can keep track of what she read. Through talking to people or getting feedback from teachers or colleagues, she also receives a lot of further references or links. These links often stay buried inside chats and emails. Regularly within one project, she looks at different options, and tries different directions, before narrowing down her process. She hasn't found a great way to keep track of these different directions. Currently Victoria uses excel to try and map these directions. However they quickly become files wherein information gets lost.


The creative process of Victoria Douka-Doukopoulou

About how she is keeping track of the links between documents and multiple projects

Victoria tried to use an excel file to map her process. Before this solution she used drawing in her notebooks. Both are hard to keep updated and difficult to navigate. Most of her materials are in chronological order. However her files on her pc are separate from her personal notes in her notebook.

How does she envisions the tool should work?

Victoria started with drawing a website that had a tool to import an link or page. She then envisions an application that would have a workspace where in all the collected materials, notes, and images are displayed. Each file that has been imported has an embedded link to their source. An important feature for her is to be able to edit the styling of imported files. She want to do this because the program might make mistakes importing it correctly.

After collecting materials she envisions the ability to group or organise the materials. Where by certain files are linked with each other to show their parent file in the process. in this step she also want the ability to resize and edit images to create visual hierarchy.
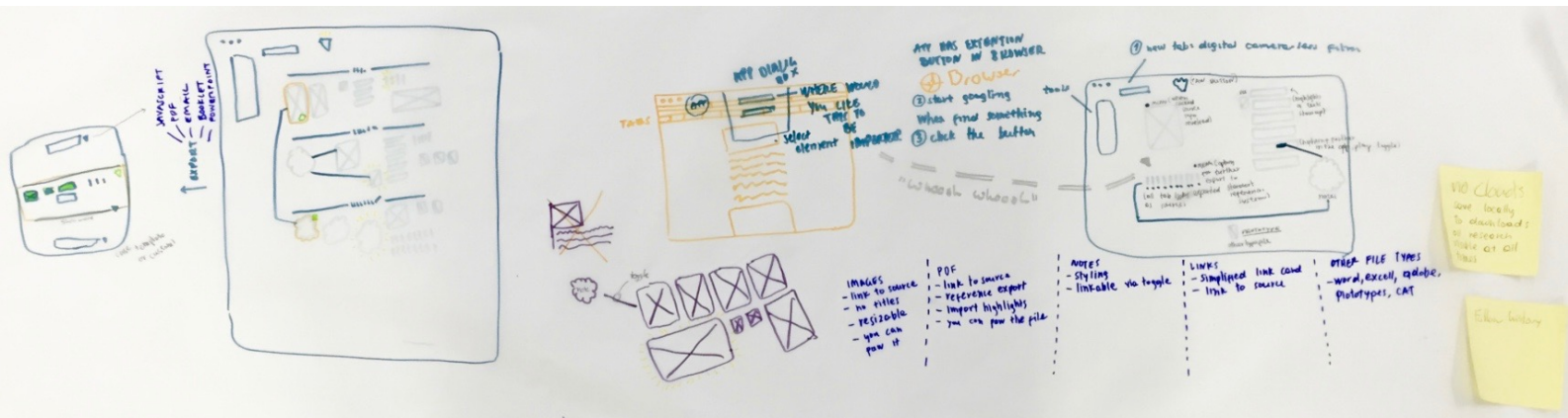
Victoria's ideas for the tool

Reflecting on the co-creation session I was really impressed with the ideas and level of detail Victoria had envisioned the app. At the start of the interview Victoria was somewhat apprehensive. She wasn't sure if she had any information that could contribute to the design. During the session she loosened up and started drawing her ideas. For the next creative I will interview I would like to reduce the time it takes for the participant to loosen up. Also I should either call the product an "tool" or an "app" using both interchangeably resulted in confusion.

Interview 4 - Timon van Reek

As preparation on the second session I went over my session plan. To get more participation from the interviewee, I'm letting the interviewee do all the drawing and writing. Not participating in the drawing, I hope to stimulate the output of information.

Session with Timon van Reek

For the second co-creation session I interviewed Timon van Reek. While talking to him before the session he stated that he has no creative process. That he just follows his gut. This is session already promising to be interesting!

About his current design and research process

Timon is currently working on an project to design an mac app. Looking and talking though his documents and folders it seems that he only works on his laptop. He only uses his notebook and post-its to write down reminders. On his laptop he has two main locations where he collects information. The first location Timon collects resources and files is inside a project folder. Inside this folder all the files have no clear structure, every file kind is in here, however they mostly consist of images, pdfs and pages files. The second location Timon uses to keep track of his work process is inside an pages document. This document contains all documents and notes of meetings. All documents in this pages document are clean and presentable. Timon removes and throws away all text and notes that don't find a place in the final documents. In this pages file each document is a separate chapter, with each chapter having a clear and distinct title. For Timon the title is important. He uses the title to descriptively present the information.
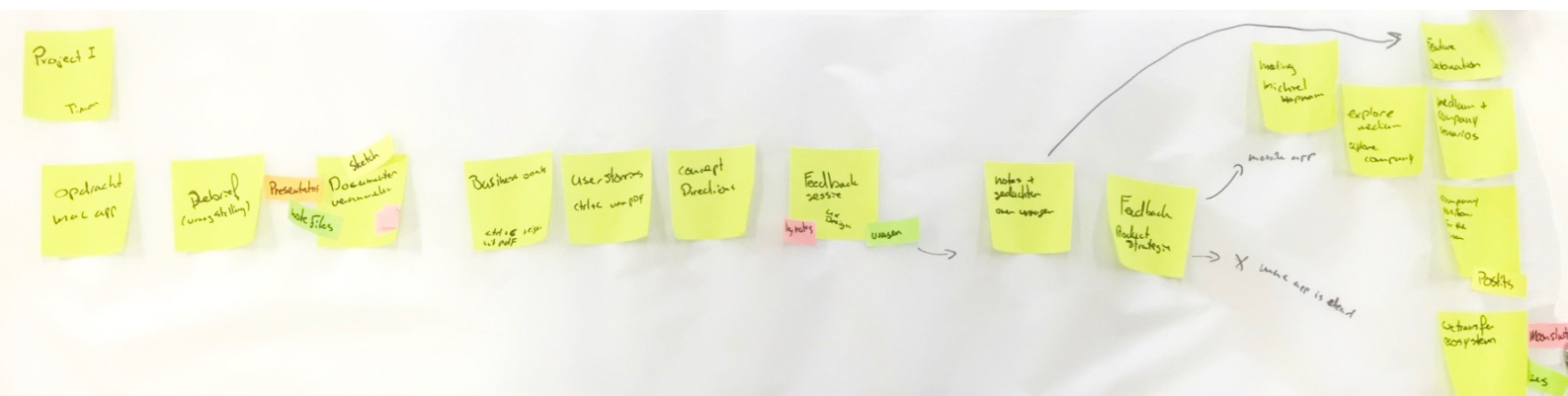
The creative process of Timon van Reek

About how he is keeping track of the links between documents and multiple projects

Timon keeps his pages document in chronological order. Starting with the first documents. Everything else is in no specific order. He said that in his projects he hadn't found any purpose for organising his project folder.

How does he envisions the tool should work?

One of the things Timon and I talked about was the option for pdfs to automatically export highlighted areas as notes. Thus making large pdfs more usable. Timon envisioned this working in a way where it is still possible to see the context of the exported note. Timon also suggested an app view wherein it would be possible to have a "collection" side and a "export ready" side. So it will be possible to easy build and export a clean document.

Timon's ideas for the tool

This session with Timon was quite insightful. It is great to see how features are starting to become more defined. With the next session I want to include a new part of the session. In this new part I'm going to involve the participant in actual design aspect. I will show the features I designed. This part will also be open to discussion and sketching. Having as goal to further finetune my designs. During the session I felt like the process of warming up the participant could still use some improving. It still felt quite restrictive.

With the next session I'll test out doing the session without post-its. I think these post-its might feel restrictive and just giving the creative a pen or marker will stimulate the creativity.

Session with Samantha Diederiks

When I told Samantha about this project she was excited to help out. Samantha has been working as a freelance designer for a couple years now. So I was interested which considerations she had made to perfect her creative process.

About her current design and research process

Samantha's creative process is clearly defined in three parts. She starts with an research phase. wherein she makes notes on paper, project documents on her laptop and mind maps on paper. She also keeps a folder of hyperlinks to keep track of her research. During the next phase, her concept phase, she makes more mind maps, now accompanied with

sketches and wireframes. This moves over into the design phase. where Samantha makes and designs the final product.

What I though was really interesting about Samantha's process is that she often uses mind maps. She uses these as to order her thoughts. But also was a way to find links between different ideas/words/inspiration.

The creative process of Samantha Diederiks

About how she is keeping track of the links between documents and multiple projects

She keeps track of her process by making mind maps. These mind maps form a visual representation of each step she takes. She also separates each of the three phases into folders. Inside of the folders she orders her files chronologically.

How does she envisions the tool should work?

Samantha wanted a way to curate her materials and create an clean deliverable. She talked about an Indesign like tool that could give an report without too much trouble. It should be more supportive of different diagrams and images than a word processor.

Samantha's ideas for the tool

Feedback on designs

The feature I showed Samantha was the pdf import feature. It works as follows : when the user imports a pdf into the tool, it extracts the sections that are highlighted, these sections turn into notes that are fully editable and highlightable. Samantha really liked the idea. She suggested there should be a description with the pdf. An easy way to know the contents of the pdf, without having to open and read the pdf again.

Ideas for how the tool should handle pdfs

What surprised me the most during the interview with Samantha, was how much she uses mind maps. Interesting to see different creatives using different approaches in their work.

This session yielded better results without post-its than the sessions with the post-its. I felt like the session flowed better. This is also visible in the detail of the drawings.

For the next session I'm going to improve the designs. I'm also looking to diversify the creatives I interview. Having mostly interviewed artist and digital designers I would like to talk to someone how is in a different creative field.

Session with Joost van Spanje

The session started with a larger introduction of the tool than the previous sessions. This because I wanted to show and talk about more specific portions of the tool. Giving the bigger introduction would make it easier of the participant to think with me about the design. Joost studies Architecture in Delft. He usually works with sketches, scale models and

3D software. Most of his process takes place on the computer, but also using a notebook for small sketches and notes.

About his current design and research process

Joost works with a folder wherein he puts all his materials. Using a very iterative process he starts to flesh out different ideas. His research leads into sketches and sketches lead back into research.
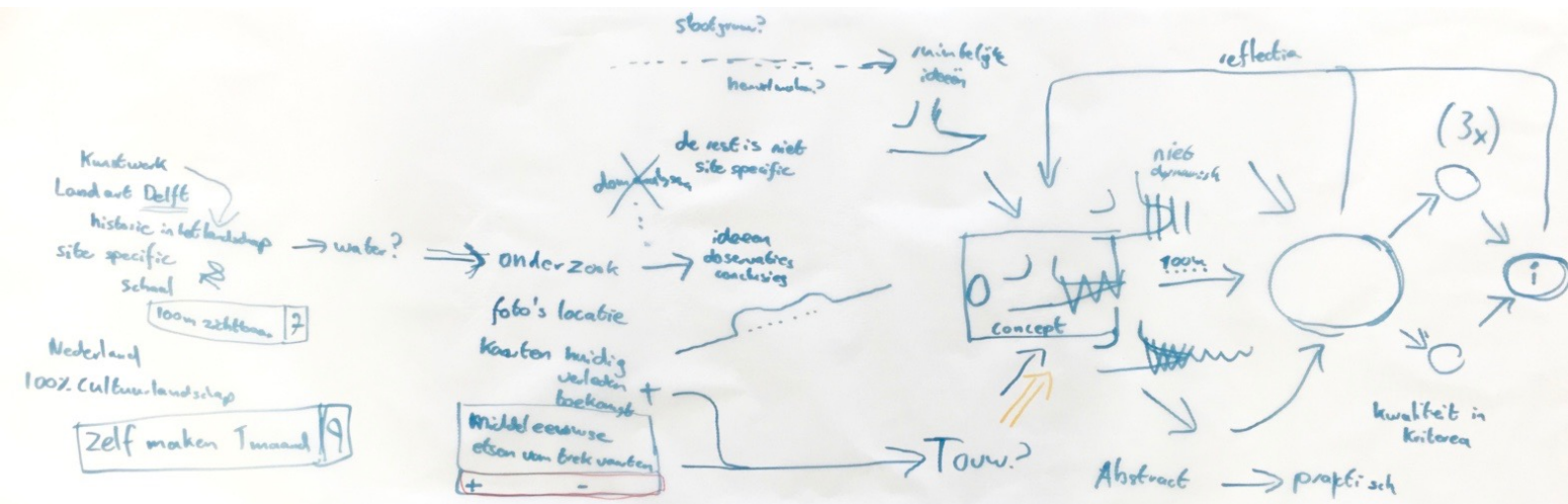

The creative process of Joost van Spanje

About how he is keeping track of the links between documents and multiple projects

Joost doesn't have a set way of keeping track of different concept directions. Most of the concept directions have a page of notes and sketches associated with it. Also Joost keeps a notebook that he writes in about his thoughts and notes related to the project. This notebook is chronologically sorted.

How does he envisions the tool should work?

Talking about how the app should work. Joost thinks it would be great to be able to have a timeline that automatically creates different design paths. This timeline should be a small view windows that is always visible for the user. Adding files to a workspace above the timeline will add nodes to the timeline.
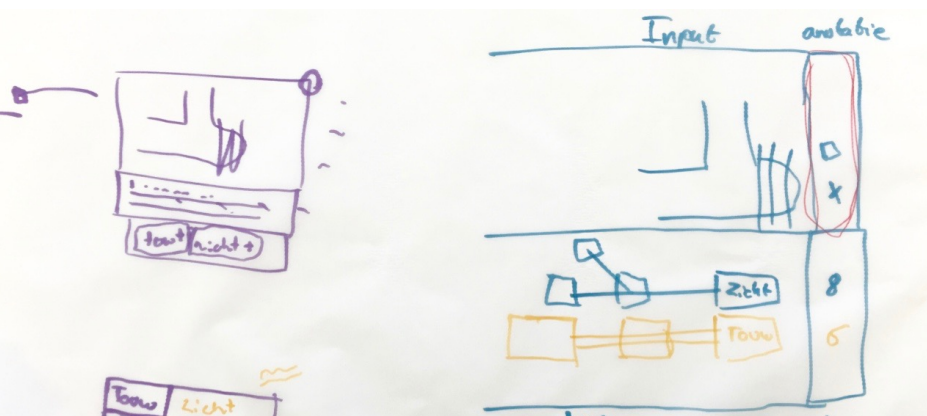
Feedback on designs

After showing Joost the iterations of the pdf feature plus the first workspace ideas, he gave me a lot of good feedback. Joost noted that with most pdfs a description might be too cluttering. Unless there are curated descriptions, the text will be too big or not interesting enough. He also thinks an expanded pdf view might hide the linked notes. Making them less useable for him.

Ideas of how the tool should handle pdfs and workspaces presented to Joost

The session with Joost prickled my mind in such a way that I think I need to rethink the way the tool works. Having features that add depth might not be necessary right now. Having a proper workspace to bring order and clarity to the work flow might be better.

Interview 7 - Victoria

Before the next session I'll be presenting the current state of the project to the client. Talking with her will give me a good indication if I'm on the right track.

While discussing the designs with the client I was changing and drawing designs. We tried a more specific timeline approach, a workspace design that is more linear, and has a horizontal view. After much discussion we decided to continue with the horizontal workspace. As the vertical approach feels to much like

creating a paper/report. Giving the user the feeling it's just a space to document their process will allow them to leisurely add documents and materials. Where if it is too reminiscent to a formal report the user might feel self-conscious about the things they write.

Preparing for the interview with George I cleaned up the .sketch file I had made during the previous interview with Victoria. Aside from the more general insights I wanted to work with George on ways how the different design directions could be presented.

Session with George Knegtel
George is a photographer at the KABK. At first she wasn't sure if she could help. As the session progressed, she talked more freely and we got some good ideas.

About her current design and research process
George starts her process with a problem, issue or question. She then starts her research into the subject. This research is put into a project folder. She doesn't really think about her process, instead she let herself be guided by the project into the different directions.
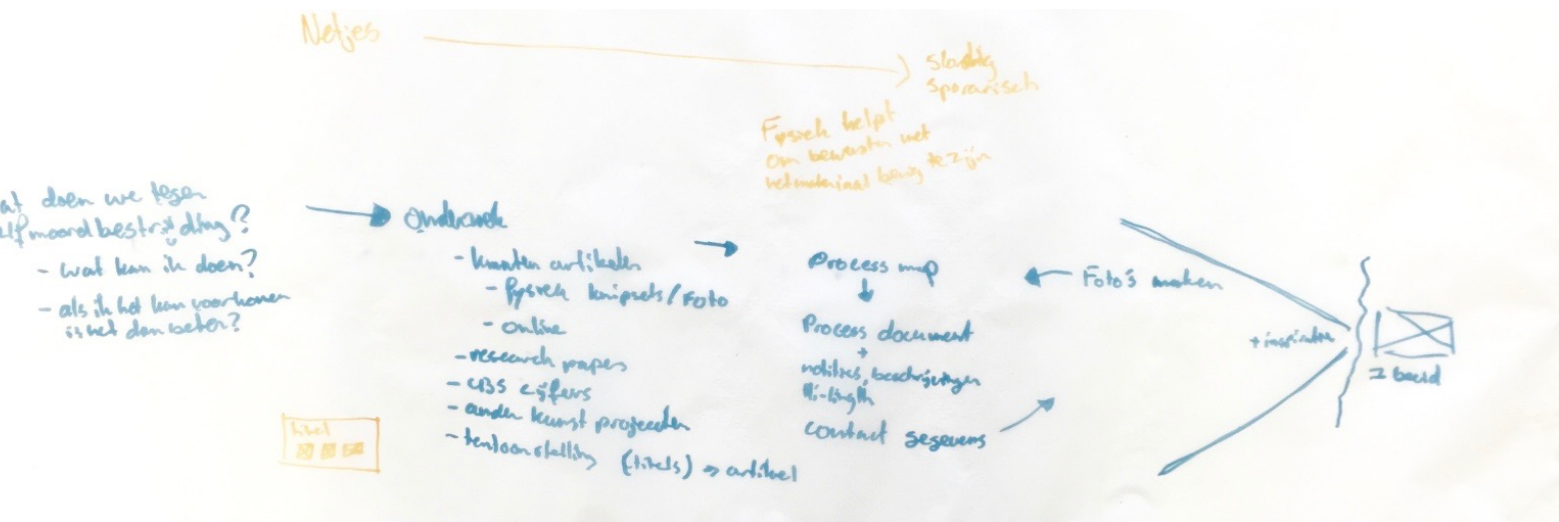
The creative process of George Knegtel
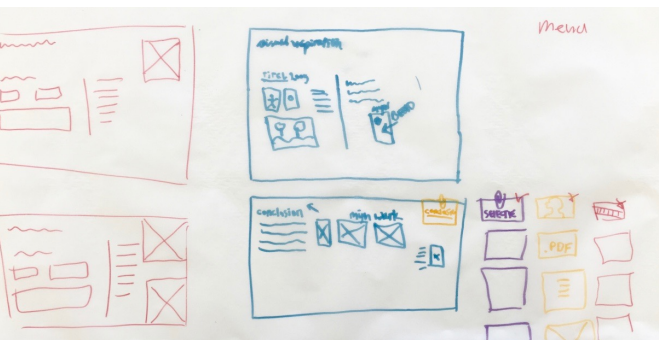
About how she is keeping track of the links between documents and multiple projects / How does she envisions the tool should work?
George thought there should be an way to annotate groups of materials. This as a way to keep track of different ideas and directions. She also wanted to "clip" materials to curated pages.

All the materials would be available in the "clip", however only the interesting materials will be shown on the page.

Feedback on designs

George didn't have a specific preferences about a horizontal versus the vertical orientation. She was more looking for a way to create page spreads. So she could more easily create photographic print outs.

Design iterations

15
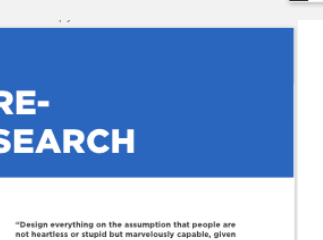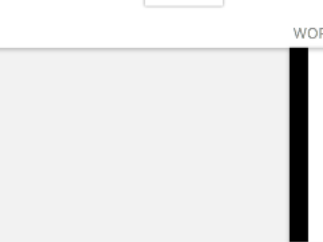
Thinking about how George may use the app. I think that in the end the tool should have the ability to export the process into a file. In this export there should also be the ability to create page spreads for more large scale print outs.

After all these interviews I'm now starting to focus on the final design. The final design iteration is the accumulation of learning of the previous eight design iterations. During this process every feature and design has been tested with users.

What did I gain from these interviews

Through conducting these interviews I gained several insights on how the creative process of artists and designers works. There were several similarities across all interviews. Here is a short summary of those points.

- All material associated with one project is collected in one spot.
- Collections are curated based on theme and not file type, mostly chronologically.
- Archiving and managing links of online sources is necessary, but complicated.
- Notes are collected in some sort of word processor or notebooks with references to the material they link to.
- Often to describe the process the creatives used mapping as an analogy.
- Annotations, like lines or other shapes, are used to link materials, there seems to be no equivalent in the digital roam.
- The work flow seems to be digital >> analog, didn't run into any examples of inputing of analog material into digital tools.
- There is a variety of files types used by each person.
- The creatives avoided giving titles to single entries, but there were accurate descriptive titles for files, to be able to sort through them.
- The A4 page seemed to be the type of format everyone was using.
- There was always intention to output the creative process or research somehow, to be shared or presented.
- The file collection is often revisited and altered, throughout the creative process.
- None of the creatives was using a productivity software to keep track of their process.

Deeper insights

Particularly interesting was that the users wanted to compare the application to an application they already know. They either thought the design was like a word document or more like an indesign file. Both had their connotations that seemed to limit the user on how to use the application. When the app seemed too much similar to a word document they thought that the app should be used to write a process report. If the application was too similar to indesign they thought it should be used to create beautiful page layouts. The horizontal work flow is a major

differentiation from these existing mental models. Having this orientation gives the app the opportunity to create a new way of working.

The interviews with these different creatives also showed that both analog and digital tools are used in the creative process. Each creative had work digitally and on paper. Restricting the options and feature in a digital tool at the right places should give the user a more analog feel. Being able to only add new files and notes to the right side, while still keeping it possible to go back and add comments. This gives the user an experience that follows the same rules as a physical notebook. Having the app be a digital experience of a physical notebook. Using the possibilities of digital tools to create interconnected, linked steps with deep support for files and media.

How the app works

When the user opens the application it will be greeted by the "projects screen". This screen will show all the currently open projects. Aside from opening the project, here it is also possible to archive, rename, move, delete the project or creating a new project.

The notebook of Victoria Douka-Doukopoulou

Current projects (6)   **Archived projects** (2)

APRIL 2016

thesis   archive   move   rename   delete

all the landscapes you are

JANUARY 2016

ETA

nitrocellulose

exercises on breath

2015

breath one

11014 155023 _ 155027
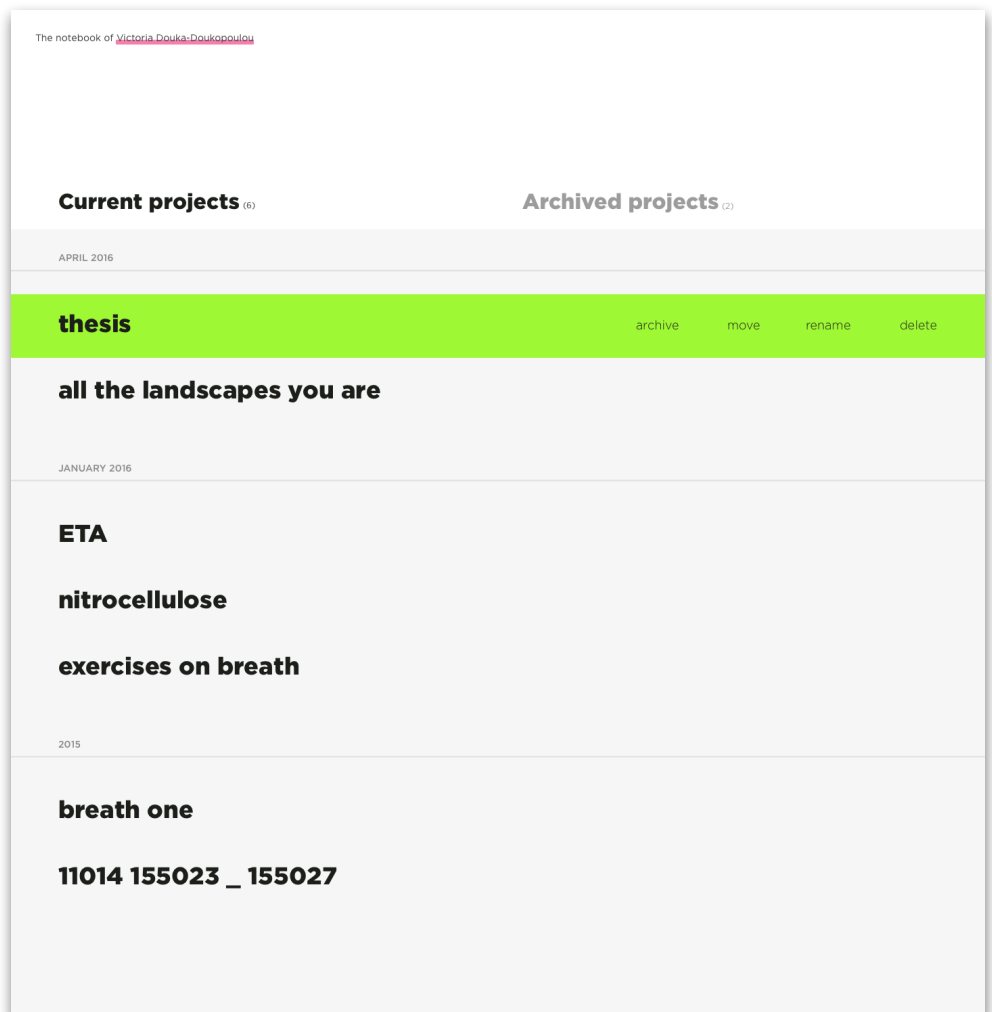
Projects screen

When creating a new project the user is moved directly into "project view". The user isn't prompted for a title. The option to change the project title from untiled into something else is possible in the projects screen. When the user sees the project screen first the page isn't empty, a "design direction" header is placed at the start of the project view, formatted as a coloured field suggesting physical context of a new section. This header is the first step in the project process path. Now the user can start to add photos, files, text and documents. All these files and notes are steps in the creative process of the user. These elements are added on the right side of the header. There is an opportunity to link files, photos and

Adding design direction headers

A new design direction; gives the user the option to link previously added materials to this direction

notes, to showcase the connection between the collected material. The link is made by connecting the materials with design directions. When the user wants to add a new design direction a path is added underneath the current row.

Each path starts with a design direction header. When adding new paths you are able to link photos, files, text and documents to its design direction header. This action gives the user a way to keep track of the history of certain design decisions. Adding comments next to photos or files makes it possible to later add an extra layer of explanations or thoughts. After the user adds all its photos, files, text and documents an export can be made. In the making of this export it is possible to select all the photos, files, text and documents the user wants to add. Giving the user the option to leave out unrelated pieces. This export could serve as a foundation for visual designs, reports or research papers.

Future improvements

This project ends with a clear direction in which the app should move. The next steps should be a minimal viable product. Having a simple working product will provide a platform for prototyping and user testing. This iteration should test how the creatives use this platform in their work. If the horizontal workflow fits with their process and what features they are missing.

As the next step, product branding and visual design should also start to play a role. The visuals should reflect the positioning of the product and prime the potential customers on how the tool is used.

These are my personal thoughts

Personally I think the biggest challenge of this tool is; giving the user a supportive environment while not giving the user a restricted feel. Perfecting this middle ground will take testing and development. I also think that the goal shouldn't be to replace the current work flow, but to aid in information collection and work process presentation. The analog process will be documented by notebooks and the digital process will be documented by a digital equivalent, which is what this tool hopes to be.

Looking back on the project, the iterative testing shaped very much the end product. The creatives changed and elevated the design in ways I couldn't have expected. It was great to see everybody problem solving and rethinking about their creative process. This project is really made for the creatives by the creatives. Deeply rooted in my personal belief, that trusting the user to be part of your design team makes testing and problem solving a inherent part of your process. I've learned to think about solutions in ways I haven't thought before.

Self reflecting on my personal creative process

It should come as no surprise that I'm deeply interested in creative processes and the possibilities of them. Looking back into my personal process while working on this project I realised how different it was from the creatives I interviewed. The majority of the people I interviewed, start working on a project intuitively and work through it as a subject and not as a method of process. I on the other hand started this project, and the majority of my other projects, by reflecting on which type of process I will be using. Crucial to introducing me to different types of processes and methods of working has been the IDEO Field Guide of Human Centred Design.

"(…) By continually iterating, refining, and improving our work, we put ourselves in a place where we'll have more ideas, try a variety of approaches, unlock our creativity, and arrive more quickly at successful solutions.(…)"

As the project evolved instead of just following one way of working. I would reflect and adjust my personal process and not just create solutions to questions or problems that would show up. Now looking back on the project, I realise that creating this tool would allow other creatives to zoom out and also see clearly the way their process works, allowing them to also self-reflect and perhaps find alternative ways of working.

This autonomous project has been a great learning opportunity, allowing me to experiment with my personal creative process as well as observe and draw inspiration form the processes of other creatives.