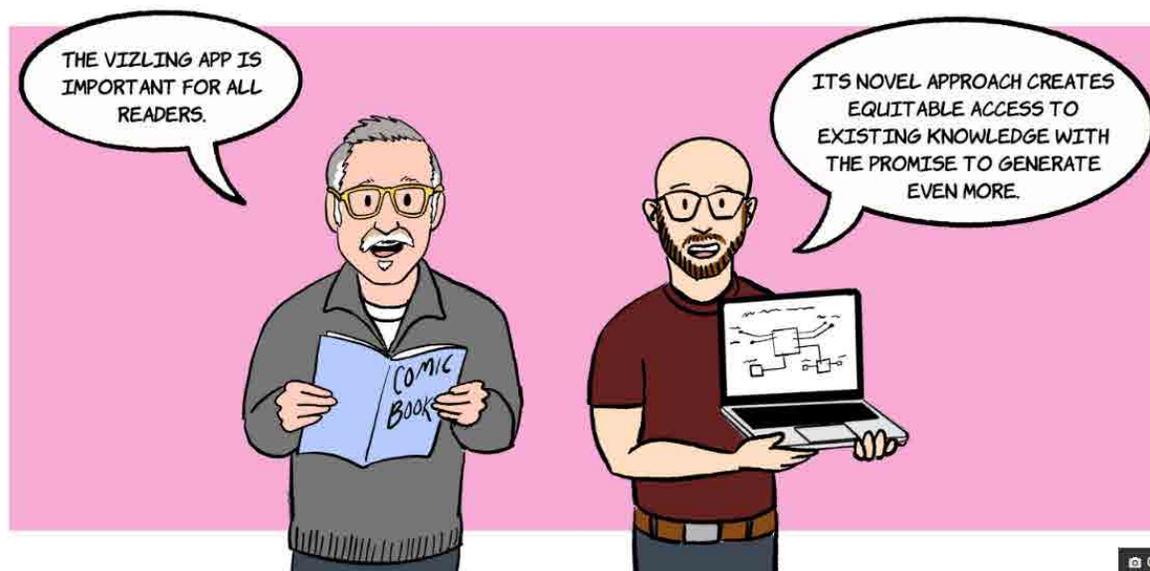


WSU News

February 03, 2021

Wichita State professor wins innovation award to create accessible comic book app

By Sara Ornelas, Marketing Content Strategist



Wichita State's Dr. Darren DeFrain has recently been granted \$11,000 from the John A. See Innovation Award to develop Vizling, an app that will help visually impaired people to read comic books.

- Dr. Darren DeFrain is working to develop Vizling, a smart phone app that allows visually impaired people enjoy the full visual experience of comic books and graphic novels.
- DeFrain was recently granted \$11,000 from the John A. See Innovation Award to further develop Vizling toward a viable product.
- Eventually, DeFrain hopes that Vizling will turn into the Netflix of comics.

Kapow! Zap! Pop! Zoinks! A Wichita State University researcher is working to develop an app to make those words come alive for visually impaired comic book readers.

Dr. Darren DeFrain, associate professor of English and director of Wichita State's Writing Program, has recently been granted \$11,000 from the [John A. See Innovation Award](#) to develop [Vizling](#).

"We're creating an app that's going to allow people who are visually impaired to read and understand comics, graphic novels — or anything that's got a visual component along with a text component — so that they understand how things are laid out on the page in addition to just getting told what's happening," DeFrain said.

With comic books or graphic novels, stories aren't always told in a linear format. There are visual clues as to where the readers' eyes should go next. With the app, the users can use their fingers to drag across and see which way things are set up. They can also touch different areas of the screen to find out what's on the screen.

For instance, DeFrain said, there's one two-page spread he teaches where one of the characters is freaking out, "and you see all this stuff happening all over the page."

He can verbally tell a visually impaired student what's happening, he said, "but that doesn't convey all the different things that are going on in the character's head. If you're fully sighted, when you open up that page, your eye goes where it wants to go. You interpret it at your own speed and in your own way."

The Vizling app is twofold: There's audio to read the words of the book, and sensory clues offer directional insight to the reader.

"We've got the traditional audio tracks that would explain things that visually impaired people are used to working with, but they can also use haptic or vibrating response so that they can see the preferred way that you're supposed to read the comic," DeFrain said.

The \$11,000 grant from the John A. See Innovation Award will help DeFrain and his team further develop Vizling toward a viable product.

"We couldn't be more pleased to receive a John A. See Award," DeFrain said. "In addition to some much-appreciated validation for our work, this fund will allow us to move our project forward through testing and by conducting surveys with blind and visually impaired individuals."

Each year the review committee for the John A. See Innovation Award is presented with some of Wichita State's most creative and timely concepts.

"Narrowing it down to the awardees is never an easy process but is based on many factors linked to Mr. See's intent to commercialize university ideas," said Dr. Jeremy Patterson, dean of the College of Innovation and Design and interim executive director for the Office of Innovation & New Ventures. "Vizling is an excellent example of what the See Award represents. It's a good idea that has taken a lot of effort to get it to its current concept to ensure it has value, and it's backed by a team that has passion and is committed to moving forward."

DeFrain and his team are hoping to be "pretty far down the road in two years" with Vizling's development. When the app is fully functional, each individual comic book or graphic novel will need to be translated into a language that can be read by Vizling.

“The idea is that this turns into something that's kind of like a Netflix of comics that will be shared with the world at every reading level,” DeFrain said.