Bowling Green State University

ScholarWorks@BGSU

Fall 12-3-2021

The Puppy in the Polka Dot Pajamas: Animating Children's Literature Through Short Film

Grace Phillips
gmphill@bgsu.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarworks.bgsu.edu/honorsprojects

Part of the Interdisciplinary Arts and Media Commons

How does access to this work benefit you? Let us know!

The Puppy in the Polka Dot Pajamas: Animating Children's Literature Through Short Film

Grace Phillips

Honors Project

Submitted to the Honors College at Bowling Green State University in

partial fulfillment of the requirements for graduation with University Honors

Spring 2022

Amanda McGuire Rzicznek, English Department, Primary Advisor

Laney Fugett, Department of Visual Communications &

Technology Education, Secondary Advisor

Abstract

The following written defense describes the guiding research, methodologies, and end results of my yearlong project - creating a digital children's book and an accompanying short film. The project was initially inspired by an event at home in which my family was laughing at our small dog for the way he looked after we dressed him in pajamas, after which my dad made a comment that it would be heinous of us to treat a human being the same way. This comment inspired me to adopt my own approach as to how humans can learn from the animal kingdom. The remaining sections of this paper delve into further detail of how I took this isolated moment and created a multimedia storytelling experience that will hopefully inspire young readers to both feel confident with their self-expression and be mindful of how they speak to others.

Keywords: children's literature, digital media, short film

Introduction & Guiding Research Question

How can anthropomorphism in early reader picture books impact children's self-esteem?

This is the question that guided the creation of my project. There are many notable dissimilarities separating the human and canine species, and children of picture book-reading age are able to discern that they are not the same type of animal as a dog (Guardo & Bohan, 1971). However, many timeless children's stories utilize the animal kingdom to deliver serious human themes in a more palatable fashion for juvenile readers, including issues of bullying and self-esteem. When I began this project, my intention was to do the same, with my story utilizing a cast of canine characters to deliver a deeply impactful story of bullying, acceptance, and the confidence for self-expression.

Literature Review

The majority of the literature review for this project was composed of children's books that contained similar themes to what I wanted to incorporate into my own story. Many of these reference works used human characters to thoroughly explain authentically human concepts such as self-expression and gender identity, while others focused heavily on the lifestyles and characteristics of dogs. One of the canine-focused works that held significant influence over my creative decisions was Kelly DiPucchio's *Gaston*, a tale in which a puppy who was accidentally separated from his biological litter learns to embrace his unique identity (DiPucchio, 2014). Likewise, Robb Pearlman's *Pink is for Boys* uses human children in his own story to share a simple yet inspiring message that there is no need for fashion or color to be as aggressively gendered as they are in modern society (Pearlman, 2018). These drastically different perspectives, along with many others of additional works, aided me in further refining my story

idea to fit perfectly in between – the experience of a puppy that could just as well happen to a young human child.

Literature textbooks, professional blogs, and scholarly articles bolstered the children's literature with a strong academic foundation. When conducting my research, the focus of my inquiry was how children can be encouraged while developing their unique self-identities and how they can be equipped to combat early childhood bullying. Supporting a child's journey of self-expression is a process that begins in toddlerhood; when children can navigate the world independently, they develop a desire to dress independently as well. According to an excerpt from a 1990 parenting editorial, toddlers who are starting to self-dress should be encouraged to value function over form, so as not to foster insecurity about their sense of style and appreciate the protective factors of their fashion (Katz, 1990). This focus on practicality is a key element to my story and a valuable life lesson for both my protagonist and my young, impressionable readers.

Even with exterior encouragement, children will likely encounter bullying when they reach school age and may be targeted for a variety of reasons beyond their fashion sense. For young victims, perpetrators, and bystanders alike, it is crucial all children learn why bullying is harmful and to celebrate their differences rather than ridiculing them. Researchers have suggested an approach that does not focus on punishing the bullies, but rather promoting acceptance and fostering a safe environment (Yaruss, Reeves, & Herring, 2018). This gentle approach to anti-bullying campaigning influenced how I crafted the resolution of my story; matching violence with violence is not what I want to promote to young readers, but instead with kindness. To achieve a world in which everyone can safely and authentically express their individuality, we must teach the youths in our lives healthy ideals of acceptance and tolerance.

Description of Methodology

Following my research period in early 2021, I spent the summer of the year drafting the text of my story. I relied heavily on guidelines for transitional literature established by Kathleen Horning while developing the structure of the text, considering factors such as words per line, lines per page, grammatical complexity, and font size (Horning, 2010). Using these suggestions, I was able to harness my general idea into a clear, developed story. Using this finalized text, I then used Adobe InDesign to create thumbnails of page layouts; with these layouts, I was able to visualize how the text would best look on each page and how much room I had to illustrate.

Once I had a solid notion of where my text and illustrations would be, I began brainstorming the content of my illustrations. In the early stages of this project, I intended to commission a student to illustrate for me; when the stage of the project finally arrived, I concluded that I would rather produce a final product that was as much my own work as possible. My key consideration when deciding what to draw was a balance of what parts of the written story were most important to show and what specific details I omitted from the text for the purpose of showing in the art. I modeled the protagonist of the book after my own dog, a Yorkshire Terrier who I dress in a red and white polka dot pajama set when the weather grows cold. For the dogs that would bully him, I wanted multiple dogs that were diverse in size appearance to add interest to the illustrations. I opted for one large, one medium, and one small dog with several varying features; a chocolate Labrador with floppy ears, a long tail, and dark hair, a Pitbull with semi-folded ears, a short tail, and gray hair, and a Chihuahua with pointy ears, a medium tail, and long orange hair. This cast of characters were arranged together on snowy backdrops to visualize and supplement the events of the written story.

Once the book was fully assembled within InDesign, I exported the pages and spreads as individual Portable Network Graphic (PNG) images. I then used Acrobat to organize the pages in the correct order and created a Portable Document Format (PDF) document to serve as the digital copy of the book. With the same PNG images, a recorded voiceover, and a page turn sound effect, I used Premiere Pro to create a read-aloud video that showcases the book in its entirety. The PDF and video deliverables both showcase the full story and can be viewed individually or in tandem.

Description of Results

The story I created, as showcased in both PDF and video form, is titled *The Puppy in the Polka Dot Pajamas.* It introduces a protagonist known simply as "the puppy," a Yorkshire Terrier who treasures the pajamas he wears because they keep him warm in the cold town where he lives. The puppy is bullied by three other dogs in the town because they believe dogs should not wear clothes, causing deep insecurity and uncertainty to root into the puppy and leading him to the decision to take off his pajamas. As a result, the other dogs welcome the puppy to be friends with them; this initially pleases him, but he begins to miss his beloved pajamas. When a winter storm arrives to the town, the puppy contemplates if he should put the polka dot pajamas back on to make the adverse conditions more bearable. At this moment, he learns the value of fashion for function and not as a reason for ridicule. Pajamas do not make him a poor dog – they make him a warm dog! He puts the pajamas back on and returns to the other dogs, who come around to the idea and join him in wearing pajamas, resolving the bullying that had earlier taken place.

My final deliverables utilize an amalgamation of digital techniques and media to share a story anthropomorphizing human issues of bullying, low confidence, and hesitance to freely self-express. When I established my research question and project idea roughly a year ago, my goal was to use cute canine characters to make a serious human issue more palatable for early readers. Struggles with bullying, low self-esteem, and developing a unique identity are common in school-age children, and I encountered all of these myself when I was still young enough to be reading picture books. Regardless of age, these topics are never easy to openly discuss. By incorporating a factor of cuteness and removing more obvious human elements, a story that remains relevant to its human readers is delivered in a less sensitive manner. I hope that *The Puppy in the Polka Dot Pajamas* can open up more opportunities for comfortable discussion of uncomfortable issues.

As a transitional work, my story is serving an underserved sector of the literary market. Transitional literature is defined by Horning as "a bridge between easy readers and longer chapter books," typically featuring "simple vocabulary," "direct and uncomplicated sentences", and frequent illustration, all at a level easy for young readers to comprehend but slightly more complex than the simplest picture books on the market (Horning, 2010). When I was in the earliest stages of brainstorming my project last year, my initial goal was to make an easy reader for the youngest children who could read on their own; I first learned about the existence of transitional literature in my research phase thanks to my primary advisor and felt immediately compelled to help expand an underdeveloped sector of young storytelling. The story undoubtedly is still a picture book, but it contains a heavier proportion of text that will aid young readers into choosing pieces with no illustration later in their reading careers. I created *The Puppy in the Polka Dot Pajamas* to boost readers' confidence in the face of adversity; with the transitional

style used in the making of the book, I hope I am also boosting their confidence in their ever-invaluable reading abilities.

Implications for Future Practice

This project is just a minor testament to the boundless future possibilities of multimedia storytelling experiences for early readers. The industry of traditional printed literature has long dominated the attention of the consumer market, but the world has been consistently making a shift toward the digital realm for the past few decades. This is not to say that digital copies and read-aloud films should fully replace printed books, as these are often treasured family artifacts passed down for several generations. However, books delivered in digital formats are highly versatile. When provided alongside a printed copy, they can animate a child's favorite story and bring it to life. For children who are frequently exposed to tablets (or parents who are too busy to read to their kids), having digital copies and read-aloud videos available can bolster screen time with education. On the downside, devices need to be charged (and, if viewing deliverables online, a connection to the Internet) and physical copies can be easily lost or damaged. No medium is without pros and cons alike. However, with a combination of media made available to early readers, the possibilities for growth and learning are endless.

References

DiPucchio, Kelly. (2014). *Gaston*. New York, NY: Atheneum Books for Young Readers.

Guardo, Carol J., & Bohan, Janis B. (1971). Development of a sense of self-identity in children. *Child Development, 42*(6), 1909-1921. doi: 10.2307/1127594

Horning, Kathleen T. (2010). *From cover to cover: Evaluating and reviewing children's books* (pp. 114-137). New York, NY: Harper Collins Publishers.

Katz, Lilian G. (1990, 02). "What would you like to wear?". *Parents, 65,* 182. Retrieved from https://search-proquest-com.ezproxy.bgsu.edu/magazines/what-would-you-like-wear/docview/1898984267/se-2?accountid=26417

Pearlman, Robb. (2018). *Pink is for boys*. Philadelphia, PA: Running Press Kids.

Yaruss, J.S., Reeves, Nina, & Herring, Caryn. (2018, August 24). How speech-language pathologists can minimize bullying of children who stutter. doi:10.1055/s-0038-1667163