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Storytelling Through Comics: An Animated Reflection

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Skylar Kaster
Storytelling Through Comics: An Animated Reflection
Honors Capstone Materials
Fall 2020

Link to Animation:

<https://drive.google.com/file/d/1z2EW1u3KHhAw9VKjet7C6fmTcKyiDJVn/view?usp=sharing>

Artist's Reflection

Beginning at the end of my junior year I began to immerse myself in animation, starting with digital animation in March of 2020 and moving towards stop motion animation in May. I've wanted to find any excuse, any project, any time I can to explore stop motion more. It feels timely that I finally discovered an art form that excites me the way that stop motion animation does. It's the perfect cherry on top of my studio art education at Western, the perfect compass as I finish my last quarter. Since the Honors Capstone Project is a reflection on your undergraduate experience, I figured stop motion would be the best medium for me to complete the project in. Additionally, I've become a cartoonist during my college experience. I wanted to reflect on that growth, as well as learn more about cartoonists that have inspired me since childhood. Thus my Honors Capstone, "Storytelling Through Comics: An Animated Reflection" was born.

I decided the best way to showcase my research on the cartooning world was to animate my own character (who is a personification of myself), presenting the information and speaking directly to the audience. She interacts with symbols and characters drawn from the script, and engages in conversation with the artists that I researched: Bill Watterson of *Calvin and Hobbes*, Jim Davis of *Garfield*, Gary Larson of *The Far Side*, and Cathy Guisewite of *Cathy*.

Whiteboard stop motion is something that I've been wanting to explore, so I chose that medium in order to further boost my animation experience. As an amateur animator, I have limited supplies and space, and my materials were gathered objects from around my house: a kitchen table, 2 rubber boots, and a block of wood became the structure on which to place my phone to take photos. I brought in several lamps to create the best lighting possible, and gathered expo markers and a large whiteboard. It was empowering to realize that I didn't need expensive materials to make an animation work well. All animation requires lots of pre-production to estimate how many photos are needed for each frame, in order for the animation to occur with the right timing and not go too quickly or too slow. I was working with a 12 fps (frames per second) framerate, and thus needed to calculate the timing of my animation with my voiceover, read from the script. I initially calculated that the animation would be approximately 2,500 photos, but it ended up being over 6,000. Upon reflection I believe I should have completed the voiceover first, in order to time the animation better.

One of the most difficult parts about this project was putting my script together. I knew I had the skills to do the animation, but I was intimidated by the research portion. It took me several months to feel satisfied with the information I gathered, and how to organize it. When I finally completed it, it was a weight off my shoulders. I had a wonderful time doing most of the research, though; it was great fun to hear the artists' thoughts on their comics and relate that back

to my own cartooning experience. Technical issues with Adobe Premiere Pro (my video editing and compiling software) was another frustrating aspect of the project, and had me reaching out to multiple teachers and peers for help. In the end, unfortunately, I had to screen record my Premiere file playing, because exporting issues prevented me from creating a video file.

The most important thing I learned from this project was about my artistic workflow. This is the largest artistic and animated project I have ever undertaken, and it shined an illuminating light on my artistic process. Although at times I disdained researching my project, it helped me to organize my thoughts and think about how I was going to animate and present the information. It gave me a sturdy foundation from which to draw from. Additionally, as this animation was completed during a wholly remote quarter, without the structure of school, I had much more time to work in my studio. It helped me to look forward to what an artistic career might look like. It also helped me to find the hours at which I was most productive, and how to shape my day in order to cultivate artistic workflow and foster productivity. I learned that I must warm up my hand by sketching if I hadn't done any drawing that day, which also helped prepare my mind for the (sometimes grueling) process of animation. While working, I learned to trust where I was going and why - a lifelong skill to have.

From this animation, I hope that my audience will glean a better and more familiar idea of what the comic-making process is. One of the most frustrating parts about the art world for me is its seemingly inaccessible platform; there are many miscommunications (and strong opinions) that tend to scare others away by making the art world seem elevated and conceited. I believe that comic-making is a much more approachable doorway into the art world, and wish to share that with others. There are many parts of the art world that do require critical analysis and others that are unfortunately barred with gatekeeping. In my experience comics are a wonderful entry point, and offer a middle ground from which to share personal experiences.

Script

(a bun slowly starts making its way onto the screen, revealing the character's face very close to the viewer)

“HELLO!!”

“Sorry I guess I’m a little too close here... let me back up...”

“Okay, lets try this again! My name is Skylar and I’m really excited to share some stuff with you today”.

“A few of you may know that I am a cartoonist! Which is *pretty* fancy, right?”

(suddenly a beret and a pen appear in my hand, sitting at a desk with a piece of paper)

“Fancy, eh? It is something that is almost always a part of my daily life, and has been for a couple of years now.”

(calendar appears, doodles happening in every day)

(character gets up from the desk and walks over to center screen, looks at viewer, claps hands)

“So! I wanted to do a deep dive into the world of cartooning

(this is written on the screen)

And we’re *not* talking the superhero cartoons - more the domestic ones from 70s, 80s and 90s, like:”

(the decades are written on the screen)

(starts making a list)

“Calvin and Hobbes..Garfield...Far Side...and one more that I grew up with.

I wanted to hear what the artists had to say, and what was important to them when making these comics. It might even help inspire me with my own work!”

“So here we go.

Part 1: The Comics, The Artists, and How It All Works(or, how it used to work)”

(this is written on the screen)

(screen is blank for a moment)

“Before we hear from the artists, let’s talk about the big boys in the newspaper comic industry: THE SYNDICATES.”

(a big dude with a cigar (which spells out syndicates in the smoke) in his mouth appears beside our character. He is much larger)

“*These* guys were a pretty big deal when you go back to the beginning of newspaper comics.

Explained by the King Features syndicates website(2019):“A syndicate edits, packages, promotes, prints, sells and distributes comic strips...around the world. We bring comics from a cartoonist to the fans!”(Submitting Comic Strips and Panels section, para. 6).

(have the syndicate dude blink a couple times)

“They are also the ones that handle *licensing* - which is basically the agreement that the cartoons, aka the intellectual property of the artist, can be re-sold and re-printed in tons of different forms”(Licensing International, 2019).

(character was holding a comic book of little red, and then mugs, t shirts, big blow-up characters, etc etc starts appearing one by one until the screen is filled)

“Yikes! This is crazy. Let’s hear what the artists have to say about all this hullabaloo”

(as each caricature of the comic artist pops up(with name + comic over top of circle)

“Please welcome Bill Watterson of Calvin & Hobbes, Jim Davis of Garfield, and Gary Larson of The Far Side”

(Characters begin speaking with speech bubbles)

Bill Watterson: “It is virtually impossible to get into newspapers without a syndicate...the cartoonist has few alternatives to the syndicate’s terms...Universal would not sell my strip to newspapers unless I gave the syndicate the right to merchandise the strip in other media”(Watterson, 8 and 12).

Jim Davis: “Someone wrote this about me: “By 2002, it(Garfield) had the Guinness World Record for the most widely syndicated comic strip in the world...There are countless bestselling Garfield books...television series, films, toys, clothes, mugs...”(Flood, para. 6)

Gary Larson: “Someone interviewed me in 1987 about this and said: “He is honestly embarrassed that his fame has allowed people to mail his cartoons, or have them on mugs”... he calls it “the merchandising monster”...(ABC, minute 11:57)

“ but I wouldn’t want the readers...to suddenly get this sense that its becoming real mainstream, that I’m doing it for the dollars...”(ABC, minute 12:26).

(characters are nodding and looking from artist to artist. Artists stay on the screen in their bubbles - maybe putting a hand or two on the frame, or putting their elbow/arm out- for a continued discussion/interview with the character)

Character: “Wow! I’m noticing that you don’t like the syndication very much, do you Bill?”

NOTE ON THIS NEXT SECTION(Bill Watterson): This was too much information to fit into the animation, but I feel that it is really important to include all of it. The underlined portion is what was NOT included in the animation.

Watterson: “Well no! I don’t...I have no interest in turning my characters into commodities(West, “Why doesn’t a doll fit into your definition of appropriate licensing?” section)..in my case, I’m convinced that licensing would sell out the soul of Calvin and Hobbes(“What’s wrong with indulging the public’s interests?” section)...I take cartoons seriously as an art form, so I think with an issue like licensing, it’s important to analyze what my strip is about, and what makes it work. It’s easy to transfer the essence of a gag-oriented strip, especially a one-panel gag strip, from the newspaper page to a T-shirt, a mug, a greeting card, and so on...Note pads and coffee mugs just aren’t appropriate vehicles for what I’m trying to do here” (“You’ve rejected licensing your strip’s characters. Why?” section).

Character: “Yeah, that makes sense. Characters are important! But Jim, you don’t seem to mind licensing.”

(Jim nods, and says:)

Davis: “I look for things that resonate with people that they can use to express themselves”
(VICE News, minute 4:14)

Character: “ And Gary, what do you think?”

Larson: “Comic pages are now becoming little advertising vehicles... and I think it sucks. I think it should be about humor” (ABC, minute 12:47).

Character: “Let’s change the subject - *what’s it like creating the characters?*”
(all the artists smile and cheer up a bit - this is something they love)

Watterson: “When I come up with a topic, I look at it through Calvin’s eyes””(Watterson, 19).

Davis: “It’s almost as easy as it sounds because Garfield writes his own material...(Chuck The MovieGuy, minute 00:51)

“I put him in a situation and then I just watch him.”(minute 2:19)

Larson: “...I didn’t assign a specific name or persona to any of them(my characters). One of my characters could be teaching a class one day and get trampled by an elephant the next.”(Gustines, “Why did you avoid recurring characters?” section)

Character: “It sounds like a lot of you are spontaneous in your comic creation!”
(artists nod and verbally agree)

Character: Now we have a guest! Please welcome Cathy Guisewite, who illustrated the Cathy comics, also popular in the 80s! Cathy, what do you have to say about creating your character?

Cathy: “Cathy was kind of my heart...Other stronger characters in the strip like Andrea were more my brain”(Neary, para. 2)

Character: That’s a really great point, Cathy.

One final question for everybody: Why do you draw comics? Who is it for?

Larson: “I think the first thing I want to do is satisfy myself, and do something that would make me laugh...(ABC, minute 2:43) “I was doing something I loved, getting by, and that’s what mattered”(Gustines, “At what point did you know the strip was a success?” section)

Guisewite: “I wasn’t intending to create a comic strip to begin with. So I think I wasn’t aware that when the strip started, there had never been a woman’s voice quite like this in the newspaper...But I love the connection that women, especially, have had with it.”(Cavna, “When you launched the strip in 1976, did you set out to speak especially to women in this way?” section)

Davis: “I feel a real responsibility to balance the scales. With what’s going on in the economy, in politics, it’s awful and very depressing, so the purpose of the comics is to lighten things up, to go, ‘Hey, let’s not take ourselves so seriously, folks.”(Flood, para. 12)

Watterson: “Really, I don’t understand it, since I never set out to make *Calvin and Hobbes* a popular strip. I just draw it for myself...(West, “How do you explain the popularity of *Calvin and Hobbes*?” section).

Character: “Great points from everybody! I understand how you guys feel when you’re creating - the characters become separate from you, yet they are an extension of yourself, your feelings, and your situations. Thanks so much, everyone! You all are truly my heroes.”

(artists nod and they all wave/say goodbye, and then their bubbles shrink and disappear)

“Wow. That was awesome. It made me think about my own experience, too. So let’s jump into

Part 2: My Cartooning Experience and the Digital World Around Me”

“As we discussed before, I’ve been a comic artist for a few years now.

(on “few years now” make a 1 - 2 - 3 number progression)

“I started drawing comics as a way to think about the world around me, and a way to think about my own feelings. I was a freshman in college, I was in a new place, and I was searching around for a community - a perfect time to find a new coping mechanism!

Look at some of these old ones!”

(find old paper comics and move them across the board)

“It’s funny to look back on these old ones, even from just a couple years ago. I’ve seen it in Calvin and Hobbes, and in Garfield too - styles, stories, and intentions can change throughout time. Look at the new ones that I’ve done!”

(new paper comics move across board)

“And more now than ever I share my comics via Instagram - pretty sweet, right?”

(actual phone come into photo and shows my instagram profile)

“The accessibility of comics is a lot wider now thanks to social media. There are more digital platforms and communities, and they are often free! Thanks to an informative blog I found by the comic artist Kotopopi, a few examples are WebToon, Tapas, SmackJeeves, and ComicFury!

(Kotopopi, “Where To Host Your Comic” section)

Crazy names, right??”

“And of course, there are the social media giants too.”

“A lot of different artists can post their comics on some of these sites. They don’t need to necessarily be controlled by a syndicate - remember those?”

(whispers behind hand, points a thumb back at the syndicate character who appears in the background)

“And syndicates still exist! A lot of them accept digital submissions now...”

(Syndicate character comes up behind the character. Sunglasses pop on his eyes)

“...like the Creators Syndicate! They say on their website: “Beginning in 2015, Creators will only accept submissions digitally.” (Creators Syndicate, “We’d Like You To Know” section)

(the syndicate character is holding a phone and is reading off of it)

“BUT! Some habits die hard...”

(his sunglasses and hat disappear, and he reads off of a piece of paper)

“The King Features Syndicate only accepts paper submissions and PDF email format(King Features Syndicate, 2019)

(the syndicate guy looks down at little red and says)

Syndicate guy: “Catch ya on the flip side, kid”

(he gives her a thumbs up and is erased. She is elated and surprised)

“Oh my god! He *smiled* at me! He *never* smiles!”

“Anyways. There’s multiple ways of sharing comics now, and not just through newspapers!”
“As I mentioned, I post my comics on Instagram, but mostly they are for *me*, just like so many of the other artists that we heard from today. They are a way for me to have a quick moment to myself, to process my thoughts, or to make myself laugh. Since I’m not on the track to become a *professional* comic artist, drawing comics for me is about fun. There is zero pressure to perform, or be as funny as I can be, or whatever. They are for my own love of drawing.”

“So to wrap this all up, let’s zoom way the heck out here for a second. It’s obviously important to me, but why is this important to **EVERYBODY ELSE?**”

(sentence appears in big text on the whiteboard)

“We live in a visual world - and “we” includes all human beings, not just artists! Many of us live in a world that is filled to the brim with graphics, logos, illustrations, and doodles all over - you just have to know how to really see them.”

(doodles and little things bouncing around the screen)

“And we can bond emotionally with images - like cartoon characters in the newspaper. You connect to them! These artists have touched people’s heartstrings all over the world.”

“*And*, creating comics is something that will be accessible not only to me for a long time, but to a wide variety of audiences - you don’t need trained artistic skill, expensive materials, or a lot of artistic connections to draw something funny. It allows for a diversity of voices. It creates community.”

“Cartoonists connect to people, through characters, through emotions, and through storytelling.”
“And that’s what I want to do through my comics.”

(She smiles, waves, and then is erased)

THE END

Animation and Voiceover by Skylar Kaster

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Note about Characters: Referencing the [Fair Use Checklist](#) from Kenneth D. Crews at Columbia University, I determined that the reproduction of these characters original to their authors was within the parameters of Fair Use, under Copyright Law.

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