

Using animation, symbolism and discovery to convey a global social issue.

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Abstract: Guided discovery is a key principle of constructivist learning. (Mayer 2004). The act of discovery creates an irrefutable physiological experience in the learner; an experience that reinforces an expectation for more discovery, creating a positive cycle of discover, learn, discover, and so on. (Hodgkinson 2008). This paper looks at story-telling using symbolism to generate the sense of discovery in the viewer. Using an animated movie to explore the global social issue of immigration, a range of techniques including metaphor and symbolism are used to generate discovery in the viewer, turning the viewer from a passive participant to an active participant. In doing so, this paper seeks to demonstrate that any potentially passive situation can be turned around into a discovery-filled cognitively engaging activity.

Can passive be active?

The physiological process of discovery is a chemically rewarding one for the learner. As described in Hodgkinson (2008) this process is the body's way to facilitate reward-based learning. It is a way of highlighting the best outcome, and setting up a memory, or somatic marker (Damasio 1994). "This was good, let's do it again". As summarised by Marr, (2002) it is the new knowledge, or surprise reward that produces the greatest pleasure and therefore most encourages learning.

This can be a largely cognitive activity – it does not necessarily require physical actions or activities. The cognitive process alone is sufficient to trigger a stimulating, memorable and desirable experience. This experience can also be an individual one. There is no requirement for teamwork or collaboration with others. The essential process is the series of steps that take the learner from encounter, to focus, decision, discovery and reward. This physically passive involvement goes some way to explain why we enjoy the "oh I get it" moments we experience in movies, presentations and lectures.

Semiotics and symbolism

With this notion of designed discovery in mind, the intention was to apply this to an animated narrative. The topic is the Tampa boat people incident of 2001 (Fox 2010). In order to design the moments of discovery that will be embedded in the narrative, a brief outline of semiotics and symbolism is required.

Semiotics is the study of "signs" and the implied meanings of these signs. A "sign" can include words, images, objects and sounds. The sign itself is referred to as the signifier, or denotation, and the meaning of that sign is referred to as the signified, or connotation. Founded by the linguist Ferdinand de Saussure (1857–1913) semiotics is the "science which studies the role of signs as part of social life" (Saussure 1983). In 1964, Roland Barthes expanded semiotics to include all media; "semiology aims to take in any system of signs, whatever their substance and limits; images, gestures, musical sounds, objects, and the complex associations of all of these, which form the content of ritual, convention or public entertainment: these constitute, if not languages, at least systems of signification" (Barthes 1976).

In this often cited example of a magazine cover (figure 1), Barthes describes two orders of meaning:

1. The literal signifier or denotation: a young dark skinned boy in a French uniform saluting, eyes uplifted, most likely fixed on the French national flag.

2. The signified, or connotation of the sign: “that France is a great empire, that all her sons, without any colour discrimination, faithfully serve under her flag,” (Mythologies, p116).



Figure 1: Barthes' example.

Some signs are understood within a single culture, and some are understood across multiple cultures. In his book *Mythologies*, (1957) Barthes discusses codes and conventions by which certain meanings are universally accepted for all societies. He calls this a “mythology” that makes certain meanings natural or common-sense to most citizens. These mythologies are supported by codes; practices, languages and conventions which are natural and embedded.

The success of a mythology then, relies on the shared ideology between cultures – a human expression of happiness or grief is the same for all cultures. However, problems can occur when a symbol crosses cultures or contexts. Chu (2003) discusses how both American and Hong Kong students can name the North American buffalo on a denotational level, but only the U.S. students understand the implied signification of pioneering, strength, and indigenous bravery the buffalo represents. Similarly, a red rose is often a symbol of love, but it can also be a symbol of socialism. If the symbol does not cross cultural boundaries, meanings will be multiplied and confused.

When symbols are used in animation, similar problems of cultural specificity arise. One example is the role of the umbrella in Studio Ghibli's movie *My Neighbour Totoro*. In Japanese culture, the umbrella is a symbol of affection, caring, or love. In *Totoro*, the young Satsuki gives her umbrella to the forest spirit Totoro, to shelter him from the rain, demonstrating care and thoughtfulness. In a second scene the young boy Kanta, gives his umbrella to Satsuki during a downpour, but then runs away nervously in the pouring rain. In this way, he demonstrates his honour and signals his romantic interest in Satsuki. In western cinema, by comparison, umbrellas are used to symbolise a character's difficulties or repressed mood, or as magical accessories to dance or fly. (figure 3)



Figure 3: Umbrella symbols

But even in a specific area such as Japanese anime, many symbols come closer to Barthes' description of cross-cultural myth. A common theme in anime is that of the nuclear apocalypse. In the film *Akira* (1989) Philip Brophy describes how the characters are “post-nuclear psycho-genetic beings”, in a culture and landscape scarred by a nuclear past yet fully capable of transcending that past (Brophy 2006 p26). The film's written and visual narrative convey these modern cyber-cultural personas very clearly.

Design of semiotics and symbols for the animated short movie

The central themes of animated narrative for this project are emigration and compassion. The inspiration for this work is the Tampa boat incident of 2001. In August 2001 the Norwegian container ship MV Tampa picked up 433 Afghan refugees on the high seas near Australia. The Australian government refused entry to Australia, provoking a humanitarian issue, a political controversy and a diplomatic dispute with Norway. Norway accused Australia of failing to meet its obligations under international law. Australia rapidly introduced a hastily assembled Border Protection Bill to "determine who will enter and reside in Australia" (Fox 2010). The asylum seekers were taken to the nearby island Nauru to be processed. It took a further seven years for all of the refugees to be finally settled.

The animation is not an info-graphic animation designed to impart details about the Tampa incident. No object in the movie has a direct link with any object from the Tampa incident. However every object is symbolic. At the denotated level, viewers will recognise many elements – such as the tallness of the ship, the concern of the captain, the state of the refugee's village and others. At the connotated level there is much to find. Viewers may observe that the ship's height is exaggerated, representing the vast difference of scale between the technologically advanced Tampa, and the refugees' wooden boat. The captain and his master are both dressed in imperial fashion, which represents both the dominating culture, but also suggests an irony in time back to the costumes of the colonising powers, themselves a kind of "refugee". The refugee character not only comes from a disheveled village, but carries a wheeled suitcase, reflecting that surprising ironic contrast of poverty with technology. These, and many other symbols, are there to provoke the viewer to question, examine, and ideally discover for themselves a correlation with their own world views. At this time of writing, only short test scenes have been available, but response from viewers so far are very favourable.

Development

Several key themes stood out from the Tampa incident that will directly inform the design of the movie:

- The refugees were a very long way from their home country, in a foreign sea, which must seem as alien to them as the desert is to Pacific island nations.
- The refugee's boat was fragile and puny when compared to the massive hulk of the Tampa, and while the Tampa was rescuing the refugees, there was real risk of inadvertently smashing the refugee's wooden boat against the towering steel sides.
- Australia has only been colonised for little over 150 years, but new, uninvited "colonists" were not welcome.
- There was such a dramatic display of contrast between the wealth and power of the Tampa and modern civilisation with the desperation and poverty of the refugees.

These key themes were pivotal in designing the narrative of the movie. Applying the principles of symbolism, a balance between literalness and connotation was sought: If symbols were too literal, the inferences would be obvious, and the benefits of discovery would be reduced. If the symbols were too obscure or culturally specific, the messages would fail outright or be limited to a specific audience. The characters are designed to be archetypes, embodying known universal concepts and behaviours. For example, the female master of the ship, "The Countess" (figure 3) represents the modern imperialist government. Her moods and expressions of approval and disapproval are synonymous with the governments and political pressures that play in events such as these. Her personification also implies that governments are not only systems and bureaucracies, but also are comprised of real people, forced to deal with situations that affect other real people.

The environment is the desert, a symbol of the ocean, only this time an ocean of sand – a place where one cannot stop, where there is no food nor water, and has nowhere to rest. (Figure 3) The ship would be excessively tall, as was the Tampa. It would be inaccessible save for one small door at ground level. This references the small flimsy ladders that the refugees needed to climb to get to safety. The ship would also have some characteristics of an old world sailing ship, to imply that this ship is also a ship of colonisation, although one backed by wealth and technology. (Figure 3)



Figure 3 : Images from the animated movie “Displaced”.

The refugee would be a girl of middle Asian appearance, slightly exotic to the western audience. She is awaiting her opportunity to leave her deserted village. There is no water remaining, no one else living there, no reason to stay. She is ready to travel, dressed in her ceremonial clothes, and has a wheeled suitcase ready packed. (Figure 3). A further symbol of the suitcase is that these are ubiquitous of modern travel, creating a shared experience amongst all travellers. And as happens in real life, the girl is in a hurry, the suitcase trips, falls and tumbles in the most awkward way, destroying the water bottle, spilling water onto the dry sand.

The male lead character is “The Count”. He is busy operating his ship, looking for a place to berth under the supervision of The Countess. This references the captain of the Tampa, who was under a range of pressures from his employer, the two governments and the rules of the high seas. The Count come across the girl, and after some pressured moments of indecision, rescues her from her plight.

Summary

The use of symbolism in animated film making is not new. Interviews with film makers will often reveal the hidden messages placed in a movie, available for the audience to discover and enjoy. What this paper sets out to do, is to demonstrate how this process is an intentional designed process that can be applied to a range of situations. The key aspect is that of guided discovery, and the things to be discovered need to be intentionally planted before they can be found. In a lecture situation, the simplest form of this is the question to the audience, even if it is rhetorical. Ideally, any presentation, from an animated movie to a lecture, has carefully designed clues and symbols that creates questions, suggests solutions, and reveals answers, all stage managed by the presenter. This approach can potentially turn any passive situation into a discovery-filled cognitively engaging activity.

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