Chapter 6
Making, Creating and Shaping Meaning Through the Art of Digital Storytelling

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Digital storytelling is an emerging and developing art form that is widely used informally on social network sites, like YouTube™ and Facebook™, and is gaining popularity in formal school settings as a means of engaging students' learning, providing them with a platform to express ideas and knowledge, and of fostering their multiliteracies. This chapter discusses *Youth Tell*, a digital storytelling project with Singapore youth, which aimed to encourage young people's media and literacy practices, and closely examines one of the stories a group of young people created. The *Youth Tell* study sought to investigate the participating youth's ability to communicate multimodally and to explore their interests and expressions of self through digital storytelling in order to better understand the ways they engaged in, interacted with, and managed new media platforms.

Creating and Making Meaning in a Digital Age

Gee (2008) reminds us that in this technological age notions of literacy are changing significantly and our understandings of literacy are expanding. Traditional theories that have dictated our understandings of how we communicate through language have become insufficient (Kress 2000). The advent of interactive electronic digital texts has called for different types of reading, writing and communication skills than the 'traditional' literacy skills found in linear 'print-based' forms (Luke 2000, p. 72). Lateral thinking is needed to work with hypertexts, critical thinking to source and choose information on the Web, and intercultural understanding when operating in virtual communities (Ibid). When we think about literacy today, we need to take into consideration the multitude of text types now available to us, as well as the social

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contexts in which they are applied and by whom, and the how they connect to information or media technologies (New London Group 2000, p. 9).

The emphasis on literacy steered by many governments and schools around the world has principally been dominated by a focus on the development of skills in the reading, writing and comprehension of printed texts. This has been particularly evident in English Language learning in the examination dominated education system in Singapore. With its citizens its chief resource, Singapore's education system focuses on economically driven subjects, particularly mathematics, sciences, technology and English Language (Cheah 1998; Kwek et al. 2007). A multicultural, multilingual country with a diverse ethnic population consisting of 74 % Chinese, 13 % Malay, 9.2 % Indian, and 3.8 % others (Singapore Department of Statistics 2010), Singapore has four official languages – Mandarin, Malay, Tamil (considered Mother Tongue) and English. However, English is 'the dominant language', crossing Singapore's 'interracial divides', and its proficiency is greatly valued as it is employed for purposes of 'administration, business and education' (Kwek et al. 2007). All classes in Singapore schools, apart from 'Mother Tongue', are conducted in English, yet just over 32 % of the population converses in English (Singapore Department of Statistics 2010) at home.

One of the outcomes of the Singapore education system's culture of testing has been the pressure it places on students to 'achieve' academic success and on parents and teachers to help them get there (Cheah 1998). Students begin a basic form of streaming in Primary 4 (9–10 years). Streaming is formalized at the end of Primary 6 after students take the Primary School Leaving Examination (PSLE) that determines the stream they will enter in secondary school – gifted, express, normal-academic or technical streams. Once in a stream, there is little movement and students tend to stay where they have been assigned. Consequently, great emphasis has been placed on examinations resulting in a prevalence of instructional and didactic teaching (Kwek et al. 2007). Thus teachers tend to position themselves as 'sages on the stage' leaving little, if any, space for student centred learning. However, recent initiatives, programmes and reports by Singapore's Ministry of Education such as *Teach Less, Learn More* (MOE n.d.a), *PAL* (Programme for Active Learning) (MOE 2010b), *STELLAR* (Strategies for English Language Learning and Reading) (MOE n.d.b) and *PERI* (Primary Education Review and Implementation) (MOE 2009) and *SERI* (Secondary Education Review and Implementation) (MOE 2010a) express a desire for and a commitment to changing traditional teaching practices. We are witnessing clear shifts in literacy and learning policies in Singapore. Reports now advocate for teachers to foster more engaging pedagogical approaches and practices in their classrooms. The *Youth Tell* project wanted to move away from the intense examination and instructional teaching paradigm, aiming instead to work with teachers to develop engaging youth centred programmes that would lead to the formation of a digital storytelling community. We wanted to foster Singapore youths' personal and social interests through multiliteracy practices.

Within an education context, multiliteracies centres on the notion that there are multiple modes of representation, and the scope is far greater than 'language' (New London Group 2000, p. 5). When we communicate with others we rarely express ourselves in one mode but multimodally, or rather through a variety of modes

(Kress and Van Leeuwen 1996). These modes can be standardized, orderly meaning-making resources such as 'image, gaze, gesture, movement, music, speech and sound effect' (Jewitt & Kress 2008, p. 1). Thus working multimodally can include 'not just linguistic but also visual, gestural, three dimensional,' and other modalities (Pahl and Rowsell 2006). With computers, digital phones and other devices, today's youth work across modalities in their day-to-day lives. They are frequently engaged in experiencing and communicating on multimodal platforms such as through instant messaging, blogging, social networking, online gaming, video, music, digital storytelling, etc. (Rennie and Patterson 2010). Youth Tell provided an opportunity to explore how Singapore youth constructed and made meaning using a range of modes in their digital storytelling.

Contextual Meanings: Unpacking *Youth Tell*

Digital stories can mean different things to different people; and definitions of digital storytelling range from the specific to loose. Robin (2008, p. 224) identifies digital stories as digitally constructed personal narratives highlighting important lived experiences. The Center for Digital Storytelling sees digital storytelling in a similar way defining it as a workshop based process in which people create short 3–5 min autobiographic stories constructed 'by combining recorded voice, still and moving images, and music or other sounds' (CDS 2011). We wanted a more open approach however and felt uncomfortable with youth feeling they had to tell stories about themselves, so we looked to Skinner (2008) and Oehler (2008). Skinner (2008) has a more open classification positioning digital stories as narrative constructs combining multiple media. This is supported by Oehler (2008) who says that since 'digital' and 'story' are synonymous with multiple meanings and interpretations, digital storytelling can simply be defined as a combination of digital media placed within a 'coherent narrative' (p. 15). The *Youth Tell* researchers took this more open concept of digital storytelling and like Hull and Nelson (2005) accepted the notion of digital storytelling being a multimedia form consisting of images and/or video segments with background music and/or a voice over narrative. Quite simply digital storytelling involves using digital media in the presentation of a narrative. The incorporation of all these elements positions digital storytelling as a form that is both interdisciplinary and integrative, in that it can work across subject areas and art forms.

Digital storytelling has been advocated as a form that is interdisciplinary (Benmayor 2008), participatory and immersive (McLellan 1999). It is recognised as a medium that is multimodal, inquiry-based, critical and reflective and acknowledged for the way it connects story-makers to different kinds of situations and experiences. Within the educational context, digital stories have been advocated for a broad range of purposes and outcomes. Digital storytelling has been endorsed as a pedagogy – whether as a 'signature' or 'social' pedagogy (Benmayor 2008) or a narrative pedagogy (Gilbert et al. 2005). Researchers and educators have recognized its potential in constructing identity (Murakami 2008), giving agency (Hull and Katz 2006),

reflecting on practice (Freidus and Hlubinka 2002), fostering art education technology (Chung 2007), and developing knowledge and skills in language (Ng et al. 2010) and second language, and learning (McGeoch 2012) amongst others.

The chief purpose behind Youth Tell was to develop a range of digital storytelling workshops suitable for youth in formal and informal Singapore settings that would engage them in media and literacy practices. The research team, consisting of two principal investigators (of which I was one) and a team of six research assistants and associates (two of whom were members of the team from beginning to end) wanted to cultivate the participating youth's literacy practices through the development of multimodal, digital texts in which the young people could explore and express their shifting and emerging identities. More specifically we wanted to engage the participants' creativity, agency and voice through the development of their digital storytelling practices, and discover if there was anything we could learn from the young people's informal practices that could be tapped into and utilized in a formal education setting. My own interest in storytelling stemmed from my background in arts education and specifically in drama. I was interested in the way the arts can be used to stretch the imagination and provide perspectives on the 'lived world' through the stories they convey (Greene 1995). As Maxine Greene tells us:

> the extent to which we grasp another's world depends on our existing ability to make poetic use of our imagination, to bring into being the "as if" worlds created by writers, painters, sculptors, filmmakers, choreographers, and composers, and to be in some manner a participant in artists' worlds reaching far back and ahead in time (p. 4.)

I was interested in the imaginative potential digital stories might provide, particularly through the possible applications of different art forms in the construction of the stories. Nathan (in Ewing 2010, p. 1.) posits that we work with the arts to express and comprehend our thoughts and feelings, joys, woes and conflicts. Each art form speaks in its own language, 'communicating in its own mode with particular knowledge, skills and symbols' and consequently each form needs 'to be seen and understood as different kinds of literacies' (Ewing 2010: 7). I was interested in discovering the types of art forms the participating young people would work with and privilege to express themselves in their story-making.

As researchers we were highly conscious of the constant demands made on youth to learn in and out of school, leaving little time for self-expression and play, we wanted to encourage the development of an evolving, flexible classroom space in which students could work on projects they felt were pertinent to their 'everyday lives', issues and practices. Moreover, we wanted to push the limits of what is considered 'normal' Singaporean school practice (Anderson and Wales 2012).

A longitudinal qualitative research study involving a series of Ethnographic Case Studies, *Youth Tell* took place in out-of-school-community-centres and a local secondary school over a three and one half year period. The study began after my co-researcher and I had completed a 6-month digital storytelling pilot study with youth aged between 14 and 19 at an informal youth centre (situated on the ground floor of a local neighbourhood Housing Development Board apartment block) in the 'heartlands' of Singapore.

Youth Tell participants ranged from 8 to 24 years of age. Within the school setting, we only worked with 'normal-technical' students, those in the lowest stream of the Singapore school system, as we were keen to identify ways in which those seen as 'low achievers', particularly in literacy, could communicate through the composition of multimodal texts. Over the course of the study we worked with six classes of normal-technical students ranging from Secondary 1 to Secondary 3 and four community centres. Some classes of students made one story, others two or more. At the informal learning centres some students worked with us for the duration of the data collection period and made multiple stories, collectively and individually. The facilitating teachers, artists and researchers developed a suite of digital storytelling workshops with a variety of social and educational purposes and outcomes.

We originally started off with simple equipment such as cameras, scanners, videos and PC computers. Art materials were also made available and included coloured paper, paints, crayons and clay/plasticine. The art materials allowed students to construct their own images by drawing or painting or constructing collages or sculptures and then photographing them. Some youth worked with photographs (new, old and accessed) and others with video footage or a mixture of both. A range of story genres unfolded, including fictional narratives (ghost stories, gangster tales, comedies, romances), personal stories (reflections, biographies, lived experiences), travelogues, music videos, etc. We were keen to use inexpensive platforms that most youth could get access to. Youth created their stories using Windows MovieMaker in the early stages of the programme because most schools had access to it as it was included as part of a PC package. However, as participating youth developed their skills they wanted to stretch their skills and started to request working with different programmes and equipment.

Data was collected over a period of 34 months. Collected data included video footage of workshops and student interactions, artefacts including the youth's digital stories, storyboards, constructed art works, student generated digital photographs, video footage and workbooks, individual and focus group interviews conducted with participating youth, teachers, social and cultural workers and trainers as well as the research team's fieldnotes and reflective journals, and notes from meetings and group analyses sessions. Over the course of the project over 200 stories were made. Some youth constructed one story, others multiple; sometimes they worked alone, and others in groups.

In the next section I discuss one digital story that was created by a group of four Secondary 1 students from the 'normal technical' stream over three afternoons. This group of 13-year-olds, two boys and two girls, made the story at the very end of the *Youth Tell* project during a special workshop that catered for participating youth from both the formal and informal settings. The group had some knowledge of digital storytelling having just completed a story for their Social Studies class. The collaborative digital story the group constructed is a fictional narrative with a 'message'. The collaboration involved the students creating and shaping their story as a 'cross arts' piece, drawing on visual art (through 2D paper animation), media, performance studies, and to a lesser extent, music. I apply a multimodal analysis to the story, and identify how the young authors worked across the arts to generate and

produce layers of meanings through their texts. I consider how the arts and digital storytelling offer opportunities for literacy development and expression through their multimodal nature.

Understanding Meaning: Working Multimodal Analysis

Lundby (2008) and Scheidt (2006, in Lundby) suggest that digital storytelling should not be viewed in the same way as written tales or oral narratives but as its own individual form. 'Digital storytelling' says Lundby, 'creates its own composition' (2008, p. 9). The composition of the story discussed in this chapter, and of the digital stories constructed in the *Youth Tell* project, worked across and integrated a range of art forms. Bearing this in mind, Kress and Van Leeuwen's (1996) work on visual design analysis and Halverson's (2010) applications of the four elements of filmic analysis have been helpful.

I approach the Secondary 1 students' story, *Awesome*, as a semiotic text, and apply a multimodal analysis to understand the group's conceptual constructions. 'Semiotic tradition' tends to examine 'individual signs and their simple, direct meanings in terms of what they connote or symbolise' while a multimodal approach looks at how the 'signs are used in combination' (Machin 2007). The analysis of *Awesome* has involved breaking down the group's narrative composition into basic components. In doing this I have divided my analysis into sections where I first describe a section of the story, before analysing it. Each section of analysis is presented in italics. In undertaking the detailed analysis, which took place after the project was completed, I allude to three of Halverson's (2010) four filmic elements. These are mise-en-scène – or what is within the camera frame such as setting (including background and foreground), characterization (expressive skills such as gaze, movement, gesture, costume) and properties as well as colour, tone, focus, spacing, alignment; editing (this includes special effects and transitions and other work done in assembling the film after footage/photographs have been shot – e.g. the illusion of movement created in the 2D animation); and cinematography (camera angles and movement, techniques and framing and lighting, focus). I have not included an analysis of sound, the reasons for which I discuss later. Many of these elements can be found in the work of Kress and Leeuwen. However, I have considered also composition, contrast, framing, genre, metaphor, mood, pace, rhythm, signs, and text types (Kress 2010).

Understanding the Power of Friendship, Failure and Success

Awesome is a 2D stop animation digital story that was created in approximately 12 h over three afternoons. The group consisted of highly committed girls and two initially enthusiastic boys who lost some of their drive when they realized their zombie story would be too complex for the tight timeline and choose to construct

a story with a more moralistic theme. With them in the workshop were three of their teachers (who also constructed a story), a group of Secondary 2 students as well as youth from a community centre. A professional local animation company, *Animagine Pte Ltd*, facilitated the workshop. After being introduced to the basic elements of animation and individually creating strips for a praxinoscope – an early animation device in which a strip of images is spun on a cylinder with mirrors animating them to create the illusion of movement, e.g. a bouncing ball, a running man – the group began to devise their story.

The students were instructed to construct a clear, simple narrative that could be told in 1 min and contained a moral or message. This fit in well with the school's ethos of fostering values of character and citizenship, a primary goal of the teachers when working with normal-technical students, and was a criteria set by *Animagine* who firmly espouse the importance of stories containing an idea, moral or message – particularly when working in educational settings.[1] The Secondary 1 students, after giving up the idea of a zombie story constructed a simple story about a school girl struggling with her grades who gets some help from her friend. The boys lost enthusiasm about content and while fairly happy to work with the technology and do some drawing decided that cutting out paper shapes was girls' work. The two girls worked consistently for the three afternoons while the boys were less committed. However, once the story was completed the boys were very proud of their own contributions and the story as a whole. Time constraints meant that the participating youth were unable to develop their own soundtracks. *Animagine* added the story's soundtrack after the workshops concluded. While the youth were able to discuss the types of sound they would like, sound has not been included in the analysis of the story as it is problematic in terms of the ownership and thus, whose meaning making it is.

Made in 2D animation the students did not construct a realistic representation of life but rather employed a range of cartoon-like elements to create a non-naturalistic comic book/storybook style. Some of the comic book conventions they used in the construction of their frames were speech balloons, captions, simple backdrops and properties, and thick black outlines to define and emphasise the shapes (similar to a colouring book that has been filled in). *Awesome* involved the construction of three backdrops on which the action of the narrative unfolds. Different shades of coloured paper were cut into shapes to represent spaces, people/characters, objects, emotions, expressions and actions. The Girl and her Friend were created with a cut-out-body-shape (rather like pears) that could be re-used on different backgrounds/settings. Other body-parts such as arms, feet, eyes and mouths were cut out separately so that they could move and/or display multiple expressions. The paper-cut-out characters and objects were placed carefully on the backdrops, also constructed from coloured paper, forming a collage, and photographed to create a series of still images or frames.

To move a character, the angle or position of the body and its parts might be adjusted slightly. For instance the arms might wave up and down, or a half circle mouth might be replaced with an open circle so the mouth appears half then fully opened. For each slight movement or adjustment another photograph/frame was

[1] This will be discussed in a future article.

taken until a sequence of photographs was collected. These photographs or frames were placed in sequence using *Animagine*'s animation software programme, *AniMaker*™, and when played in succession give the illusion of a character/s moving. For example, large eye shapes with round dark pupils might be placed on a character's face, photographed and then be replaced with single black lines and photographed, only to be changed back to the wide eyes, etc. When these frames are placed sequentially in the *AniMaker*™ they give the illusion of eyes blinking.

Awesome is the story of a cheerful schoolgirl who is devastated to receive an 'F' for a test. A friend offers to help her study and together they cram for their next examination. The girl is delighted to receive an 'A' for her next test and advises her audience to 'never give up in life when there is still hope'.[2]

Awesome's opening mise en scène reveals an outdoor location. An arc of green paper with some spiky black doodles, made with a thick marker pen, fills the lower section of the frame. Above it, but separated with a black comic-book-style line, is an expanse of light blue paper. In the top left-hand corner sits a large yellow globe that has been cut off in the top corner of the frame. Triangles of yellow sit slightly away from the globe. Two white shapes, curvaceous at the top and flat on the bottom, appear suspended in the top right hand. A thick black line outlines each piece of paper to emphasize the representative shapes and patterns. Movement enters the frame.

> *The opening mise en scene conveys a spacious external setting, a rare feature in Singapore. The composition is balanced as we recognize the stylistic comic/story book style in which the shapes imply green grass, blue sky, the shining sun and harmless white clouds. The bright colours give us the sense of a beautiful day; warm, serene and peaceful. We could read this as all is well with the world.*

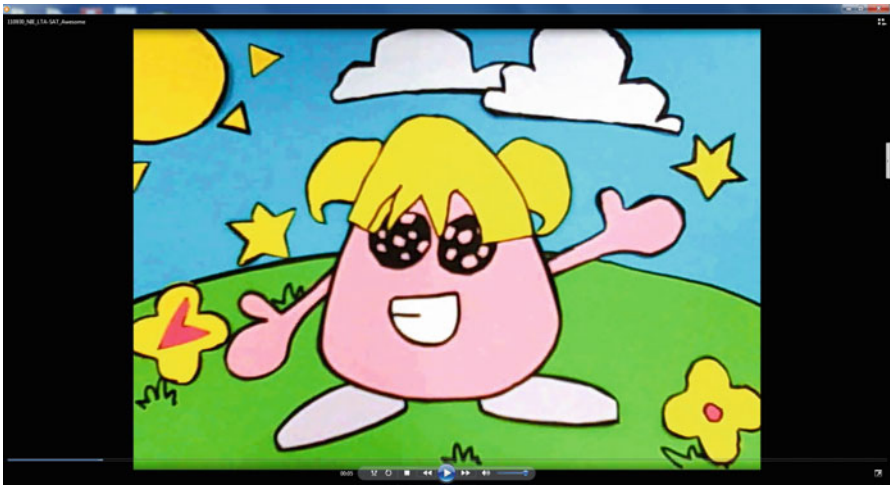

Image 1: *Awesome*'s Opening sequence reveals a happy girl with sparkling eyes

A Girl enters the frame from the right, moving sideways her body and gaze faces the audience. She stops momentarily in the centre of the image. She has a pear-like

[2] Awesome can be viewed on the *Youth Tell* website at http://youthtell.wix.com/dsw2#!youthtube

triangular-shaped body, long pink arms with mitten shaped hands, and longish white feet with no visible legs. Her arms are stretched out wide with her right arm pointing high into the air, her left arm down to the ground. A half-oval-white shape, signifying a smiling mouth, curves upwards. She has large black rounds for eyes that are scattered with squarish pink dots. The top of the pear-shaped body is flanked with a dome of yellow hair, to the sides of which are suspended two large teardrops of yellow that curl up at the ends signifying pigtails. In the middle of the yellow dome pointy edges hang slightly over the eyes indicative of a fringe. Two yellow floral shapes with pink heart centres pop up to the left and right of the frame on the green 'grass' while two yellow star shapes appear in the blue 'sky', one slightly to the left of the girl, underneath the sun, the other just above the girl's hand. In an instant these shapes vanish and the girl sidesteps to the left and departs the frame only to sidestep back in after a moment's pause.

There is a quick pace to the scene. The Girl's jaunty entrance and bright white smile communicates a cheerful and happy character. Her black eyes, dotted with pink, metaphorically imply that she has stars in her eyes, while the broad spread of her arms implies and open and welcoming nature. This is supported by her gaze towards the audience which conveys a mood of confidence and contentment. The sudden appearance of stars and flowers, which vanish again in an instant, suggest the Girl is flourishing; a rising star even who lives a magical existence. One star materializes just above her right hand, as if she has just thrown it up in the air, or could catch it. Yet, the stars and flowers vanish just as quickly as they arrive suggesting that good things can vanish in an instant. When the Girl runs out of the frame, there is a moment's pause before she runs back in, as if excited and keen to be back in centre stage.

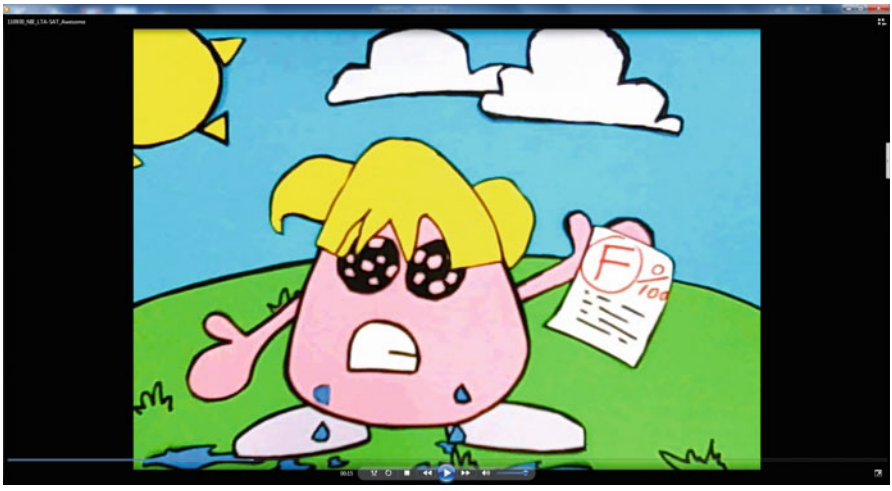

Image 2: The Girl discovers she has failed and cried pools of tears

A red hand holding a piece of paper appears from the top right hand corner of the frame. It places the oblong piece of 'white' paper into the girl's hand. Black horizontal lines fill the bottom half of the paper signifying text. A large circled red 'F' fills most of the top half of the paper next to which is written, also in red, '0/100'. The uplifted half circular white mouth reverses to a grimace. A series of blue paper shaped tears run down each check in successive frames and form two

blue 'pools of tears' in front of the girl. A brown cloud-shape replaces the two white clouds and emits a forked bolt of white that travels down to the girl's head. She drops her right hand and the white paper falls to the ground.

> *The arrival of the 'paper' transforms the mood of the story into something more ominous. Bright colours are still present but these are interrupted with darker colours and tones entering the frame: reds, browns and a darker blue. The emerging red hand can symbolically be read as the 'hand of correction' – the teacher's hand, which comes from the 'right'. Yet the teacher is faceless, it is only the hand that delivers the Girl's results. We know it is an assessment result because we understand the context of school and its signs. The red F signifies a 'mark' of failure; 0/100 tells us that the girl has not just failed but achieved the lowest possible mark, nothing. She becomes 'worthless'. The composition of the test sheet emphasizes the 'failure'. The 'F' is a focal point – it is not only written in red, it takes up almost half the sheet. We can't miss it. Yet, the pace in which we witness the Girl's smile transform into a grimace, her arm drop, the paper fall, the dark brown cloud emerge and the bolt of lightning striking her implies that this is sudden and that she is surprised and shocked. Her life has turned upside down; her smile physically reverses. A dark cloud comes over her; a metaphorical image of depression. Life, which moments ago seemed bright and shiny, suddenly is hot. We witness the Girl's distress as she starts to weep. Tears run down her 'face', forming a puddle at her feet – another metaphor that perhaps she is drowning in tears. Her world has darkened.*

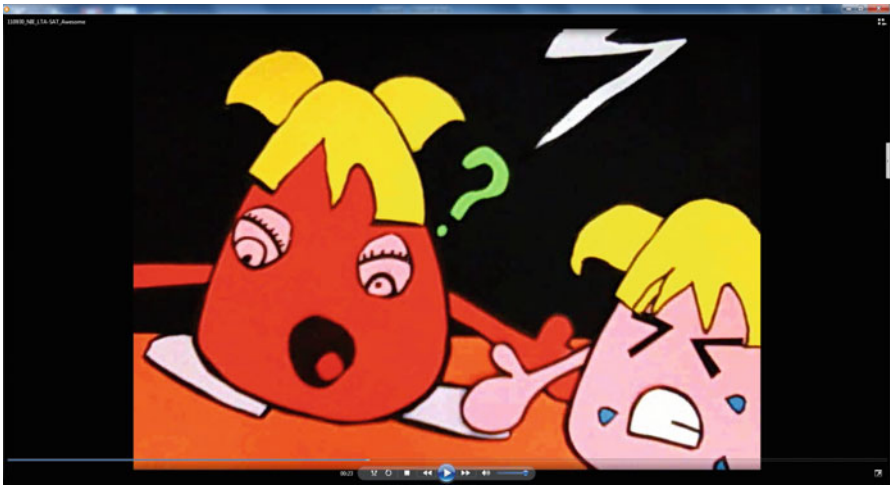

Image 3: The Girl's friend makes an inquiry

The animation 'cuts' from the green field and blue sky and transforms to another location. Black fills the top two-thirds of the frame, orange runs across the bottom in a straight line – there is no longer an arced horizon but a 'flat' red/orange earth. The girl stands to the left. The girl's eyes are now two arrows, like mathematic symbols for 'greater than' and 'lesser than' like such, $> <$. From these narrow representations of eyes fall blue shaped tears outlined with a black marker. A white bolt of lightning is suspended right of centre against the black sky. Another girl (the Friend) with a similar pear-shaped body bounces in from the left of the frame. She has a bright red body, white feet and a similar dome of yellow hair with high 'pigtales'. Her eyes, large rounds of pink paper have semi circles drawn in the bottom section to represent irises,

with dots in the middle conveying pupils, and half circles at the top from which have been drawn a series of short lines signifying eyelashes. A black circle characterizes her mouth into which has been placed a small red oval shape denoting her tongue or back of her throat. The Friend moves towards the Girl, her body rocking from side to side, and slips her hand behind the Girl's. A green question mark appears by the side of her head just below the lightning bolt. A moment later, a speech bubble proclaiming, 'Don't cry' replaces the question mark. The Friend continues to bounce from side to side and her mouth is transformed to a half shaped oval. Another speech bubble appears and reads, 'Let's work hard together. I'll help!' The Girl's grimace transforms back into an upturned smile. A speech bubble appears above the Girl's pig-tale saying 'Ok!'

The Girl's world transforms into an environment of black and orange, of darkness and fire. She could almost be in hell itself. Her eyes are narrow slits, pointed arrows that could symbolize the sharp pain of failure. She continues to cry blue tears, as if there is no comfort, and she is in her own hell. The arrival of the Friend heralds help. The Friend is open mouthed and rocks from side to side, we instantly read her concern. As the Girlfriend moves closer to the Girl, she appears to take and hold her hand and then moves her arm as if she is about to put an arm around her. We understand that she wants to support and help her friend. The question mark represents an inquiry, for instance it could be saying, 'What's wrong?' 'Why are you crying?' 'Can I help you?' 'Do you want to talk about it?' A simple question mark allows the audience to ask their own questions. The offer of support is seen spatially through the composition of movement and hand holding as well as through the speech bubble that states, 'I'll help'. She does not offer help blindly, saying that she will do it for her, but rather she implies that the Girl needs to work hard and she makes an offer 'let's work hard together'. A subtext emerges. What is needed to achieve is not an isolated and lonely job but rather something to be shared and worked on together. The Girlfriend offers companionship and perhaps a work ethic as well as help.

Image 4: The Girl falls asleep in the library

Signage in the top left hand corner of the frame tells us the narrative has shifted to the '*LIBRARY*. . .' The background has changed. The two girls are positioned side-by-side smiling, their upper bodies (faces) are set against the light brown background at the top

of the frame. Both now wear spectacles. Girl, situated on the left hand side of the frame, has square shaped glasses; her Friend positioned next to her on the right has round shaped John Lennon style spectacles. The Girl's eyes are once again wide black rounds with dots of pink. Running over the lower part of their bodies is a black sheet on paper suggesting they are sitting behind a long table/desk – on which their smiles rest. In front of each girl, on the table/desk, is a white piece of paper with lines drawn, representing text, and thus 'work/study' of some sort. Each girl holds an overly large long pencil constructed from stripes of yellow and red paper with a white point and black tip that balances on the 'work' (a white piece of paper in front of them). The Girl's mouth transforms into a fluid amoebic shape from which dribbles blue. Her eyes transform into straight black lines and her glasses drop to a crooked angle. The Friend's arm and hand move up and down swiftly, as if to shake the Girl. Two 'Z's float up from the Girl's head while four straight black lines run almost perpendicular to the Friend's hand. The Girl's 'closed eyes' open to black circles and her 'amoebic-shaped' mouth transforms into a black circle containing a red dot. Both pencils move rapidly. The starry eyes (black with pink dots) return to the Girl and the pencils move on the paper.

This scene conveys the 'difficulties' of hard work. Both girls wear glasses, a symbol that they are both studying hard. The Girl, now in square glasses, has transformed into a 'square eyes'. She finds studying so exhausting her glasses slip, as do her study habits, and she falls asleep. We know she is asleep because her mouth dissolves and she dribbles blue drops of saliva. Just to affirm the situation, two Zs travel above her head – a comic strip and cartoon symbol for sleep/snoring. The rapid upward and downward motions of the Girlfriend's hand and arm convey that she is trying to shake her friend awake, which is supported by the perpendicular lines indicating the rigour of the shaking action. These perpendicular straight lines are another comic book convention sign. The Girl opens her eyes but they are black circles, perhaps a reference to the circles we get around our eyes when we are tired, perhaps to indicate that she is shell shocked, that her pupil are dilated. The pencils begin to move and we get the sense that the two girls are back hard at work. This scene also makes inferences about the friendship between the two girls. The Girlfriend, determined to help her friend pass her next test, will not let her sleep. She needs to be diligent and keep her friend on track. The Girl accepts her Friend's help and interference (waking her up).

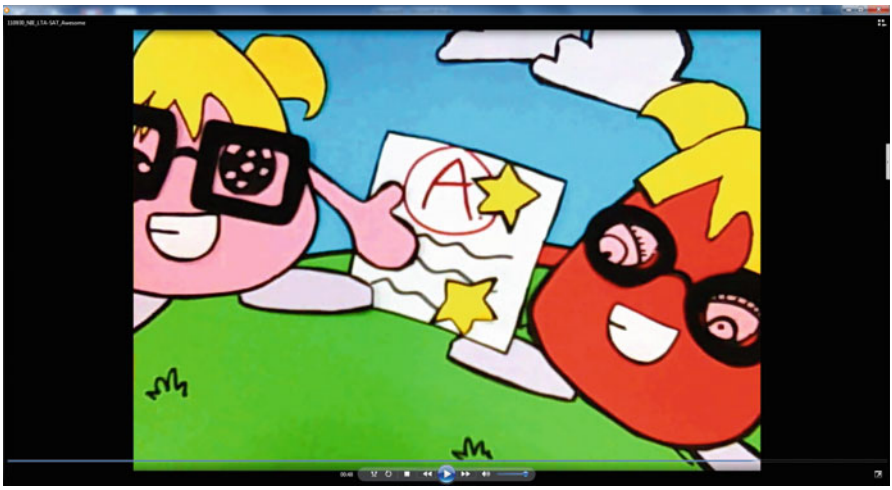

Image 5: The Girl becomes a star 'A' pupil

The story cuts to the green grass, blue sky and two bouncing clouds seen in the opening scene. On the grass placed symmetrically to the right and left of the frame are two yellow flower shapes with pink heart centres, next to each sits a yellow shaped star. (The world appears back in balance.) Text on a white piece of paper sits under the clouds proclaiming, 'Few weeks after the exam'. This informative signage floats across to the middle of the page. The Girl and Girlfriend sidestep into the frame from opposite directions; both are still wearing glasses. They stand next to each other smiling but are separated by the arrival of a piece of paper that comes between them. On the bottom part of the paper sit three squiggly lines, indicating text. Above these lines is a large circled red 'A'. A yellow star is positioned at the top and bottom of the test.

The Girl has transformed from failure to 'star'. Here we have our happy ending. The mise en scene is almost symmetrical with a flower and star positioned to the left and right of the frame, indicating the world is back in harmony. Both girls continue to wear glasses that they started to wear in the library, conveying that they are still studious and hardworking. Moreover, this suggests the Girl has transformed her working habits. The girls remain in close proximity even when separated by the arrival of the marked exam paper implying the power of friendship.

Image 6: The moral of the story

The scene cuts again and we see the Girl, still wearing glasses, standing against a bright orange background, smiling. A large pink square speech bubble announces 'Never give up in life when there is still hope ☺'.

While the narrative has ended, the digital story continues – there is one final element to complete: the message. This is delivered against an orange backdrop, a colour that could signify brightness, warning or attention. But it is just a colour; it does not signify or connote a physical environment. The authors want to ensure that the audience understands the moral of the tale – don't give up. There is always hope.

Conclusion: Rewriting Cultural Understandings

Hegemonic discourses and understandings of normal technical students argue that they typically struggle with literacy and experience difficulties completing work or producing comprehensive written texts. Teachers at the school reiterated these ideas frequently. 'When you give them (NT students) paperwork, ah, even their computer application, their daily paper, they struggle with it', the school's Head of Normal Technical students informed us. Their teacher told us that he rarely received more than a couple of sentences or small paragraph of writing from the students. The school's Head of English told us that technical students struggle to 'tease' out ideas and explore issues with any depth. "NT (normal technical) kids face obstacles of literacy and numeracy. . .when you, you can't get your reading, writing well, uh, how else are you going to learn new things," said the school Principal. Yet although the students might struggle to 'write' their ideas down or articulate them 'orally' it is clear that they can create comprehensive multimodal texts.

Awesome, while a simple story, contains considerable depth through which layers of meaning can be found. Moreover it is a strong piece of aesthetic work in its structure and composition. The story has a clear narrative arc and a theme, the central character develops as the story progresses, the narrative shifts from one location to another, there is action and dialogue, stillness and movement, mood and rhythm as well as dramatic tension – all elements of a good storytelling. The happy Girl experiences a setback, which causes anxiety and tension. She is offered help by a friend, works hard and overcomes her adversity. The Secondary 1 students showed that while they might be seen to struggle with their 'written', and even 'oral' texts, they are able to work with a range of literary conventions through the arts and digital media – be it an image, a gesture, a gaze or expression, the list goes on. The Secondary 1 students' digital story included the use of symbol and metaphor, pathos and humour, setting, character, tension and mood.

Many other stories created by 'low academic achievers' during *Youth Tell* demonstrated high multimodal literacy skills; Youth generally worked to their strengths. Those who were good at visual art and enjoyed art-making created their own images, those keen on photography or filmmaking shot their own film, others sourced image. Some narrated their stories or created their own sound effects through soundscapes; some worked from songs they had composed. Had there been more time in the animation workshop it would have been interesting to observe what kinds of sound and music the Secondary 1 students might have added. Demonstrations and music videos of *Youth Tell* the participating youth constructed a range of different story types and genres. These included autobiographical and biographical narratives, stories about friendships and adventures, birthdays and celebrations, hobbies and passions, point of view pieces, informative stories and documentary style episodes, ghost stories, love stories, enacted dramatic stories, travelogues, skateboarding demonstrations and music videos.

An understanding and knowledge of multiliteracies is essential in these times. We no longer live, work and/or socialize in monocultural spaces – certainly not in multicultural Singapore. As Kress tells us that,

> Communication is multimodal: by speech at times, as a spoken comment, as instruction or request; by gaze; by actions – passing an instrument, reaching out for an instrument; by touch. (2010, p. 32).

The arts as forms of communication can express thoughts and concepts, information and ideas, feelings, and stories. Digital storytelling is an interdisciplinary, integrative art form and as Lundy tells us, 'creates its own composition'. It has been applied in a range of educational settings for pedagogical purposes including as a way to teach language learning (Ng et al. 2010), narrative and science (Gilbert et al. 2005), twenty first century skills and technology (Robin 2008), and art technology (Chung 2007). It has been seen as a 'worthy' and 'engaging' pedagogy. As a multimodal literacy, I believe digital storytelling can have a firm place within the arts as well as the literacy classroom. The facilitation of the workshops by professional animators from *Animagine Pte Ltd* helped students focus on aesthetic composition and meaning making within their narrative form in a creative way. Moreover, students who had experienced so much failure in the literacy/English language classroom had a highly successful experience that demonstrated highly competent communication skills.

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