

Exploration in tangible storytelling

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What is Story, Storytelling and Tangible storytelling

Story

Account of imaginary or real people and events. They are composed of events narrated in a particular order and told from a particular point of view.

Storytelling

It is the means of conveying events in words, images, and sounds. The earliest forms of storytelling were primarily oral combined with gestures and expressions.

Tangible

Tangible means perceptible by touch, something that is clear and definite and real and that can be grasped.

Tangible Storytelling

A 'tangible story' is one that allows children to grasp the story through materials and forms etc.

Here 'tangible' refers to that which is of material nature and is situated in an environment and can be experienced by the living body. 'Grasping' refers to the act of enclosing an object within one's fingers, touching and feeling them.

Premise

Stories for children take the aid of pictorial elements or technologies to support children's fantasies, stories and storytelling.

Pictorial elements or illustrations help in telling the tale twice. Stories also serve as an additional aid for reading to learn.

When objects are incorporated into children's play, it encourages the child to be imaginative and serves as a channel to look at different perspectives.

3 Dimensional objects or forms will make the stories and the elements of any story more physically graspable.

It will add a new level to playing and learning along with increasing the inter child interactions and developing a sense of confidence in children.

Defining the Age Group

Target age group was 2 to 6 years. After one testing I understood that children under the age of 4 the children find it difficult to string sentences .

They may need assistance of parents or teachers in their storytelling.

Thus my intended audience age shifted from 2 to 6 years to children of the age group of 4 years and above.

Intended audience: 4 years and above.

Story

Inspiration

Haroun and the Sea of Stories – By Salman Rushdie

Haroun and the Sea of Stories is an adventure story.

Haroun Kahlifa is determined to get back his fathers special gift of telling stories. For this and to save the ocean of stories he goes through a war with an Evil lord and his shadow. At the end defeats him with the help of the army of Gup city and returned Rashid Khalifa's gift of the Gab.

I was impressed by a particular part in the story. It is the part of the wellspring of Stories where new stories are always generated. These Stories are always connected to each other. Stories mix with one a new story is born.

Explore the imaginative prowess of the children by letting them create many stories of their own by mixing characters or changing their identity.

Reading different stories

Panchatantra
Aesop fables
Amar chirta katha
Disney Stories

Selecting Panchatantra stories

The Panchatantra stories that I have selected are the ones that have been retold by the authors in the modern context.

Revised stories

These were the stories provided by Tulika publishers which had a more modern outlook to them.

The lion, The Fox, The Donkey, Retold by Deepa Balsavar

The Rumour, Retold by Niveditha Subramaniam

The Four Friends, Retold by Kala Sasikumar

Snake and the frogs, Retold by Mariam Karim-Ahlawat

The Talkative tortoise, Retold by Jeeva Raghunath

The Talkative Tortoise

Retold by Jeeva Raghunath

Should I tell the story of how I came
or the story of how I went?

I lived there, near that pond.
I had two bird friends, Ganga and Yamuna.

Whenever I saw them, "yak yak yak yak" I would talk.
Meet in the morning, "yak yak" ...
Meet in the afternoon, "yak yak" ...
Meet in the night, "yak yak" ...

Fed up with my "yak yak" they decided to go away to
another pond.

Boo-hoo, I began to cry.
They felt bad and said, "Okay, come along, but you must
keep your mouth shut and not talk at all."

They took a stick.
Ganga held one end.
Yamuna held the other end.
I held the middle.

Flap flap we flew high.
All was well until I opened my mouth.
"Yak yak yak yak... Owwww!"

That's all, I became like this.

Reasons for selecting this story

The story 'The Talkative Tortoise' is very exciting.

It provides possibilities for character development.

It uses slang like "yak-yak" for talking.

Also this story gives out a moral message that we should talk only when needed otherwise we may lose our friends and may also be badly hurt.

This story is very different as it is a story told from the tortoise's perspective.

Also this story encourages self reflection and creates a sense of sympathy towards the tortoise.

There is a lot of movement in the story. So there is movement of all the animals in three spaces i.e. the pond, on earth and in air.

The aspect of the tortoise falling down from the sky is quite imaginative.

Design Brief

My aim is to design a tangible assistive device for children to learn the art of storytelling and expand their imagination. This product could be used for telling stories by parents, teachers and children themselves. They can understand the stories better and create new stories with the given objects.

These tangible toys will act as a catalyst to boost the imaginative power of small children, expand their thinking and challenge their minds. This design might trigger role-play among children, increase inter-child interaction, may develop their confidence and may act as a channel for change in a child's perspective.

Senario

Tina is a four and a half year old girl living with her parents in Pune. They have a flat in a large colony. Being such a large place Tina has many friends. She plays many games with them. Still Tina has a problem. She is too shy to talk to her friends and generally submits easily to their demand.

One day Tina hears her mother call out from their house asking her to stop playing and come home immediately. Sulking, Tina goes home. When she enters the house she gets a surprise. Her *Nanni* has come to visit them. She is going to stay with them for a few days. Tina is very excited. Knowing that grandma always gets something for her she closes her eyes and puts out her hands.

This time *Nanni* has got a big gift. She tells Tina that she can have it only if she promises to use it well. An excited Tina makes the promise. Tina then opens her gift. It is a storytellers kit. It has many toys and a board and some other objects made of cloth. She does not understand how to play with it so she begs *Nanni* to show her how to use it.

At that time her mother comes from the kitchen and tells Tina that she will have to wait till after dinner time to play as *Nanni* is very tired and needs some rest. Tina is disappointed and goes to her room sulking. She is eagerly waiting for dinner time so that she can play with the kit.

It is finally dinner time Tina gulps down her food and waits eagerly for *Nanni* to finish her dinner. As soon as *Nanni* is done with her dinner Tina takes her to her room and opens the kit. *Nanni* takes the parts of the kit and meticulously arranged them on the board with Tina looking on with curiosity.

Nanni then begins to tell a story using the toys and the book. The story is of 'The Talkative Tortoise'. Tina has heard this story before but what she finds new is that it is the tortoise telling his own story. Also she realises that the characters of the story stick on the background. Seeing the interesting way the toys are used, Tina wants to make up a story too. She starts telling the story. At first she falters but *Nanni* keeps on encouraging her. So she starts by creating scenes of her own story. When she finishes her story to her surprise her Mom, Dad and *Nanni* start clapping for her performance.

The very next day shy Tina calls her friends over to her house to show them her new kit. She first tells the story that her *Nanni* had told her the previous day. After finishing the first story she tells another one and then another. Her friends are astonished to see shy Tina talk so much.

Tina's storytelling sessions have become a big hit amongst her friends. They have also bought similar kits from the market with different stories. Now all of them come together with their toys and create many stories by mixing up the characters. Everyone is surprised how Tina has opened up to become a girl who is more confident and can speak out amongst her circle of friends and also have all the children listen to her.

Concept Development

Initial Concepts

Having explored various places and seen many toys and materials the sketches below were my initial concepts out of which I decided to work further on three of them and finalise on one which would then grow into one final concept.

Medium for Execution

Cloth toys are a safe way to make the tangible objects as

Cotton cloth is less harmful as compared to other materials generally used in fur toys.

Toys made from cloth are very graspable and hold able. They can also be cuddled and held.

These toys are really soft to touch.

Cloth toys can be made to look very close to reality.

Cloth also gives a large medium to explore as there are many types of cloth, with many textures and patterns.

Also cotton cloth can be painted and customised graphics can be added to the toys which might not happen while using the usual materials for making stuffed toys

Hence I decided to use cotton called as bizzylizzy which is a mixture of cotton and another material. Bizzylizzy is softer to touch than pure cotton and readily takes the shape given to it and is more long lasting.

Exploring the form

Tortoise

At first I wanted to create an abstract form of the tortoise by using a textured cloth with a different print.

Taking this point into consideration I created one more tortoise with 'batik cloth' but got the same response.

I made the third exploration with more details like the mouth open and body texture with fabric paint trying to get the form as close to reality as possible. This worked well with children.

Final tortoise has been revised in the stitching sense. Some stitching techniques have been used to create a tighter and better looking form of the tortoise.

Birds

The form of the bird emerged from the fact that the birds in the story 'The Talkative Tortoise' had to fly. Hence the birds should have wings that can flap.

Also the wings and the belly of the bird would have some texture which would incorporate some meaning.

The Backgrounds

The backgrounds I have used magnetic sheet as the base and a cloth hand painted background on it.

These backgrounds can be adjusted to suit the need of the children story.

Finalising a concept

In finalising the concept I merged 3 concepts which are one which is the theater style book, the other is a fan fold book and the concept of a board on which the characters will move.

The concepts consists of using magnets which would give freedom of movement to characters along the magnetic backgrounds and also in space. It also gives freedom to explore many stories with various combinations of the backgrounds and toys.

Magnets are a creative approach to the initiating imagination and storytelling. It adds a surprise element in the story when the characters are 3 dimensional and they stick on the background as well as come off. Thus giving children the possibilities to explore space in storytelling.

Stage 1 of concept development

Using Steel wire and Magnets

In this concept I created a path way for the characters with magnets. I used a MS steel wire to create the path for the children to move their character through the story but this had many limitations

Difficulties

The background illustration was already given and it restricted the use of the whole background.

Also the use of a single wire restricted the movement of the character along the story.

There was a sense of lack of creativity as the child could not fully explore the possibilities of the concept thus binding a child's Imagination.

Also use a metal wire is commonly not allowed in children's products.

Stage 2 of concept development

Using Steel wire mesh and Magnets

The second concept was to use a wire mesh to replace the wire to provide for more movement on the board and within the story.

Difficulties

The magnetic power between the wire mesh and magnets is very strong.

The mesh gives a texture of its own.

Again there are the constraint of environment and thus resulting in the lack of creativity in children and hence binding the child's imagination.

Stage 3 of concept development

Using magnetic sheet and magnets

Using magnetic sheets was an alternative to a wire mesh. This sheet is also safe to use in children's products. Also it is plain not having any texture hence acts as a good background.

Difficulties

Most of the difficulties of using a wire and a wire mesh are solved. The only problem could be that the strength of magnetic sheet may reduce over period of time due to extensive use.

The toys cannot be very heavy as they may fall off the board. Thus weight of the toys is critical.

I will be correcting the sizes and proportions of the characters to the backgrounds.

Final Concept development

The storytelling kit contains

Elements of the story

One tortoise

Two birds

Some backgrounds

The sun

Three clouds

Four trees

Instruction Manual and Story Book

Stand

Bag

Playing with the Kit

Testing the product

The product was tested on children of age group of 2-3, 3-4, and 6 and above.

I found that children have immense storytelling skills which were enhanced by this kit.

Teachers found it rather innovative to have toys for the characters which the children can actually touch and feel and hold in their hands.

They were excited about how the animals stuck on to the backgrounds.

The kit made its acceptability known from these few reactions.



Strengths and Limitations

There wasn't enough time to carry out more experiments and testing so these strengths and limitations may not be as accurate but they are as follows.

Strengths

Personality development

This kit may boost the child's confidence and may help him/ her to be more free in expressing their thoughts along with teaching them moral values.

Knowledge

This kit will increase their knowledge about stories and storytelling.

Storytellers

Children are dying to be storytellers and parents are always eager to listen. This kit will boost the child's storytelling ability and also may help him with his articulation skills.

Imagination and creativity

The child may have imagination and creativity which may be hidden and this kit may bring out the creativity with its unique feature of making new stories of the given objects.

Make their own toys

This project may also encourage children to develop their own toys out of rags that they can find at home and create characters for stories that they make up.

Limitations

Strength of the magnet

Stronger the magnet it is difficult for children to separate the objects once they stick together. An option to this is to use a magnet with less strength or a magnetic sheet with appropriate strength

Backgrounds

One insight that I got from one of the testing is that children may not play with the backgrounds hence I may change the concept to giving them a illustration of a scene

Imagination

There is one short come of this project which will be if the child does not use his/ her imagination. In this case the parent may have to encourage the child by prompting him/ her with words or ideas that might trigger the magical imagination skills innate in children.

One child at a time

This kit has not been designed to be played by many children and can be used by only one child at a time hence in a group of children there can be only one storyteller and the others have to be an audience.

Future Use

This kit has other uses than storytelling as well. The kit can be used to explain other concepts in the environment such as sunrise and sunset, etc. This Kit can also be used by children to explore role play. It is very useful for children to boost their confidence, their articulation skills etc. It may help in improving their language skills and vocabulary too. It will hopefully churn their minds to think creatively and imaginatively and give the joy of telling stories.

Conclusion

The process of making this kit has taught me immensely. It has taught me how to interact with children and how to convince the shy ones to come out and speak up.

Most importantly though this process has taught me how to do storytelling myself. Telling a story either through words or through pictures or through tangible objects is very challenging as there is always an audience involved. To convince a large number of people that the imaginative story you are telling is true, is very challenging in itself. Through this project I have overcome my fears of storytelling and articulation.

This project has thrown open an option for my future, which will be exploring storytelling or getting into children's publications.

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Thank You!!