

Bringing Dolls to Life with Media

A technical approach - by Steen Søndergaard, University College Copenhagen, Denmark

In this little article, I will show how you can make doll films with kindergarten-age and older children. Children of all ages love seeing pictures and films of themselves, and you can certainly pass many an hour just happily playing with a video camera and filming one another doing funny things. But when you are through with this game, you can go further with your use of video by making a doll film. There are many different approaches to making doll films with children, and you can select among these on the basis of the children's age, development, and experience with the available equipment as well as your own skills. In this article, I will present three different approaches.

Filming Doll Play

The simplest way of making a doll film is, in fact, a method that can be mastered by even the youngest of kindergarten children, namely, the filming of children playing with dolls. The camera is set on a tripod on the floor, and a scene is set up, perhaps with doll furniture or the like. The children lead the dolls around on the scene while they relate a narrative and speak the dolls' lines. This type of film is extremely easy to make since all it requires is a video camera, some dolls, and a pedagogue who is not afraid of letting children take responsibility for developing their own narratives and forming their own relationships with technology. It is also possible, of course, for the adult to participate in the game directly, thereby becoming an active player in the production of the film, both as a doll-actor and co-director.



The children could even repeat the same story multiple times in order to eventually progress to a version they like best. There is a tendency for repetition of the story to cause some giddiness, but this method has the advantage of inspiring new, creative ideas that influence the filmic narrative. It is often in this sort of exhilarated atmosphere that the most exciting and creative ideas arise. It has been my experience that, when the end result is shown to people other than the children who have made the film themselves, it is a good idea to show an edited and shortened version.

Even though it is enjoyable to make long films and even though it can be fun to watch long films that you have made yourself, unedited films quickly become boring for parents and other children. From a learning standpoint, it is possible to integrate a discussion of content and form into the editing phase, and by cobbling together scenes from the various recordings, one can create an entirely new story. While engaging in this process, it is a good idea to talk with the children about the composite nature of the films they see on television, how these films' reflections of a greater reality are composed of small, edited segments (clips) from the real world and that this is the same process their own film will undergo. Such discourse permits high-level media learning for even very young children.

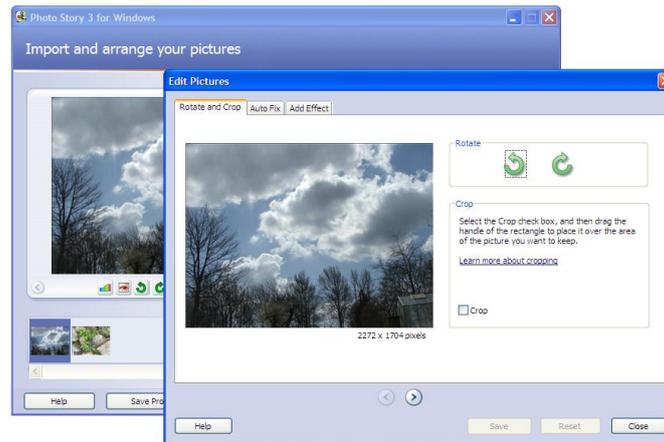
When you make this type of film, in which the difference is slight between the children's play and the process of film production and in which the children are in possession of most, if not all, of the initiative from the start of the project through to the editing process, it is possible for the pedagogue to see firsthand what motivates the children. The pedagogue can get a feel for the content of the children's play and for the children's reflexive thoughts on their childlore.

Bringing Pictures to Life

A more advanced means of making films, one for which younger children will require some assistance, is to make a film from scanned drawings or photographs. The photographs are placed in a sequence. The children then add music and record stories to overlay the pictures as well as use a tool to create movement during the showing of individual pictures and during transition between pictures. There are numerous free programmes that can be used to create this sort of film though the programme I am using at the moment is PhotoStory3,¹ which can be downloaded free of charge on the Microsoft website. PhotoStory3 is extremely easy to use, and the children can choose between various effects, including one in which the display pans over the picture, offering the illusion of "real film." You can, for example, make a drawing that includes multiple little images and tell the programme to pan over these. This might sound little better than the sort of boring PowerPoint shows we all know from various presentations and lectures, but the method presents children with the possibility of expressing themselves through the media of illustrations, song, music, and storytelling, and the end result can look highly professional. If you do not have a scanner, you can take digital photographs of the drawings, but the children can also make and

¹ Link for downloading the program: <http://www.microsoft.com/downloads/details.aspx?FamilyID=92755126-a008-49b3-b3f4-6f33852af9c1&DisplayLang=en> This link bring you to a site in English. You can change the language to your own. PhotoStory3 is very intuitive, and there are explanations on your own language directly on the screen. Somewhere on the web page <http://www.mediaplaying.net> you should be able to find guidance in use of PhotoStory3.

photograph scenes with dolls and other toys. The pictures are then entered into the programme, at which point the children can begin providing narratives for what is going on in the scenes.



When you initially open PhotoStory3 after having installed the programme, the first thing you have to do is open a new story. Besides the programme's user friendliness, one of its great advantages is that, throughout the course of production of a presentation, you are guided by country-specific instructions written in a clear and comprehensible language. Once you have opened a new presentation, you are asked to import pictures, meaning that you select the series of pictures of which the presentation will consist. Throughout the process, you have the opportunity to change the order of the pictures as well as to correct the pictures in the accompanying photo editing programme. Then, you can place text over the pictures if you so desire, record sound to be played during the display of the pictures, decide for how long a particular picture should be shown, set-up the above-mentioned panning effect or other movement effects, and create fluent transition between the images. Finally, you can set the whole thing to music prior to saving the presentation on your computer. The programme can also save multiple versions of the same presentation so that the end result could, for example, be made to be shown on mobile phones or the like.

From a media learning perspective, use of this method teaches the children about the combination and interplay of sound and image as well as about narrative structuring.

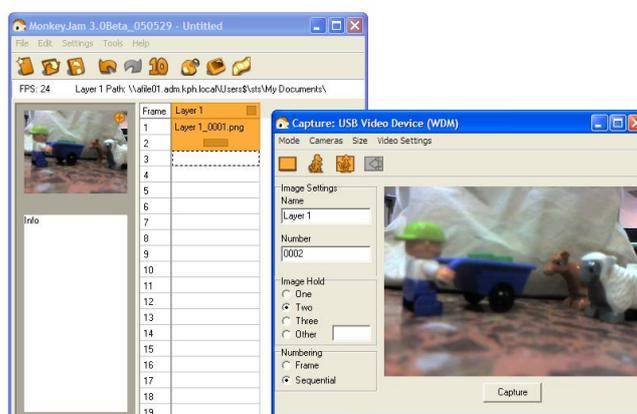
Stop Motion: The True Doll Film

The third and most advanced method of making a doll film that I will present here is called stop-motion animation. A stop-motion film is a doll film in which you record one image at a time. When you have taken a picture, you proceed to move the figure slightly, after which you take another picture. This process is iterated as desired. When the figures are moved slightly between pictures, movement is created when these pictures are later juxtaposed and viewed together. This is the

method used in, for example, the Postman Pat and Wallace and Gromit films. This technique is relatively work intensive inasmuch as a large number of pictures are needed before you can make even a small part of a doll film. The results, on the other hand, are very convincing.

In order to produce smooth movements in the film, there need to be at least 25 pictures per second. However, the first film you make need not use quite so many pictures: You can simply choose to use the same picture multiple times, one after the other.

Free programmes for the making of stop-motion films are also available. At the present time, I prefer Monkey Jam.² If you use this programme, you can link a video camera directly to your computer. In case your video camera or computer lacks built-in Firewire technology, you can use an ordinary webcam to make these doll films instead. In this instance though, it is important that the scene is very well lit.



When the camera is hooked up and Monkey Jam has been started, you begin a new film and move the cursor over to the “Capture” button. The children can then take a picture every time they left-click the mouse. Move the doll or dolls slightly, and then take another picture. The programme can be set up to take multiple pictures at once. If, for example, you set it to take five pictures at a time, you need only go through five iterations of the process for every second of film you wish to produce. Similarly, if you set the programme to take 25 pictures each time, every click of the mouse will result in one second of film, which is within the capabilities of most elder kindergarten-age children.

When you begin making a stop-motion film with younger children, it is important to construct a scene that is relatively stable since even the slightest movement of the scene ends up looking like an earthquake in the completed film. It is also important to start off with dolls that are easy to manipulate: Having to lift a doll in order to move its arm, for example, will result in strange

² Link for downloading the program - <http://www.giantscreamingrobotmonkeys.com/monkeyjam/download.html> Monkey Jam is only in English, and not as intuitive as PhotoStory3. But somewhere on the web page <http://www.mediaplaying.net> you should be able to find guidance in use of Monkey Jam.

movements in the film, particularly as it will be impossible to return the doll to precisely its original position.

Upon my arrival to a kindergarten for the purpose of making a doll film, I once asked the children how many of them would be interested in helping to create the movie. There were a large number of them who wanted to, so in order to give them all the opportunity to participate, I suggested that we make a film about a town with a lot of cars. The kindergarten had a carpet on which streets were drawn, and this tended to serve as a car-driving zone for the boys. We made a movie in which each child chose a car that he or she wished to steer. They then drove their cars around the town by means of moving the vehicles by small increments for each picture. After we had filmed long enough for the children's tastes, we set the computer to show the film in a loop, which is to say that the film sequence is shown again and again until one clicks "Stop." The movie ended up lasting 23 seconds and was received with great excitement by the children. One of the four-year-old boys was particularly fascinated by the film and watched it for a very long time, punctuating every 23 seconds with the excited remark of "That's my Batman car."

From a media-learning perspective, children gain understanding that this method of film-making is very time consuming. The results, however, can be stunning, granting children an appreciation for structural movement and spatiality. The programme is also applicable for primary school art classes.

The first time I tried to play with Monkey Jam in a kindergarten, there was a group of three-year-old girls who made a film with Lego's BelleVille dolls in a dollhouse. Instead of moving the dolls a tiny bit for every picture, they built a completely new scene each time they took a photograph. This made it very difficult to watch the film inasmuch as the doll boy flew from the upper right-hand corner to the lower left-hand corner of the screen each second. In order to make use of these pictures, we turned to PhotoStory3, which allowed the girls to record their descriptions of the scenes and set music and movement to the story. So, a little adaptability helped us to make a watchable film together.

If you wish to let kindergarten-age children express themselves via the newer electronic media by producing a doll film, you can make advantageous use of the methods described above, first by introducing the children to the video camera itself and letting them play with it, and then by starting off with a simple doll film. When the children are familiar with this method, you can then proceed to more technically-intensive methods by making a film with pictures and sound.