

Character Design towards Narrative Believability of Boboiboy in the Malaysian Animated Feature Film *Boboiboy: The Movie* (2016)

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Abstract: Designing a character in animation film is crucial especially when it concerns narrative believability. A character is designed to complement the narrative especially believable animated character. A believable animated character allows the audience to perceive the characters as a life-like character thus the 'illusion of life' well-constructed. In order to achieve a greater effect close to life-like character, a believable animated character must also be appropriately timed, and his emotions must be clearly demonstrated (Joseph Bates, 1994). It is also argued that a believable animated character moves according to his emotional state and personality throughout his journey in the narrative similar features as presented in live action films. Problems arise if a character is not bothered about what happens in his world or is emotionally detached of his surroundings. If the characters do not react or respond to his circumstances, they did not take action, the audience will not care about what happens to them. Characters without emotions are considered as a robot. The scenario becomes even worse if the physical features of a character do not match with the personality. This paper attempts to examine the qualities and personalities of BoBoiBoy in *BoBoiBoy: The Movie* (2016) that make him a believable character with 'life-like' form and clear demonstration of human-like basic emotions even though he is personified as a little boy with superpower qualities. The Ten key characteristic qualities of Hayes-Roth and Doyle (1998) is used to textually analyse BoBoiBoy in a systematic manner.

INTRODUCTION

It is argued that a believable character will lead to a believable narrative. A character is one of the crucial agents that propels the story forward through a series of events in the film narrative. The fact that both concepts are significantly connected, the notion of believable character serves believable narrative is central in this study. In the context of animation films, Joseph Bates (1994) argues that "believable character...does not mean an honest or reliable character, but one that provides the illusion of life, and thus permits the audience's suspension of disbelief" (p.1). The concept of 'suspension of disbelief' is defined as a character that allows the audience to perceive the character as a life-like form (Loyall and Bates as cited in Zamitto, Dipaola & Arya, 2008). A life-like form which is designed with basic human-like emotions and personalities. A believable animated character must move according to his emotional state and personality throughout his journey in the narrative with similar features as presented in live action films.

Problems arise if characters do not care about what happens in his world or are emotionally detached to his surroundings. If

the character does not react or respond to his circumstances, he does not take action, the audience will not care about what happens to them. Characters without emotions are considered as robots. The scenario becomes even worse if the physical features of a character do not match with the personality. Bates (1994) further argues that that, "the apparent desires of a character, and the way the character feels about what happens in the world with respect to those desires, are what make us care about that character. If the character does not react emotionally to events, if they don't care, then neither will we. The emotionless character is lifeless, as a machine" (p.2).

In Malaysia, poor design of animated characters is believed to have been a long-term debate in animation, which eventually causes poor reception of its screenings and collections in the cinemas. Nonetheless, two notable successful animation films in Malaysia worth mentioning are *Geng: Pengembaraan Bermula* (2007) with cumulative sales of USD1.73 million while *BoBoiBoy: The Movie* (2016) successfully garnered USD4.12 million. Due to its success, this study argues that the character of BoBoiBoy in the *BoBoiBoy: The Movie* (2016) is a believable animated character in a 'lifelike' form with clear

demonstration of human-like basic emotions. Thus, this paper attempts to identify the qualities of BoBoiBoy as a believable character through the framework of the ten key perceived qualities of characters by Hayes-Roth and Doyle and to discuss

AN OVERVIEW OF ANIMATION IN MALAYSIA

Hikayat Sang Kancil by Anandam Xavier (1978) is believed to produce the first Malaysian animated characters. The story and character are based on local folktales. According to Lent (2004), the major themes of animation mentioned being claimed as locals are fairy tales, fantasy, and superhero. *Sang Kancil dan Monyet*, *Sang Kancil dan Buaya*, *Gagak yang Bijak*, *Arnab yang Sombong* and *Singa yang Haloba* are among other animated characters that were designed upon the success of the short animation *Hikayat Sang Kancil* (Rozianah, 2015). On the other hand, *Keluang Man* (1998), the Malaysian TV series has been adapted to the local version which is inspired by the American animated superhero series Batman.

Usop Sontorian (1996-1998) is the first Malaysian TV series that situates three major ethnicities namely the Malay, Chinese and Indian as central characters. Similarly, Datuk Lat (one of the renowned local cartoonists) also portrays indigenous identities through his depiction of the kampong lifestyle, traditional local games and physical features of the local people in his popular graphic novel *The Kampung Boy* (1978) which then later became a TV series (Kampung Boy, 1999-2000). The plot is about a village boy called Lat who appears to be the writer of the story himself. Despite political issues, the story also conveys about Datuk Lat's lifestyle in the village and the then current issues of Malaysia as the background of the story. This has been his principle in creating artwork (Khalid, 2010). Due to the emergence of 3D-animation in Malaysia in recent years, *Upin-Ipin* by Les'Copaque was accredited by the Malaysian Book of Records in 2011 as being the latest and most successful Malaysian Animation. Thereafter, Les' Copaque produced its first full-length film titled *Geng: Pengembaraan Bermula*. The series portrays simple themes and can be easily understood by children where Malaysia's kampong lifestyle acts as the main theme of the series. The series highlights good morals such as generosity, politeness and trustworthiness. In

its relation to the narrative believability by relating the significance of character design to the concept of classical Seven (7) elements; Water, Fire, Wood, Earth, Air, Metal and Aether.

consequence, *Upin-Ipin* becomes very well-known in Indonesia, Singapore, and Brunei.

Several initiatives were lined up for the purpose of enhancing the growth and development of the Malaysian creative industries through the introduction of *Dasar Industri Kreatif Negara* (National Creative Industry Policy) in 2009. Thus, Creative Industry Fund (CIF) was set up in 2010 for individuals and companies, especially for those who are engaged in marketing their products for the local and global markets. The initiatives worth RM200 million (USD50 million) fund that prioritizes to facilitate the Malaysian animation industry. Animation and digital contents were seen as the new potential market that could reach the mass audience worldwide. With the formation of the Multimedia Super Corridor companies called Creative Multimedia Cluster (CMC) was recognized for further investment in creative companies (Barker & Lee, 2017). In 2015, Malaysia Digital Economy Corporation (MDEC) recorded 436 companies including more than 104 animation companies, 52 games companies, 100 companies in film, TV and visual effects, and 54 in new media. The numbers mark the rapid growth of animation and digital contents in Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK

Narrative is trans-historical and transcultural hence we rely on narrative to make sense of our surroundings so that we are able to generate meanings out our observation. Apart of film and literature, narrative can also be found in other different forms or texts such as newspapers, letters, postcards, books, television, video games, emails and many computer interactive applications as well mobile applications. What are the constituents of the narrative? Without a doubt that the conception of moving images derives its intrinsic fundamentals from literary texts hence a brief background of literary narrative

is put forth in order to ascertain an understanding of the cinematic narrative later. Cobley (2001) says that ‘narrative is a sequence that is narrated’ (p.7). He further states that narrative is neither plot nor story. Hence, he argues that story contains all events while plot is the tool to link those events in a causal relationship. Pramaggiore and Wallis (2006) further add on to the notions of the cause and effects where they must contain character traits, character goal, conflicts and actions. On the other hand, Todorov in Pramaggiore and Wallis (2006) explains that all stable narratives must get disrupted in order to restore equilibrium in the end; nonetheless, the character must undergo changes in the course of the story to attain the equilibrium. As far as cinematic narrative is concerned, these basic characteristics are being transposed and translated onto cinema hence narrative is the way that we make sense of the world that we live in; ‘a chain of events in cause-effect relationship occurring in time and space’ (Bordwell, 2004, p. 69). Believability which is tagged to the narrative is defined as a persuasive tool that influences the character to move progressively in the narrative.

Several studies were conducted to examine character design in animation by employing distinct methodologies according to the nature of the discipline namely computer science and Art and Design (Maldonado & Hayes-Roth, n.d; Bamman, O’Connor & Smith, 2013; Ramakrishna, Mart’inez, Malandrakis, Singla, & Narayanan, n.d; Faryna Mohd. Khalis and Normah Mustaffa, 2017). Ramakrishna, Mart’inez, Malandrakis, Singla, & Narayanan (n.d) uses generated lexicon of linguistic norms to identify gender representations and potential biases by examining character depictions in movies

between male and female based on language patterns. On the other hand, Bamman, O’Connor & Smith (2013) proposes two latent variable models to learn character types or personas in film by focusing on a set of mixtures over latent lexical classes through capturing stereotypical actions of a character. Interestingly, from the perspective of art and design, Faryna Mohd. Khalis and Normah Mustaffa (2017) studied the cultural influence on the final year students’ artwork from selected university in Sarawak and how Sarawakian traditional clothing has impacted on the designing of the cultural costumes.

Heidy Maldonado and Barbara Hayes-Roth in their article entitled *Toward Cross-Cultural Believability in Character Design* (n.d) concern on the cultural influence in the context of cultural variability and cross-cultural communication. They argue that instead of focusing on the concept of ‘suspension of disbelief’ and human-like emotions to inanimate objects, “...the characteristics of breakdown moments...” must be explored (para. 2). Despite the approaches mentioned in relation to the character design above, this paper will experiment on the approach of Maldonado and Haye-Roth due to the fact that it contains interesting breakdowns that are more generic to understand character’s identity and also personality. Therefore, this article focuses on the ten key characteristic qualities of Hayes-Roth and Doyle where each component is summarised briefly in Table 1 below. The study of Hayes-Roth and Doyle uses the approach to generate computational character design however, this study adopts the approach and transpose it onto film henceforth, a few words are adjusted to fit the framework that could produce expected outcomes.

TABLE 1

Ten key characteristic qualities of Hayes-Roth and Doyle

No.	Quality	Description
1	Identity	Identity encodes not only the character choice in terms of demographics and description, but also the personality traits and qualities of the character, including what she or he likes, dislikes, and the character's signature and idiosyncratic behaviours.
2	Backstory	Backstory refers not only to cultural variations in individual reactions but to any self-recognized individual experience and history that had a direct influence on the character's personality, as well as current facts of the character's "life" outside the screen.
3	Appearance	Appearance refers to the encoding of each characters' identifying demographic information - age, weight, gender, socioeconomic background and culture – in the chosen embodiment of the character, as well as the representation of this embodiment. It is critical to choose a representation of the character that will appeal to the targeted population, and to choose an attire that will also be considered acceptable - or at least neutral - to the target population.
4	Content of Speech	When considering how an agent should change between countries, language is the first porting issue that comes to mind, yet the available topic choices for the character may present even more salient cultural cues. Moreover, the phrasing of the character's utterances - beyond the use of colloquial expressions and culturally specific word choices - may also play an important role in establishing each character as a genuine representative of the culture they portray.
5	Manner of Speech	The acoustic characteristics of speech - intonation and pronunciation, with the appropriate variation for the localization of the character, for example, are particularly important to differentiate characters from cultures where appearance cues do not convey the necessary degree of specificity.
6	Manner of Gesturing	Cassell as cited in Hayes-Roth and Doyle (2008) suggests that we use our faces and hands as an integral part of our dialogue with others, no matter what our language, cultural background, or age may be, but identifies particular emblematic gestures that appear to constitute between ten and twenty percent of the everyday gestures produced by speakers engaged in conversation as solely culturally defined, and imbued with meaning.
7	Emotional Dynamics	Animated characters' emotional model should impact their behaviour, and in turn, be affected by the interactor's comments and actions. The appropriateness, frequency, degree of emotional outbursts (such as crying, yelling, seething), amount of stimuli required for the outburst to reach its performance threshold, and length of time an emotional state lasts, as well as the degree of comfort with direct confrontations, vary across cultures.
8	Social Interaction Patterns	Social Interaction Patterns perhaps even more important than what is said, how it is pronounced, and how gestures support the utterance, is the knowledge and "tact" of when and how to bring up certain topics, which varies dramatically across cultures.
9 & 10	Role and Role Dynamics	Each character is crafted with a role in mind, be it to advise, to entertain, to educate, to guide, among others. In all of these applications, interacting

		with an animated character should provide a uniquely immersive and human experience, as much like reading a book or watching a film as it is like using a computer.
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BoBoiBoy will be textually examined and analysed based on the qualities above and it is further strengthened by the concept of universal elements namely the Seven (7) basic elements (2014) as illustrated in Table 2 below. The elements are argued

to be fundamental to the qualities of reality and they are controlled by a certain pattern. Each element represents a certain meaning and signifies several emotional contents.

TABLE 2
Seven (7) Elements

Element	Meaning	Emotional Contents
Fire	Hungry	Strength, Emotion and Change
Metal	Stark, Vigorous	Focus, Willpower and Potential
Earth	Static, Monolithic	Endurance, Determination and Fertility
Water	Enigmatic, Amorphous	Flexibility, Intellect and Momentum
Wood	Steady, Progressive	Vitality, Patience and Purity
Air	Aloof, Dynamic	Speed, Creativity and Confidence
Aether	Radiant, Energetic	Power, Wisdom and Clarity

FILM DISCUSSION

BoBoiBoy: The Movie (2016) is about BoBoiBoy and his friends, Papa Zola, Gopal, Fang, Ying and Yaya who stick together to fight against the evil aliens led by BoRara or known as Tengkotak Gang. BoRara and his contraband are determined to steal the teleportation power which is believed to have been secretly restored in Ochobot by Klamkabet. Ochobot is the best friend to BoBoiBoy, who appears to be the ninth generation of Power Sphere's clan. On the other hand, Klamkabet seems to be related to Ochobot. Ochobot is the only hope that Klamkabet has, to stop Tengkotak Gang from abusing the power of teleportation. BoRara confronts BoBoiBoy and his friends in a park and relating his desire to take Ochobot away. BoBoiBoy refuses to let Ochobot go, Ochobot who is clearly frightened hides meekly behind BoBoiBoy. The Tengkotak Gang manages to take Ochobot with extreme force. This infuriates BoBoiBoy and he determines to rescue Ochobot from being further victimized by BoRara. Tengkotak Gang must be stopped which ultimately stop the gang from executing their evil intention over

the Power Sphere. BoBoiBoy and his friends quickly plot a rescue mission. During their mission, BoBoiBoy and his friends are constantly under attack by Tengkotak Gang. BoBoiBoy almost lost Ochobot a few times, however, due to his courageous and strong-willed nature, BoBoiBoy uses all his superhero strengths to fight Borara and rescue Ochobot. In the end, Klamkabet is dead because he has given all his powers to Ochobot. During this time, BoBoiBoy is very devastated thinking that he would lose his best friend forever. Ochobot who initially appears weak and dying comes back to life once he uses up his last power given by Klamkabet, to be reunited with BoBoiBoy and his friends. BoBoiBoy and friends are so elated to learn that Ochobot is still alive. Tengkotak Gang is finally lost and defeated.

It is crucial to identify BoBoiBoy's character design by referring to the framework of Hayes-Roth and Doyle's Ten Key Perceived Qualities. In the study of Hayes-Roth and Maldonado, the term 'interactor' refers to the 'human' who interacts with Kyra (the animated character). This study

modifies the term ‘interactor’ to ‘character’ due to its contextual nature of the medium used. One of the key qualities is combined

henceforth, the number of key qualities will be nine (9). The qualities affected are role and role dynamics.

TABLE 3

The Ten Key Perceived Qualities of Characters as demonstrated in BoBoiBoy

Quality	Description	Character Traits
Identity	Who is BoBoiBoy?	BoBoiBoy is a fashionable and trendy boy who always puts on his favourite orange cap with tiny short thorn and small dots. He constantly changes his attires during his fighting scenes. Each attire is coloured with symbolic universal colours associated with the elements. For example, Water; he would wear a rugged looking attire in blue and white.
Backstory	Who shaped who BoBoiBoy is?	The narrative reveals a few significant backstories of BoBoiBoy which are most evident through the newspaper cuttings plastered on his room wall. He has received a few medals and awards for his heroic deeds. He is also known to be ‘party spoiler’ because he failed to appear on several occasions which are planned by his friends previously.
Appearance	How Does BoBoiBoy’s embodiment limit, expand and communicate who he is?	BoBoiBoy appears to be very agile and strong however he maintains his style as a young fashionable cute boy that the audience could relate to.
Content of Speech	What does BoBoiBoy want to talk about, what does he avoid and how does he say things?	BoBoiBoy loves his friends and would like to maintain the friendship intact however sometimes he accidentally forgets his friends due to his very strong desire to help people in need. He tries to reason with his friends for constantly prioritizing his superheroic acts than being with his friends however he decides to mellow it down in order to avoid any further misunderstanding and guilt. He expresses his speech in a steady manner and his intonation changes according to his emotional change. If he is sad, his voice tone will become softer, if he is angry or upset, his intonation would be forceful.
Manner of Speaking and Manner of Gesturing	How does BoBoiBoy express herself verbally and non-verbally?	BoBoiBoy speaks normally just like ordinary kids. His body movements change especially when he hugs the dying Ochobot.
Emotional Dynamics	What angers or excites BoBoiBoy? How does he express it? And how long does this emotional charge last?	He cries whenever he sees Ochobot is hurt or in pain. He frowns and looks guilty if he hurts his friends. His body would slough and his eyebrows slide down if he feels guilty or sad. BoBoiBoy’s emotional turmoil lasts for quite a while especially in the final episodes of the fighting scenes between him and BoRara.

		His facial reaction is fiercer if he is angry over BoRara and his gang or whenever he regains his strengths to fight back.
Social Interactions Patterns	<p>How does BoBoiBoy react with whom he interacts?</p> <p>Does it change depending on gender, age, position, knowledge or time he has known other characters?</p>	<p>BoBoiBoy interacts freely with his friends, Gopal, Fang, Ying and Yaya as well as Cikgu Papa (Papa Zola).</p> <p>Papa Zola is about 40 years old teacher with the strong interest in taking selfies. He interacts normally with Papa Zola just like his friends.</p> <p>BoBoiBoy seems to be an important person to his friends because all of them are disappointed when BoBoiBoy does not turn up at their campsite. His friends leave the campsite with sulking faces right after BoBoiBoy arrives. BoBoiBoy appears guilty and helpless because he knows that everything that has happened is his fault.</p>
Role /Role Dynamics	What value does BoBoiBoy add to the story?	BoBoiBoy believes in teamwork and friendship hence, even though, he makes decisions in most circumstances, he acknowledges that he cannot fight the evil forces alone. His role is both as a loyal trustworthy friend and a brave, strong-willed superhero who is there to save his loved ones and the earth.

BoBoiBoy's physical traits are argued to have been influenced by the Japanese animation characteristics; sharp and flat hair, medium-sized eyes, small nose, and thin lips. In comparison to his head, his other body parts are proportionately smaller than his head (Faryna, Normah & Mohd. Nor Shahrizan, 2016). BoBoiBoy is designed to appeal to school-aged children between the ages of 7-12 years old. He is about 10 years old boy who possesses superpower qualities that are inspired by the seven (7) elements; water, fire, wood, air, metal, earth and, aether. Each element represents symbolic meaning and emotional contents as illustrated in Table 2 earlier.

BoBoiBoy gradually emits the superpower qualities above according to the conditions or circumstances that he is into. Each element is embedded in his character hence becomes

part of his personalities. The first round of his fighting sequences with Tengkotak and Gang, he emits three (3) types of elements, the second round of the fighting sequences, he performs five (5) types of elements and the last round of the fighting sequences, he delivers all seven (7) types henceforth his character grows even greater in strength and power. The story's narrative is gradually built on these superheroic qualities. BoBoiBoy's physical features change or transform especially when he is under in extreme pressure and his emotions are highly charged. The transformation draws the audience especially children to engage with his predicament and identify with the suffering that he has to go through in the narrative especially when it concerns Ochobot.

FIGURE 1
Fire /Air Element

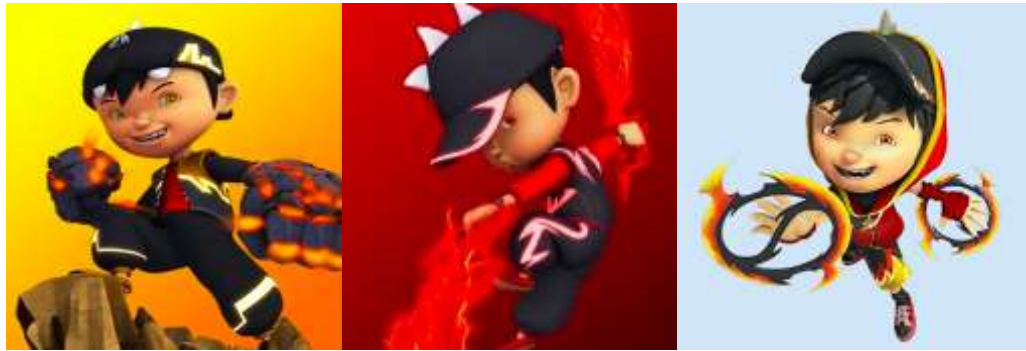


FIGURE 2

Water



BoBoiBoy's emotional reactions toward difficult circumstances are depicted through his clothing, facial expression and colour coding as demonstrated in Figure 1 and Figure 2 above. Table 3 below illustrates BoBoiBoy's emotional reactions, types of fighting style that are aligned with the element highlighted in the narrative. These are the main colours identified through BoBoiBoy's clothing which represents fire, metal, earth, water, wood, air and aether. Fire is signified as red/orange in colour, Metal as chrome/grey, Earth as brown/black, Water as blue/white, Wood as brown, Air/Aether as off-white/white.

BoBoiBoy releases Aether /fire together (*Pusaran Halilintar, Meteor Berapi & Tembakan Solar*) to demonstrate the feelings of anger and strength. BoBoiBoy releases water/air/aether (*Selakan Bongkahan Ais & Taufan*) to increase the momentum, speed and power. BoBoiBoy releases the element of earth/wood (*Tumbukan Tanah/Akar Berduri*) to show determination. All these elements are put together in order to enhance BoBoiBoy's superhero's qualities that are motivated by deep affection towards Ochobot.

TABLE 4

Seven (7) Elements Represented through BoBoiBoy

No.	Element	Types of Fighting Style	Emotional Reactions	Colours
1	Aether/Fire	<i>Pusaran Halilintar, Meteor Berapi & Tembakan Solar</i> (Whirlpool of Lightning, Fiery Meteor & Solar Shots)	Anger/Strength	Red/Orange
2	Water/Air/ Aether	<i>Selakan Bongkahan Ais & Taufan</i> (Ice Cubes & Hurricane)	Momentum/Flexibility/Speed/ Power	Blue/White

3	Earth/Wood	<i>Tumbukan Tanah & Akar Berduri</i> (Ground Fist & Thorny Roots)	Endurance/Determination/Vitality	Black/ Brown
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CONCLUSION

In general, as far as animated feature films are concerned, designing a character is constantly prioritized before other elements are created or supplemented. It is crucial to produce the desired character design that fits the story concept and the types of narrative that the producers want. Animators acknowledge that to create a convincing and believable character for animated feature films is a tedious and detailed process. However, if an animated character is successfully

created other elements such as the settings and the sound effects that come along with it will be easily designed. BoBoiBoy in *BoBoiBoy: The Movie* (2016) is a believable character with life-like form and he demonstrates a clear demonstration of human-like basic emotions even though he is personified as a little boy with superpower qualities. He reacts and takes actions based on his natural instincts to protect and to rescue, henceforth making himself a believable character to serve believable narrative that appeals to children of his age.

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