TechMatters: Get More Animated: Online Tools for Creating Cartoon Videos in the Classroom

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Previously in TechMatters…

We considered ways to engage students with library instruction through the use of comics, and explored a variety of online tools to aid instructors and students alike in their creation. However, those tools only allowed for the development of static cartoons and comic strips. In this installment, we'll move beyond the stationary and delve into the realm of animated videos with three online tools that allow you to incorporate audio and motion into your creations without requiring any significant artistic or technological skills.

The Tools

Voki
http://www.voki.com/

The simplest of the three tools, Voki lets you create customized speaking avatars that you can embed into web pages including library guides and blogs. To get started, you'll need to create a free Voki account which requires only a name, email address, password, and date of birth to establish. Next, create your avatar using the straightforward configuration tool (see Figure 1) that allows you to select and customize (e.g., choose gender, look, clothing, and/or accessories) your character.

Figure 1: Voki's avatar configuration tool

Next, you need to give your avatar a voice. You can do so by recording your own voice via your computer microphone or telephone. Alternately, you can type the text of your message to have it read by a computer-generated voice

or upload a previously recorded sound file. Regardless of your choice, messages are limited to 60 seconds per Voki.

Finally, use the "Publish" button to save your Voki. Once published, you can email your Voki to a list of recipients, or grab the code you need to embed your Voki into a web page. For a sample Voki (which I created using a computer-generated voice), visit http://www.voki.com/pickup.php?scid=7136640&height=267&width=200.

In addition to the free version (which is ad supported), Voki offers a fairly low cost ($29.95/year) version for educators which is ad free, allows for 90 seconds of audio per Voki, allows student use without registration, and provides an administrative module for class and lesson management.
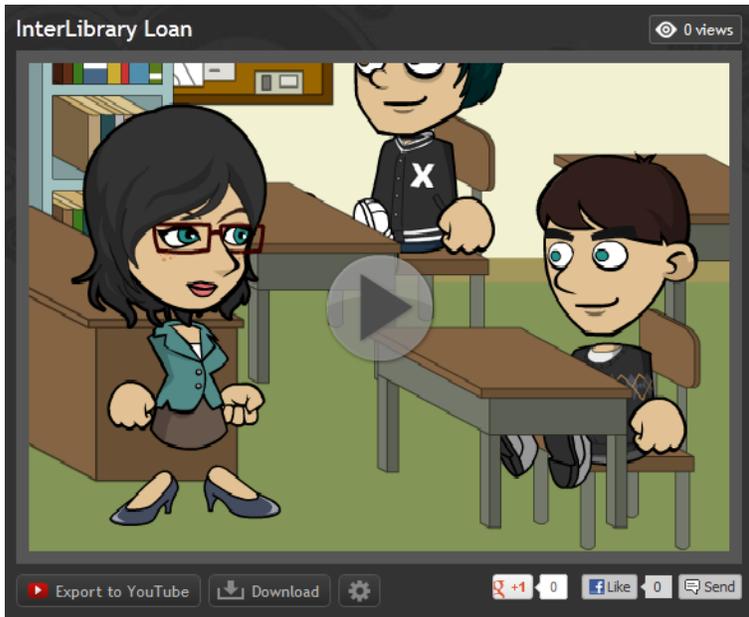
GoAnimate
http://goanimate.com/

Much more sophisticated than Voki, GoAnimate allows users to create fully animated, multi-character videos. As a result, it can be used to easily develop animated demos and lessons to aid in teaching key concepts for your classes.

GoAnimate offers a variety of licensing options and pricing models ranging from a very basic free version, to full-featured versions for business and educational purposes. Pricing for educational use varies depending on the type of institution (K-12 or higher education), number of student users and/or staff users, and duration of license. Although considerably more expensive than Voki, an educational license for this tool is still fairly reasonably priced. For example, a higher education license covering 25 students and one instructor would cost $149.

While the basic free version of the tool does place limitations on video length, as well as on number of available characters, settings, and lines of dialog, you can certainly use it to experiment with the software and create short instructional videos.

The easiest way to start is with the "Quick Video Maker". First, you choose a "video maker" theme package such as "epic ninja battle", "a space odyssey", or perhaps more appropriately in our context "the school chronicles". Next, choose a setting and characters and then begin to type or record your dialog. With a free account, you will be limited to 10 lines of dialog containing a maximum of 180 characters each, so plan carefully!

Figure 2: A "quick video" created with GoAnimate

View video at http://goanimate.com/videos/0_sYhq0Y3-fw?utm_source=linkshare.

Xtranormal
http://www.xtranormal.com/

Similar to GoAnimate, Xtranormal facilitates the easy creation of multi-character animated videos. To create a video, you simply choose a setting, select the number of actors (1 or 2) to appear in your scene, choose a background set, customize your actors, add sounds or background music, and then type your story script. What sets this particular tool apart from the others is the ease with which you can add camera effects (e.g., choose different angles) and control the motions and facial expressions of your "actors".

To use Xtranormal, you do need to have an account. As with the other tools, there are a variety of account options ranging from Basic (free) to Educator ($10/month) to Professional ($50/month). The Basic version actually uses a sort of "pay as you go" model where individual actors and sets (aka "assets") cost a certain number of "xtranormal points" to use. Once purchased, however, assets belong to you and can be used in future videos at no extra charge. You get 300 free points when you sign-up for an account, but from that point forward you will need to purchase additional point bundles at a cost that amounts to less than a penny a point. The minimum bundle is $10.00 for 1200 points. With monthly plans, all available assets are included in the subscription cost.

Figure 3: A free video created with Xtranormal

View video at http://www.xtranormal.com/watch/13967543/psychology-100-library-orientation.

End Credits

Just as with static comics, animated videos can be used to motivate and engage students in the library instruction classroom.

Assignments and/or activities utilizing these tools can be worked into library instruction for students. For example, you might ask them to create an animated video at the end of a course to summarize what they learned. Or, maybe have students investigate a library resource or service and then create an instructional comic or video to describe and promote it to others.

Instructors can use online animation tools to create full-blown instructional tutorials that go beyond the usual screen captures and slidecasts, but without the need to recruit and direct live actors. In fact, using any of the tools described above, all that is needed is a good script, the ability to type or record dialog, and a little bit of creativity in order to create a reasonably professional looking video in a relatively short time.