

Digital Storytelling Project Report

Visualizing Japanese Artistic and Literary Culture, JAPN 251, Fall 2019

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1. Project Description

I incorporated digital storytelling project into *JAPN 251 Manga, Anime, and Beyond: Japanese Visual Culture*. As part of an effort to revitalize the Japanese program at Kenyon College, this course was newly designed to stimulate students' interest in Japanese language and culture as well as help students gain a deeper and more comprehensive understanding of Japanese visual culture. It not only covers manga (Japanese comics), anime (Japanese animation), and contemporary films, but also traces back to premodern times, examining illustrated handscrolls, picture books, and various forms of performing arts, including noh, bunraku (puppet theater), and kabuki. Through these eight different forms, students learned emergence of and transitions in the visual culture of Japan.

While most students already had some basic knowledge about the contemporary forms such as manga and anime before taking the course, the premodern forms were extremely challenging for them, since these forms are distant not only in terms of space, but also in terms of time. When I attended the digital storytelling workshop at Kenyon last summer, I realized that the creation of a digital story would provide a perfect opportunity for my students to fully engage with these premodern forms in a deep and meaningful way, so I decided to incorporate a digital storytelling project as a major assignment of the course. Students formed a group of two to three, and each group used WeVideo to create an 7-10-minute video introducing one of the premodern forms covered in the course, including illustrated handscrolls, picture books, noh, bunraku, and kabuki.

2. The Process

First, I created a questionnaire in which I asked students to list the genres they are interested in (in the order of most interested to least interested), list students they would like to work with and students they would prefer not to work with, and self-evaluate their knowledge in art, literature, Japan and their abilities of using technology and creating a good story. Based on the results of the questionnaire, I divided them into five groups (four three-person groups and one two-person group) and assigned a genre to each group.

Then, students did the project in three steps. First, each of students wrote an 800 to 1000-word paper that is related to the topic of their project. Second, students worked with their group members on the script of their video. Lastly, they collaboratively created a video about the genre. Since most students did not have experience in creating digital stories, Ashley Butler from the Center for Innovative Pedagogy held two interactive workshops in class time and has provided assistance along the way. Student submitted their videos by October 24th. On that day, we watched the completed videos together and did peer review in class. Students also gave grades to videos not made by themselves, and evaluated the students from the same group.

3. Participants and the Final Products

Fourteen students enrolled in the course. Below is a list of the projects with the name of participants.

- *Emaki* (illustrated handscroll): Nicholas Downey, Ashley Li, Anni Ma
- Noh: Isaac Lipkowitz, Eric Schwartz, Henry Ratliff
- *Kibyōshi* (picture books in the 18th century): Nathan Chu, Kate Scheyer
- *Bunraku* (Puppet Theater): Shanti Silver, Cynthia Oyarce, Quan Yuan
- Kabuki: Micah Smith, Zhixing Sun, Amanda Simpkins

4. Digital Storytelling Project Grant

A big challenge I had when designing this course is the lack of related resources at Kenyon. Except for several anime DVDs, our library did not own any of the resources related to the course content. I requested the library to purchase some of the materials, but most of the materials are either relatively expensive or difficult to obtain through library. It is impossible to fully understand and appreciate these premodern works without having a first-hand experience, since the way how these works are viewed is very different from the way how we read printed books or view modern western art works. With the support of both the Digital Storytelling Project Grant and Faculty teaching Grant, we were able to obtain materials (both books and DVDs) that are normally not accessible for Kenyon students. Students also have had hands-on experience with some course materials such as authentic noh mask and picture book from early 19th century. Through directly engaging with these materials, students have gained a more profound and comprehensive understanding of the course content.

Moreover, Ashley Butler from the CIP held two workshops to help students get started working on the digital projects and she has been available for help throughout the process. Many students did not have experience in making a digital story before this course, so Ashley's guidance and support were crucial in the success of their digital storytelling projects.

4. Outcome and Future Plan

Overall, I am very impressed by the students' projects, and I plan to incorporate this project when I teach this course again. I think this project is a good substitute for a traditional research paper. Through this digital project, students were able to improve skills that are aimed in traditional writing and presentation assignments, such as skills of reading, writing, critical thinking, and communication. Moreover, compared to traditional assignments, which only focus on words, the digital project also needs the students to find, select, and comprehend visual materials, which are essential to their understanding of a visual culture. Meanwhile, by participating in creating a visual product by themselves, the students have gained a better understanding of the creation process of the works we study. The collaborative nature of the project also made it possible for them to help each other in understanding unfamiliar and difficult concepts and materials. Making a video is time-consuming, but most students said that they enjoyed the process and it was easy for them to retain the knowledge when they have put so much effort into it.