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The Digital Afterlife of Characters in Popular Children's Literature

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Abstract

Tales are passed down through time not just for their narratives and moral insights but also for those memorable characters that carry those meanings forward. This paper explores the “digital afterlife” of characters in popular children's literature through the literary framework of comparative media studies and trans-media storytelling theory. As the shift occurs from print to digital spaces, children's literary characters become part of a trans-media event where a singular character comes into existence across multiple media. Ranging from books, television, online videos, games and much more, these characters begin to melt themselves into the ordinary routine of children. The study has taken into consideration three characters from children's literature genre: Paddington Bear from the novel *A Bear called Paddington*, Peppa Pig from the *Peppa Pig* animated series and The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse from the novel of the same name. These selected works have different media origins. To clarify, Paddington Bear was born in print and has maintained popularity through social media platforms and paratextual forms such as soft toys. *Peppa Pig*, by contrast, originated as a television-based narrative popularised through YouTube videos and other media extensions. The third case study of The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse was also born in print but later gained wider recognition through an animated short film adaptation by the same creator. On the subject of narratives, Bronwen Thomas's insights into narrative fluidity and reader participation, complements the study that focuses on character's renewed vitality while retaining core identities. The study has attempted to analyse the importance of media convergence in enabling children's literary characters to endure the

test of time by continuing to shape contemporary childhood and also cementing their adaptability in the expansive digital era.

Keywords: Trans-media content, Children's Literature, Digital Storytelling, Animation, Media Convergence.

1. Introduction

Storytelling is an art that predominates the literary genre, and exposure to this art form often begins early in life, with grandchildren huddled in groups around their grandparents or any elderly who have a knack to tell stories. More often than not, these stories go on to shape the ethical qualities in most grown adults who find themselves navigating the world through good times as well as the bad ones. This is why children's literature has evolved over time, placing strong emphasis on the messages conveyed through allegorical characters and their interaction. "Children's literature, the body of written works and accompanying illustrations are produced in order to entertain or instruct young people" (Fadiman). There is a distinct omission of certain types of works which may be confused as part of children's literary genre like comics, which has heavy commercial prospects and may lack literary pulse. The list includes didactic books, which are simply instructional, classic literature, which children may read or dabble with but has nuanced and complex subjects and themes beyond their understanding. Books like *Lord of the Flies* based on their illustrations may be mistaken to be of this genre; however, the gore and psychological themes do not match children's literature. Finally, non-fiction books which may be a heavy reading for children are excluded from children's literature. Further, literature is deemed literature only when there is proper recognition of its core subject matter. To specify the proper subject matter of children's literature, apart from informational or didactic works, is children. It is also important to specify that the focus must not only lie on children but also the world they interact with; it may be their surrounding as well as the

emotions attached to certain ideas or things they understand. More broadly it should be inclusive of the whole content of the child's imagination which can even extend to their favourite inanimate objects.

It was not until the middle of seventeenth century that writers began to take cognizance of children as a separate audience with a taste and imaginative flair of their own. Tales of talking animals, fairy-tale princes and princesses, folk legends etc. became a favourite trope among children and thus, storybooks began to circulate. The flourishing of children's literature has now taken a new turn with the advent of other media, such as television and digital platforms that continuously stream these stories online. This then led to many beloved literary characters making the leap from page to screen and vice-versa, transforming themselves from purely textual or illustrated figures into audio-visual icons. In case of *Peppa Pig*, the animated cartoon became such a beloved and celebrated series that creators of the cartoon came out with a book series in 2001. This points to an obvious situation where a character can now exist simultaneously in books, animated series, video games, apps, and social media, and each medium has a slightly different rendition or experience. This multiplatform presence allows children to engage with their favourite characters in interactive ways, deepening their attachment and expanding the character's cultural impact. This paper attempts to look at three popular characters in children's literature with special focus on the multi-dimensional quality of these characters and also the expansion of scope in the medium of storytelling today.

2. The Transition from Books to Online Platforms:

There are very few parts of our world untouched and not pervaded by digitisation and social media. In line with this, characters from children's books and shows have developed new forms of identity on such online platforms. Earlier, the trajectory of characters in children's books typically followed a linear and highly controlled pathway where they are created for reading which then through gained popularity and public demand gets adapted into television series and finally expand itself into the commercialised zone of becoming a merchandise ranging from soft toys to lunch boxes and water bottles amplified for mass consumption. All of this process carries on seamlessly while keeping the character's identity intact and relatively stable. An interesting observation is that of the deepening attachment a child develops with the character through the change of each medium. The sensory experiences get widened each time, first through reading which fuels the cognitive part of children through their imagined worlds, secondly through the sight of watching these characters get animated and heard and finally when these characters become tangible objects igniting the sensation of touch extending the experience of this narrative. These sustained expansion of characters onto different platforms with consistency has led to what we term a 'multi-platform identity' which refers to the existence of same characters or identities across different platforms. The concept simply means that a single character or content can live in stories, videos, games, memes, and fan spaces simultaneously, gathering new traits and meanings along the way. Such a trait, therefore, transforms a single and fixed character into multi-dimensional and fluidic one adapting across different forms of narratives in print as well as in digital spaces. Every nook and cranny of children's life is filled in by these curated digitised versions of these characters and with the onset of short and impactful burst of

narratives across online platforms, such characters are made visible effortlessly deepening the experience.

The methodology employed for this study is a comparative media analysis with emphasis on how these characters have found their narratives unfold from print to being broadcast into the ever-evolving digital setup. By examining selected representations of *A Bear called Paddington* (1958), *Peppa Pig* (2009) and *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse* (2019) across books, television, film, and online platforms, this approach highlights both their continuity and reinvention. The attention is drawn in analysing the core traits of Paddington which is politeness and mischievous tales of Peppa alongside the philosophical and thoughtful conversations about life and friendship in Charles Mackesy's *The Boy, the More, the Fox and the Mouse*. Each version of these characters has a slight difference owing to differing medium of presentation, narrative tone, visual elements etc. demonstrating its adaptability, all the while keeping its traditional roles or characteristics intact and still fully being immersed in the expansive digital storytelling terrain. The theoretical underpinnings of this study largely remain influenced by theories of media convergence and character transmediality, Henry Jenkins's concept of convergence culture does not miss a beat when applied to this study as it significantly points to examining how different media intersect over time and create an overarching space where characters or content or stories move across platforms easily. The concept highlights how entities of creation do not reside in a singular fixed format but migrate and adapt accordingly. This theory is crucial in decoding how Paddington bear has become a transnational sensation despite being written somewhere within the mid-twentieth century. It also brings to fore the creation of an unusual protagonist in Peppa, a pig and her family which translates into children learning about things as simple as the meaning of an adventure or the etiquette of eating and sharing.

Complementing these ideas is the concept of trans-media character adaptation, in which fictional characters maintain a stable core identity while shifting and adapting to different platforms. Scholars such as Paul Booth and Matt Hills emphasise that characters must remain recognizably themselves (visually, narratively, and morally) even as new media forms reshape how their stories are told. The layered ecosystem of contemporary digital culture makes these popular characters from children's literature evolve and endure on the basis of the aforementioned theories as well as the ability to conform and adapt to current digital phenomenon.

3. Analysis of the Character 'Paddington Bear' from *A Bear Called Paddington*:

"Mr and Mrs Brown first met Paddington on a railway platform. In fact, that was how he came to have such an unusual name for a bear, for Paddington was the name of the station" (Bond 1). In studying the character Paddington Bear which originated in 1958, when author Michael Bond published *A Bear Called Paddington*, he drew his inspiration from a lone teddy bear seated on a store-shelf near Paddington station. The plot of the story is around an orphaned bear from "Darkest Peru" sent to London for safety resonating with historical memories of wartime evacuees and displaced children, grounding him firmly in a tradition of British narratives about kindness toward strangers. Britain had massively seen destructions from the second world war and was in the process of recovering from all the conflict affected aspects. So, the mighty theme of displacement, hospitality and resettlement were sentiments that was felt in general. Perhaps, this was the reason why the theme of Paddington bear has this tragic undertone despite being a children's literary genre. The note tied onto his neck which asked to be looked after is an obvious caricaturisation of the aforementioned theme. The plot relies on the contrast which is drawn between Paddington bear's polite and slightly bewildered outsider characteristics as

opposed to the chaotic situations he ends up creating accidentally. The attire of this beloved bear is quite iconic ensemble with his blue duffle coat, red hat, and ever-present suitcase, all of which are symbolic of vulnerability and resilience, while his fondness for marmalade sandwiches brings out his quirky and relatable side. His core personality is a good balance of curiosity, sincerity, and a gentle optimism about human nature. Paddington continues to be a symbol of warmth, hospitality, and the conviction that even the most chaotic experiences can be tamed by tiny acts of kindness, whether he is portrayed on paper, in a stop-motion film, or in modern digitally generated images. His demeanour is endearing as it is a mixture of innocence mixed with an old-fashioned sense of propriety. Much like restoration comedies which had plot twists and unintentional mishaps erupting in comic relief, the humour found in Paddington bear's adventures are grounded in misunderstanding and earnest attempts to do the right thing. This kind, good-natured humorous manner has become one of Paddington's most distinctive characteristics. Readers have connected the figure with a reassuring, bygone image of British life over the years-orderly, kind, and subtly comical. No matter how technologically advanced an adaptation gets, it always feels familiar because of this nostalgic essence that follows him into every new medium.

Paddington Bear has received global audience after its reintroduction in the twenty-first century CGI films presenting him with a cinematic polish that retained his bookish innocence while making him visually appealing to contemporary viewers. This phenomenon is exactly what Transmedia theorists have stated over time, that it is not just a revival of interest among the masses but also transformation of a character that withstands the test of time in terms of audience acceptance. This successful reinvention of Paddington, later led to its commercialisation with a series of merchandise making it one of the characteristic figures, which

represents London. These forms of media adaptations find a way to reasserted Paddington's identity in popular culture and create countless entry points for younger generations encountering him for the first time. In the age of iPad and Tablets, children are attracted by the short and friendly snippets they encounter while adults rediscover the renewed version of this gentle character they grew up with. This mingling of old and new adaptations allows Paddington's identity to flow across eras, reinforcing his position as a cultural constant. The character is so popular that it has made him unexpectedly meme-friendly content. One of the most widely shared line, *"If you are kind and polite, the world will be right,"* has become a digital mantra, often posted by influencers and pages that promote kindness or talk about the importance of mental well-being, being tied directly to random acts of kindness. In 2022 when Queen Elizabeth II passed away, the official twitter (X) account of Paddington Bear posted online a video of tea party of a CGI Paddington Bear and the Queen commemorating the platinum jubilee celebrations, captioned *"Thank you, Ma'am, for everything,"*. Thousands of mourners flocked Buckingham Palace with stuffed toys of Paddington Bear, which revealed the profound association the late Queen had with this iconic character. This situation posits the character as a soft symbol of comfort Britain has grown to love and adore, much like an emotional anchor during collective moments of emotional events. Paddington's digital afterlife expands his cultural role beyond that of a children's book character, making him a sentinel of kindness and warmth which are great qualities that children can develop. Each digital reproduction reaffirms his place in the cultural imagination. In this way, Paddington's afterlife is not merely digital rather it is emotional, communal, and continuously evolving.

4. Analysis of the Character 'Peppa Pig' from Peppa Pig animation series:

The wonders of electronic devices can only be sincerely vouched for by a sleepless mother who craves a cup of morning coffee or catch a quiet time for herself without having to answer continuous curious questions from her toddlers. In this context, animated series like *Peppa Pig* become a part-time nanny for the children. *Peppa Pig* came into existence in 2004 as an animated series with short episodes created by Neville Astley and Mark Baker. Within a short span of its release, the cartoon became a sensation throughout the world and the media transference occurred from television to book in 2009 along with its screen presence in various social media platforms especially YouTube. Storybooks have been read to children as a means to comfort them or make them inquisitive, the main objective of children's literature has always been to develop a child wholly with essential social qualities. The short narration accompanied by good dose of humour and brightly coloured animations, peak interest in children who are learning to track movements and interpret expressions. The simple drawings with pastel and bright coloured visuals along with an easy-to-follow plot makes this cartoon the perfect kind for children to engage with in the long run without any form of over stimulation. *Peppa Pig* is a highly recommended cartoon by adults who are parents because of its educational aspect. The many episodes teach young minds about social etiquettes and the need to understand their emotions from a young age so they may handle tiny emotional bumps better. It is also a delight for English majors as the cartoon series encourages vocabulary building with the dialogues of these characters being grounded in simplicity, proper enunciation and repetitive phrases that allows younger children to form words or sentences faster. This exposure makes the children more articulate and open to understanding the dimensions of languages more effortlessly. B.F. Skinner's behavioural

theory in terms of language acquisition can be thoroughly applied in this context as the very essence of imitation, reinforcement and repetitive conditioning yield fruits when watching animated series like *Peppa Pig*. The cartoon is not only made to entertain children but teach them life skills, problem solving attitude and cultural awareness. Peppa's character also appears in a wide range of child-friendly mobile games which include digital colouring books, puzzle apps, character builders, and simple exploration games. These apps often focus on developing the child's tactile interaction like dragging, tapping, and drawing. This seamless adaptation of a single character in many formats of digital and electronic devices makes Peppa endurable as well as promotes a sense of stable identity.

5. Analysis of the Characters 'The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse':

Charlie Mackesy's *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse* (1958) is a visual treat both for children and adults. The first few pages feel like opening someone's diary and looking at raw talent with the messy strokes of brushes, the short lines of wisdom and the blank pages that gives the impression of a pauses. The beauty of the book's plot is not hinged upon the complex stories or superficial twits, rather it is based off of the poignant and gentle moments captured in ordinary life. When the book was remade into an animated version in 2022, the only shift was seen in terms of narrative tone and continuous movement as opposed to the blank pages on the books meant for pause and introspection. The trans-media activity did not have any significant alteration to the philosophical intimacy invoked in the book as well as the film. Most children are captivated by the drawings of the book and easy to read sentences in the form of dialogues, with each page being flipped, their tactile activity enhances along with visual stimulations allowing children to become more creative in viewing the real world outside the book. When the same characters are animated and come to life on screen, children often feel a sense of

excitement in confirming their creative imaginings come to life on the screen. The film's animation is based off of the similar colour palletes with a water colour effect that softens and preserves the contemplative ethos of the book. In this sense, the project exemplifies transmedia storytelling not by showing how narratives can be re-stated or re-animated using different sensory stimuli. The comparative approach of the two works aids in understanding how each medium favours distinct ways of interaction. The book promotes non-linear, episodic reading; its disjointed format invites readers to pause, revisit, and reconstruct meaning through self-reflection. Its trans-media equivalent, in contrast, connects these instances into an unbroken temporal stream, weaving them into a consistent emotional narrative conveyed through performance. Taken together, the two forms demonstrate how trans-media storytelling honours the longstanding traditions of fable-telling even as it embraces the expressive possibilities of contemporary animation.

The title refers directly to the four central characters of the novel, all representing certain traits found in ordinary world. For instance, the boy characterises the innocence and tender curiosity of humankind in general and function less as psychologically complex individual. The other emblematic characters are the mole who is symbolic of a yearning or desire with its constant reference to "Cake" serving as a running joke but connotative of a longing that burns in humans. The fox represents the shadow aspect of humankind, wounded yet loyal and filled with logic while the horse emanates protectiveness with its wisdom and gentle guiding force. The characters do not come off in this deep philosophical perspective to children; however, they watch the cartoons or see the sketches in the book as a way to connect with animals they often see in the real world driving their creative instincts. For the adults, these characters represent the inner struggles faced in daily life, the silent battles fought and how

through it all, kindness and empathy go a long way in healing and carving the path for a gentle life. In short, it works in two levels, the child hears the story while the adult hears reassurance. At its core, *The Boy, the Mole, the Fox and the Horse* carries a moral message which is simple with a heavy relation to raw emotions evoking compassion as a mortar for creating a life that reaffirms a value system that is timeless as well as progressive. The larger message each character delivers is not a message of grandiosity but a message of paying attention to smaller and often overlooked moments as a canvas for a world with gentle and ordinary lives thriving in it.

6. Conclusion

The study has analysed three important children's work spanning across different media platforms inhabiting a world which can be read, watched and shared. As stated by Bronwen Thomas in *Narratives: The basics*, that audiences of all ages are required to fill in the gap, interpret or even imagine new versions without having to alter the original narrative structure. Each medium has a different lingo and format that allows for these characters to exist in multiplicity. As a central idea to her work, Thomas notes that more than the plots, it is the characters that grounds or attaches the audience to the work in question, whether it is a book, a movie or even a digitally generated art imagery. This trans-media movement changes the way audiences interact with the characters and the literature it seeks to propagate and not just aim at modernising its representation. What once lived primarily in segregated pages of books now thrives in a dynamic space. The beauty of this transformation lies in the emotional warmth of such iconic characters that will continue to be sensational in the world of children and adults alike. The traditional notion of storytelling may well have undergone alterations; however, the primal quality of familiar narration and grounding universal moral stories remain intact and still in vogue.

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