

Katy Kavanagh

Incorporating cartoons in an academic library

Spicing up LibGuides graphically at East Carolina University

Let's face it. We're not all creative geniuses. In the July/August 2011 cover article of *C&RL News*, authors Matt Upson and C. Michael Hall presented their amazing full-length graphic novel used to instruct information literacy concepts.¹ The zombie-themed tome was the product of hours of work by a library employee with a natural gift for drawing. Although the article was a joy to read, few of our academic libraries have the kind of talent or time needed to complete such a large-scale project.

That is not to say that cartooning is only for the professional-artist-turned-librarian. I decided to take on a small-scale cartooning project that has been very successful for our library, in that it has added color, personality, and life to our LibGuides. I did not need to draw, nor did it cost me anything but my time. In fact, there are many cartoon software products available for free on the Web that are easy to learn and require little artistic talent. The product that I used was called ToonDoo.² There are others that can do the same thing, including Pixton, Bitstrips, and GoAnimate. In this article, I will tell you about my own experience creating cartoons with a free Web-based tool, as well as give you tips and tricks for getting this started at your library.

What's up, Doc?

In July 2011, I was a recently minted librarian starting as the instructional design librarian at East Carolina University's (ECU) Joyner Library. In my new position, I found myself

at a large academic library that was already using LibGuides heavily. As early adopters of the platform, the librarians had taken a primarily text-based homegrown system, Pirate Source, and moved many of their online help pages into LibGuides. This left many of the pages text heavy and in need of updating. Overhauling and improving LibGuides was a goal of mine in the position since day one.

As part of my job orientation, I attended a week-long workshop called Teaching with Technology through ECU's Office for Faculty Excellence. In one presentation, a group mentor for the instructional session suggested the use of a cartooning software called ToonDoo for creating an avatar to post in Blackboard. I created an account on the free online site while he was talking and began fiddling with the software in the free moments we were provided during our break time. This gave me an idea. What if cartoons could be one way for me to break up some of the text in Joyner Library's LibGuides, and breathe a little life into them?

Not just for the funny papers

I started to sketch out the basics of my cartoon. I thought about the comics page in the newspaper that I read on Sunday morning when I was younger. There was always a

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recognizable cast of characters in the strips. Since the ECU mascot is a pirate, I began to research famous historical pirates from the 1700s online. I saw a name on one site: Henry Every. This struck me as the perfect name for my hero, an everyman. I knew I also wanted to have characters of varying ethnicities and ages, which would equate well with the actual makeup of the student body at ECU. I knew, however, that I wanted the time period to be in the present, and that I didn't want my cast of characters to actually be pirates; rather, they would be students at ECU in need of help at the library. I designed a well-dressed African American male student to play the role of Henry Every. Next, I needed a librarian.

At this point, I remembered that my new colleagues in the Research and Instructional Services Department lovingly called one of our librarians "The Oracle." I got to work on designing The Oracle, who looks a lot like this person in real life, except that she does not usually wear a toga.

I came up with a few more librarians, but none of them were based on real life people in the department. One has the body type of a football player and is named Blackbeard, after the most famous pirate from this region. Anne Bonny is a female librarian with a large feather in her cap. I needed more students, but not all of my comic characters needed to be normal people. I realized that often times, there is a suspension of belief in comics especially when it comes to talking animals, inanimate objects, or major disconnects in time. The next character I created was a skeleton named Bellamy, who also looks quite

comical with his wild hair and single googly eye. I also knew we'd need some comedy. I thought about my favorite comic strip as a child, *Garfield*. Whereas Garfield is always represented as the curmudgeon, Odie, the dog, is the comic relief. I set to designing Calico Jack, the spaced out hippie roommate of Henry Every.

As you may have picked up, I kept the pirate naming theme going, while additionally keeping a color scheme centered on the school colors, purple and gold. Even with some of the comedy aspects, I still wanted it to speak to the students academically, and I didn't want it to be cheesy.

I made a few draft cartoons in the software and then pitched the idea to my boss, who loved them. At this point, I had about ten hours of time into the production, including developing the idea, learning the ToonDoo inter-

face, and coming up with three comic strips to show my supervisor. She told me to run with the idea.

What came next was the development of READ Posters for each of the characters within the ToonDoo platform, followed by what I called "Citation PSAs," which were just cartoons reminding students to cite. I created these in a tall rectangular format that fit well with the small columns on the sides of LibGuides. These worked great as an introduction to people in the library. It was time to show them to the rest of the Research and Instructional Services Team so that we could start embedding them, but I wanted to make sure they were widely accepted as a viable idea for LibGuides by my new co-workers

The screenshot shows a web browser displaying the East Carolina University LibGuide. The page title is "BIOL 1051/1101: Biology Information Library Tutorial". The navigation bar includes "Home", "Choose a Topic", "Primary/Secondary", "Scholarly Sources", "Articles", "Evaluate Websites", "CSE Citation", and "Get Help". The "Table of Contents" section lists "Choose a Topic", "Primary/Secondary", "Scholarly Sources", "Articles", "Evaluate Websites", "CSE Citation", and "Get Help". The "Library 101" section contains a "Library 101" button and a paragraph: "This guide is meant to assist BIOL students with a specific research assignment. For more general help with the research process, you may wish to also go through Library 101, which is an overview of using the library and its resources." The "Cartoon!" section features three comic strips with the following dialogue:

- Strip 1: "THIS IS CALICO JACK, AN OLD FRIEND WHO HASN'T VISITED FOR A FEW YEARS." "WELCOME TO JOYNER LIBRARY, NEW FRIEND!" "A MIGHTY NAME, ANY DAD?" "USE A RESEARCH GUIDE, NEWBIE!"
- Strip 2: "YOU HAVE TO HELP ME. BIOLOGY IS GOING TO KILL ME IF I DON'T GET THIS ASSIGNMENT DONE!" "DON'T WORRY, WE HAVE A FEW MORE LIKE YOU. WE'LL HELP LET ME SHOW YOU."
- Strip 3: "THIS BIOLOGY ASSIGNMENT IS OBVIOUSLY BRINGING LIFE. I DON'T EVEN KNOW WHERE TO START. BETTER GO TO JOYNER."

Below the cartoons is a "Welcome to Joyner Library" message: "Hello, and welcome to the Biology 1051/1101 Research Guide. My name is Jeanine Hoover and I'm the Science Librarian at Joyner Library. Please feel free to contact me with any questions you may have about this tutorial. My contact information is on the Get Help page." At the bottom, it lists learning objectives: "By the end of this tutorial, you should be able to: 1. Identify potential information resources on your topic; 2. Identify and locate primary and secondary sources in the biological sciences; 3. Construct a successful search strategy to locate primary and secondary sources; 4. Construct correct citations in CSE style." A footer note reads: "Powered by Springshare. All rights reserved. Report a non support issue. View this page in a format suitable for printers and screen-readers or mobile devices."

LibGuide featuring library cartoon. View this article online for detailed images.

who had, up until this point, been creating all of the content. It was with great trepidation that I displayed the READ posters in a team meeting. I was especially worried about The Oracle's reception to the images.

Suffering succotash!

Everyone loved them. After they were so widely accepted, I decided that the cartoons would guide students through our basic skills tutorials, Library 101, and Graduate 101, and I went to work designing cartoons for these.³ I also created stock boxes in LibGuides with the cartoons already embedded in them for others to borrow the images off of the template guide.

I now can create a cartoon in around 15 minutes. The cartoons are simple to produce, and since the software is Web-based, I can do it on the reference desk or in my office. I even wrote the cartoons into my goals for the year, so the administration knew of their existence. When introducing the new Graduate 101 library skills tutorial for graduate students to assembled faculty and staff in a meeting, I got as many questions about the comic strips as I did about the content.

Andale! Andale! Arriba! Arriba!

Are you intrigued? Think you can take this on for your library? Below are some tips if you would like to start a cartooning project. Most importantly, have fun with it!

- **Brainstorm.** Come up with a cast of characters that you will use again and again. Even if you have no artistic talent, you can still write lists of attributes that you want the characters to have before jumping in. ToonDoo lets you save your "TraitRs" (individual

characters you make), so that in the future you can quickly build a new cartoon.

Decide if you want to use real-life librarians, or make up new ones. You may need to anticipate whether people might be offended, or pleased, to see a cartoon character made out of them. You will need at least one hero and a villain. Once you have your cast of characters, you may also want to storyboard each new cartoon before you make it. Start out with a pad of paper and pencil and draw out the three squares you will design in. Storyboarding can be just as effective with labeled stick figures with thought and speech bubbles. It doesn't need to be a masterpiece.

- **Research.** Research the comic creation platform you want to use before committing to it. For instance, one drawback of the ToonDoo interface is that the images that you receive for free from the site are relatively low resolution. (They offer high resolution files for a small fee.) I did not know of other cartoon-

ing sites when I got started; I just went with the one recommended to me.

- **Get buy-in.** Come up with a few characters, make a few cartoons, and then show them to your supervisor and the others responsible for making LibGuides. If they are not fans of the idea, it may seem like you're wasting a lot of time on the cartoons, so prove their worth. Market the toons to students by having the characters star in READ posters. Consider doing a Flat Andy spinoff with one of the cartoons and send it with members of the instructional team on vacation. Make the

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Samples of ECU library cartoons.

metal cylinders that were the standard format before vinyl. The site also has extensive information on the history of cylinders, as well. *Access:* <http://cylinders.library.ucsb.edu/>.

- **Free Music Archive.** An interactive library that provides high-quality, legal audio downloads from many genres. It is directed by WFMU, a New Jersey-based freeform radio station. All the audio on this site can be downloaded for free and has been cleared for certain uses (remix projects, production soundtracks, etc.) that would otherwise be prohibited by copyright laws. *Access:* <http://freemusicarchive.org/>.

- **Live Music Archive.** The Internet Archive's Live Music library is an audio archive of live recordings that are available royalty-free and at no cost. This collection is home to material from those artists who like the idea of noncom-

mercial distribution. LMA has been successful because of members of online communities like etree.org, who are committed to providing public access to high quality digital recordings of performances. All records are preserved in "lossless" archival compression formats, such as Shorten or FLAC, to achieve the highest quality of preservation. *Access:* <http://archive.org/details/etree>.

- **National Jukebox.** Historical recordings are made available to the public free of charge thanks to the Library of Congress and its National Jukebox site. The recordings come from the extraordinary collections of the Library of Congress. At its launch, the site included more than 10,000 recordings that were made by the Victor Talking Machine Company between 1901 and 1925. *Access:* <http://www.loc.gov/jukebox/>. *ZZ*

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toons accessible to everyone by sharing them on your shared drive, or by creating stock boxes on a template guide for LibGuides.

- **Make it your own.** To avoid conflicts of copyright, come up with your own ideas. Don't use Looney Tunes or Disney characters. Make up something totally new. I avoided naming any of the toons any form of "Peter" since our mascot is named PeeDee Pirate, and I wanted to avoid hearing from our University Marketing Department. Get a feel for the culture at your institution before using any names or characters that may be copyrighted, and consider asking permission before you use the anything directly identifying the school, as well as reviewing their Web guidelines for design and color codes. Your institution might be on board. I made new characters, while sticking with the school colors and the pirate theme. What are your school colors and mascot? What kind of attributes does that mascot have?

Th-th-th-th-That's all, folks!

It was only after I had completed the begin-

nings of the cartooning project that I was made aware of McPherson College's Library of the Living Dead. I was blown away by their project, and even though my cartoons are not as artistic, nor as lengthy, I was not deterred; rather, I was inspired to take the project further. Our cartoon librarians and students have been a positive addition to our online presence at ECU.

I know that with a little time and buy-in they can be an easy addition to bring colorful life to LibGuides and other help pages in your academic library, as well.

Notes

1. Matt Upson and C. Michael Hall, "Zombie attacks." *College & Research Library News*, 72, 7 (2011): 390-93.
2. ToonDoo can be accessed at www.toondoo.com.
3. Library 101 tutorial can be accessed at <http://libguides.ecu.edu/library101>. Graduate 101 tutorial can be accessed at <http://libguides.ecu.edu/graduate101>. *ZZ*