



“Dashing and daring, courageous and caring”: Neomedievalism as a Marker of Anthropomorphism in the Parent Fan Fiction Inspired by *Disney’s Adventures of the Gummi Bears*

Abstract:

As is already visible in its opening credits, the television series *Disney’s Adventures of the Gummi Bears* (1985–1991) uses neomedievalism to confirm the anthropomorphism of the titular characters. More than 35 years after this series’ first episode aired, this phenomenon is still easily traceable in the parent fan fiction, online stories about the Gummi Bears, written for children by adults. This paper addresses two seemingly overlooked fields: *The Gummi Bears* series and the fan fiction it inspired. It shows that this anthropomorphic perception adds new perspectives on human relations with the natural environment and on the treatment of animals, and thus contributes to building the awareness of ecological and animal rights in societies, especially when it comes to future generations.

Key words:

animation, anthropomorphism, children’s television series, *Disney’s Adventures of the Gummi Bears*, neomedievalism, parent fan fiction

„Zawsze zwycięskie, waleczne, rycerskie”. Neomedievalizm jako wyznacznik antropomorfizmu w inspirowanej serialu *Gumisie* fanowskiej twórczości rodziców

Abstrakt:

Jak widać już w sekwencji początkowej, serial *Gumisie* (1985–1991) posługuje się neomedievalizmem, aby potwierdzić antropomorfizm tytułowych postaci. Ponad 35 lat po emisji pierwszego odcinka zjawisko to jest nadal łatwe do odnalezienia

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w fanowskiej twórczości rodziców, czyli internetowych opowieściach o gumisiach, napisanych dla dzieci przez dorosłych. Artykuł dotyczy dwóch ewidentnie pomijanych kwestii: serialu *Gumisie* i fanowskiej twórczości inspirowanej tym programem. Autorka wykazuje, że antropomorficzna percepcja oferuje nowe spojrzenie na relacje człowieka ze środowiskiem naturalnym i traktowanie zwierząt, a tym samym przyczynia się do budowania społecznej świadomości ekologicznej i praw zwierząt, zwłaszcza w odniesieniu do przyszłych pokoleń.

Słowa kluczowe:

animacja, antropomorfizm, dziecięcy serial telewizyjny, *Gumisie*, neomedievalizm, fanowska twórczość rodziców

Introduction

As Gail F. Melson (2001) states, “children live in a world filled with animals – both real and imaginary” (back cover). Looking back at myself as a kid, for me there was not much difference between these two categories: I loved our cats and I loved my cartoon animals, especially the Gummi Bears. In this paper, I will explain how this likeability of the television series characters is enhanced by the markers of neomedievalism (to be defined later herein) that serve as signals of humanness. This works because of the *anthropomorphism* – “the attribution of human traits to nonhumans” (Andrews, 2018, p. 240) – that people engage in when, for instance, they suspend their disbelief watching animated animals wearing human clothes and accessories. Moreover, I will argue that anthropomorphic elements in the transmedia storytelling (Jenkins, 2006, p. 95) focused on the Gummi Bears might be beneficial to animal well-being. Therefore, after a short introduction of the mentioned series, three case studies of what I call *parent fan fiction* will be analysed to show how the neomedieval layer manifests itself in different languages and contexts. These three examples have been selected because they exemplify the genre; moreover, non-English fiction from countries where the original series is dubbed has been deliberately chosen to see to what extent the translations have influenced the new storytelling.

The Television Series

Officially called *Disney’s Adventures of the Gummi Bears* (Eisner, Vitello, & Magon, 1985–1991), the programme commonly known as *The Gummi*

*Bears*¹ was The Walt Disney Company's first thorough commitment to television animation. No previous series in the Western hemisphere had a similar image quality and detail: the show's animation was done in Japan and in the mid-1980s, the standard was unparalleled, even compared to many examples of Japanese anime. The strong rise of the popularity of animated series at the end of the 1980s and during the 1990s may be attributed to *The Gummi Bears*, as this programme was the forerunner and springboard for such classics as *DuckTales* (1987–1990), *Darkwing Duck* (1991–1992), *Chip'n Dale: Rescue Rangers* (1989–1990), *TaleSpin* (1990–1991), and *Gargoyles* (1994–1997). Although these series were often given more budget and time, the anthropomorphism as seen in *The Gummi Bears* can be considered to be prototypical for all the similar shows that followed.

The Gummi Bears is a series of 65 shows, of which 30 consisted of two 11-minute cartoons, thereby bringing the show's total to 95 distinct episodes overall ("List of *Disney's Adventures of the Gummi Bears* episodes," 2021). The story is about a group of anthropomorphic bears with "a long and rich history" ("Gummi Bears," 2021), with the six of them (later – seven) secretly living in the forest out of human sight. They cultivate the so-called Gummiberries, used to make Gummiberry Juice that gives them great strength and allows jumping very high. There is also an antagonist – Duke Igthorn – who tries to catch the Gummi Bears to get the formula for the juice. Just like in such neoancient cartoons or comic books as *Asterix in Britain* (Mussies & Steenbeek, 2020), in the neomedieval world of *The Gummi Bears*, everyone who drinks the potion is temporarily given great powers.

As demonstrated by many pieces of fan art, the Gummi Bears have been loved in many different cultures. As David Forgacs (1992) explains, this is due to Disney's "relays between past and present, adult, adolescent and child," in this case especially "the feelings of parental protectiveness evoked by Disney Babies, Wuzzles and Gummi Bears" (p. 362). As I will show later, these feelings of nostalgia perform a major role in the production of the parent fan fiction based on the Disney canon.²

¹ From now on, this version of the title is used.

² In this article, when referring to 'Disney,' I do not mean to suggest that the large corporation should be viewed as a monolith, responsible for all decisions, but as the label 'Disney' is used to distribute and copyright the contents, I do utilise it even when I aim to describe the people behind *The Gummi Bears*, somewhere at the department of production, that made the cartoon in the 1980s. Most likely, these would include Art Vitello and Jymn Magon, but they are both uncredited, as *The Gummi Bears* are credited to 'Disney.'

Neomedievalism

Although the premise of the series might sound more fantastical than historical, Disney clearly added many allusions to the Middle Ages as markers to the worldbuilding around its imaginary anthropomorphic creatures. The complex phenomena of medievalism and neomedievalism are well-researched, for example in the context of the Early English historiographical traditions (Bildhauer, 2011). In his book *Medievalism: A Critical History*, David Matthews (2015) defines medievalism as the “*process of creating the Middle Ages [emphasis in original]*” and “the study not of the Middle Ages themselves but of the scholars, artists, and writers who [...] constructed the idea of the Middle Ages that we inherited” (p. 7; based on a definition by Leslie J. Workman). As Julia M. Smith (2015) explains, Matthews thus “seeks to offer a starting place for those who wish to study and define medievalism.” But in the case studies included in this paper, there is more at stake than a mere construction of an idea of the Middle Ages, thus one may try to seek another term relating to the whole issue discussed herein.

In his essay “Dreaming of the Middle Ages,” Umberto Eco (1986) stated that “the Return of the Middle Ages” was then a “hot topic” because we were “witnessing, both in Europe and America, a period of renewed interest in the Middle Ages, with a curious oscillation between fantastic neomedievalism and responsible philological examination” (p. 63). Eco’s claim about the renewed interest in the Middle Ages is still true in the 21st century and the “fantastic neomedievalism” of *The Gummi Bears* is an example that resonates with this description. Their transmedia storytelling can be interpreted as a dream of an idea about the Middle Ages instead of a re-enactment based on historical facts. In the words of Tison Pugh and Angela Jane Weisl (2013), the main characters “are not occupying their ‘real’ roles or engaging in their own historical moment” (p. 126); moreover, in the stories about the Gummi Bears, there is no medieval reality such as “plague, infection, danger, violence, filth, intolerance, or torture” (p. 135). “Why, some wondered, do we even need the word neomedievalism?,” Amy S. Kaufman asks in her 2010 paper “Medieval Unmoored,” and adds that, “[a]fter all, we have a perfectly sound word, medievalism, that encompasses all manner of interaction with the Middle Ages” (p. 1). She then answers her own question by distinguishing the two, following the argument of Carol L. Robinson and Pamela Clements (2009) that “neomedievalism is further independent, further detached, and thus consciously, purposefully, and perhaps even laughingly reshaping itself into an alternate universe of medievalisms, a fantasy of medievalisms, a meta-medievalism” (p. 56).

Considering all the above, in this paper, I will use the term *neomedievalism* to refer to the many identity markers of the Gummi Bears that seem to be inspired by the Middle Ages. This is in line with the argument of Mary Jane Toswell (2010), for, as she explains, “medievalism implies a genuine link – sometimes direct, sometimes somewhat indirect – to the Middle Ages, whereas neomedievalism invokes a simulacrum of the medieval” (p. 44). This is exactly what happens through *The Gummi Bears* in which ‘medieval-styled’ elements create a fairy-tale-like atmosphere. In the words of Kaufman (2010): “Neomedievalism is [...] not a dream of the Middle Ages, but a dream of someone else’s medievalism. It is medievalism doubled up upon itself” (p. 4).

Neomedievalism in the Series’ Theme Song

In a television series, the introductory song often creates the atmosphere and introduces all the important characters and other storyworld elements; therefore, it is no surprise that there are many neomedieval components to be found in *The Gummi Bears* theme song. It lasts only a minute but in that minute Disney presents many different markers of neomedievalism on three levels: the visual, the musical, and the textual. In particular episodes, there are various versions of the intro song that all feature the same elements – although some show another dragon or another shot of a Gummi Bear with the wooden sword, just to name two examples. In the different variants of the intro, the lyrics did not change with the diversified visuals. The text of the original version (written by Michael Silversher and Patricia Silversher, performed by Joseph Williams) can be found in the Appendix, and the detailed visual analysis of the intro’s neomedieval elements can be found on my website (Mussies, 2022b).

I will highlight a few of the intro’s main points here, focusing on the elements that are in a way transformed, modified, or challenged by the parent fan fiction that will be discussed later on. The first marker already appears in the introductory seconds of the song: the series starts with a shot of a medieval castle; the gate is open, and knights on horseback are galloping outside. As will be shown, the idea of the knight is an important topos as well as an identity marker of neomedievalism. Another such a marker is the presence of a dragon, an imaginary creature that did not exist in the historical Middle Ages but performs a big role in various neomedieval evocations. The same applies to the ogres, the magic potion bubbling in a large cauldron, and, most clearly, to the clothing of the Gummi Bears, which is in a (late) medieval style – this is visible in the use of buttons on the loose belted tunic (Monet, 2020; there are

also other types of clothing present in the series, like a cote – under tunic – and a chaperon – a hood attached to a cape).

In the intro, right before the actual song starts, we hear hoof clapping and a variation on the classical hunting motif. The instrument imitates the fifths of the hunting horn that has no keys or valves (all tones and effects have to be produced using lips, cheeks, tongue, and air pressure) – an instrument that we also associate with the past (the sound of the horn is mentioned in the Book of Joshua in the Hebrew Bible). In actuality, the hunting motif persisted into or was even more prevalent in centuries following the Middle Ages, thus this is a second-degree semiotic association. This reminds us of an imaginary past of horseback riding through nature and is thus in line with the series’ neomedievalism. As can be seen from the sheet music (the first bars – Figure 1; the entire sheet music can be found on my website – Mussies, 2022a), the neomedievalism present in the lyrics and the visuals is musically confirmed in the theme song as well, as present-day instruments (including electronic ones) are used to play fragments and motifs of earlier musical styles. This is especially the case for the trumpet and the flute, two instruments that are often associated with the medieval times. The other monophonic instruments – like the oboe and the violin – imitate the trumpet and the flute, whilst the accompaniment is clearly not from the Middle Ages, as the harmonics in the electric bass and the keyboard show (for example, in the second half of bar three in which the bass is playing a D, and the keyboard an F major which makes it a Dm7). Also, the drums sound quite modern, hence together the instruments create an eclectic neomedieval ensemble. All these markers add to the anthropomorphisation of the Gummi Bears.

The image shows a musical score for the first four bars of the Gummi Bears theme song. It is written in 4/4 time and B-flat major. The instruments are Trumpet, Drums, Keyboard, and Bass. The Trumpet part features a melodic line with triplets and a final note. The Drums part shows a simple rhythmic pattern. The Keyboard part provides harmonic support with chords, including a Dm7 chord in the second half of bar three. The Bass part plays a steady eighth-note pattern.

FIGURE 1. The First Bars of *The Gummi Bears* Theme Song

This is effective, as the potential audience no longer perceives the characters as animalistic – in contrast to other animals in the series, like the horses – but rather as humans. The neomedieval elements, also the music, contribute to this, as they create an atmosphere of a fairy tale or a folk story featuring magical

entities. Although there are many similarities in how the ‘Victorian’ and the ‘medieval’ are reimagined in popular culture, there is one big difference, which would make a neo-Victorian *Gummi Bears* series less effective. Unlike neo-Victorian evocations, which are often about the body (e.g., vampire mashups) and/or about technology (e.g., steampunk), neomedievalism here is more about natural life, an existence in harmony with the environment. That is also why *The Gummi Bears* can add new perspectives on human relations with nature and treatment of animals. By presenting an animal as anthropomorphic, it becomes easier to relate, empathise, and feel compassion for ‘it,’ or better: for him/her/them. Marc Bekoff (2013), for example, writes that “anthropomorphism [...] play[s] a large role in helping us to understand animal behavior and consciousness,” even if it cannot be seen as a substitute “for solid science” (p. 63). Therefore, making the Gummi Bears neomedieval makes them more human.

To see how these ideas, already present in the canon (original series), are further worked out in the private sphere, the next section of this paper will present three case studies of what I call parent fan fiction.

Parent Fan Fiction

In this paper, I would like to coin the term *parent fan fiction* for the kind of fan fiction written by parents – or sometimes also by teachers or other guardians – intended for children (but for other nostalgic adults as well) and about their beloved characters that already existed, for example, in books, films, video games, and television series. When I approached some of the authors to ask them about their motivations, they said that they felt nostalgia for their own childhood and, therefore, wanted to pass on something of the ‘carefree time’ to the children around them. One author wrote to me how she exchanged these stories with other parents she knows (offline), thus participating in a form of what Axel Bruns (2008) calls a “produser community,” in which users become producers of content, and use and production are intertwined, so that the old distinction between producers, distributors, and consumers no longer applies (Mussies, 2020). These works are meant to be read by children and, therefore, vastly differ from the adult parodies as seen in, for instance, some of *My Little Pony* ‘bro’ fan fiction. Although it is hard to create a meaningful distinction between a fanfic piece that was consciously written for children to enjoy and one that was written to evoke nostalgia from an adult audience, all three texts discussed in this paper are intended for children according to their authors, and as a reader I found that this is also reflected in the use of language.

Following Abigail Derecho (2006), fan fiction texts are often described as archontic (as opposed to derivative or subordinate), which is based on Jacques Derrida's (1995) ideas of texts being archives. As Peter Gldenpfennig (2011) explains, when viewing fan fiction as archives, one can “see the text as an entry to an open archive with the original artefact as the basis for this same archive” (p. 14). My focus here is on the parent fan fiction that adds a new layer to the transmedia storytelling of *The Gummi Bears*. As will be discussed below, the writers' freedom allows the fan fic to work in ways that are different from the cartoons.

As in the fantastic, English is the dominant language (Bhabha 1994, p. 21; Gouanvic, 1997; Venuti 2008, p. 13), I chose to de-Englishise my research and select case texts in other languages. The stories presented were all found on the internet and derived from different cultures – Polish, Russian, and Greek, respectively – that encountered *The Gummi Bears* in their native languages and thus in a version slightly different (because translated) from the canon. Still, every local variation of the theme song contains the indicators that the bears share a distinctive culture; they live in a society that has cultural transmissions and traditions, which make their clothes look a certain (neomedieval) way, etc. The neomedieval elements serve as identity markers for humanness and are, therefore, further worked out in the parent fan fiction, as will be shown in the case studies.

Case study 1: “Gumisie i Mwice Drzewo” [The Gummi Bears and the Talking Tree] by Nvilia

The Gummi Bears series was available to many Polish people growing up in the 1990s (Deszcz-Tryhubczak & Świetlicki, 2017, p. 9). As in all dubbed versions of the series, the theme song is not only translated, but also adapted, because it must keep rhyming. By its choice of words, the Polish variant often adds another layer to neomedievalism, for example by the adjectives in the title song. Whereas the (American) English original speaks of the bears as being “dashing and daring, courageous and caring,” the Polish dubbing makes them “always victorious, brave, and chivalrous/knightly” [*zawsze zwycięskie, waleczne, rycerskie*] (“Gumisie [piosenka tytułowa],” 2021). By adding the latter word (*rycerskie*), the translator/adaptor, Dorota Filipek-Zaęska, makes clear that the bears live in a medieval or fantasy setting, a context in which the idea of the knight performs a role.

“Gumisie i Mwice Drzewo” by Nvilia (2020a; English translation – 2020b) is a Polish medieval mashup piece of parent fan fiction. As its title

suggests, in this frame story, it is the Talking Tree that tells the Gummi Bears a bedtime tale about a dragon, called Euzebiusz [Eusebius], who went to a secret island to collect a mysterious amulet that will help stray travellers to find their way. Next to the bears, the Talking Tree, and the dragon, the story also features a siren/mermaid (in Polish, the word *syrena* denotes both types of creatures) and a witcher (monster slayers created by Andrzej Sapkowski for the purpose of his *Witcher* short stories and novels). With the addition of these two imaginary half-humans, especially the second one, Nvilia adds a “Slavic character” (McCasker, 2014) to “engage with the imagined pagan past” (Majkowski, 2018, p. 19), reflecting on what Paulina Drewniak (2020) describes as “stereotypical Polish national self-perceptions, preoccupations and attitudes to the wider world and the country’s place within it” (p. 206). In the discussed parent fan fiction, Amalia, the “Queen of Sirens,” is presented like Warsaw’s (Polish capital city’s) coat of arms, a siren/mermaid: “The woman sat proudly on her throne, holding a shield and a sword that would always defend the island’s inhabitants from any harm” (Nvilia, 2020b). Moreover, the introduction of the witcher Geralt of Rivia from Sapkowski’s works and a popular video games series is not only a marker of Polishness, but also an act that stresses that the Gummi Bears live in a particular neomedieval fantasy world.

A clear signifier of medievalism that was not present in the canon of *The Gummi Bears* but is used by Nvilia is the Talking Tree. It remains a mystery how talking trees ever came to be associated with the medieval, perhaps this was enforced by a handful of famous Anglo-Saxon examples, such as the Old English poem *Dream of the Rood* and the Arthurian legend in which Merlin is turned into a tree by Viviane. In any case, the idea of a talking tree has a long history in neomedieval texts. The 7th-century scholar Isidore of Seville provides a comprehensive medieval definition of trees in his *Etymologiae* (c. 600–625 AD). According to him, the term ‘tree’ (*arbor*) is derived and modified from the word ‘field’ (*arvum*), because these are plants that cling to the earth with their fixed roots (Barney, Lewis, Beach, & Berghof, 2006, p. 342). One of the most striking salient features of trees in medieval times, particularly in the then literature, was the quality of sapience.

However, this is not a medieval novelty, as the idea of divinity surrounding talking trees could already be found in Greek mythology, for example in Herodotus’s description of the oracle of Dodona in *Histories* (430 BC), which was devoted to a Mother Goddess. The tall trees in the Dodona grove – a forest beside the sanctuary of the Greek god Zeus – were said to be blessed with the gift of prophecy. These trees, oaks to be exact, were believed to speak and

deliver oracles, both in the living state and when they were cut down and built into the ship *Argo*. Some of the most prominent mentions of talking trees also include Alexander’s letter to Aristotle (included in the late-7th- or early-8th-century *Liber Monstrorum*), elucidating the wonderful things that he had encountered in India. In these narrations, Alexander speaks of monsters, wild animals, fantastical poisonous snakes, men clothed in tiger skins, as well as of talking trees (Johnston, 2011, p. 512). He provides vivid and clear descriptions of such trees and the message of doom that they prophesied to him. In both Greek and Indian storytelling traditions, the male tree of the Sun and the female tree of the Moon were prophets. They are described to defy the laws of nature and thereby allude to the presence of divinity within or around the trees (McFadden, 2001, p. 108). Similar ideas have also found their way into later examples of storytelling, such as Tolkien’s medievalist fantasy. In his *The Two Towers* (1954), the forests of Middle-earth encompass the Forest of Fangorn – huge walking and talking trees that were responsible for the destruction of the evil Saruman’s stronghold in Isengard (Holman, 1981, p. 6).

On the whole, there are many mentions of talking trees in various storytelling traditions, including those from medieval times and their neomedieval evocations. These trees were considered to be sapient and sometimes divine. In addition to being the resting place of deities, they were often used to deliver prophecies and warnings, as is the case of the discussed parent fan fiction as well. The tree as a symbol of nature is also important for the titular characters of the series, which, I argue, hints at the environmental awareness that has been picked up and magnified by the authors of parent fan fiction.

Case study 2: “Puteshestvie Malusha Gammi v poiskakh zolotykh chasov” [Little Gummi’s Journey in Search of the Golden Clock] by xoalexandraox

This Russian example of parent fan fiction was written by xoalexandraox (2020b; English translation – 2020a) and is based on the Russian version of the Disney series. In the introductory theme, the narrator sings that “Fairy tales and secrets await them tirelessly” [*Skazki i taĭny ikh zhdut neustanno*], but with the magic juice, they will pull right through [*No s sokom volshebnyĭm im gore ne beda*]. Moreover, the Gummi Bears are in a hurry to fight their enemies, because – according to the lyrics – in a fairy tale the good always wins [*Speshat Mishki gammi na bitvu s vragami – chtob v skazke dobro pobezhдалo vseġda!*] (all quotes from Russian – “Priklĭucheniĭa mishek Gammi,” 2021).

In the story by xoalexandraox, the youngest Gummi Bear wants to be a knight, but the others tell him that he has to be very brave and daring to become one. Then, he tries to prove that he is very courageous and goes to fight a dragon, but the dragon is very amiable and they become friends. The ideas and associations used revolve around the neomedieval idea of the knight. Also, by writing about the interaction with the mentioned creature, xoalexandraox clearly adds a new neomedieval layer to the storytelling, as the dragon – that can talk but not fly – has much in common with ideas surrounding the medieval wyrm.

By the popular *Wikipedia* definition, a knight is a man granted the honorary title of knighthood, especially in a military capacity by the queen, the head of state, the church, or the country (“Knight,” 2021). In the Middle Ages, the term referred to soldiers who fought on horseback while wearing armour. These men were considered to be noble warriors, not only fair in their dealings on the battlefield but also with women and God. Knights were popularly regarded as defenders of the weak and defenceless, hence the informal code of chivalry associated with them (Keen, 2005, pp. 7–17; after “Knight,” 2021).³ Popular culture portrays knights as soldiers who went on adventures, slayed dragons, won titles, and explored places; all in the name of their kings. Because of the glamorised portrayal of medieval times in literature, the contemporary world is often fascinated with medieval concepts such as knighthood.

Popular culture presents several interesting ideas about knights. First and foremost, the phrase ‘knight in shining armour’ is ubiquitously used to refer to heroes. Markedly, the idea behind this phrase stems from Victorian poetry and literature, which is an example of neomedievalism in itself, to which contemporary neomedieval texts frequently refer to (Fliegel, 2015). This idyllic view of knights has transcended time and still persists even in the present day. However, the idea of knights has been expanded in the contemporary world such that it is not only limited to military men saving women in trouble (which is being critically discussed nowadays as a narrative pattern), but also includes people who selflessly help strangers in need.

Arguably, the idea of knights in popular culture is extensively explored in cinema and television. In most of neomedieval evocations, including the parent fan fiction discussed in this paper, the concept of knighthood is being treated very broadly; ‘medieval knights’ is a label that covers a wide range of beliefs

³ It was a moral system which went beyond the rules of combat to promote chivalrous conduct – Christian values promoted by the Church at that time as well as military skill. Chivalrous conduct entailed ideals such as bravery, piety, courtesy, honor, and great gallantry towards women (Goff, 2019).

about/codes for soldiers, from Anglo-Saxon warriors to pre-Renaissance fighters. There are six dominant subjects covered by films (and television series) set in the Middle Ages, all of which utilise the idea of knighthood in their execution. These include: King Arthur, Vikings, the Crusades, Robin Hood, the Black Death, and Joan of Arc, identified in John Aberth's 2003 book *A Knight at the Movies: Medieval History on Film*. As noted by many other scholars before me, Aberth's list of six is not exhaustive or complete. Nevertheless, it does provide an idea of some of the tropes commonly used in neomedieval films and series, which we also find in the parent fan fiction about the Gummi Bears, that all feature the idea of the knight. Notably, films, television shows, comics, and literature on knights often portray them as villains, representatives of evil societies, misguided zealots, or keepers of long-lost treasures (Nicholson, 2014), which is in line with the depiction of Duke Ighorn in *The Gummi Bears*. Nonetheless, the idea of armoured soldiers on horseback and the code of chivalry still persist as a fundamental identifier of knighthood, which is also present in many examples of the parent fan fiction about the Gummi Bears, including that discussed in this paper. This is all vastly neomedieval, since the authors of these stories clearly use a generalised neomedievalism that transcends historical distinction and geography, whereas historical knighthood shifts radically over the thousand-year period of the Middle Ages and across countries.

The Oxford English Dictionary defines a wyrm – another neomedieval signifier in this piece of parent fan fiction – as a dragon without legs or wings, while in other definitions it is described as a large snake. The consensus is that the term *wyrm* refers to the earthworm and similar creatures in Middle English such as dragons and snakes. Nonetheless, it can be argued that there is no standard definition for the term in fantasy genres. Various mythologies have their own unique definitions and uses for the word, and as will be explained, these different forms of dragons make a difference to *The Gummi Bears* neomedievalism. Most Western mythologies depict wyrms as long bloodied fire drakes that are flightless (Flanagan, 2017–2018, p. 96). Within the Old English translation of the biblical Genesis, the word *wyrm* makes an “unlikely appearance” and was later used to describe the “well-known serpent” in hagiographical literature (p. 91). The Anglo-Saxon poem *Beowulf* (Hall, 1892) uses both the term *draca* and the term *wyrm*. The latter is used to describe the final monster the hero must face, which is a dragon (Wanner, 1999). In Germanic cultures, the tales of Beowulf in particular conferred a lot of belief in the boar protector and often featured dragon- and snake-like monsters which were referred to as wyrms (Glosecki, 1986). Evidently, just like its German variant *wurm* (Gibka, 2016, p. 146), the word in question is

used to describe a wide variety of serpentine creatures. The majority of etymological research argues that the term is used to mean a ‘dragon’ and is of Germanic origin, thus connecting two vastly different storytelling cultures (Lionarons, 1998, p. 14, 28, 30). And, with the insertion of this wyrm-like dragon into her piece of parent fiction, xoalexandraox connects her Russian interpretation of *The Gummi Bears* to these two traditions.

Case study 3: “I apagogí tis prinkípissas” [The Abduction of the Princess] by Klarissimus

“I apagogí tis prinkípissas” [The Abduction of the Princess] is a Greek piece of parent fiction written by Klarissimus (2020a; English translation – 2020b). Just like the American English canon and the Russian and Polish versions of the intro song, the Greek one is full of history and magic, as it explains that the Gummi Bears live for 2000 years [*Zoune chília dyo apístefta – Kai omos ta pan kalá*] (“Ta lastichénia arkoudákia [Gummi Bear Intro],” 2019), but it remains unclear whether this is as a species or that each single bear is 2000 years old. Akin to the other stories discussed, this Greek case mixes ideas retrieved from *The Gummi Bears* canon with other neomedieval storylines, although compared to the other two examples, the emphasis is more on the neomedieval fairy-tale-like story than on Disney’s series. If it were not for the tags and the names of the two main characters – in the Greek version of the series, the yellow bear is called Liochari and the brown bear is called Katsoufis – the reader would not have guessed it was about the Gummi Bears.

In this story, Princess Liochari is practising archery: “In the stadium she saw the knights with their horses, dressed in their armor. It was as if they were going to war, but they were probably doing exercises and training with bows” (Klarissimus, 2020b). Then, she is kidnapped by a dragon, but Katsoufis, who rides on his own dragon, rescues her. Just like the ideas about knights and dragons that were discussed in the context of the first two cases, the ideas surrounding archery that perform a role in this third story heavily resonate with neomedievalism. Less conspicuous is the neomedievalism in a play on numbers. As Natalie Crohn Schmitt (2004) explains: “The occult significance of numbers, numerology, was central to the medieval concept of the universe” (p. 97).

In this Greek example of parent fiction, there are ‘magical’ numbers 3 and 7, also important in the Middle Ages (Cusimano, 2010). The number 3 biblically represents divine wholeness, completeness, and perfection and is essential in many folktales as well – for example, in elements like the three

wishes, three little pigs, three challenges for the hero, three princesses, three rings, etc. (Lüthi, 1962/1976, pp. 33–34). The number 7 is often considered to be a ‘lucky’ number – it is the sum of the spiritual 3 and the material 4 as well as the unity of the four corners of the Earth with the Holy Trinity (Stewart, 2018), and a popular fairy-tale number (Lüthi, 1962/1976, 33–34). In contrast to the second story, the dragons in “The Abduction of the Princess” are less wyrm-like, they are merely presented as friendly animals that can be tamed to ride on, similar to horses, elephants, and camels.

Neomedievalism in the Transmedia Storytelling

Within their transmedia storytelling, the idea of *The Gummi Bears* being neomedieval keeps being reinforced over and over again. This is even done in media produced by the Disney studio itself, as Jangobadass (2018), a You-Tuber, proved in a video about references and cameos to *The Gummi Bears* in Disney’s *DuckTales* (2018–2021; a reboot of the 1987–1990 series of the same name). Already in the first reference that Jangobadass provides, a book featuring the Gummi Bears is literally called “medieval.” As the above analyses show, all three discussed parent fiction texts also confirm this neomedievalism, and their authors added new neomedieval elements and markers to those already present in the original canon of *The Gummi Bears*.

Although all three case texts – from different countries – seemingly use neomedievalism in the same way, by adding similar elements as their markers, they do add a different perspective to the (American) neomedievalism of the canon. By writing the stories in their own language and from the perspective of their own culture, the authors offer some local flavour to the addressed global issues. The differences between them seem to be mainly based on the translated lyrics of the introduction song, although the version by Nvilia adds many neomedieval elements that are specifically Polish and not found in the translation. Despite the minor differences between the use of neomedievalism in these three versions, there is a clear common thread in terms of how neomedievalism works in the parent fiction featuring the Gummi Bears. For all authors contributing to the intertextual storytelling around these characters, neomedievalism is used as a vehicle to tell their stories for entertainment, education, and animal rights. This is not a new phenomenon, as in cartoons such as *Time Warp Trio* (2005–2006) and other productions by companies like Disney, the neomedieval visual elements and characters in some contexts are carefully chosen for entertainment. For instance, Gale Sigal (2019) posits

that in renowned Disney cartoons, like the animated adventure comedy film *Robin Hood* by Wolfgang Reitherman (1973), episodes get inundated with violence, as well as bathroom humour, but correspondingly employ the common semiotic arrangement for Vikings used in the Middle Ages. Thus, neomedievalism is an element of entertainment, and therefore axes, the Gummi Bears themselves, and perfectly-horned Wagnerian helmets form a part of existing cartoons (McAvoy, 2017). Nonetheless, or even rather captivantly, neomedieval representations are not only used to provide an insight into the Middle Ages but also to make the characters or features of the film appear authoritative (Emery & Morowitz, 2018).

For the purpose of education about the Middle Ages, the use of characters such as the Gummi Bears not only imparts educational values but offers a platform for sharing knowledge. Most creators of neomedieval cartoons, as stated before, are adults, and the act of incorporation of neomedievalism in animations offers an environment allowing them to share their childhood nostalgia and comprehension in a friendly milieu (Minear & Deb, 2017). Thus, as the grownups writing the parent fan fiction have appreciated the neomedievalism in *The Gummi Bears*, and by means of repetition or inclusion of imagery, activities, characters, or parental acknowledgement, their offspring similarly gains the recognition of neomedieval markers.

Because the discussed neomedieval elements are often associated with humans, the different layers of neomedievalism as expressed through these markers add to the anthropomorphic perception of the human-like animals/creatures presented in the show. Be them ogres, coloured teddies, or dragons – they all wear human neomedieval clothes and accessories. This does not count for the horses, which are not presented as being anthropomorphic and wear modern saddles, bridles, stirrups, and horseshoes. The dragons, however, are somewhere in-between: sometimes they are treated like horses, sometimes they can also speak and are thus more human-like and equal to the Gummi Bears themselves. This anthropomorphic perception offers the audience new perspectives of empathy and compassion on human relations with the natural environment and the treatment of animals, and thus contributes to building awareness of ecological and animal rights in societies.

Anthropomorphism, often considered to be an innate tendency of human psychology (Bastian, Loughnan, Haslam, & Radke, 2012), as a term, describes cases wherein people attribute minds to a wide range of non-human agents such as animals, mechanical and technical objects (Urquiza-Haas & Kotrschal, 2015). It is not uncommon for human beings to attempt to perceive the natural world as a reflection of the human self, as described in Duncan Taylor's

1990 “Nature as a Reflection of Self and Societys [sic].” This feature of human psychology is evident in the naming of storms such as Desmond and Katrina and also in the creation of animated characters such as Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. Researchers assert that the impulse to connect socially with others and the impulse to explain and predict their actions are the leading motivations behind anthropomorphic engagement (Epley, Schroeder, & Waytz, 2013). As such, it can be argued that attributing human-like intentions and beliefs to animals can help in generating empathy for mistreated animals (Watanabe, 2007). Overall, anthropomorphism may, therefore, be a foundation of animal ethics.

Psychological research points to the sophisticated ability of human beings to reason about the minds of others (Epley, Schroeder, & Waytz, 2013). In this way, people are able to attribute human-like minds to almost anything, thereby creating anthropomorphic engagement. To illustrate this, domesticated pets such as dogs and cats are often the object of anthropomorphism. People would say that a dog is smiling because it is showing its teeth, that the same dog feels shame when it hides from its owner after destroying a cushion chair, or that a cat is bored because of sluggish reactions. Such engagement is considered to be important to the welfare and perception of animals because mindful agents cannot be considered as tools (Butterfield, Hill, & Lord, 2012) but are to be perceived to deserve treatment which respects their capacity to reason, to suffer, and to have a conscious experience (Epley & Waytz, 2010). Additionally, agents with a mind are deemed worthy of empathic care and concern (Watanabe, 2007). Therefore, moral and empathic concern for animals stems from the degree in which people perceive these creatures to have minds.

Further research has to examine the evidence that scholars have offered for anthropomorphic creatures in television shows and stories leading to a change in beliefs towards pro-animality and pro-environmentalism in both children and adults. There are, however, some indications in that direction. Anthropomorphic perception makes people more willing to consider animal ethics, to care for animals, and to be selective about the animals that can be used as food (Bastian, Loughnan, Haslam, & Radke, 2012). For example, in many Western contexts, the idea that a dog is man’s best friend has caused these animals to be viewed as pets and not sources of food. Nonetheless, there is a downside to the anthropomorphic engagement. Notably, assigning intentions and emotions to animals may lead to an inaccurate understanding of the biological processes in the natural world (Milman, 2016). Human beings often extend anthropomorphic language to wild animals such as the

larger members of the cat family like tigers, leopards, and lions. As a result, inappropriate behaviour towards wild animals occurs, for example, people begin to domesticate or adopt tigers and lions and keep them in their backyards. Because films by Disney have frequently led to misunderstandings and animal suffering – such as the many Dalmatians adopted by people with no experience with these dogs, and the illegal raccoon trade after the release of *Pocahontas* (1995) – I suspect the writers of Disney had no intentions to connect medievalism, anthropomorphism, and environmentalism. There is no literature that points to that either, thus it seems simply an unintended by-product of the show. Judging from the nostalgia described by the authors of the parent fan fiction, it could, however, well be that the popularity of the show grew from a combination of these parts, because animal welfare – such as the welfare of the dragon – does perform a major role in their stories.

Also, the theme of inter-species bonds is developed further. In the canon of the series, there were already many encounters between the Gummi Bears and other creatures, which has led to a friendship between two humans and the Gummies. In the parent fan fiction analysed in the paper, this is expanded by the introduction of the Talking Tree and a talking dragon. The second and third stories provided an interesting difference, as in the second one, the dragon is very much like a medieval wyrm and represented as rather anthropomorphic, whilst in the third case, the dragons are more like pack/sumpter/riding animals which, after domestication, are used as a means of transporting goods ('load') or people. Thus, in the second example, the dragon is an autonomous agent, whereas in the third, the dragon is a pet with its own task. These different approaches to a fantastic beast offer possibilities to think in a new way about different attitudes that people in different cultures have towards animals: a slaughter chicken has a different life than a dressage horse and yet another life than a pet.

In the stories, the Gummi Bears care for their environment, and this is picked up by the children watching the show. Ann Sanson and Christine Di Muccio (1993) investigated children's behaviour when playing with characters from TV series that the children knew. That with figures from Gummi Bears was found to be less aggressive than when playing with figures from another series. This underlines how the value of 'caring' in the series is reflected in the children's fantasy world. In the canon, the Gummi Bears are just as valuable as humans, because with the help of medieval elements, the anthropomorphic representation makes them more human. This is already noticeable in the first few seconds of the series' opening song and was developed further in the online written adaptations that I call parent fan fiction.

There are some local flavours in terms of the differences in neomedievalism between the three selected stories, but this does not influence on how neomedievalism links with anthropomorphism. All the added neomedieval elements enforce the humanness of the Gummi Bears, which might lead to reconsiderations beneficial to the welfare of animals, as anthropomorphism can be pegged as a contribution to the foundation of animal ethics. This is because animals get to be perceived as mindful agents, hence deserving of treatment that considers their capacity to suffer. When perceived as mindful agents, animals can receive empathetic care. As my analyses show, the neomedieval elements in the transmedia storytelling of *The Gummi Bears* serve as identity markers confirming the humanness of these anthropomorphic colourful teddy bears and this anthropomorphic language, I argue, helps human beings to care more for animals. In the parent fan fiction discussed in this paper, these pro-environmental and pro-animal welfare elements have been deliberately incorporated by the authors into their stories to have a positive effect on their audience. As one of the authors puts it in a private message: “By tapping into the love of nature of the Gummi Bears of my youth, I pass on this good stewardship to the next generation.”

Conclusions

The above analyses show four things. Firstly, that *The Gummi Bears* cartoons include markers of neomedievalism. Secondly, that neomedievalism can make animal characters appear more human-like (via anthropomorphism). Thirdly, that human-like entities can garner more sympathy than non-human beings, possibly serving animal rights and increasing environmental awareness. And, finally, that *The Gummi Bears* parent fan fiction has been created in a similar manner. But it does not stop here – there is a big difference between the canon and the parent fan fiction in terms of the purpose with which neomedievalism is used to make the Gummi Bears more human. For the creators of the show, it was purely about entertainment, but the writers of the analysed parent fan fiction look for interpersonal connections and educational opportunities. Moreover, the writers add all kinds of neomedieval elements from other storytelling traditions, so that the children to whom they may read the stories will also learn about the images and imaginations of a more local past.

Appendix: Original Lyrics of *The Gummi Bears* Theme Song

Dashing and daring,
Courageous and caring,
Faithful and friendly,
With stories to share.
All through the forest,
They sing out in chorus,
Marching along
As their song fills the air.

Gummi Bears!
Bouncing here and there, and everywhere.
High adventure that's beyond compare.
They are the Gummi Bears!

Magic and mystery
Are part of their history,
Along with the secret
Of Gummiberry Juice.
Their legend is growing,
They take pride in knowing,
They'll fight for what's right,
In whatever they do.

Gummi Bears!
Bouncing here and there and everywhere.
High adventure that's beyond compare.
They are the Gummi Bears!
They are the Gummi Bears!

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