

Writing Children's Stories Using Artificial Intelligence

There has been a lot of stuff about AI in the news recently. Huge amounts of money and effort have been put into developing commercially useful AI systems, despite the cries of concern that the 'robots will steal our jobs'. While there is undoubtedly a lot of hype in the media, there are also many places now where AI is doing stuff that uses to be exclusively a human activity.

I stumbled across one of these places recently – the task of writing bedtime stories for your children - Scarlett Panda (<https://www.scarlettpanda.com/>). Actually, Scarlett Panda is somewhat more than a writing tool to produce children's stories. It aims to involve the child in suggesting characters, actions and outcomes – in other words instead of the child at bedtime asking their parents for a story about unicorns who fall in love with a princess, the parent and child together ask the Scarlett Panda website for the story, but still specifying the components of that story. No physical reading book is involved – the experience is much more like playing a computer game. This is promoted as an advantage, as this gamification (ie web site interface) and personalisation is seen as a way of encouraging children with ADHD, autism or dyslexia to participate in reading stories.

Scarlett Panda offers the ability to generate and save personalised stories, create storybooks, and make lullabies for \$10 per month. They also have a library of existing stories. An additional \$5 per month gets you access to personalised meditations/mindfulness for your child. There is an initial free trial.

I was curious to see how well it worked, so I ask it to write a story about a Banana and an Elephant:

Create a story



This story is about

A banana and elephant go to the park and meet a dinosaur who teaches them to skateboard

The main character's friends are - optional

A wise elephant and an impulsive banana and a rather dim wi

The moral of the story is - optional

Live for the moment

The story is for a child aged

0-3

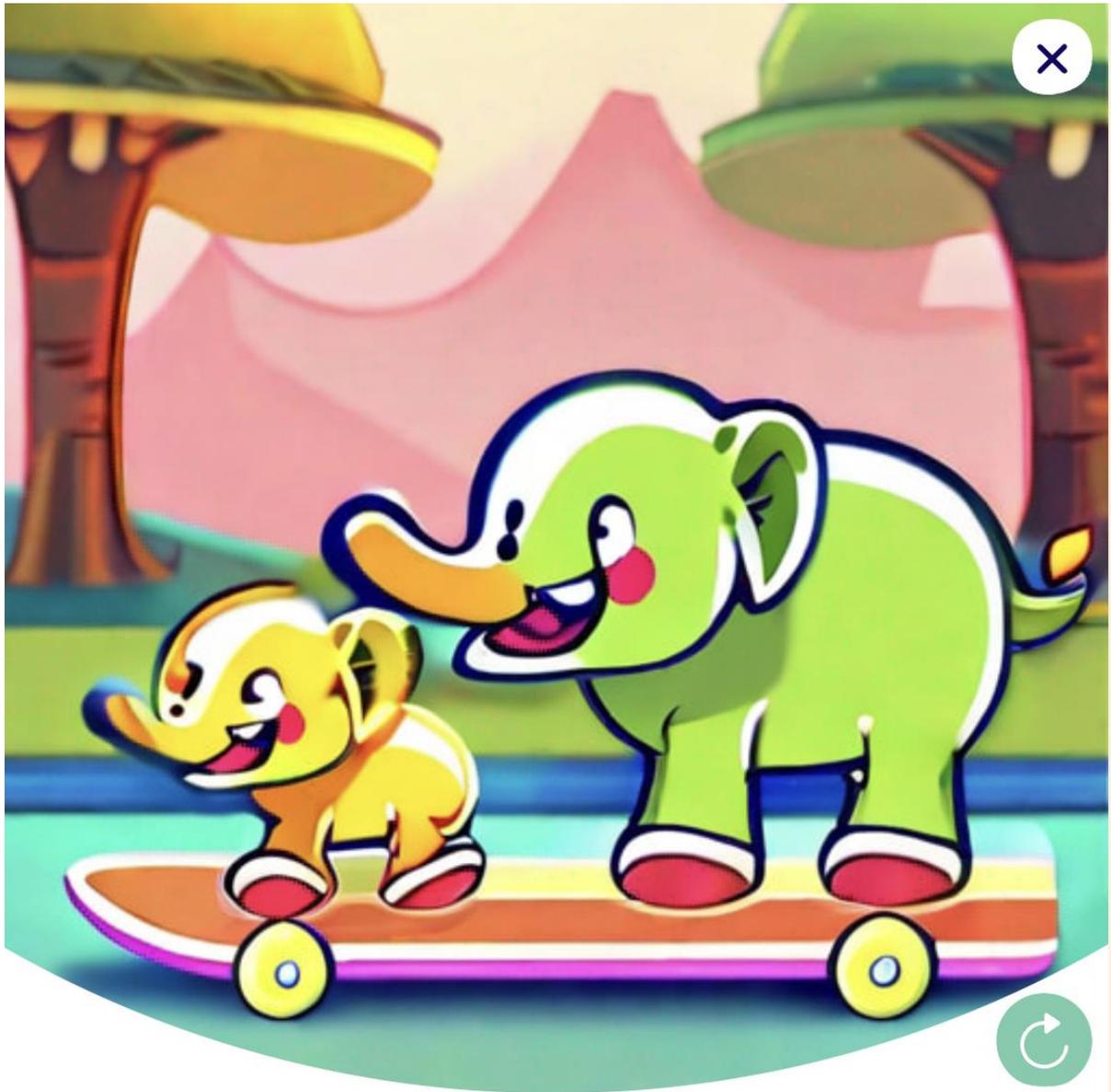
4-6

7-9

10-12

13+

This resulted in:



Skateboarding Adventures with Ellie, Benny, and Dizzy

In a bustling town near the edge of the forest, there lived a wise elephant named Ellie and an impulsive banana named Benny. They were the best of friends, always seeking new adventures together. One sunny morning, they decided to go to the park and enjoy the beautiful day.

As they walked through the park, they stumbled upon a rather dim-witted dinosaur named Dizzy. Dizzy was a friendly dinosaur, but he often got confused and had a hard time keeping up with the world around him.

"Hello, Ellie and Benny!" Dizzy greeted them with a big smile. "What brings you here today?"

"We're just enjoying the sunshine and hoping for some fun," replied Ellie.

"Fun, you say?" Dizzy's eyes lit up. "I know just the thing! Skateboarding!"

Benny bounced up and down with excitement. "Skateboarding? That sounds awesome!"

So off they went to the skate park, where Dizzy attempted to teach Ellie and Benny the art of skateboarding. With his clumsy steps and occasional falls, Dizzy made everyone laugh. But despite his lack of grace, Dizzy never gave up.

Ellie, being wise and careful, learned slowly but steadily. She watched Dizzy's every move and practiced diligently. Benny, on the other hand, being impulsive, couldn't wait to jump on the skateboard and zoom around.

But as Benny tried to imitate Dizzy's moves, he found himself tripping over his own feet and tumbling down. Each time he fell, he would get back up and try again with even more determination.

After many attempts, Ellie and Benny improved their skills. They were not experts, but they were able to skate without falling every few seconds. The three friends laughed and cheered, feeling proud of their accomplishments.

As the day wore on, they realized something important. Skateboarding wasn't just about fancy tricks and perfect balance. It was about enjoying the moment, living in the here and now.

Dizzy, the dim-witted dinosaur, had unknowingly taught them a valuable lesson. He may have struggled to learn skateboarding, but his enthusiasm and zest for life were contagious. Dizzy reminded them to embrace each experience, no matter how challenging or silly it may seem.

From that day forward, Ellie, Benny, and Dizzy continued to explore and have adventures together. They didn't worry about being the best or the fastest. Instead, they focused on cherishing every moment and making the most of their time together.

And so, they skateboarded through the park with joy in their hearts, leaving behind trails of laughter and friendship. Together, they understood that living for the moment was the greatest adventure of all.

The end.

Well, that seems pretty good, particularly as it only took a couple of moments to generate. The header picture (the two elephants on a skateboard) was also generated by the AI – so that is slightly wrong as it probably should be an elephant and a banana. The story certainly meets the spec and definitely promotes the desired message. The tone of the prose is a little stodgy to my mind and maybe the vocabulary is slightly too advanced for a seven-year-old. (But then it is a long time since I was seven). I think the main faults with the story are:

- 1) It is very bland. There is a lot of telling and hardly any showing, but perhaps this is appropriate for this age range. There are no expressions of emotion and we don't really see what the characters are thinking.
- 2) There is no humour. Okay, I did not ask for humour, but then isn't the computer supposed to do work, and not me?
- 3) The words I used in the initial specification are pretty much lifted from the spec and placed directly into the story – so not much invention has occurred in creating the story.
- 4) There is no way to control the tone of the story – so it is not possible with the current interface to ask for a story in the style say of Roald Dahl, or A.A. Milne or the Brothers Grimm. I think that would certainly be possible technically.

Would a seven to nine-year-old be happy with this story? I don't feel it is complex enough and in particular, I don't feel there is much emotional engagement with the characters for the reader. Would the child really care what happens to these admittedly imaginary characters?

Let's compare this story to something a real human writer might produce:

The banana and the elephant

Banana and Elephant were walking the park one day and came across something that they had never seen before.

Elephant said, 'Look, there's a new playground over there.'

Banana did indeed look, but Elephant was standing in the way, so he could not see anything.

'Move over you big lump,' said Banana.

'Well, really, there's no need to be personal,' replied Elephant, grudgingly moving over.

Banana could now see the playground. It was very big. Even bigger than Elephant. There was a large concrete ring and steps up to the top. And in the middle, there was a deep concrete bowl. A dinosaur was standing on the top of the ring, looking down into the bowl.

'Let's go over and see what the dinosaur is doing,' said Banana.

‘Okay, maybe he can see some food in the middle,’ said Elephant hopefully.

When they got closer, they could see that there was no food in the bowl. It was just plain concrete, with a few bumps in the middle.

When they got really close, Banana shouted out: ‘Hey, Mr Dinosaur! - what’s occurring?’

The dinosaur ignored them, however, and skipped onto a little wooden plank, and then glided down the slope of the bowl. As he picked up speed, he went over one of the bumps in the middle of the bowl and flipped up into the air. The little plank had wheels underneath - it was a skateboard. The skateboard seemed to twist under the dinosaur, and then the dinosaur was zooming up the other side of the bowl and dextrously came to a stop at the top. ‘Alley top’ the dinosaur exclaimed.

‘Oooooohhhh’, said Elephant, ‘that looks fun.’

Banana and Elephant climbed up the steps at the side of the skatepark so that they could see better.

Again, the dinosaur whizzed across the bowl, this time coming to a stop right next to the banana and the elephant.

‘Can I have a go?’ Elephant.

‘Don’t be silly,’ Banana, ‘you are much too heavy. I’m much lighter, let me have a go.’

‘All right,’ said the dinosaur.

So, the dinosaur stepped aside and the banana leapt onto the board, and in a trice, he was whizzing down the slope into the bowl.’

‘Wheeeeeeeeeeee,’ he cried out.

Elephant hrumphed down his trunk. He wanted to do it too, it looked so much fun. But then he looked, and Banana was stuck in the middle of the bowl. He simply hadn’t been fast enough to climb up the far side.

‘Your friend is pretty good, but I think he needs some help,’ said the dinosaur. And with that, he slid down the side of the bowl and gave the skateboard a big swipe with his tail. This caught Banana by surprise, and he fell off the board with a thump. The skateboard zipped back up the slope to the top of the bowl, and the elephant put his foot on it to stop it.

‘Watch me, you guys,’ Elephant called out. ‘I’ll definitely make the other side with all my weight.’ But there was a problem. There was no way the big elephant could get all four feet on the board at once. Then had an idea. Standing on the board with his back feet, he reared up into the air, so that he was standing up just like the humans he had seen at the zoo.

‘Look at me,’ he shouted. ‘Here I come.’

And with that, Elephant was speeding, faster and faster, down the side of the bowl.

‘How do I steer,’ he trumpeted, though really it was too late.

There was a tremendous crump! and he flew into the dinosaur - followed by an even bigger thump as Elephant fell off the board and came down the concrete.

‘Ow, that hurts,’ he moaned.

‘I don’t think you two are really suited to skateboarding,’ said the dinosaur, who after all was not that bright and quite often stated the obvious.

‘I think you are probably right,’ said Elephant, carefully getting up and checking that all four limbs and trunk were still attached. ‘I think it would be much safer if Banana and I should just carry on our walk.’ He looked around to see where Banana had got to. But Banana had been at the epicentre of the crash and had met the full force of Elephant’s fall. His skin was now a full three feet from his body.

‘Oh dear,’ said Elephant, ‘I’m so sorry. I don’t think there’s anything to be done now, though - one can’t unmake a banana split.

And with that, Elephant climbed up out of the bowl, though he was not too sorry because he did remember to eat the banana before leaving. After all, a banana skin could cause a nasty accident in a skateboard park.

I would claim this is a much more interesting and engaging story for both the child and the adult reader. Of course, it only took a few minutes to create the computer-generated story while it took me a day or so to write my version. But then I would argue that my version has a level of emotional depth, mixed with some humour and pathos and that the moral of the story is delivered in a more subtle and nuanced manner. In the end, though, the reader is the judge. Does anyone have a few seven-year-olds who would like to act as an audience panel?

Dave Sinclair
22 August 2023

Notes:

- 1) Who owns the copyright of the story once it is generated? I think Scarlett Panda does, as far as I understand their Terms and Conditions and then grant the customer a limited licence to use that story for their own personal and (customer’s) non-commercial purpose.