

TELEVISION

International Central Institute for Youth- and Educational Television, IZI

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Children's fantasies and programme design

Statements from the staff responsible on the opportunities of involving children's fantasies in their TV programme



Frank Beckmann

[Programme Manager of KI.KA, the ARD/ZDF children's channel, Erfurt, Germany](#)

Fantasy is a motor, motivating kids to drive into new worlds. These worlds belong exclusively to the kids. With the motor of fantasy voyaging to distant planets, facing new challenges is a child's game. Dreams become true, hopes are fulfilled, fears are endured and overcome, heroes are born - day for day in the kids' minds.

Our job - as adults - is to provide the energy for this motor: by writing books, telling stories, recording radio plays, making dolls, developing games and - of course - transmitting TV programmes. The role of television must not be reduced to merely providing fantasies. We provide the energy, the fuel, as it were; our task is not to just pull the kids in tow. The stories we tell must leave sufficient space for the kids' own fantasy. They must not be one-dimensional. Stories without fantasy are a trip around the next corner - predictable and boring. The whole should be aimed at opening up spaces, not just stuffing them with furry toys, advertising slogans and interests alien to children.

Fantasy cannot be controlled. Once the motor is switched on, off we go - to anywhere possible - even partly beyond our own influence. We therefore may not confront children's minds with just talking animals, nasty monsters and super heroes. We have to put up signposts pointing out the way, we have to convey values and fill the fantasy worlds with good ideas.

And when good ideas have something to do with reality, this does no harm. Reality can also be make-believe. Stories from here and now are just as exciting as stories from remote planets, they are also closer to children. For experiencing reality, putting oneself into another's position, becoming acquainted with people from foreign countries fantasy is also required.

So fill her up, please...



Firdoze Bulbulia

[Chairperson, Children and Broadcasting Foundation for Africa \(CBFA\), Gauteng, South Africa](#)

Television programmes in the Apartheid South Africa did not concern themselves with black children's issues - fantasy or otherwise - especially when you consider the issue of language. A broadcaster that was steeped in the Apartheid mentality would not find a way of including black children's stories and definitely not in their languages.

As the political milieu in South Africa began to change and producers found a niche in children's programmes some producers began to concentrate solely on the production of children's programmes. South Africa began to see a sprinkling of African storytelling in a popular South African children's programme entitled Kideo - produced by Louise Smit Productions. Within this format a short segment involving an African woman storyteller would begin to draw on the folk tale tradition and entice the children to listen to the stories. Even later the books from which the stories emerged would be brought into the studio and the colourful drawings would become part of the presentation. Animation in the crudest form was beginning to unfold. Now though, more sophisticated animations have begun to be produced, and recently even African animation with African images is seeing some light. A notable example would be the Francophone (French and West African) production of Kiriku - a highly sophisticated animation based on an African folk tale.

Another type of African "fantasy" would be the BMW-African Pen Pals, a 10-part series of 15 minutes each, portraying the lives of one boy and one girl in each country and produced in five African countries: South Africa, Nigeria, Tanzania, Egypt and Kenya. This series gives audiences an opportunity to see a different Africa - one in which children were like any other children in the world, they lived in houses, they went to school, they had family lives with parents and siblings, they played with their friends, they went shopping, they participated in sports, arts, culture, and they were not the BBC/CNN images of war-torn Africa, of bare-bottomed, fat-bellied, running-nose African children - curious, exotic and afraid. Rather, these are images of an Africa and its children that are loving, ordinary, children. In the words of the Head of UNICEF, UK: "We saw images of Africa that we have never seen before." (Commonwealth Broadcasting Association General Assembly, Manchester April 2002.)

In a crude way we have created a fantasy, a place where children are clean and healthy, where there are no wars, and they are not viewed as "other or different". So - what do we child-rights activists, producers of children's programmes and parents from Africa do, where some of our children struggle to find comfort in their homes and meals for their bellies? We look for fantasy in the images of everyday life, in the sound of the morning crow and the twilight colours of the African skies - we find it in the smiling faces of a child receiving food and the child going to school, in the dusk and dawn images of the cows going out to graze and then returning to be milked for the family meal. These images that create hope and prosperity, that are simple and differ from the images of the fantastical castles, or giant cream cakes, or chocolate chip factories - no, these are comforting images of Africa, where our reality is interwoven with our fantasy and where our children look in wonderment at the images that are created of themselves - beautiful images we find in documentaries like BMW-African Pen Pals or the Sesame HIV + puppet images of fantasy. For is fantasy not a place to escape to, where you are comforted and supported, where there is meaning and understanding, where there is hope and not fear - where you know who you are - when all around is burning...?

Globalization is thus not a great fear - for how does one compete with these images of Africa, these fantastical images that soothe the soul and awaken the spirit? My guess is that these will become the global images, the images for which we all will aspire, that we will fantasize about.

(Extract from a longer article "Fantasy and the African child - What happens when the townships are burning?")



Mary Ann Dudko, Ph.D.

[Vic President, Content Development, HIT Entertainment, Allen, TX, USA.](#)

Barney & Friends is a live-action American television programme that has been broadcast on PBS (Public Broadcasting System) since 1992. It currently airs in over 100 countries worldwide. The main character is a lovable, friendly purple dinosaur named Barney, who comes to life from a plush toy via children's imaginations. Barney serves as a guide or facilitator for the children to use their imaginations to problem solve and to discover the world around them. Barney helps teach educational concepts through pretend play, singing songs, reciting rhymes, and playing games. He demonstrates his love of books and reading by telling favourite children's stories and reading good books. Barney encourages problem solving, creative and imaginative thinking, politeness, and fair play.

Each episode emphasizes language development, physical activity, social interactions, and music through one primary theme that is especially geared for the preschool child. Interesting, meaningful, and relevant topics are selected to present educational concepts in a developmentally appropriate manner. The theme of each episode revolves around the utilization of the child's imagination and pretend play - critical elements in developing creative thinkers. The themes incorporate problem-solving situations that stimulate and challenge the development of critical thinking skills.

The cast children and Barney model positive prosocial behaviours and the use of fantasies, or pretend play, in order to help the viewing children learn polite behaviours, readiness skills, and the ability to use their imaginations. The activities, such as singing, dancing, and clapping, invite active participation by the audience. The songs and choreography are presented in a simple repetitive style - a key for learning for young children. At the end of each episode, Barney concludes with a short talk directed to the viewer, known as "Barney Says". This closure technique reinforces and summarizes the episode's sequences as well as the educational concepts presented.

When Barney & Friends first aired in international markets it was often criticized as being "too American". With the acquisition of Lyrick Studios by London-based HIT Entertainment in February 2001, we became even more aware of global implications for Barney. Our attempts to broaden the appeal of Barney should be more evident with newer shows as they are broadcast. Our most recent co-production of Barney & Friends with South Korea's KBS is a good example of a joint effort to help Barney be more relevant to the children of other cultures.

As Barney always says, "It's fun to use your imagination!"



Olivier Dumont

[Deputy Managing Director, Saban International, Paris, France](#)

Incorporating child fantasies into kids' programming is essential for our work. However, Saban International Paris faces, in doing so, a very special task. The reason is that we are distributing our series world-wide. This means that the stories have to appeal to and must be understood by children all

over the world. Our series must reflect the fantasies of an American child as well as those of a kid in Europe or a child who lives in Asia or Latin America.

Consequently, our work requires a deep understanding of what children think in every part of the world. And indeed, there are certain child fantasies which are universal. The fear of loss of family and friends, the longing for adventures, the dream of supernatural powers to overcome the physical and mental limitations of childhood or the need for everlasting friends are examples for fantasies which all children have, apart from their cultural heritage.

Saban International Paris has a long-standing tradition in producing children's programming which serves this demand. Series like Gadget and the Gadgetinis, Princess Sissi, Diabolik or the two Michael Ende adaptations Wunschpunsch and Jim Knopf clearly reflect this aim.

Thus, whenever we look for a new property to adapt or create a new concept, we always take into account, what kind of child fantasies are being incorporated and if they suit our multi-cultural approach.



Birgit Guth

[Head of Media Research and Youth Protection Officer at Super RTL, Cologne, Germany](#)

Children's television is a broad field where men and women of action can romp about and let off steam. All genres can be employed, ranging from comedy to horror series. A wide variety of techniques are possible: animated cartoon, computer animation, real film or a combination of the same. The choice of subject is very free. A sound, attractive way of captivating children's interest in a certain TV format is that of appealing to their fantasies. At Super RTL - in the co-production sector - there are several examples of such themes.

One of them is "Alien Worlds, Magic", which we are currently processing in three different animated cartoon series due to go on air in the next few years; the titles of the series are Meadowlands, Hans Christian Andersen and Arabian Nights. Fairy tales and make-believe worlds are filmed in these formats, a theme full of thrills for children of all ages.

In Angela Anaconda the situation is much closer to real life, but Angela's wittiness and her verbal competence in solving problems are of keen interest for many children, particularly the older age group. The wish for more self-confidence and a healthy portion of impudence lie locked away in many children's minds. Angela demonstrates how this works, even though she herself - like many other children in real life - often just dreams about it.

A popular and constantly up-to-date child fantasy comes to fruition in Typisch Andy (Typical Andy).

Every child has dreamt of the perfect prank. For Andy, the master of pranks, the great, ingenious, well-planned and colossal prank or trick is the utmost priority.

But children's fantasies are also part and parcel of the production of shows for the kids. The game show, which has been successful for many years, Super Toy Club, rewards the winners with a trip through the toyshop, where they can take along with them everything the heart desires. What in former times was the dream of a real Cockaigne is adapted to a modern-day shopping spree.



Susanne Müller

Head of Programming Children and Youth at Zweites Deutsches Fernsehen (ZDF), Mainz, Germany

Have you ever attentively watched a child at play? The child is alone - but speaks intensively with the invisible friends surrounding it. Normally he or she should not be disturbed, for this would harm the enchantment of fantasy. But sometimes, in really lucky cases, explanations are given: of all those joining the child at the table, what the people look like, what they are eating and drinking, what they are talking about and experiencing together. A glance at the child's soul. At times the piano bench may turn into a noble steed, the shower head into a phone for calling into outer space, and the bath tub into the waves of a rough ocean. The disorder is always instructed by an invisible third person. In the case of one of my children, the figure is called "Ina Packet" - to this very day I have no idea why.

Every child dreams at some time or another of being rich and powerful, a king or princess, a dragon killer or a witch - in any case someone who really shows adults what to do with all their rules und regulations, which make life so difficult....

Erich Kästner once wrote: "Only one who grows up and remains a child is a human being. Don't allow your childhood to be driven out!" At the ZDF children's editorial office we stick to this motto. Only those who can understand children are good producers of children's programmes. The optimal solution is when they have preserved their child. Alternatively, they know what children think, feel, need - simply how they tick. Because they have children, because they know and observe children, because they remember how it was to be a child. These ideas are then incorporated in the programme: fairy-tale stories about talking animals, wondrous metamorphoses, dreams coming true, make-believe stories of children saving the world and making sure that everything turns out well in the end - adventure stories about fighting against and conquering evil. I am firmly convinced that only if the "child" is allowed to let his or her imagination run free, can he or she develop into a creative, self-confident, community-spirited person. This explains why children's fantasies are important for the programme range.

They constitute the backdrop to all programmes, regardless of genre. We attentively read what children write us. We listen closely to what they want to tell us. We are inspired by their ideas and the way they live. This is not always "politically correct", but in my opinion it does not have to be. After all, we make the programmes for kids - not for adults with all their misgivings. Everything conceivable must be possible. If not, I am pessimistic regarding the future!

INFORMATION

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