

# “Stories introduce new experiences”

A conversation with Ralf Gerhardt\*

## *What is storytelling like at Disney?*

At Disney Junior, storytelling is a huge issue, because this network places a much greater emphasis on storytelling than its predecessor, Playhouse Disney. Here the aim is to tell stories in which the viewers can bond emotionally with the protagonists and experience things through the story. That is, they share in their protagonists' opportunities for decision-making and action, and can draw conclusions which are also relevant to their own lives. When telling stories, it is important to us to tell the stories in a well-rounded, complete way, i.e. not to leave any strands of the plot open. As a brand, we want to convey optimism and love of life. That doesn't mean we're exclusively programmed to create happy endings, but we do bring our stories to a – let's say – peaceful ending. We make sure that the stories shown under the “Disney” label correspond to the company's brand values. This includes the stories being free of violence, for example, or having no objectionable sexual content.

## *What changes have taken place at Disney in the preschool area?*

Playhouse Disney was still very much based on a school curriculum, i.e. there was a lot of counting, spelling, arithmetic. But there is much more happening in the lives of preschool-

ers, for example issues which could be subsumed under the area of “social competence”, e.g. “How do I resolve an argument between friends?”

We had long discussions, which were also conducted on a global level, in which we European colleagues tended to advocate storytelling rather than an educative approach.

## *Can you name a specific example of this?*

A good example is the series *Doc McStuffins*, in which a girl plays being a doctor and healing the mental and physical ailments of toys (cf. ill. 1). There are lots of things in there that allow you as a viewer to slip into the role of both the patients, i.e. the toys, and the doctor. And in the fictional plot I learn by experience that

my behaviour has something to do with my wellbeing, e.g. that I can get a stomach-ache from eating the wrong thing or eating too much. Or that going to the doctor isn't a bad thing, because he knows what can be done to make me feel better. And this way you experience, on a playful level, something which may be a little scary in real life, and hopefully you can draw conclusions for real life.

## *Do you test your stories?*

Yes. If we stay on the topic of series, which is most relevant for television: firstly there is an exposé and a pilot script. The story is then tested by the professionals, i.e. it is cross-read and commented on by producers and programming people all over the world.

If this goes on and a pilot is actually produced, this pilot is tested again to see how it is received – both by professionals and by children. This market research is generally carried out in several countries. At Disney Junior, where the storytelling really has a very prominent function, there is an “Advisory Board”, made up of – mainly American – academics, who give academic support or advice, and of course also pay attention to what is being made and developed, and what themes are being dealt with etc.

to the portable device, and which are partly produced from the content of the long version. The focus is on a single protagonist or one part of a plot thread, and the narrative is tighter and more succinct than in the long form. The result is a compact anecdote that requires the full attention of the viewer. Of course in the long form this compact narration would overtax the viewer. The short also allows the viewer to carry his favourite series around with him, and show it to friends, which is of course fan-

Firstly because – this has to be said in this case – shorter formats can now be put to good use in preschool television, even in linear programming, and secondly because these can then be used across all media. For example we have *The Mini Adventures of Winnie the Pooh* (cf. ill. 2), those are lovely little stories. By “little, short stories” I mean anything under 5 minutes. And if you had said, 5, 6 or 7 years ago, “Let’s make a nice little short, 4 minutes long”, everyone would have replied, “It’s not worth it.” Today the value of short stories has been rediscovered. I believe there are some really positive developments in this area, which have certainly been triggered by technological progress.

*If you look into the future, what do you think are the most promising ideas in the area of storytelling?*

*In what direction should quality television be developing?*

I think that storytelling will remain something very emotional. Great stories have always touched us emotionally, have picked us up and taken us with them. So it’s actually really nice that there’s something at the heart of storytelling which remains very much the same, and is always being presented in new guises. ■

*Do you think that, in the area of new media developments, devices like iPads are bringing about changes in storytelling?*

Of course things develop, but that happened in the past too. In children’s television today – except in preschool television, perhaps – we tell stories much faster than we used to. Of course there are trends and new technological possibilities, and many attempts at interactive storytelling mechanisms etc., and that obviously influences the way we work and design things.

There are already a lot of things where for example linear delivery is combined with portable devices, i.e. with phones or iPads. For instance there are really good examples of short programmes which are better suited

tastic – as with any favourite toy. It thus assumes the function of a trailer, although it is narrative and not promotional. But that’s nothing out of the ordinary any more. If you look at today’s market and at what is being produced, there are obviously a lot of series for which short versions are also being produced. These include some quite good things, but, on the other hand, things that I don’t find so convincing as well.

*Could you name a specific example here?*

Let’s take a classic theme like *Winnie the Pooh*. Here, there’s the classic half-hour episode, and also several films. We also approach the topic in quite a different way, however, by producing shorter things as well.



\* Shortened version of a conversation between Ralf Gerhardt and Dr. Maya Götz (IZI).

Ralf Gerhardt is Deputy General Manager and Executive Director Programming of Disney Channels GSA, Munich, Germany.