Remediating Tinker Bell:
Childhood Commodification and the Transmedia Narrative

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Abstract

The 100-year trajectory of the mischievous Tinker Bell, from J.M Barrie's 1904 play *Peter Pan* to the present-day Disney Fairies franchise, is a metanarrative of adaptation and remediation through which media and "childhood" can be seen to interrelate as mutually constitutive forces. With a focus on contemporary children's media and narrative, this paper examines multiple incarnations of a media franchise at 50-year intervals. Our close-reading yields insights into the reflexive relationship between social constructions of childhood, the evolution of narrative in children's literature, and the development of media for child audiences since the Edwardian era.

Keywords: childhood, intertexuality, material culture, digital media, remediation

Introduction

One hundred years ago, children in theatre audiences and nurseries throughout the Western hemisphere clapped to save her life. Today, 20 million children per year embody her character online as virtual fairies. The 100-year trajectory of the mischievous Tinker Bell, from J.M Barrie's 1904 play *Peter Pan* to the present-day Disney Fairies franchise, is a metanarrative of adaptation and remediation through which media and "childhood" can be seen to interrelate as mutually constitutive forces. With a focus on contemporary children's media and narrative, this poster examines multiple incarnations of a media franchise at 50-year intervals—beginning with Barrie's play and novelization of *Peter Pan* at the turn of the 20th century, Disney's animated retelling of *Peter Pan* in 1953, and the Disney Fairies franchise which "rebooted" the classic character in 2005. Our close-reading of this franchise, informed by the theories of remediation (Bolter and Grusin, 1999) and intertexuality (Wilke, 1999), yields insights into the reflexive relationship between social constructions of childhood, the evolution of narrative in children's literature, and the development of media for child audiences since the Edwardian era.

At a cultural moment in which we approach the view of literature as an interactive medium and children as content-creators, we are mindful of the ways in which commercially formulated media empower and constrain childhood agency. For younger online players, being online is becoming an increasingly important part of social life; massively multiplayer online games, or MMOGs, have become mainstream forms of social interaction (Kafai 2008, Gee 2007, Meyers 2009). Kasturi (2002) argues that in both content and form, new media conveys specific pedagogical messages to children about representation and consumption, identity and social status. In this context, the character of Tinker Bell is particularly instructive because she was developed in the pivot-point of social concern and fascination with childhood as a special time and place separate from adults, something to be both protected and commodified through integration into social policy and the economy (Gavin & Humphries 2009; McGavock 2009). In our study, we trace the practice of remediation and the gradual intensification of the child as consumer, as well as the evolution of the franchise into a true transmedia narrative (Jenkins 2003). In the process, we demystify the idea that current children's media constellations are novel developments; rather, they fit into a historic tradition of constructing childhood around social control and commercial gain.

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Method and Data Source

We approach the character of Tinker Bell through a close-reading method (Bizzocchi & Tannenbaum 2011; Looy & Baetens 2003) involving engagement with several different levels of text and media to present them as a narrative of remediation: a meaningful whole. We emphasize multimodal engagement with contemporary digital media and film, while referencing and re-reading related historical "texts", including various versions and incarnations of Barrie's *Peter Pan*, Disney's *Peter Pan*, and the contemporary Disney Fairies franchise. Combining textual analysis with historical/cultural analysis, we juxtapose three historical phases in the social construction of the child, the status of Tinker Bell, and the media incarnations (plays, picture books, novels, cinema, branded merchandise, games, interactive spaces) that support these constructions. The result is a metanarrative of the Tinker Bell character in which we describe a historical phenomenon: the story of how media and childhood interrelate.

Findings

Our study identifies and focuses on three phases in the evolution of the Tinker Bell transmedia franchise over a century-span. While the limits of this abstract prevent us from illustrating the extent of our findings, our final poster will lay out these 3 phases chronologically, linking the Tinker Bell character, her media instantiations, and key touchstones in the changing nature and conception of childhood. Very briefly:

Phase 1: Edwardian Era (1900s)

In the Edwardian era, "childhood" became recognized as distinct from adulthood in terms of desires, needs, and ways of being. Children were celebrated for being at once precious and charming, savage and uninhibited. This time is characterized by an unprecedented increase in children's fiction, children's toys and merchandise, and child welfare legislation. The play *Peter Pan* was introduced in this period, and became an instant transmedia success. The novelization of the play, *Peter and Wendy*, was sold at various price points to achieve commercial saturation, and Peter Pan merchandise was among the most popular Christmas gifts in the early 1900s.

Barrie positioned children as the link between Neverland and the "Mainland". Fairies at the turn of the twentieth century were characterized by lawless, hedonistic, childlike behavior (Tatar 2011). Barrie's Tinker Bell is described as buxom and flirtatious: she is also like a pre-linguistic child. The audience/reader requires Peter's translations in order to understand what she says. Murray Pomerance (2009) describes Barrie's Tinker Bell as representative of a particular historical moment in terms of the cultural, technological (electricity), and artistic elements that inform her relation to contemporary notions of domesticity, womanhood, and the fantastical.

Phase 2: Cold War Era (1950s)

In the 1950's, the Disneyfication of *Peter Pan* intersected with a cultural moment in which society reneged on women's war-time independence and popular culture shifted its focus away from the child alone to pervasively endorse the nuclear family unit and women's domesticity (Pomerance 2009; Wojcik-Andrews 2000; Ohmer 2009). Of the cross-platform, multi-media merchandise surrounding Disney's 1953 film *Peter Pan*, Susan Ohmer explains: "Merchandising has been a crucial part of the Disney empire since the 1920's, but with *Peter* Pan it took a quantum leap forward" (2009). *Peter Pan*, and its attendant multi-media constellation—expanded from that of the Barrie franchise 50 years earlier through technological innovations in film animation, vinyl recordings, and the all-new immersive experience of the theme park—also intersected with a meteoric rise in material consumption. With the release of *Peter Pan,* Disney merchandising maximized the film's synergistic possibilities, targeting both children and parents, creating the cultural perception of a link between youth and consumption.

Tinker Bell's physicality in Disney's 1953 movie *Peter Pan* departs from the Victorian depiction of fairies to reflect contemporary beauty ideals. Contemporary critics described Tinker Bell as a "vixen", likening her to Marilyn Monroe, and Zsa Zsa Gabor (Pomerance 2009: Ohmer 2009). Tinker Bell's femininity is positioned in competition with Wendy's traditional, domestic womanhood. Like Barrie's *Peter*

and Wendy, Disney's *Peter Pan* came about at a time of transition, and in response to contemporary attitudes and values (Ohmer 2009).

Phase 3: Internet Era (2000s)

Fast forward to the current media mix ecology that is the Disney Fairies franchise and we find Tinker Bell at the center of a hypermediated riot of licensed merchandise, print and electronic media, all of which point toward a subscription-access virtual world as the central, authoritative text. In 2005 Disney debuted the Disney Fairies franchise with the release of Gail Carson Levine's novel *Fairy Dust and the Quest for the Egg,* the first installment in a trilogy aimed at 6 to 10-year-old girls. Based on the character of Tinker Bell and the limited mention of fairies and their home in Barrie's work, Levine develops a rich, magical community centering on a small group of culturally diverse fairies lead by Tinker Bell. As a Newbery award-winning author famous for contemporizing fairytales, Levine lent credibility to the franchise, anchoring it in the cozy lap of classic children's literature. Based on Levine's adaptation, in 2008, Disney released the animated film *Tinker Bell,* featuring the titular character as fully developed with a voice and a relatable backstory that locates her within a social structure that is recognizable to children as the class system of our own society.

Disney concurrently released the Pixie Hollow MMOG, which approximately 20 million children visit per year. While watching the movie is not necessary, it functions as a guide that brands the experience of playing Pixie Hollow by contextualizing the games within a cross-platform narrative structure. In the MMOG, children create their own embodied fairy based on Tinker Bell and her fairy friends; 40.5 million have been created to date. Narrative elements of the films are mined and incorporated into the Pixie Hollow MMOG, illustrated books, licensed toys and other merchandise, a magazine, a theme park and Ice Shows to form a vast narrative that crosses a multitude of platforms. Children's media franchises in the current era bank on a the consumption of interrelated media enhancing the richness of the 'reading' experience, and position the serial/subscription environment in the center of a media constellation that aims for integration into "the routines of children's everyday lives" (Buckingham & Sefton-Green 2004; see also Ito 2008). Scholars suggest that virtual worlds offer children an ontological position not available to them in children's literature, or anywhere in their lives, granting them agency and authority. Are virtual worlds a reflection of or a force in the (re)construction of contemporary childhood (Papazian 2010; see also Sherington 2010)? We argue that they are both.

Scholarly Contribution

The historical and cultural analysis of a century-long transmedia narrative stands out from other work that focuses only on contemporary instantiations of transmedia. By charting the evolution of a popular character over several periods of remediation, we gain a richer perspective on the relationship between media and childhood, a perspective largely absent in media franchises that emerge (and sometimes disappear) in less than the span of a single generation. Our work illustrates the changing nature of character and narrative in children's media, but also shows how many "commercial transmedia supersystems" (Kinder 1991), portrayed by some as novel aspects of the digital age, are rooted in a century-long commercialization of the childhood experience.

A novel aspect of the transmedia narrative that emerges from this study is the shifting focus of the seminal text toward the immersive, embodied child experience. In the Internet Era we see the rise of the virtual world as a centerpiece of the narrative, surrounded by supporting media (movies, novels, comics, websites and fan spaces, etc.) that might have been centerpieces themselves in a different age. These new central texts are dynamic and immersive; at the same time they are highly stratified and consumption-focused. While this move might appear to facilitate greater child agency and a different level of engagement with the franchise, through our play in these spaces we find that the commercial constraints counter what appears on the surface to be an empowering shift. Our analysis of the changing nature of the transmedia narrative, situated in a historical understanding of children's media and culture and with a spotlight on an iconic media symbol, will be of interest to scholars of new media, educators of the 'Net Generation, and the designers of contemporary media experiences for children.

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