Chapter 10
Hey Inner Four-Year-Old, Wanna Play?
Creativity in Children’s Media

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ABSTRACT

Though the spontaneous creativity of children narrows naturally in development, the rigid structures of our culture further suppress these necessary abilities. Enhanced by the ubiquity and interactivity of emerging technologies, media provides a unique method of encouraging creativity in a manner children are growing ever more familiar with. The authors discuss the role of creativity in children’s media from multiple angles: the importance of creativity in children’s play and development, how creativity is cultivated through effective media, and the creativity involved in producing media content. Relevant scientific research is explored throughout the chapter. Extensive interviews with two prominent creative producers in children’s media, Tone Thyne and J.J. Johnson, contribute expert perspectives and provide detailed insight into the creative process behind children’s media.

INTRODUCTION

Children draw constantly. They draw to tell stories, convey emotions, and learn. They draw for pure fun. Children proudly display a nonsensical doodle as a portrait of “mommy,” offering it up to anyone nearby. Most adults cringe when such “creative” activities are imposed upon them, feeling sure that whatever they produce will fail to meet the elusive standards of “art.” How does this transition come to pass? When does the four year-old who puts a Band-Aid on her forehead, purely for style, decide she needs a fashion blog to tell her how to dress? Freedom of expression in childhood is a manifestation of the creativity that we all innately possess. Creativity is what makes people different, whether that is one’s impressionistic painting style or distinct hair-do. These creative expressions, big and small, are derived from personal experiences and motivations, and are necessarily unique.

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One fortunate group of adults who straddle the gap between the imaginative freedoms of childhood and the comforting structures of adulthood are those who create children’s media. These content creators channel their inner four-year-olds in their work, tapping into their creativity to develop content that will resonate with their freethinking viewers. Children’s media professionals aim to impart both joy and knowledge to their audience. The challenge lies in creating compelling digital worlds that remain fresh and engaging across multiple television seasons or game levels, appealing to both the child as the consumer and the child’s parent as the gatekeeper. These efforts demand a team of media developers open to inspiration and novelty, with a firm belief in their ability to positively impact children’s lives.

We discuss the role of creativity in children’s media by exploring the impact of creativity in children’s development, the influence of the media they consume, and the creativity involved in producing children’s media. The discussion includes the importance of creative play, as well as the devolution of creativity throughout maturation, the devaluing of creativity in schools, and how creativity can be cultivated through effective media. To examine the role of creativity in the creation of children’s media, we enlisted the help of two top creative minds in children’s media: Tone Thyne and J.J. Johnson. Thyne’s lengthy and highly respected career in this industry includes working on hit Disney feature films and creating and producing award-winning preschool television programs. Johnson, a multiple Emmy-award-winning director and producer, has created and written over a dozen successful children’s shows and multiple interactive games. Months of conversations with Thyne and Johnson are distilled throughout this chapter to provide a unique perspective on an integral area of research that has been studied for decades, yet is still shrouded in mystery.

CAPTURING CREATIVITY

Creativity is a difficult construct to define. The creator of the Torrance Tests of Creative Thinking (measures of creativity used in many studies with children) acknowledges that creativity is impossible to truly define (Torrance, 1988). Of the many varying definitions, none has been widely adopted (Parkhurst, 1999). Therefore, as a starting point, we asked Thyne and Johnson what creativity means to them. Although they answered independently, their interpretations of creativity were quite similar, suggesting a consistent view of creativity in the field of children’s media production:

Creativity is a calibrated unit of measurement that spans two points. Point A is ‘what everyone else has done before’ and Point B is ‘what no one else has ever done before’. The degree of one’s creativity is directly proportional to their proximity to Point B. (Tone Thyne)

Creativity is original thinking. It’s innovation. It’s being able to take everything you’ve learned or been exposed to and finding a way of expressing it that hasn’t been done before. (J.J. Johnson)

PLAY AS CREATIVITY

Play is the most natural expression of creativity—using one’s mind and body in imaginative ways with the sole aim of experiencing joy. Play is at the basis of Vygotsky’s (1978) renowned theory of children’s cognitive development and is crucial to children’s social-emotional growth (Singer, Golinkoff, & Hirsh-