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1001 markets: Independent production, ‘Universal Childhood’ and the Global Kids’ television industry

ABSTRACT

This article critically analyses the independent Vancouver-based animation company Big Bad Boo Studios and its programme 1001 Nights (Van de Keere, 2010). Placing Big Bad Boo Studios in the context of the global animation industry, the article considers the strategies that the small producer employs in order to compete against multinational corporations such as Disney and Turner. Using 1001 Nights as a case study, the article argues that Big Bad Boo offers a unique vision of global childhood founded on the common experiences of multicultural modernity that impact the lives of children across the world. Ultimately, Big Bad Boo puts forth this unique perspective in order to appeal to a wide swath of potential programme buyers, including both public and commercial broadcasters.

KEYWORDS

children’s television
animation
independent producers
global television
industry

Despite its diminutive nomenclature, there is nothing small about the children’s media market known as MIP Junior. Staged in Cannes in the days leading up to MIPCOM, the world’s largest international television marketplace, MIP Junior features nearly all of the pomp and extravagance of the main

event. Major children's television producers such as Disney, Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network create intricate displays, set up opulent reception areas and rent yachts on the Riviera in hopes of persuading buyers from across the world to purchase their new programmes. Armed with near-universal brand recognition, decades-old professional relationships and the financial might of multinational hegemony, the major players in children's programming occupy a dominant space at the market, both literally and figuratively. But, despite these advantages, none of the megaliths owned the property that went on to become the most requested in the 2012 MIP Junior screening room, where buyers devote valuable time to viewing shows they are considering for purchase.

Instead, a new animated programme, *1001 Nights* (Van de Keere, 2010), from the small, independent Big Bad Boo Studios took this coveted title. Despite having produced successful shows in the past, Big Bad Boo Studios' success was nonetheless a major surprise. Unable to afford its own space, Vancouver-based Big Bad Boo borrowed a corner of the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation's display and set up meetings with potential clients in hallways and alcoves throughout the convention space. Relying on personal connections, a unique company narrative and the cache of *1001 Nights* as a beloved children's classic, Big Bad Boo was able to overcome its disadvantages and prove that a family-run outfit based in Vancouver can, at least in its best moments, compete with corporations such as Disney and Turner.

This is not to say, however, that such opportunities are broadly available or that there is room in global children's programming for idealists intent on subverting industry norms. Big Bad Boo does not reject industry norms; it plays with them, honing its programming and marketing strategies to fill small niches that multinational corporations leave available. This article analyses the success of Big Bad Boo, drawing upon interviews with the company's president and co-founder, Shabnam Rezaei, as well as close analyses of the studio's public statements, promotional materials and programming content. Ultimately, we argue that Big Bad Boo puts forth an innovative, nuanced brand identity that allows the outlet to sell its programming to both commercial and public broadcasters.

To do so, the company has crafted a nuanced and occasionally contradictory notion of global childhood in its public statements and in its programmes. Trapped between a commercial world that values universal audience appeal and a public service ethic fearful of cultural homogenization, Big Bad Boo offers a notion of global childhood centered around common youth experiences of multicultural modernity. They suggest that a key commonality between contemporary children in radically divergent cultures is the increasing importance of interactions with people of different ethnic, racial and religious backgrounds. This approach allows Big Bad Boo to blend the imperatives of a multi-billion dollar global industry with the language of children's rights advocacy, crafting a universal solution to the problem of cultural specificity and significantly expanding their potential buyers.

CHILDREN'S TELEVISION IN A GLOBALIZED MEDIA MARKET

Formed in 2005, Big Bad Boo Studios operates in an increasingly globalized media environment. Worldwide regulatory reforms, the digitization of content, and the growth of international cable and satellite channels have fundamentally changed the industry over the past decade. The result has been a significant inflation in demand for new content, particularly in the realm of youth programming. Children's television has become an integral and

profitable segment of this expanding international media market, with youth media playing a central role in the drive towards globalization (Thussu 2006). The satellite revolution launched 50 new dedicated children's channels internationally between 1996 and 1999 alone, with this growth continuing into the new millennium (Thussu 2006). Across Europe, for example, there are now some 320 thematic kid-focused channels, up from 110 in 2006 and only three in 1985 (Roxborough 2013; Westcott 2010). In addition, many generalist channels have continued efforts to attract youth demographics by scheduling children's programming blocks, while digital technologies and time-shifted viewing options (video-on-demand, digital video recorders, etc.) have further expanded the need for content. Figures from Eurodata TV Worldwide (2012) show that this increase in programming has been met with a growth in youth viewership across the globe, with children devoting increasing minutes per day to watching television in France, Italy, Britain, Spain, North America, China, Japan and Malaysia.

These shifts have created opportunities for upstart producers such as Big Bad Boo Studios to enter the marketplace. Indeed, Big Bad Boo's animated content now airs on channels around the world ranging from commercial channels such as Al Jazeera Children's or Lider TV (Azerbaijan) to public sector/non-profit outlets like RTP Portugal Noga TV (Israel). With so many channels across the world needing to fill their schedules, it is logical that some segment of this new demand would benefit new content providers. However, globalization has been anything but a hindrance for major media companies. A single programme can, of course, be sold dozens of times to different global stations, somewhat mitigating the total aggregate demand for unique material. Furthermore, as is the case in all genres, buyers of children's programming have little indication of future success beyond a producer's brand recognition, a feature of the media business that often positions larger, more established firms at an advantage. The global children's television industry thus remains dominated by three major players, all part of US-based media conglomerates: Nickelodeon (part of Viacom), Cartoon Network (owned by Turner Broadcasting, part of Time Warner) and the Walt Disney Company's Disney Channel. The 'big three', as analyst Tim Westcott refers to them, brought in over \$6 billion in revenues during 2006 – accounting for two-thirds of the entire \$9 billion in revenues reported by the top 25 international children's television companies combined (Westcott 2010). A number of institutional, economic and cultural factors contribute to these three major players maintaining such a significant presence in the global kids' media marketplace. Big Bad Boo thus requires a unique strategy in its efforts to find a space in a growing, but not necessarily democratizing market.

As Timothy Havens (2006a) suggests, 'the story of global television is not simply one of domination by the powerful', but rather a complex process of negotiations among various players and competing interests. Of course these negotiations, Havens notes, do not take place on a level playing field, but are 'profoundly distorted by economic inequalities' that privilege certain nations and specific producers within those nations. As part of multinational media conglomerates, Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network and Disney Channel's access to global capital, worldwide production facilities and economies of scale have established them as the leading brands in children's entertainment. These advantages emerge in large part as a result of the vertical and horizontal integration of their parent companies, a benefit unavailable to Big Bad Boo. For example, in the case of Nickelodeon, subsidiaries such as Nickelodeon Animation produce programming that airs across around the world on its

parent company Viacom's digital terrestrial and satellite stations. These channels reach over 100 countries, ensuring that all Nickelodeon programming will find an immediate global audience. Disney Channel and Cartoon Network each also run over 100 branded channels around the world, creating distribution avenues and exhibition venues for their parent company's sizeable stable of intellectual property. In addition to bolstering the success of new programmes, this structure also breathes life into extensive libraries of existing media content owned by the Walt Disney Company and Time Warner (Warner Brothers), reducing the need for new, independent content.

These companies also operate across a variety of platforms, from film to television to video games and consumer products. This development resulted in media content designed to capitalize on this ownership structure through efficiencies in multi-platform content development and cross-promotion, an effort commonly referred to as synergy (Turow 1992; Murray 2005; Jenkins 2006). From Pokemon to Harry Potter to Hannah Montana, some of the most widely recognized (and financially successful) media properties in the kids' global market during the last decade are multi-platform properties with built-in merchandising and cross-promotion designed to take advantage of vertically and horizontally integrated ownership structures, an efficiency touted by former Disney CEO Michael Eisner as a strategy where 'one plus one equals four' (1996, quoted in Megginson and Smart 2005: 877). Through synergistic practices like developing transmedia franchises, launching promotional merchandise lines, or cross-promoting branded content and outlets, such integrated ownership structures allow for diversified investments that overlap and reinforce each other in ways that offer higher profit margins, higher brand visibility and a level of market power unattainable to smaller independent firms such as Big Bad Boo.

CHILDREN'S MEDIA AND THE 'GLOBAL' CHILD

The dominance of multinational corporations in children's media does more, however, than impact the financial and industrial elements of the international television market. They also affect a significant discursive impact. The major players in the global children's entertainment industry create not only programmes, but also ideas about television, audiences and children. Most importantly, they craft and propagate specific notions regarding what childhood is and how it can be understood in an era of radical globalization. This manifests in what Havens describes as an 'industry lore' supporting a notion of a universal childhood. The buying and selling of children's programming in the global market relies upon a perception of children around the world as sharing some sort of universalized experience of 'childhood'. Without it, corporations might struggle to justify the sale one programme to dozens of nations. However, as Havens (2008) argues, this universal conception of childhood is anything but culturally neutral. As he notes, the notion of 'the universal child that emerges from "industry lore" is predominantly a Western, middle-class boy'. This essentialization of global childhood results in what might be understood as a mutually convenient myth told among global producers and local programmers in order to simplify the complex process of international television trade. However, being at the periphery of this system, Big Bad Boo offers an alternative to this element of industry lore. In this section we critically consider the concept of a universal child in order to provide context for Big Bad Boo's alternative perspective.

Historians, sociologists and cultural studies scholars have devoted considerable energy over the past half-century to challenging notions of a universal

definition of childhood. Beginning with the work of Aries, critics have consistently argued that a given culture's definition of childhood emerges not from nature, but from specific material and discursive contexts. In the work Aries, visual and literary evidence suggest that pre and postindustrial European societies operated with radically divergent understandings of the value and unique nature of children. Although Aries' specific claims have been taken to task by a variety of scholars, few outside the realm of pure developmental psychology deny the fundamentally fluid and cultural nature of the concepts of youth, children and childhood. As S. C. Aitken (2001) notes, 'childhood cannot be regarded as an unproblematic description of the early stages of the life course', but instead must be understood as a site of contestation that both creates and is created by socio-economic power struggles. The demands of a cultural space's financial, military, religious and other elements deeply inform who counts as a child, how children are addressed and what should constitute an appropriate or desirable childhood experience.

However, despite the general academic consensus on this point, discourses persist in which a notion of a global, one-size-fits-all understanding of childhood remains in operation. Many of these discourses relate directly to the world of global media production and distribution in which Big Bad Boo Studios operates. The most obvious way in which Big Bad Boo grapples with notions of a universal childhood derives from the economic realities of the contemporary media business. It is imperative for current children's programmers to operate across borders in order to secure large enough consumer bases to justify and recoup the tremendous upfront costs of producing industry-standard levels of animation. Although animation offers a limited flexibility to adjust language and performance style to address localized audiences, the major visual and narrative elements of each programme must be shaped based on the notion that there are certain attributes that appeal to children everywhere. This does not mean that shows are interpreted in a uniform fashion across different geographic and cultural spaces, but it does require a faith in the notion that certain stimuli will appeal to a truly global array of individuals with little more in common than age.

This universalist discourse has led to what Debbie Olson and Giselle Rampaul (2013) describe as a 'romantic' notion of white childhood that the West has succeeded in exporting across the globe. In such approaches broad discourses of individual rights are conflated with the specific economic imperatives of the global neo-liberal order. When corporations such as Nickelodeon and Disney position their products as 'conduit[s] to the imagination' (Langer 2004: 260), they are in some ways grafting onto ideas such as the UN's Childhood Rights Council declaration of every child's 'right to engage in play [and] ... leisure, recreation and cultural activities' (Makman 2002: 289). Sue Ruddick (2003) suggests that such sleight of hand is present in all Western discourse on childhood, arguing that children in need tend to be defined by a lack of consumer niceties, not locally informed aspirations. In any case, multinational corporations benefit from a vague but ever-present sense that children across the globe not only have similar needs, but also that there is a moral case to be made for providing the types of relatively low-cost imagination-prompts that Disney and its ilk excel at crafting. Big Bad Boo Studios thus operates within an economic system that tacitly accepts a notion of universal, global childhood. However, in order to occupy its unique space in the market, the studio carefully keeps itself at arms length from the consumer-oriented, neo-liberal approach to what children ought to get out of media. Big Bad Boo's

strength lies in its ability to create media that looks similar to global corporate animation products but that are seen as less guilty of employing children as what D. Smythe (1981) describes an 'audience commodity'.

Although operating as a for-profit entity, Big Bad Boo Studios cannot exist solely on purchases from commercial outlets. Conglomerate-produced media takes up far too much this market. Instead, Big Bad Boo employs a hybrid sales strategy that depends largely on the support and approval of public-sector funding sources such as PBS, the National Endowment for Humanities and the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. These organizations each avow an approach to children's rights that includes some level concern with the impact of consumer culture on young people. Requiring funding from the public sector in addition to commercial sales, Big Bad Boo Studios thus attempts to carve out a narrow space between commercial celebrations of free markets for children and concerns over the moral implications of unfettered consumer culture. Big Bad Boo thus accepts the economic inevitability of global products aimed at a constructed notion of global childhood, but nonetheless includes in their programmes and self-promotional material a connection to anti-globalizationist trends in childhood rights discourses.

Primary among these is a concern with the cultural homogenization that has long been associated with multinational children's media producers. As Olson and Rampaul (2013) argue, globalization has had a profound and potentially deleterious effect on the representation of local and regional diversity in programming geared towards children, with Euro-centric imagery prevailing worldwide. Critics reaching back to Dorfman et al. (1975) have argued that corporations such as Disney have robbed children of their authentic cultural experiences, replacing them with an economically driven international culture that instills ideologies aimed to benefit the Global North. Even in overwhelmingly white cultures, this homogeneity is understood as detrimental, blinding children to the richness of culture that emerges from diversity.

Big Bad Boo Studios thus negotiates a complex set of demands when producing its work. To sell to for-profit global broadcasters, Big Bad Boo must offer programming thought to appeal to children across the world, regardless of cultural context. It must also, however, appeal to public broadcasters that are both concerned with the commodification of youth viewers and sensitive to the importance of cultural specificity in children's programming. To straddle this line, Big Bad Boo must put forth a fundamentally new conception of global childhood. The version they offer is one that considers multicultural experiences to be the key commonality in the lives of children across the world. Emphasizing the fact that the young are often key participants in the increased travel, immigration and communication that A. Appadurai (1996) identifies at the heart of globalization, Big Bad Boo offers the universal experience of cultural collision as a means by which to connect children across the world.

BIG BAD BOO AND COUNTER-BRANDING

Big Bad Boo offers a compelling case study of the complex negotiations at work in the global children's television industry, illustrating the ways in which the economic and cultural processes of international media trade construct and circulate notions of childhood. In their own positioning strategy, marketing efforts, and media texts, we argue, Big Bad Boo navigates competing demands of global capitalism and non-profit organizations by offering a vision of the 'global child' where universality rests on the multicultural experience of

children regardless of their geography. Big Bad Boo's market position as a small, newly established (and minority owned) production company produces a 'universal child' based on cultural interaction, thus negotiating both global media flows and cultural specificity to become financially successful as a new type of 'industry lore'. In this section, we discuss the ways that such a concept of childhood is produced through Big Bad Boo's strategic branding discourse and related marketing materials as well as the programmes produced by Big Bad Boo for the international television market.

Our analysis here draws on textual analysis of marketing materials and the programmes produced by Big Bad Boo, as well as a series of personal interviews with the studio's co-founder and president, Shabnam Rezaei. Discussing topics during interviews, ranging from the creation of Big Bad Boo as a business and a brand to various experiences with production and sales strategies, Rezaei engages in what John Caldwell (2008) calls 'trade storytelling', or a type of ritual exchange that industry practitioners often employ 'to make sense of their specific work worlds and their creative or managerial task at hand'. It is important to note that Rezaei's words are not being presented as analysis of Big Bad Boo's actual work, but instead in support of our claims regarding the company's discursive strategies as they relate to childhood and the marketing of children's media.

Indeed, perhaps the most interesting manner in which Big Bad Boo attempts to establish its unique, multi-cultural approach to global childhood is by creating a close relationship between its programming and the personal narrative of the company's co-founder, Shabnam Rezaei. As an Iranian woman now living in North America, Rezaei's personal history and experience of global modernity dovetail with the core brand values of Big Bad Boo. Born in Tehran, Rezaei was educated in both Austria and the United States where her personal identity was shaped by the experience of being a perpetual immigrant. She had developed a successful career as a Wall Street finance and technology professional before entering the children's media business. Whereas most of the multinational corporate CEOs working in children's media are led by white Americans, Rezaei's personal story embodies Big Bad Boo's emphasis on cultural interaction as a uniting principle of modernity. In interviews on major media outlets ranging from *NPR* to *Entrepreneur Magazine* to *Fox Business*, Rezaei has articulated her personal story, using it to reflect upon the brand identity of Big Bad Boo.

The impetus for her interest in media, she says, came from a feeling that her personal cultural experiences as an Iranian American were being lost and even demonized in the North American mainstream media. She goes as far as to describe the production of Big Bad Boo's original programme, *Babak and Friends: A First Norooz* (Ellis, 2005), as part of a 'personal mission to give Iran a makeover in terms of the bad image it has in America' after 9/11 and accompanying American military actions in the Middle East. Rezaei and her husband, Aly Jetha, partnered with Dustin Ellis to produce the direct-to-DVD cartoon, *Babak and Friends*, 'with the idea to be sort of like the *Charlie Brown Christmas Special* but teach kids about the Persian holiday of Norooz', according to Rezaei (2013). *Babak and Friends* offered what she saw as a unique opportunity to shape both American and international understandings of Persian culture. For Rezaei, the character of Babak, an American boy with an Iranian heritage, and his family's celebration of the Persian holiday (Norooz) offers an opportunity to illustrate commonalities between Persian and other cultures while simultaneously fostering understanding of difference; 'here's a character who

has parents and goes to school just like anybody else, he's not a terrorist', states Rezaei (2013).

To take her 'personal mission' to more professional, and profitable, level beyond screenings in museums and libraries, however, Rezaei and Jetha turned to independent commercial television production. In order to move beyond the largely Persian subject matter of *Babak and Friends*, Big Bad Boo struck out to develop a programme that could bring the appeal of Babak to a broader audience. Big Bad Boo developed the animated television series, *Mixed Nutz* (Ellis, Gimeno, Jetha and Rezaei, 2008), about a group of children in which each character hails from a different specific country, including Babak (Iran), Jay (Korea), Sanjay (India), Adele (Austria), Damaris (Cuba) and Michael (United States). Building characters with specifically identified heritages exemplifies both Big Bad Boo's strategy based on 'teaching children culture through entertainment' and the identities of Rezaei and her husband. In fact, Rezaei points that in the early stages of pitching the show to commercial broadcasters, many executives suggested that she 'universalize' her characters by stripping them of specific cultural identifications. Jay, the Korean character, for example, was suggested to become generically 'Asian', but Big Bad Boo refused, opting to maintain creative control in the characters' nationally specific identity. This change, however, we argue, would have ultimately undermined Big Bad Boo's appeal and its effort to find a middle space between corporate notions of universal childhood and critical concerns regarding cultural homogenization. What is universal about Jay, *Mixed Nutz* suggests, is his struggle to maintain a specific cultural identity while confronting a modern space marked by extreme diversity.

Maintaining Jay's ethnicity as specifically Korean rather than one more generically coded as Asian exemplifies the multicultural vision of the global child which Big Bad Boo brings to international television trade. 'We're, at our core, about a commitment to building children's knowledge about other cultures around the world', said Rezaei (2013), describing Big Bad Boo as a production company that stands for 'education, in the sense of helping kids learn about other cultures from other parts of the world, other countries and other customs ...' The company's effort to build a business around a pro-social multicultural appeal also informs the ways in which they frame their programmes within the industry and engage in the 'rituals' of pitch meetings and trade shows. The busy meeting schedules and crowded convention room floors at key industry trade events like MIP Junior – where connections are made and deals often begin – necessitate a clear, convincing angle to pique the interest of programmers and help distinguish certain shows from others on offer. For this task, Big Bad Boo combines a generalized appeal to education and cultural awareness with the personal narrative of Rezaei to differentiate the studio from the major multinational conglomerates, carving out a small, distinctive space for their brand of content.

Crafting such a pitch for Big Bad Boo includes simultaneously acknowledging that the logics of multinational capitalism in children's television are ultimately unavoidable, and to enter such international trade means constructing some version of a 'global child' in the creation and distribution of programming, even as a small, independent company. Big Bad Boo does this by combining discourses of a 'global child' tied to education and multiculturalism that circulate in non-profit, human rights circles with the logics of international television trade. 'To be in this business, you have to have a show that travels well', Rezaei explains. In some ways, Big Bad

Boo aligns the focus of its pitches to buyers along established, Western-influenced assumptions about the global child audience. In pitching their animated series, *1001 Nights* (2010), for example, Big Bad Boo frames the series with elements of action and adventure. In printed sales material, the company website and a host of related news releases, Big Bad Boo describes *1001 Nights* as:

... an original show that brings the delightful tales of the famed 1001 Arabian Nights to the screen with hilarity, excitement, and non-stop fast paced action. Filled with exciting stories, vivid animation, wonderful music, and unforgettable characters, *1001 Nights* is eye-popping entertainment ...

Framing the show as ‘exciting stories’ with ‘non-stop fast paced action’ for ‘eye-popping entertainment’ takes up long-held assumptions about action, adventure and a fast-paced visual style as a feature of successful children’s entertainment. Such themes are commonplace among the ‘industry lore’ of what appeals to children based on decades of trends and previous successes, from *He-Man* to *Hot Wheels*, *Pokemon* to *Powerpuff Girls* (Tobin 2004; Havens 2006a, 2006b). This dynamic, of course, goes hand in hand with the gendered implications of the Western-influenced perception of the imagined child audience as boys by default (Havens 2006b), despite the fact that Big Bad Boo positions the female character of Sharzad as the protagonist in *1001 Nights*. Additionally, the very format of animation further takes up industry norms governing ideas about what ‘travels well’, given that animated fare involves relatively easy and cost-efficient means of adaptation. As a number of scholars (Dupagne 1992; Thussu 2006; Barca and Marzulli 2009) point out, animated programming tends to cross borders well because it is relatively easy to dub into local languages and often includes less local context (via casting, location, set-design, etc.) than live-action content.

While animation, action and adventure may be factors that help Big Bad Boo’s *1001 Nights* ‘travel well’, Rezaei contends that the company’s shows ultimately ‘travel well’ for *different* reasons than content from the industry’s



Figure 1: Sharzad as story-teller in Big Bad Boo’s *1001 Nights*.

major players. As described earlier in this article, companies like Disney and Nickelodeon trade on established brand recognition and cultivated relationships with distributors developed over decades. Such a dynamic is echoed by Rezaei, who conceptualizes the international children's television business as one in which American conglomerates present challenges to entry for companies like hers: 'Nick and Cartoon Network, these guys have been around for 20 or 30 years. They have a catalog of amazing content and they're American ... they are better and bigger, and doing more than an independent producer can do', she explains.

In response, Big Bad Boo does not try to completely abandon efforts at branding, but rather attempts to construct their own brand as a counter-play to those of the major players. Rezaei sees her brand as one that 'stands for education, values and cultural awareness' versus a Nickelodeon brand that she perceives as 'adventure, sometimes more edgy content for older-skewed boys', or Cartoon Network that stands for 'older boys, comedy and adventure', or even a PBS, which Rezaei sees as 'safe and gender neutral'. But all of those, in Rezaei's opinion, 'cater to middle America, which is mostly whites ...' (2013). Such a characterization at once distinguishes Big Bad Boo from others in the market on the level of brand promise, but also allows Rezaei to be critical of the very commercial media system in which she tries to take part. Key to this brand pitch, however, is Rezaei's assertion that awareness of diversity is growing on a global level. The major players in the children's television business (including PBS) approach audiences with Eurocentric assumptions, according to Rezaei, but, she adds, 'that is slowly changing, not just in the U.S. but also in other regions' (2013). Around the world, then, there may be recognition of growing diversity as populations shift amid mobility and immigration, a factor of globalization that helps to create room for Big Bad Boo's programming.

Appealing to this recognition of diversity and a 'globally multicultural' audience plays a key part in Big Bad Boo's efforts pitching their content to international buyers. For instance, in pitching *Mixed Nutz* to ORF Austria, the country's public service broadcaster, Big Bad Boo framed the show's multicultural appeal particularly suitable to the dynamics of Austrian population shifts. Big Bad Boo's pitch included researching relevant population trends and numbers of immigrant families, which in Austria include a significant number of Turkish ethnicities. 'The number of second generation Turkish Austrians that are growing up have issues of identity', according to Rezaei, 'and so a programme like *Mixed Nutz* can do well because of that', she asserts. Here, Big Bad Boo navigates perceived industrial disadvantages by creating a brand that fills a niche space for a type of culturally aware programming, offering a multicultural experience for children in a variety of geographic contexts.

Maintaining this vision of a diverse and culturally aware global child nonetheless presents certain challenges in the international marketplace. In an increasingly convergent media environment, constructing meaningful and recognizable brand appeal serves as a means of differentiation in the shifting landscape of the post-network era. This differentiation, however, all works within a single, western-dominated multinational system of global trade. Big Bad Boo's branding and programming is thus limited in its ability to challenge industry norms, lest they lose the crucial component of their business represented by commercial broadcasters. From their company logo and website to printed sales materials and banners at various trade shows, Big Bad Boo works within these conventions to create a coherent brand for their studio and its programmes. Using a bright, bold colour palette of fuschia, green,

blue and orange and the occasional playfully cartoonish font, Big Bad Boo's brand aesthetic aligns with conventions frequently used to indicate a focus on general children's media – from Nickelodeon's bubble letters and signature orange, Disney Channel's bright blue, or Jetix's neon green. Big Bad Boo's boilerplate (a one-paragraph description of the company or brand) identifies Big Bad Boo as 'a production and distribution company dedicated to teaching children culture through entertainment', a phrase that appears consistently as part of a wide array of Big Bad Boo's marketing materials. Indeed, this very line exemplifies the studio's attempt to blend the imperatives of a multi-billion dollar global industry with the language of children's rights advocacy, crafting a universal solution to the problem of cultural specificity and significantly expanding their potential buyers.

Though such a vision may present a more culturally aware, perhaps more progressive approach to children's media in a globalized world, it is important to note that Big Bad Boo presents this vision not by resisting industry norms nor by rejecting capitalist enterprise. Rather, the independent production studio straddles the discourses of non-profit children's organizations and the for-profit world of commercial media. Accordingly, entering the business of children's television with a personal and professional mission materialized in a number of negotiation strategies for Big Bad Boo. 'We were pretty naïve about how this industry works', said Rezaei. 'We thought if we had a great idea, we could just come and do it. So it took us a long time to understand the market', she professed. Even Rezaei, in the form of such trade storytelling, acknowledges that bringing their vision of the multicultural global child required adjustments in order to operate within international media trade.

To negotiate this space as a newcomer with limited financial means, Big Bad Boo established its production headquarters in Vancouver, the major metropolitan centre of the Canadian province of British Columbia, where tax incentives for localized production offer a way to manage costs. Combined with British Columbia's own endeavour to bring international capital to the region by courting media production firms, the Canadian government's tax incentives, subsidized resources and growing locations industry have helped turn Vancouver into what Michael Curtin (2003) terms a 'media capital', where a range of industry talent and resources converge in a particular geographic area. Several decades of such efforts by the provincial government has helped to build a growing infrastructure for Vancouver and establish the area as the third largest production centre for Hollywood movies and television series after Los Angeles and New York. Notably for children's television, Vancouver is home to a number of media programmes and design schools as well as animation studios of other media companies, resulting in a sizeable labour force of freelance animators with experience working for major players like Disney, Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network.

While the area has been accordingly dubbed 'Hollywood North', media production in Vancouver is also a process marked by specific tensions between the global and local. As Serra Tinic adeptly asserts in *On Location: Canada's Television Industry in a Global Market*, Vancouver's growth as a media capital and 'global city' has been an uneasy process given the related federal policies in Canada, which mandate programmes 'reflect a sense of place and community' in service of the country's 'cultural development goals' (2005: 9). Big Bad Boo's brand identity of 'cultural education through entertainment' based on a multicultural notion of global childhood allows the independent studio to traverse the specific challenges presented by the Canadian context and recon-

cile programming practices for the global market with the culturally specific, nationalist goals of Canada's national broadcasting system.

While establishing Big Bad Boo's production offices in Vancouver helps the company offset some production costs and offers access to an experienced labour force, and the studio's multicultural approach to global childhood helps navigate the potentially limiting federal cultural policy's of Canada, their organizational strategy still necessitates some areas of compromise. For example, as Big Bad Boo produces an increasing number of series and hires an increasing amount of freelance production talent, Rezaei and Jefy must give up a certain amount of control over their initial creative and personal vision informed heavily by their own immigrant experiences. Rezaei and Jefy worked closely with a small group of freelance animators on Big Bad Boo's first series, but in producing the amount of content to create compelling packages for international buyers, a number of labour and timeline efficiencies necessitate them taking less of a first-hand role in each level of animation. Producing 52 11-minute episodes of *1001 Nights*, on average, involves 140 people working on each episode (Rezaei 2013). Thus, a certain amount of control must be given up to animators and production staff working for Big Bad Boo as freelancers – people who commonly work (or have worked) as freelancers for other major production studios. Furthermore, despite efforts at communicating the company's founding ethos and related brand positioning internally to such production staff, the animators and freelance production staff available in Vancouver may be minimally attuned to broader, non-western cultural elements and experiences espoused by international child advocacy groups and public service institutions. In the following section, we consider one textual manifestation of this complex negation: Big Bad Boo's MIP Junior success, *1001 Nights*.

1001 Nights

One Thousand and One Nights, the classic compilation of folk tales that serves as the inspiration for Big Bad Boo's *1001 Nights* series, represents the infinite potentials and pitfalls of globalized storytelling. First appearing in English at



Figure 2: The heroic mermaid traps the antagonist in the *1001 Nights* episode, 'What's Yours is Mine'.

the beginning of the eighteenth century, *One Thousand and One Nights* features stories from across Asia and Africa and even Europe, deftly weaving together a narrative that exemplifies the dynamic possibilities for multi-perspectival, cross-cultural literature. As opposed to so many forms of traditional storytelling, the book puts forth a culturally diverse array of protagonists and, through its ingenious tactic of layering stories within stories, offers a narrative in which notions of the foreign and the local are constantly shifting. Thus *One Thousand and One Nights* offered Big Bad Boo studios more than a set of famous stories and memorable characters such as Ali Baba and Sinbad. Perhaps more importantly, the book provided the opportunity to produce a series that possessed the action-adventure thrills coveted by major commercial broadcasters yet also maintained the multi-cultural elements that made their previous series, *Mixed Nutz*, popular with public broadcasters across the world.

However, along with this unique potential to both meet the needs of the global market as well as to assuage concerns about global homogenization, this famous source text brought with it considerable baggage. Adapted for screen numerous times in a variety of formats since the beginning of cinema, *One Thousand and One Nights* has inspired an *oeuvre* whose considerable popularity is rivaled by its ability to stir controversy. Most relevantly to the production of Big Bad Boo's series, *1001 Nights*, Disney's 1992 film *Aladdin* (Clements, 1992) reaped tremendous financial rewards while becoming a prime target for critics of the globalization of children's media.

Taking place in an exoticized vision of the Arabian desert, *Aladdin* has been accused by both scholarly and popular critics of crafting a demonizing, Eurocentric portrayal of the Middle East. As Alan Nadel (1997) argues, the film 'participates in a series of clichéd [...] narratives informing popular American assumptions about the Muslim Middle East' and paints Arabs as 'foreboding, dark peoples of shifting sands'. The protagonists of the film, Aladdin and Jasmine, are often critiqued for being coded as white through visual and vocal queues while less sympathetic characters are provided darker features and arguably sinister accents. Perhaps most famously, Disney, as a result of public pressure, was forced to redact a line of the line from the film's opening song that described Arabia as 'barbaric'. Jack G. Shaheen, positioning Aladdin in a long tradition of Orientalizing Hollywood portrayals of Muslims, expressed the general concern over the movie's impact by arguing that 'for generations [the film] will teach children that Aladdin's home is indeed 'barbaric' (2000: 29).

At first glance, it appears as though the troubling elements of Disney's adaptation should be relatively easy to avoid for a self-reflexive organization such as Big Bad Boo. However, it is important to note that *Aladdin's* reliance on stereotypes and geographical othering do not necessarily emerge from simply racist intentions. These tropes and clichés form a set of textual conventions for crafting a clear narrative with easily distinguishable heroes and villains – conventions that are partly a product of US-based industry assumptions about children's inability to differentiate character motivations or connect plot points (Katsuno and Maret 2004). Furthermore, the global market into which the film was sold requires main characters with which children across the globe can easily identify. After years of cultural saturation by western media, it is arguable that the world has come to more easily accepted white-coded characters in such roles. Although such an explanation does not relieve Disney of potential moral responsibility for its representations, it illuminates the fact that any company, including Big Bad Boo, must negotiate a complex set of demands when crafting its animation.

The most immediately striking element to Big Bad Boo's approach to representation in *1001 Nights* is the manner in which it emphasizes the global and cross-cultural elements of its source text. Each episode begins in Persia, where the character of Shahrzad takes on her traditional role as narrator. Although largely ignored in Hollywood adaptations of *One Thousand and One Nights*, all of the book's stories are framed through this character. The action of each episode starts in the present tense, as some dispute between Shahrzad's children prompts her to tell one of her celebrated folk tales. In these opening scenes characters are presented in traditional Persian dress. A monkey, much like Abu in Disney's *Aladdin*, plays a comic role in the family. In the English version, each character in Shahrzad's family is voiced with what might be described as a 'neutral' North American accent and performed by actors of European descent.

Where *1001 Nights* truly diverges from previous adaptations, however, is in the world evoked by the stories that Shahrzad tells. Whereas nearly all previous visualizations of *One Thousand and One Nights* have relied upon a romantic, exotic and generally stereotypical picture of the Middle East, Big Bad Boo's version fully embraces the diversity of spaces found in the original stories. In fact, it is rarely clear exactly where a story is taking place. Ethnicities and environments often converge and conflict, resulting in a world that cannot easily be decoded using visual cues such as skin colour or dress. Though perhaps in a more abstract fashion, *1001 Nights* recreates *Mixed Nutz's* sense that children are constantly being confronted with new and challenging cultural circumstances.

In the episode 'King Bitehard', for example, Shahrzad tells her family a story which seems to begin somewhere in the Middle East, but then quickly shifts in geography and provides an apparently incongruous set of character relations. The king, serving as the protagonist of this sub-story, is depicted with a peach skin tone while his parents are clearly marked as East Asian through skin tone, clothing and accent. A scene of the king's parents with him as a baby seems to discourage the possibility of adoption – this is simply a world in which such a relationship is possible. As the king grows up, the hybridity continues. In one scene he receives a package from a 'Fez-Ex' deliveryman, suggesting a Middle Eastern or North African context via pun. The guards, however, are dressed as samurai and drawn with the long, wispy mustaches of characters in medieval Japanese epics. In one scene, the king confronts a South American panther, in another he is captured by a platoon of Spartan soldiers. These scenes, all from the episode 'King Bitehard', exemplify the complexity of environments and ethnicity in the programme's world.

The frantic diversity of the world put forth in *1001 Nights* does not only add a sense of excitement to its narratives. It also establishes a comfortable, perhaps attractive way to avoid both the homogenizing whitewashing of characters that Olson and Rampaul (2013) bemoan in most western children's programming and the difficulties in depicting a single non-western space without resorting to tropes and clichés. It is easy to see how this set of creative choices might appeal to both financially oriented programmers as well as representatives of state broadcasters eager to add elements of diversity to their lineups without sacrificing audience interest. Furthermore, the intrusion of different cultural markers into a single story place plays directly into the concept of global childhood that Big Bad Boo offers in its other programming. Just as children across the world are asked to incorporate the cultural collision of global modernity, the characters in *1001 Nights* are constantly incorporating seemingly incongruous elements of cultural bricolage.

However, despite the exceptionally multicultural cast of characters and environments featured in *1001 Nights*, the programme is not entirely devoid of some of elements that drew criticism towards *Aladdin*. In every episode of the series' first season, it is tempting to view the sub-story's main character as being the one most clearly coded as European. In the case of 'King Bitehard', the king, while possible to read as Persian, conforms to the Eurocentric visual and vocal standards assumed by most global children's programming. He is the only character that puts forth what would be considered an 'unaccented' North American vocal performance. The episode feature's great diversity, but this comes primarily from secondary characters, such as the king's parents, with which viewers are perhaps less likely to choose to identify.

This dynamic is more apparent in the episode 'What's Yours is Mine'. In this story a fisherman saves a mermaid from certain death. In gratitude, she provides him with an enormous pearl, thus setting off the narrative's main action. In the episode, the fisherman is depicted as East Asian from a visual perspective, as he is drawn with wan, yellow skin and at all times wears the sort of Non La bamboo hat that is so often used in media to identify Chinese or Vietnamese peasants. His voice, however, tells a considerably different story. His accent, in stark contrast to the negative characters in the episode would also be deemed as 'unaccented' North American English, at least in the English language version of the episode. His grammar is correct and his word choices are conventional. The episode's second heroic character, the mermaid is depicted as a moodier version of Disney's Princess Ariel with light skin and another voice that conforms to American broadcast standards.

However, the episode's two antagonists, the emperor and his advisor, have much in common with the oft-criticized character of Jafar, the villain of Disney's *Aladdin*. As the two plot to steal and cheat the fisherman out of his pearl, their words are marked by pronounced accents that appear to caricature the speech of Asian-American immigrants. If nothing else, they clearly establish them as foreigners, whereas as the fisherman's voice suggests locality. Stroking their overlong facial hair, these two villains are distanced from the audience through odd elocutions that further distinguish them from the struggling fisherman with the All-American accent and his fair-skinned mermaid helper. Although the episode is rather multi-cultural at the surface level and features an East Asian hero alongside its two villains, it is quite easy to employ critiques of Disney's Orientalizing approach to storytelling to the episode. In order to produce a story with easily identified protagonists and antagonists, Big Bad Boo evokes numerous stereotypes that function to assert the centrality of certain character-types that better fit Eurocentric norms.

This process, we suggest, is likely furthered by the Big Bad Boo's need to rely on the same production staff and facilities that are employed by multinational corporations. Working on tight budgets and within limited time frames, only so much can be done to shape the visual and audial elements of *1001 Nights* in a unique fashion that is fully integrated into the company's broader brand strategies. Both industry assumptions and practical limitations contribute to the contradictory nature of *1001 Nights*. Although the main characters and overall approach to the source materials emphasize multiculturalism and the experience of difference, many of the side characters and antagonists are drawn directly from Orientalizing tropes so often invoked by multinational corporate media. Framed by such western visual traditions, *1001 Nights* evinces the uneasy middle ground a small independent like Big Bad Boo must traverse in the global television marketplace.

CONCLUSION

The international children's television industry depends on constructing a universal childhood as a way to navigate financial risks of uncertainty in trading content across cultures. As Ien Ang (1991) points out, extensive measurement efforts, professional assertions and industry lore about television audiences are not enough to ultimately assuage the uncertainty and inherent risk involved in the business of television. Such uncertainty over predicting who will watch what and why, of course, remains an inherent part of the media business. Any 'audience' is constituted by individuals navigating their own subjectivities and social contexts, none of which are stable enough entities to provide capital investors with confidence. Stuart Hall reminds us that 'we are all, in our heads, several different audiences at once and are constituted as such by different programmes. We have the capacity to deploy different levels and modes of attention, to mobilize different competencies in our viewing ...' (Quoted in Morley 1986: 10). In other words, the actual audience consists of individual identities, existing as dynamic and variable formations of people with a variety of intersecting engagement modes and lived experiences. Thus, concepts of a 'television audience' endure as 'fictional abstractions' which often abnegate dynamic complexity and contradiction in pursuit of perceived stability.

Accordingly, the discursive constructions of any 'television audience' produced by commercial industries are ultimately 'strategic structurations which are under constant pressure of reconstruction ...' (Ang 1991: 41). Although Ang's focuses on this relationships largely in terms of re-asserting the potential power of individuals to be 'active social subjects', the instability of the audience as a discursive construct remains a key theoretical tool for making sense of the global media environment and international negotiations of power at the institutional level. When, as Havens (2006a) argues, the global trade in assumptions and ideas about television – including notions and constructions of a universal child audience for international children's programming – are ultimately the key site of western influence and/or media imperialism (as opposed to the textual representations in programmes themselves), such influence and power remains unstable and hardly deterministic. Big Bad Boo's vision of a global childhood as an experience defined by multicultural collision, then, reveals the dynamics of adjustment and negotiation available within the circumscribed spaces of conventional industry practices and flows of global capital. As a case study, this small, independent production company and the ways it navigates competing demands of non-profit organizations and commercial enterprise illustrates the fact that, despite the dominant presence of multinational conglomerates in the global marketplace, such giant corporate hegemonies are not totalizing in their discursive power.

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