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Disney Jr. Appisodes and the “Merged Screen” Viewing Experience

Abstract

Even while the media industry and media scholars have just begun to grapple with the implications of second screen technologies, some in the industry have begun to experiment with the ways that we think about screens and their roles all together. This paper explores the new iPad app Disney Jr. Appisodes and the ways in which it undermines clear distinctions between “viewing” activity and interactivity or play. This paper identifies this app as a “merged screen” experience, which combines the metaphorical interactivity of the television viewing experience, particularly children’s experiences, with the literal interactivity of a touchscreen app. It also argues that the unique industrial situation of Disney, and the particular attributes of children’s animated television more broadly, are significant factors in facilitating the development of this new approach to interactive viewing.

From a tablet screen Mickey Mouse waves to the young viewer and asks if they are ready to help him on a fun adventure. When greeted with silence, he tells the viewer “you need to speak up nice and loud so we can hear you.” When the young viewer replies, audio bars on a Mickey shaped symbol grow and the episode of *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* continues. This is no ordinary television episode; it is an Appisode produced by Disney Junior as a digital extension of the Disney programming block and cable channel targeted at young children ages 2-7.

The Disney Juniors Appisodes app on the iPhone and iPad represents a novel development in the evolving relationship between television and mobile devices (sometimes referred to as “second screen” media or connected viewing), one with the disruptive potential to help re-conceptualize what interaction with television means. Unlike a great deal of television related or “second screen” media apps, Disney Junior Appisodes does not merely deliver games or content intended to be used while viewing a television program nor does it follow the formula of most “TV Everywhere” apps, like Netflix or Hulu, by simply providing the ability to watch television episodes, more or less as they were aired, on a mobile device or computer. Instead, Disney Junior’s Appisodes blend these two core functions of connected viewing apps, interactivity and flexible on-demand viewing, into a single coherent experience for what I am calling a “merged screen” experience. In this article I demonstrate how the merged screen of Disney Junior’s Appisodes is appreciably different from other forms of connected viewing, with markedly different goals and advantages, and how the specific form of preschool television series, the disposition of the audience, and the industrial context of Disney all come together to allow for this new form of connected viewing.

As it becomes clear that the internet and mobile media have appreciably and irrevocably altered the ways in which many viewers consume television, major media companies have increasingly invested in apps, websites, and strategic partnerships to try to manage the ways in which viewers use their
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mobile devices while viewing their programs. Much of the attention to the growth of second screen media and connected viewing has focused on teen and young adult markets. This is partially because connected viewing is often associated with social viewing (texting, tweeting, etc.), which marketers associate with the 18–34 year old demographic,1 and partially because this demographic is particularly valuable to advertisers, and, therefore, television networks, who seek to use connected viewing to drive viewers back to live television or to provide additional venues for advertisers. However, while it has received less attention, children’s media companies have been particularly innovative about their use of mobile media apps and content to connect with their core audience and to extend their brands and viewing experiences. Disney is particularly notable in this respect. While other popular children’s media companies (Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network, and Dreamworks) have approximately twenty-seven, seventeen, and forty-one apps,2 respectively, for iPhone and iPad available on iTunes, Disney has a whopping 161 apps, the vast majority of which are direct extensions of Disney’s television shows and films. Many of these apps are traditional paratexts (games, interactive books, etc.) that are ancillary to the original film or television show and are not designed to be used while watching these texts or used to watch these texts. However, a full sixteen, or 10 percent, of these apps are TV Everywhere, Second Screen, or Merged Screen apps devoted to watching media, and many more apps include clips from film and television programs within the context of an interactive book or game. Observers of the evolving role of digital paratexts and connected viewing in media industries3 have noted the importance of content and context sensitivity in the production of digital paratexts. Ethan Tussey notes that many connected viewing apps were too limited in their interactivity and often failed to consider what “might work beyond a living room context,”4 and indeed many early efforts at connected viewing apps failed to effectively connect with audiences in part because they did not allow for new viewing patterns and contexts.5

While connected viewing apps targeted at children share some of these issues, often replicating or depending on traditional media viewing patterns, they also vary significantly from connected viewing apps targeted at different audiences and are often a more fully integrated part of a media IP. Disney Junior recently premiered its new series Sheriff Callie’s Wild West on its Watch Disney Junior app before airing it on television,6 reversing the traditional role of TV Everywhere apps that make portions of familiar television content available on internet connected devices. Other children’s networks are similarly considering their on-line and app products as central to their larger media properties. PBS debuted Daniel Tiger’s Neighborhood simultaneously as an app and as a television program; and Lesli Rotenberg, who manages children’s programming at PBS, has said that “her team had ‘sent away’ a number of producers who came to PBS with ideas for television shows with no thought-out mobile component.”7 The growing significance of connected viewing apps to children’s media reflects significant shifts in this market. Disney’s own research found that 40 percent of homes with children under seven have at least one tablet in the home.8 TV Everywhere apps from Disney Junior and PBS Kids have also shown significant success, with over 5 million and 2.4 million downloads9 respectively and hundreds of millions of video views. Disney has also shown a particularly strong commitment to second screen apps, which have often proven challenging to develop successfully,10 developing second screen apps not only around blu-ray releases but even creating specialized apps for use in app enabled movie theater screenings of classic Disney films. It is in the context of these successes that Disney Jr. Appisodes emerged.

Disney Jr. Appisodes consist of full, or slightly abridged, episodes of the popular Disney Junior shows (Mickey Mouse Clubhouse, Sofia the First, Doc McStuffins, and Jake and the Never Land Pirates) that have been modified to include a number of interactive elements, puzzles and/or games. All, or the majority, of the original episode is retained and interactivity is produced by two primary methods: 1) brief new sequences are added that ask the user to complete a task or interact with an object or character and 2) already existing sequences with implied interaction are given an added mechanic to measure whether the interaction is really taking place. For example, Mickey Mouse Clubhouse and
Jake and the Never Land Pirates episodes, as they are aired on the Disney Channel, include moments when the characters ask the viewers questions or encourage them to repeat a word or phrase. When these episodes are reworked as appisodes, they use the iPhone or iPad’s microphone to measure whether or not the viewer actually replies, and in many cases, if the viewer does not, the episode will pause while the character on-screen encourages the viewer to speak louder. The Appisodes are very sensitive to the specificities of the technology used, relying on the device’s microphone, camera, touch screen, and accelerometer to allow for interactivity, encouraging young users to tap, swipe, tilt and speak to the screen to interact with the episode’s world. These Appisodes represent what I am calling a merged screen experience, where both the viewing of the television content and the interactive elements extending the content, which is generally provided as a “second screen” app, become one coherent experience that takes place on a single (mobile) screen.

Most second screen or connected viewing apps either complement the traditional television viewing environment (encouraging real-time and social viewing)12 or replicate traditional living room viewing practices. Indeed, although one of the promises of “TV Everywhere” apps like Netflix or HBO Go is their potential to allow for watching on the go, many viewers use internet enabled game consoles, set top boxes, or televisions to stream content on television screens or use computers in living rooms or bedrooms to fulfill the function of a television. Ethan Tussey argues that increasingly “connected viewing is tied to the living room screen,”13 compromising the flexibility and creativity of social viewing practices by domesticating these practices to feed the corporation’s goals. There is no question that Disney’s apps are an extension of the walled garden that the conglomerate provides for experiencing most of its products, and indeed Appisodes tightly constrain what media can be consumed, how it can be acquired (all episodes must be purchased through the app), and what interactions it allows. The goals of this app, however, vary significantly from most connected viewing apps and depart noticeably from the strictures of the “living room screen.” Both second screen apps, which include what Tussey calls companion viewing and social networking apps, and TV Everywhere Apps largely reinforce a distinction between watching and participating, as two distinct activities that take place on separate screens or at separate times. This is largely an extension of industry logic, where goals for connected viewing are often to increase viewership of a television program as it airs live or to increase sales of DVDs. Here, the newer interactive media experience is often produced largely to try to encourage older media consumption patterns that are on the decline.14

The merged screen experience of Disney Junior Appisodes revises this logic by using mobile media technology to blend the experience of viewing and the experience of interacting with what is being viewed. Appisodes viewers/users engage in these two activities on the same screen, at roughly the same time, and as part of a holistic experience. Moreover, while many other connected viewing apps give viewers the opportunity to comment on or learn about the content playing on a primary screen, Disney Junior Appisodes allow the viewer a small degree of efficacy in relationship to the world of the television show being watched. Because these are versions of already aired shows, viewer participation does not in reality alter the text in any substantial way, but the viewer/users’ actions still affect the progress of the episode. If viewers/users do not tap to open a door, pull a switch, push a button, or say the magic words the episode will often not continue. Sometimes players have to complete a specific task for the characters— such as blow into the microphone to blow up a balloon or focus a spyglass—in order to help solve a problem before the episode continues. In rare cases this interaction actually impacts the video that plays. In the Sofia the First Appisode “The Big Sleepover,” the viewer/user is told to pick the colors to decorate a fan; when the episode recommences, the fan of one of the character changes to reflect the choices of the user. In Jake and the Never Land Pirates “Hide the Hideout,” the app records the viewer/user making monkey noises and later plays these noises back to them. However, these are exceptional cases and generally the impact the viewer/user has on the unfolding of the episode is primarily only on whether or not they make noise, tap the screen, or perform the other
actions that are required to allow the episode to continue. While the idea that the viewer/user has an actual impact on the unfolding story is largely an illusion, the form of interactivity provided by the Appisodes not only provides simultaneity with the viewing experience, which is often emphasized by second screen apps, but they go further to absorb the function of interactivity into the viewing experience itself, requiring interaction as a precondition of viewing.

Appisodes are able to make this shift, in part, because of the nature of the television texts on which they are based. Currently Disney is making Appisodes exclusively out of their Disney Jr. Programs, which are targeted at children ages 2-7. Pre-school television programming is often designed with a great deal of implied interactivity already in the original television program: *Dora the Explorer* asks questions of her young viewers, the Muppets who live on *Sesame Street* implore them to sing along, and Mickey Mouse was asking his viewers to say the magic words to bring out the *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* well before Disney created an app that could hear them do it. Programs targeted at these audiences have long broken the fourth wall to invite their views to sing and dance along, talk to the screen, and to mime pushing the buttons or pulling the levers that the Disney Appisodes now allow them to touch on a screen. Lee and Andrejevic observed that after the failure of the *Grey’s Anatomy* second screen app, “what the industry learned from ABC’s second-screen app experiments is that these apps do work but that their features need to vary depending on “the show’s tone, pace, and style.” These specific attributes of preschool television have made it a particularly strong candidate for a merged screen experience. The implied interactivity of pre-school television makes the integration of interactive elements and activities particularly natural. Indeed, in any given appisode, a significant number of interactive elements may already be in the original episode, either as implied interactivity or as a graphic image that can now be manipulated. In the *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* appisode “Road Rally,” which was an abridged version of a 2010 television episode, nearly 60 percent of the almost 40 interactive elements in the episode were already in the episode as aired, and many of the remaining ones simply involved adding brief pauses or a request that players tap images, like a location on a map, that were part of the original episode. Often elements of an appisode will appear to be added gamification, like the coins that appear in the *Jake and the Never Land Pirates* when you complete a task, but are in fact part of the original television episodes. Often very small changes, like tapping the coins as they appear to collect them, are made.

Not only do television programs targeted at preschoolers feature implied interaction and often specifically address the viewer, but their visual style also makes them particularly well suited to integrating interactive segments into the episodes themselves. Television shows targeted at preschoolers are typically animated, generally using bright colors and simple animation, which makes it easier to seamlessly integrate games and interactive sequences after the episode is completed. Similarly, because it is only necessary for a small number of the characters to provide instructions for the viewers to prompt these interactions, only a small number of actors are required to create additional voiceovers, even when several characters are visible. This makes it easier and more affordable to include new sequences or to extend a sequence to include an interactive component—like an added sequence in a *Doc McStuffins* appisode where viewers/users help Doc finish her new “docmobile” by dragging and dropping items onto the vehicle or one where they tilt the iPad to help a toy fairy fly. Because preschool television shows generally have straightforward goal-centered story lines, with clear and distinct narrative beats, they are easily broken into segments to accommodate the added interactive sequences. The implied interactivity, animated style, and accessible story lines, as well as the cheerful tone, ample verbal explanations, and sometimes even direct audience address, of the original television episodes make Disney Jr. Series particularly viable as examples of merged screen experiences by allowing interactive elements and sequences to be built into the original episode naturally, making it part of the television episode rather than ancillary to it.

While a good fit between the merged screen app’s interactive functions and the original media text is key, creating an app and interactive elements...
that are consistent with the habits and desires of the core audience is also crucial to the success of connected viewing experiences. This can be seen in the ways in which Disney Jr. Appisodes replicate and exploit viewing patterns already common to children. At the time of this writing, there are only seven available appisodes that run around 30 minutes and usually cost $4.99 each, all of which have been previously aired. For many audiences the limited content and high price would present a significant barrier to the success of an app. However, for children, the fact that there is less than 4 hours of content available does not mean that this equates to 4 hours of entertainment. More then any other audience, children enjoy repetition and like to rewatch the same program over and over again. While this tendency is well known to anyone with small children, it has proven to have a significant industrial impact, with Amazon reporting that 65 percent of its most frequently replayed programs are children's shows. Children also often “play along” with what is on screen: talking to the television, asking questions or mimicking gestures. In many ways, what the Appisodes do is to harness this play.

Disney executives argue that they are responding to the fact that using “smartphones and tablets is second nature to kids today.” While it is true that the fact that young children are “digital natives” certainly contributes to the preponderance and rapid evolution of children's connected viewing apps, the ways in which connected viewing fulfills the specific needs of families with young children are actually quite complex. The influence of advertising on children is a common concern and the fact that TV Everywhere and other connected viewing apps often exclude ads, particularly for children's programs, make them an appealing option for parents, as does the fact that these apps make age-appropriate programming available regardless of the time of day. While scholars have noted that many viewers appear to be more interested in watching clips than full episodes or movies on mobile devices, children appear to be comfortable watching video on these devices. Preschool television is also particularly well suited to the medium of mobile media devices. Animated children's programs often translate well visually to a smaller screen, episodes frequently consist of two shorter segments (of around 15 minutes), which may be more manageable on a small screen, and the mobility of the apps are particularly well suited for young children and parents who often use media as a distraction or to fill downtime. While many audience groups want ever increasing access and flexibility over how they use media content and connected viewing apps, the parents of young children often want a limited and controlled environment where they feel the content is “safe” for their children. TV Everywhere apps for kids networks provide many of these advantages, which has contributed to their success, and Disney Jr. Appisodes build on these viewing patterns and audience needs by facilitating repetitive viewing, excluding advertisements, and by providing a menu at the top that allow for viewers to watch and play in brief segments, repeat the same segment over and over again, or begin an appisode, stop, and then begin again. This allows for viewers/users to consume an appisode in bite size pieces, to “binge watch” all the appisodes, or to repeat a single appisode, section or activity over and over again. These goals differ significantly from those of typical “second screen” or connected viewing apps. Connected viewing apps frequently focus on creating a social experience for viewers, encouraging viewers to post quotes or discuss the television episode or film on social media sites or in a chat forum provided by the app. This is a common enough goal that some observers connect social viewing and second screen viewing as intrinsically related; and, indeed, many teens and adults want extensive social media interactivity as part of connected viewing. However, privacy and safety concerns create a number of issues with importing this social driven model to children’s connected viewing apps, and many of these apps—particularly those for younger viewers—do not include any social media components. Because creating interactivity by facilitating discussion about the show is not a viable alternative for connected viewing apps directed at young children, Disney Jr. needed to make the interactivity part of the show, rather then a response to it. While the merged screen Disney Jr. Appisodes app represents a new direction in connected viewing apps, it does so by building on existing audience viewing practices, including the preference of children for
repetition and play, and the desires of parents for a safe, age appropriate environment, that allows for flexible viewing times and locations.

Ultimately, however, connected viewing apps are designed to meet the needs of the company that produces them as much, or more, than the needs of the viewer. It is here, where the distinct industrial context of Disney becomes key in facilitating the emergence of Disney Jr. Appisodes. The goals of many connected viewing apps are to drive viewers away from time-shifting and towards live television viewing, to promote their product through social viewing, and to help gather information about the audience as valuable marketing information.25 In almost all of these respects The Disney Jr. Appisodes, and indeed most of Disney’s TV Everywhere apps, could be considered an unequivocal failure. While which appisodes or episodes are downloaded or viewed the most frequently certainly provides some valuable information about the popularity of various shows and episodes, by and large the closed nature of these apps prevent the kind of in depth market research collection that other apps do. Nor do they directly encourage the viewer to watch the programs live. While many connected viewing apps only fully work when synced to a live program or require other simultaneous viewers to enjoy, many of Disney’s apps focus instead on providing on-demand viewing opportunities or displacing the context of live viewing by allowing for live viewing through a mobile device. This reflects Disney’s unique financial structure and goals. Advertising, and therefore live viewing, is less important to the Disney Channel, Disney Jr. and DisneyXD than most television channels, even cable channels, because a large percentage of their advertising is in-house and serves primarily to promote their own programs and IPs, something that is also achieved by the TV Everywhere and merged screen apps.26 For Disney, and many children’s networks, there is a great deal of value not only in a television program but also in the characters/world it features. A single IP for Disney represents many possible venues for profit, since successful Disney Channel and Disney Jr. Series beget a slew of apps, games, books, toys, DVDs, clothes, and merchandise—all of which also cross-promote for both the IP and the show itself. Ultimately, it is here that the Appisodes shine; not only do they represent a potential source of revenue as individual purchases, but they also engage viewers/users more closely with the brand, have the potential to introduce viewers/users to new shows, and contribute to a form of rudimentary “fanification”27 by deepening the way in which a viewer/user may participate and immerse in the program and its world. By developing in Disney Jr. Appisodes a merged screen app which combines interaction with viewing, they are both providing a more immersive and interactive experience for young viewers, one that literally responds to their voices and their desires to participate, and exploiting children’s normative desire for repetition and interaction, essentially profitizing play, in order to build their IP brands.

While these Appisodes are certainly not a normative example of connected viewing, they represent both the potential, and potential problems, that ever-evolving efforts to integrate media viewing, mobile media, and digital interactivity present. While many second screen apps have struggled, Disney Jr. Appisodes has thus far been successful for Disney as an example of the potential of a merged screen experience. Because these Appisodes integrate the elements of the viewing/interactive experience, they avoid the frustrations and distractions that some users report with second screen apps. They deploy the specific technological capabilities of their platforms, the pre-existing interactive and stylistic elements of the television programs they are drawn on, and the unique viewing patterns and needs of their audiences. They are, in other words, both content and context sensitive, producing a form of interactivity that is uniquely reflective of the original media text and the audience. While the specificities of this app may be difficult to replicate with media texts that are less interactive and straightforward or audiences less willing to suspend disbelief, the larger model—of starting with the text and the audience’s existing attributes and building an interactive experience that reflects these—is one that represents a great deal of potential for developers of connected viewing apps and fills a need noted by many market observers.28 Disney Jr. Appisodes may, in many ways, be the first of its kind, and it is not yet clear if it will also be the last, but it certainly has its pre-cursors.
The 1983 video game *Dragon’s Lair* represents an early model, while technically a game it largely consisted of animated narrative sequences that required viewers to push a button at the right time in order to continue the story, rather than meeting your death and starting over. The 2002 flash animation series *Gotham Girls* also is an important touchstone, in that it incorporated brief games or interactive features directly into the short animated webisodes. Even some two-screen apps have included small merged screen components; *The Dark Knight App* for instance, allowed the user to post quotes to Facebook or Twitter while they watch the film, from the screen. However, these examples are limited and there are undoubtedly challenges in translating Disney Jr. Appisodes model into other viewing contexts, so it is far too early to project whether the merged screen experience will become a common one. Regardless of whether or not Disney Jr. Appisodes has many followers or imitators, its model begs the question of how to conceptualize both television and the interactive experience in a context where the “screen” is constantly changing and where it may no longer be appropriate to thinking of viewing and interaction as separate (if often simultaneous) activities with their own realms. However, if the Appisodes continue to prove as popular as Albert Cheng, executive president of digital media for Disney/ABC Television Groups, felt their initial offering was, then their unique attributes may prove an important model for ever evolving connected viewing apps. Through their extensive digital offerings, particularly their merged screen Appisodes app, Disney has demonstrated the value that can be gained from a sensitivity to content and context in app development and proven that the limitations the children’s market provides, in terms of the social media and market research goals of many connected viewing apps, also can inspire creativity and innovation that just might change how we look at our screens altogether.

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**Notes**

2 The number of Dreamworks apps is a bit complex. There are only 7 apps for which Dreamworks Animation S.K.G. were the developer, the remaining apps are using Dreamworks characters and IPs but are made and published by diverse developers. The other instances listed include only apps from the actual companies listed.
9 Barnes
10 Jensen
11 Lee and Andrejevic, 50-51.
12 Lee and Andrejevic, 40-41.
13 Tussey, 211.
14 This is least true of TV everywhere apps. However, even these apps often delay the release of new television episodes or only offer limited episodes, creating the potential to encourage live viewing or DVD purchases.
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15 Lee and Andrejevic, 41-47; Tussey, 206-209.
16 Lee and Andrejevic, 42.
17 Gamification refers to the use of game design principles and mechanics in non-game contexts.
20 “Disney’s App...”
21 Evans, 156.
22 Indeed, general interest TV Everywhere apps like Netflix or Amazon Prime have produced children’s only variations to benefit from these audience desires.
25 Lee and Andrejevec, 44-53.
26 The Disney “TV Everywhere” apps also serve to deter cord-cutting, a key interest of Disney’s, by requiring a valid log-in from a cable or satellite company in order to access the majority of available episodes or watch live TV using the app.
27 Lee and Andrejevic, 46.
28 Tussey; Mancuso and Stuth; Stelter; Susan Ashworth, “Defining the TV Experience,” TV Technology, January 2012, 1.
29 Jensen