

Remediation, Children's Television and *Dora the Explorer*

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Abstract: This paper examines Nickelodeon's *Dora the Explorer* as reflecting traditions in children's television, notions of child audience's correct relationship with media technologies, and anxieties surrounding the position of children within Western culture. It examines the ways in which the show remediates the aesthetics and interface of the point-and-click computer game into the non-participatory cartoon show. *Dora the Explorer* consequently translates children's television's historical preoccupation with activity and participation according to the mode of interactive media, while reflecting anxieties surrounding children's use of and relationship with new media technologies.

Key Words: cartoon, children's television, computer game, convergence, *Dora the Explorer*, remediation, videogame

1. **Reverse Remediation**

The term 'remediation', as coined by Bolter and Grusin refers to "the representation of one medium in another". Considered "the defining characteristic of the new digital media"¹ Bolter and Grusin explore the reciprocal relationship between 'new' media - the computers, MP3 players, games consoles - and 'old' media forms of technology - books, television, radio, cinema. Remediation is most commonly used to describe the process whereby new media technologies appropriate and reinvent codes and conventions of traditional media. The internet draws upon print media, with websites emulating the layout of magazines and newspapers; videogames remediate cinema in their cut-scenes and virtual cameras, and *YouTube* remediates the videotape player. New technologies draw upon traditional forms and formats in order to remain comprehensible in the established media marketplace and cultural landscape. The discursive application of 'internet radio' to online music sites involving a very different form of wireless transmission, 'digital film' to processes where celluloid is completely absent, and 'interactive cinema' to interactive digital experiences differing from cinema in most fundamental respects, indicates the reason 'new' and 'old' media exist within inverted commas.

Such a perspective is evident in David Buckingham's² discussion of children's relationship with new media technologies. Positioned against more

polemic commentators, Buckingham is quick to challenge the claim that young people represent a “digital generation” empowered through new technologies which saturate their lives. While acknowledging that contemporary childhood is permeated with media forms, Buckingham points out that many of these are traditional - television, video, popular music - as well as digital - computer games, internet, mobile phones. Moreover, Buckingham asserts the importance of recognising ‘continuities and connections’ between the newer and older media which are significant in the lives of contemporary children. As he writes:

...what remains striking about many of these new media technologies is how much they rely on the forms and conventions of old technologies. Just as a great deal of television is in some sense literary or theatrical, so many CD-ROMs and websites implicitly use the book as the model for structuring ways in which readers get access to information; and the internet, of course, is heavily reliant on written text and on conventional verbal literacy - as indeed are many computer games.³

Buckingham's observations are common amongst commentators seeking to situate new digital media within a traditional media context. Hence, Geoff King and Tanya Krzywinska consider the ways in which videogames are borrowing from cinema;⁴ Sean Cubitt observes the prominence of cartography in digital media,⁵ while many “cinematic” horror videogames also draw upon CCTV cameras, photography and paintings.⁶ Less common are discussions of the ways in which established media forms are incorporating the codes and conventions of digital texts and technologies. This is undoubtedly a component of Bolter and Grusin's study, which observes the ways TV news increasingly resembles an internet site in its visual design,⁷ a popular American newspaper which constructs a printed version of its own website,⁸ or live musical shows employing televisions within their performances.⁹ Given that many forms considered to be new media are now decades old - home videogames systems have been commercially available in the west since the 1970s, while the internet appears to be in its second incarnation - or entrenched in contemporary life - evident in the penetration of the mobile phone and digital television - many modes and communicative methods of these young media have become so assimilated as to be reincorporated into elder formats. Contemporary convergence of media technologies, as discussed by Henry Jenkins, involving industrial practices such

as “extension”, “synergy” and “franchising, involving the coordinated transference of branded media content across multiple media platforms¹⁰ results in the textualities of divergent forms - films, television shows, videogames and websites - becoming increasingly interconnected. Studies such as Tom Engelhardt critique of merchandising strategies in 1980s children’s television;¹¹ Robert C. Allen observations concerning the marketable ‘toyetic’ characters of children’s fantasy cinema,¹² or Buckingham discussion of the multi-media “cultural practice” and global phenomena of *Pokémon*¹³ suggest children’s media is not immune from such tendencies, but might be variously well suited for the kinds of diversification of products and texts these trends entail.

Such processes can be clearly seen in the Nickelodeon TV show *Dora the Explorer*, a cartoon series which incorporates elements of the videogame and computer interface into its aesthetic and viewing strategy.

2. *Dora the Explorer*

Dora the Explorer is a show produced by the commercial children’s television network Nickelodeon, first screened in 2000 on Nick Jr. According to the network’s website, Dora is “a half-hour animated children’s television series starring a 7-year old Latina girl and her friends” which is “designed to actively engage preschoolers in a play-along, computer-style adventure.”¹⁴ As with many Nickelodeon shows, there are numerous *Dora the Explorer* synergistic products associated with the show aimed at children, such as clothes, bed covers, soft toys, and craft sets, and the show itself extends into many media forms including books, comics, DVDs, computer and videogames. In terms of the show, the structure of each episode is the same: Dora must embark upon a short journey, her destination ranging from the mundane - a school, a library, or a relative’s home - to the fantastical - the Lost City of Toys, the Purple Planet or Treasure Island. Aiding her in this quest is her companion Boots the monkey, a backpack containing various items which will assist her progress, and a map which charts the route she must take. The map shows a series of distinct obstacles, characters, architectural, or natural features between Dora and her final goal - a river, a pyramid, a garden gate - each of which poses a challenge which Dora must overcome.

Perhaps the first thing to note is the extent to which this series has seemingly responded to popular and academic criticisms of the lack of diversity in children’s television shows. In particular *Dora the Explorer*, both the show and the character, address the calls contained within Frederico A. Subervi-Velez and

Susan Colsant's 1993 chapter "The Television Worlds of Latino Children".¹⁵ Pointing to the significant rise in the Hispanic population within the United States, constituting a numerical majority in some cities, and schooling systems, and the increasing attention this demographic receives from advertisers, political parties and media researchers; Subervi-Velez and Colsant point to the minimal or negative representation of ethnic minorities, the overwhelming absence of Hispanic characters, and the dominance of English-language outside Hispanic-orientated television networks. The central character of this series is Dora, a seven-year old Latina young woman who each episode journeys across a different landscape in a quest of progression and acquisition. Consequently, Nickelodeon's show answers the call for more active female characters in children's culture, as well as more central representations of non-white characters in children's television.

The prominence of Spanish within *Dora the Explorer* corresponds with an educational imperative across much children's culture, evident in media associated with the series. However, it appears less concerned with embracing children for whom Spanish is their first language, as with teaching English-speaking children how to speak the second most-common language within the United States. Throughout her adventures, Dora uses Spanish words to open gates, address Spanish-speaking characters, and engage with her parents. Words of Spanish are also integrated into the programme: At the beginning of each episode Dora addresses the audience with a cheerful "¡hola!" before she says "hello", Dora's bilingual Backpack exclaims "¡delicioso!" as she re-engorges her contents, and there are many moments when the audience is encouraged to count along with Dora and Boots in Spanish. This method of encouraging viewers to respond to questions or join in is central to the show's key teaching and learning strategy. At various stages in her journey, when Dora encounters problems of various forms, the viewer is asked to "help" by participating in the narrative. This may be answering a riddle from the Grumpy Old Troll to be allowed to cross his bridge, working out which sections of track fit which gaps in a railway line to allow Azul the train to cross, or solving simple sums. While this is a common method in children's television, presenters frequently breaking the fourth wall to address their audiences, and subsequently responding to an imagined answer, what makes *Dora the Explorer* particularly interesting in terms of the relationship between 'new' and old 'media' is the ways in which the cartoon's reaction to its audience's implied response remediates computer game interfaces and traditions of representation.

3. (Inter) Activity and Children's Television

The history of children's television in the United States and Britain is characterised by a range of anxieties. Fears about television inducing addiction and poor health amongst children, an incitement to criminality and vulgar tastes, the erosion of the boundaries between adulthood and childhood, and the stupefying effects of this "passive" medium reproduce previous cultural antipathy towards cinema,¹⁶ while anticipating subsequent negative discourses surrounding videogames.¹⁷ A recurring antidote to such concerns is the claim that children's television should encourage activity. Lynn Spigel observes this emphasis on industrious and active participation in critical debates surrounding 1950s children's television, observing that such assertions were not applied to television for adults. Juvenile delinquency, criminality and immorality amongst the young was blamed on mass media in post-war America. While many voices championed television as a force for bringing the family together, there were concurrent concerns about the new medium's "dissemination of debased knowledge and its related encouragement of passive minds and bodies." Passive addiction, it was feared, might result in poor hygiene and nutrition, physical and mental disorders, and aggressive behaviour.¹⁸ The antidote was television designed to allow the possibility of children's participation, such as drawing and writing competitions.¹⁹ Such concerns were also expressed in Britain, where broadcasting was and continues to be subject to a greater degree of regulation, originated in the publicly-owned British Broadcasting Company. Writing about the history of British media for children, Stephen Wagg illustrates how concerns about imitation, founded on conceptions of children as a vulnerable and passive group, resulted in a broad political consensus that this should be counteracted through an emphasis, in approved children's culture, on *activity*. This is traced through Baden-Powell's scouts movement, to BBC radio, to television shows, typified by the institutional *Blue Peter* with its home making sections and charity appeals, all of which sought to make young people active, rather than inactive, recipients.²⁰ Television for children, in a British context, traditionally deflects criticism through encouraging productive activities - craft projects, letter writing, competitions - participation - singing, answering questions - and education - teaching numeracy, literacy and life skills. Although Wagg argues such concerns about the *active* viewer have largely been replaced by ideas of the child consumer in Saturday morning television of the 1990s, the emphasis on activity is still

evident in many Nic Jr. pre-school programmes. *Dora the Explorer* notably represents this participation through the conventions of interactive digital media.

Dora the Explorer's remediation of computer and videogames is evident in a number of regular features within the show. Early episodes began with a camera moving through a child's bedroom to close in on a computer screen, situating the show within a digital space at odds with its cell-animation aesthetic. The series reproduces one of the key organising features of many game genres: spatial progress. Henry Jenkins in conversation with Mary Fuller observed parallels between Nintendo videogames and colonial narratives with their emphasis on spatial progression through sequences of visually spectacular environments. Indeed, Jenkins might have been referring to the cartoon adventures when he wrote: "Virtual reality opens new spaces for exploration, colonization, and exploitation, returning to a mythic time when there were worlds without limits and resources beyond imagining."²¹ The writer draws applicable parallels between Nintendo videogames and other forms of child-associated culture such as Narnia, Oz, Middle Earth fantasy, and amusement park rides.²² Each episode of *Dora the Explorer* is concerned with navigating a space, be it a journey to the North Pole, across Nursery Rhyme Land, or in a submarine under the sea. This journey is represented through Map, an anthropomorphised cartographical device which is brought forth from Dora's backpack when the viewer is encouraged to shout his name. A representation of the terrain which Dora must cross then fills the screen, in the manner of the familiar computer game info space, the term Aylish Wood uses to refer to the integral space unmediated by the game avatar, including gages, timers and maps.²³ Showing a player's location in the virtual environment, the image Map contains similarly seems to exist as a non-diegetic zone outside the cartoon world. Similarly, when "Backpack" is called upon to surrender one of her objects to help Dora's journey, the screen switches to an image of the character surrounded by the objects available in a style reminiscent of the inventory screen in many adventure computer and videogames. The objects Backpack carries correspond with the tasks ahead of Dora, providing paddles to cross a river, or sticky tape to allow progress up a slippery mountain, in the same manner as found objects allow progress through adventure game spaces. However, the most notable remediation of digital media is represented by the computer desktop-style arrow which appears when audiences are asked to select an object, either from Backpack or from Dora's environment. In this case, the selectable element will appear with a glowing outline, similar to objects in computer and videogames which can be

interacted with. Dora will ask the viewers advice on what object to select, the arrow will hover momentarily, giving the audience time to respond, or move from option to option as Dora continues to talk, before “clicking” on the correct option. As such, the traditional interactive dimensions of children’s television are translated into the conventions of the new interactive “point and click” computer and videogame.

4. The Ludological and the Ludite

Despite television’s non-participatory nature, shows for children tended to address their audience as active participants. Dora simply interprets children’s television’s historical preoccupation with activity and participation according to the mode of interactive media. The processes of remediation at work within *Dora the Explorer* may appear counterintuitive, running against the predominate old-to-new media flow of cultural influence. In its sophistication such tendencies seem at odds with a seemingly simplistic series aimed at pre-school children. From a historical perspective, however, children’s television has always contained elements of interactivity pre-empting technological developments such as digital television, computer games consoles and the internet, which make viewer participation in on-screen activity a real possibility. Consequently, the modality of computer and videogame fits well with the traditional address of children’s television within the UK and the United States. Moreover, the ways in which *Dora the Explorer* reproduces aspects of interactive digital media, not so much through the point-and-click arrow, but through its emphasis on spatial progression, puzzle solution, and collection, anticipates the franchise’s subsequent marketing as digital games with different degrees of educational content. Such regular elements translate well into, for example, the PlayStation game *Barney Buddies*, where Dora collects stars, and Boots retrieves useful objects from haystacks, while searching for various lost farm animals. *Dora Saves the Mermaids* has players selecting a vacuum cleaner from Backpack in a manner identical to the non-interactive TV show, features a Seashell Bridge with stepping-stone shells which must be crossed in numerical order, and a compelling combination of traditional and digital interaction where players must press the action button while simultaneously shout “squeak” at the screen in order to summon a dolphin to help cross the Silly Sea.

Moreover, if the educational imperative remains that children’s television imparts valuable knowledge and skills to its audience, the remediation of computer game aesthetics corresponds with some contemporary views on

teaching and learning within the classroom. With its stealthy teaching of numeracy, problem solution, and language skills, *Dora the Explorer* clearly evidences such intent. That educational content in the show is associated with digital media modes of interaction is appropriate to some current constructions of children, technology and teaching practices. In educational discourses Buckingham observes descriptions of children as technologically savvy surfers of an emerging cyber-culture, with the use of computers in schools promoted as a means of re-invigorating dusty scholarship and engaging young people in the digital language in which they are fluent.²⁴ While remaining traditionally non-participatory in format, *Dora the Explorer* is clearly reflecting a perceived familiarity of digital interfaces amongst its pre-school audience, or anticipating their use of educational software in years to come, and translating its own non-interactive interface accordingly.

At the same time, *Dora the Explorer* also reflects anxieties circulating children's use of new media technologies. Children, as a socially constructed audience, have a problematic relationship with recent media forms, and Buckingham notes the polarised constructions of children as both empowered by digital technologies, and in need of protection from such developments.²⁵ Narratives of computers revolutionising the classroom exist side by side with darker tales of cyber-grooming, mobile phone bullying and "happy slapping", videogame addiction, and internet pornography. If children are seen as more at home with digital technologies than their elders, this is not something adults necessarily feel at ease with. Anxieties about children's knowledge of new media to the exclusion of adults, and concerns about the extent to which children's culture has been increasingly technological and commercialised, are identified by Patricia Holland in her discussion of postmodern children's television. Like the cartoon internet cow Holland describes, *Dora the Explorer* "straddles the cosy children's world of puppets and friendly animals and a much more threatening landscape of a technologized future."²⁶ Despite the familiarity with digital technologies the series assumes amongst its audience, and the show's apparent location within a computer terminal, the series maintains a traditional hand-drawn cartoon aesthetic far from the frenetic computer generated animation of many other teen and pre-school series. This traditional style is notably enhanced through the locations of *Dora the Explorer*, which are predominantly pastoral, rural and natural. Dora and Boots cross rivers and lakes, mountain ranges and hills, forests and jungles. Narratives and characters tend to be from traditional fairy tales, such as the three little pigs, or the Grumpy Old Troll, or the Prince

Dora rescues from the High Tower. Computer and videogames, such as *Barnyard Buddies*, *Dora Saves the Mermaids* or *Dora the Explorer Saves the Snow Princess* continue such trends in their location within pastoral settings and traditional children's culture. Despite their situation within new media, in both analogue and digital incarnations, *Dora the Explorer* is not far removed from the television 1950s children's shows Spigel considers, being "symptomatic of the more general efforts to establish an economy of pleasure for children spectators that suit[s] adult concepts of appropriate children's entertainment."²⁷

5. Conclusion

In various ways, *Dora the Explorer* remediates computer and videogames: through its quest narrative of spatial progression, involving the completion of specific tasks along the way; in its reproduction of the "info space" of map screens and inventories, and in its use of a computer cursor as a surrogate for viewers' participatory decision making. This corresponds with a historical concern within children's television that viewers should be actively engaged in its content, an activity translated into the interactivity of the computer and videogame. The *Dora* brand can be seen to negotiate the perceived emergence of a "digital generation" of pre-schoolers, either already conversant with the language of new media or needing to be brought up to speed in preparation for the digital school and workplace. The show also can be seen as appeasing concerns about children's over-familiarity with digital media, the detrimental effects of computer technologies on contemporary childhood, and adult nostalgia for a less complex era of childhood and children's culture.

Notes

¹ J. D. Bolter and R. Grusin, *Remediation: Understanding New Media*, MI Press, Cambridge, 2001, p. 45.

² D. Buckingham, *Beyond Technology: Children's Learning in the Digital Age*, Cambridge, Polity, 2008.

³ Buckingham, *Beyond Technology*, 80-81.

⁴ G. King and T. Krzywinska *Screenplay: cinema/video games/interfaces*, Wallflower, London, 2002.

⁵ S. Cubitt, 'Spreadsheets, Sitemaps and Search Engines: Why Narrative is Marginal to Multimedia and Networked Communication and Why Marginality is More Vital than Universality' in *New Screen Media: Cinema/Art/Narrative*, M. Rieser and A. Zapp (eds) BFI Publishing, London, 2002.

⁶ E. Kirkland, 'Resident Evil's Typewriter: Survival Horror and its Remediations', in *Games and Culture: A Journal of Interactive Media*, Vol 4, number 2, April 2009, p. 120.

⁷ Bolter and Grusin, *Remediation*, p. 9.

⁸ *ibid*, pp. 40-41.

⁹ *ibid*, p. 71.

¹⁰ H. Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, New York University Press, London, 2006, p. 19.

¹¹ T. Engelhardt, 'The Shortcake Strategy', in *Watching Television: a Pantheon guide to popular culture*, T. Gitlin (ed), Pantheon, New York, 1986.

¹² R. C. Allen, 'Home Alone Together: Hollywood and the "family film"', in *Identifying Hollywood's Audiences: Cultural Identity and the Movie*, M. Stokes and R. Maltby (eds), BFI Publishing, London: 1999.

¹³ D. Buckingham and J. Sefton-Green, 'Structure, Agency, and Pedagogy in Children's Media Culture', in *Pikachu's Global Adventure: The Rise and Fall of Pokémon*, J. Tobin (ed) Duke University Press, London, 2004, p. 12.

¹⁴ Nick Jr. television station website, viewed 31 July 2009, <http://www.nickjr.com/shows/dora/dora-the-explorer-tv-show/dora-the-explorer-show.jhtml>

¹⁵ F. A. Subervi-Vélez and S. Colsant, 'The Television Worlds of Latino Children', in *Children & Television: Images in a Changing Sociocultural World*, G. L. Berry and J. K. Asamen (eds), Sage, London, 1993.

¹⁶ R. deCordova, 'The Mickey in Macy's Window: Childhood, Consumerism, and Disney Animation', in *Disney Discourse: Producing the Magic Kingdom*, E. Smoodin (ed), AFI Film Readers, Routledge, London, 1994.

¹⁷ J. Newman *Playing With Videogames*, Routledge, London, 2008.

¹⁸ L. Spigel, 'Seducing the Innocent: Childhood and Television in Postwar America', in *The Children's Culture Reader*, H. Jenkins (ed), New York University Press, London, 1998, p. 116.

¹⁹ *ibid*, p. 121.

²⁰ S. Wagg, “‘One I Made earlier’”: Media, Popular Culture and the Politics of Childhood’, in *Come on Down? Popular Media Culture in Post-War Britain*, D. Strinati and S. Wagg (eds), Routledge, London, 1992.

²¹ M. Fuller and H. Jenkins, ‘Nintendo® and the New World Travel Writing: A Dialogue’, in *Cybersociety: Computer Mediated Communication and Community*, S. G. Jones (ed), Sage, London, p. 58.

²² *ibid*, p. 65.

²³ A. Wood, *Digital Encounters*, London, Routledge, 2007, p. 128-9.

²⁴ Buckingham, *Beyond Technology*.

²⁵ *ibid*, p. 84-5.

²⁶ P. Holland, “‘I’ve Just Seen a Hole in the Reality Barrier’”: Children, Childishness and the Media in the Ruins of the Twentieth Century”, in *Thatcher’s Children?: Politics, Childhood and Society in the 1980s and 1990s*, J. Pilcher and S. Wagg (ed), Falmer Press, London, 1996, p. 155-6.

²⁷ Spigel, ‘Seducing the Innocent’, p. 121.

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