

DISNEY'S DUCKTALES SHOW ANALYSIS

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ABSTRACT

Disney's DuckTales DVD offers parents a unique opportunity to simultaneously educate, entertain, and spend time with their children. The entertainment value this show provides for both parent and child can lead to a covieing environment that promotes healthy dialogue beneficial to the child's educational development. However, *Disney's DuckTales* also has its own special codes and symbols that once learned, make understanding and retaining the information from each episode easier for the child. The educational content in the show can be uncovered once the parent and child begin to understand the symbols and methods used through the themes of the show.

INTRODUCTION

Disney's DuckTales DVD offers parents a unique opportunity to simultaneously educate, entertain, and spend time with their children. Each episode contains content designed to appeal to both young and old viewers providing parents and their children with excellent material for discussion. The discussions between parents and children have the potential to educate kids on prosocial and academic topics using the content included in each episode as a guide. Every show includes stories full of educational value that can be taught most effectively if parents are prepared and able to see each lesson. Fisch (1999) defines educational content as "...the underlying educational concepts or messages that the program is intended to convey, which can include aspects of both declarative knowledge (e.g. historical facts) and procedural knowledge (e.g. problem-solving strategies)" (p. 2). This is the definition I use when discussing the educational content found on *Disney's DuckTales* DVD. I am also including instances when children learn lessons that were not intentionally designed into the program as well as instances when a negative lesson is transferred.

DUAL APPEAL

Appeal for Children

There is much found in each episode of *Disney's DuckTales* that will help to capture and keep the attention of a child viewer. The fact that it is an animated series automatically attracts children. Seels, Fullerton, Berry, and Horn (1996) affirm that animation is a program component that is found to hold the attention of children (p. 263). Children watching this show will also enjoy the new and interesting locations introduced within each episode. In an online review of the DVD, UltimateDisney.com (2005) stated that "Rather than dealing with just a few locations, each story employs a diverse number of settings: an Egyptian desert, a tumultuous sea, outer space, and the blustery Arctic are just four of many environments memorably depicted in this collection of episodes" (Show Discussion section, para. 5). Seels et al. (1996) also confirm that "changes in scene, character change, and high levels of action, are reasonably effective at eliciting attention" (p. 263).

The main characters found on the show will also assist in keeping the attention of the younger viewers. *Disney's Ducktales* follows the story of Scrooge McDuck and his three grandnephews Huey, Dewey, and Louie. Scrooge's grandnephews are often depicted as full of energy and exhibit many of the same interests as other young boys. The presence of Mrs. Bentina Beakley and her young granddaughter Webigail Vanderquack provide the female presence many young girls may need in order to maintain interest in the show as well. During their research, The Children' Television Workshop found that children viewers "... identified with and preferred with cast members like themselves in terms of gender or ethnicity" (Seels et al., 1996, p. 300).

Appeal for Adults

I believe that much of the material found in *Disney's DuckTales* will interest adult viewers. They may appreciate that much of the content found in each episode is influenced by real world examples. The areas of the world that many of the adventures take place in are creatively renamed using their real world locations as inspiration. The new characters introduced on each adventure are also playfully renamed using real world examples for ideas. For example, Great Britain and William Shakespeare are the inspirations for one adventure as Uncle Scrooge and his nephews "... search 'Great Written' for a lost 'William Drakepeare' manuscript" (UltimateDisney.com, 2005, Show Discussion section, para. 6).

As with much of today's cartoons designed to appeal to adults, *Disney's DuckTales* also employs the use of many subtle adult jokes that are written into the dialogues. Swafford (1997) writes "the media still tends to [understand] adult fixation to animation with prime-time shows like *The Simpsons* and the injection of subtle adult humor into children's cartoons for the benefit of any adult viewers" (American Stereotypes section, para. 1). Wikipedia (2007) also writes "Many ... cartoons were, unlike most traditional saturday morning cartoons, designed to appeal to adults as well as children, and thus incorporated plenty of 'adult humor', such as pop-culture references and sexual innuendos" (The Decline of Saturday Morning section, para. 4).

COVIEWING

Social Learning

The entertainment value *Disney's DuckTales* provides for both parent and child can lead to a coviewing environment that promotes healthy dialogue beneficial to the child's educational development. Bandura (1971) argues that "... although much social learning is fostered through observation of real life models, television provides symbolic, pictorially presented models" (as

cited in Seels et al., 1996, p. 284). These visual representations have the ability to greatly influence the mind of the child viewer as they tend to imitate everything they see. Seels et al. (1996) also write "...it is possible that coviewing may help parents deal with difficult issues. Through viewing scenarios on television, the child may discuss the television character's dilemma with a parent" (p. 279). These discussions can lead to situations where a child may need further explanation as to which of the actions taken by the television characters should or should not be followed along with the reasoning behind these decisions.

Explicit Education

However, simply sitting in front of the television with the child may not be enough to promote the dialogue exchange necessary to create the ideal situations described above. It has been found that having the parent make it explicitly known to the child that they will be engaging in an educational activity is more effective than allowing it to remain implicit. Seels et al. (1996) write that "...learners reported attending more closely to educational television programs than to commercial programs" (p. 298). When the parent prepares the child for the educational experience it places them in an ideal frame of mind allowing for more of the educational information to be retained. Fisch (1999) writes "...any other factor that serves to make the educational content more salient in the mind of the viewer is likely to result in a greater proportion of working memory resources being allocated to educational content" (p. 18).

MEDIA

Media Formats

Having *Disney's DuckTales* available in DVD format is another factor that should be considered when discussing the educational aspects of this coviewing environment. As is the case with much of today's television media, parents and their children now have numerous

shows to choose from. According to Fisherkeller (2002), "Because of steady increases in the cable and network programming and consumer 'zapping' via remote and pointer controls, [content producers] now compete fiercely for consumer's attention-especially that of young consumers" (p. 4). This creates more opportunities for children to view content that could potentially harm them. Viewers also have a great deal more control over how they choose to watch the multiple shows they now have available to them. This extra freedom comes in the form of multiple Video on Demand options, TiVo, basic and cable television channels, internet websites, and multiple media formats such as DVD, VHS, PSP, and Blue-ray Discs. Bryant (1990) writes that "The rapid proliferation of videocassette recorders and the expansion of cable television and movie channels have also dramatically increased the diversity of what young people and their families see" (as cited in Villani, 2000, p. 394). These new options provide parents with much needed control over what they allow their children to view.

Media Literacy

The numerous forms of television media available to viewers along with the countless hours of television viewing they engage in also provide children with the opportunity to develop their media literacy skills. Fisch (1999) describes this as "...time spent practicing all of the skills needed to understand televised narratives, such as decoding formal features, engaging in semantic and syntactic analyses, drawing inferences, and so on" (p. 21). Once they have developed their skills to a point where understanding what happens on the television screen is automatic, the children can better focus on the content of the programs. Developing these skills helps to make the transfer of educational lessons in the story easier.

However, *Disney's DuckTales* also has its own special codes and symbols that once learned, make understanding and retaining the information from each episode easier for the

child. The educational content in *Disney's DuckTales* can be uncovered once parent and child begin to understand the symbols and methods used throughout the themes of the show. Owning a copy of the DVD provides them with the freedom to view the shows multiple times. They also have the ability to pause and rewind through the different parts of the show. Through repeated viewings, parent and child can become more adept at finding and decoding the recurring symbols and methods. Once decoded, the discussion that evolves can lead to a better understanding of the educational topics. There is also the potential for the inspiration of creative constructive activities such as further research into the educational topics. Seels et al. (1996) write that children "...who watch carefully selected programs in terms of content and pacing, and who engage in conversations with adults who mediate that exposure are likely to use their television experience as a springboard to positive, creative, and imaginative activities" (p.271).

On the other hand, repeated viewings of cartoons can also negatively influence a child when a parent is not available to mediate. Swan's (1995) research into Saturday morning cartoons revealed that they "...presented many negative portrayals based on age, gender, and ethnicity" (as cited in Seels et al., p. 309). Although, *Disney's DuckTales* is an animated show, it has already been established above that this show is full of real life references. Much of what is portrayed on this show can be interpreted as representations of the real world. Berry and Asamen (2005) wrote "Fact or fiction, real or unreal, television programs create cognitive and affective environments that describe and portray people, places, and things that carry profound general and specific cross-cultural learning experiences for the child and early adolescent" (p. 363). The next section will now continue with a brief discussion of ten episodes that I chose to view between the first two *Disney's DuckTales* DVDs now available for purchase. I will also briefly discuss some of the lessons taught in the first two episodes.

EPISODES

1. Treasure of the Golden Suns (I): Don't Give Up the Ship

During the first episode of this five-part pilot series, Disney's Ducktales' main hero, Uncle Scrooge (inspired by Charles Dickens' character Mr. Ebenezer Scrooge from the novel *A Christmas Carol*) is introduced to us as a wealthy penny-pinching businessman. We are also introduced to his three grandnephews, Huey, Dewey and Louie. They move in with Uncle Scrooge after Scrooge's nephew, Donald Duck, asks him to take charge in watching over them. We are also introduced to the Beagle Boys and El Capitan. They are the main antagonists in this episode as they plot to steal from Uncle Scrooge.

Scrooge's grandnephews are young boys who love to play and often find themselves in mischief. In order to keep them out of trouble, Uncle Scrooge enrolls them in the Junior Woodchucks. The *Disney's DuckTales'* Junior Woodchucks organization is loosely based off of the Boy Scouts of America. As members of this group, the boys spend their time engaging in constructive activities that allow them to collect their merit badges.

Early on, the viewer is able to decipher some of the codes and themes present in a *Disney's DuckTales* episode. Many of the names used follow the duck theme of the show. For example, the name of the town the characters live in is Duckburg and the name of their butler is Duckworth. Also, while watching the episodes, the viewer will often hear several of Uncle Scrooge's memorable quotes. Examples include "I made it be being smarter than the smarties and tougher than the toughies" and "And I deserve every penny because I made it square"! Each of these quotes can be heard as Uncle Scrooge speaks proudly of how hard he works to be the best. They can also be heard at times when he tries to give the boys much needed motivation.

The main lesson taught is the importance of family. Following in the theme of *A Christmas Carol*, Uncle Scrooge discovers late in this episode that all of the money in the world means nothing if you do not have a family to love. The episode ends with him saying “We make a good team, don’t we lads? Give me four! What a *family!*” Inclusion of the Junior Woodchucks in the story is also a healthy way to promote involvement in positive organizations such as the Boys Scouts of America. The show can also inspire children to turn to reference books when they have questions about a subject. Many times, the boys are shown searching through their Junior Woodchuck guidebook for answers to questions they may have. In future episodes they are also shown searching for books to read in Uncle Scrooge’s library.

2. Treasure of the Golden Suns (II): Wronguay in Ronguay

The second episode continues with the pilot story as Uncle Scrooge and his grandnephews discover that they have access to a treasure map. In this adventure, their search for the treasure takes them to “the tiny country of Ronguay”. With the Beagle Boys in jail, El Capitan decides to enlist the help of Flintheart Glomgold, the second richest duck in Duckburg. The two villains team up in an attempt to steal the treasure from Uncle Scrooge.

Uncle Scrooge and the boys successfully find the hidden treasure aboard an ancient ship. However, as they begin to sail away with it, El Capitan and Flintheart Glomgold appear. The two villains steal all but one piece of gold away from Uncle Scrooge. Shortly after, a struggle between El Capitan and Flintheart Glomgold creates a hole in the bottom of the ship causing the stolen treasure to sink to the bottom of the ocean. At the end of the episode, Scrooge McDuck is still left with the one gold coin he kept from the ship.

Some of the episodes provide the potential for a geography lesson because the adventures Uncle Scrooge and the boys go on take them all around the world. In this episode, the viewer

does not necessarily learn about geography, but they are exposed to it in the dialogue that takes place between the characters. The nephews mention “latitude” and “longitude” as they discuss the location of the treasure. They also make use of a globe as they point to the location of their new adventure in South America. A parent can provide the child viewer with an interesting lesson using this episode as a launching pad. As Uncle Scrooge’s nephews point to the location of Ronguay on the globe, the parent and child can pause the show and begin a short discussion on Ronguay. After viewing a map or globe with a child, the parent can explain that Ronguay is not on a real map because it is a fictional country whose name was inspired by Uruguay and Paraguay which are also located in South America.

Also, Uncle Scrooge often speaks about different skills and facts he has learned while on past adventures. For example, in this episode he is shown carrying a palm tree-like umbrella to protect him and his nephews from the rain as he states “I learned how to make these while hunting uranium in Borneo. It’s called a Malaysian Umbrella.” Little facts such as these are thrown into the dialogue many times throughout the shows and can also provide more opportunities for lessons as the child may ask the parent questions such as “Where is Borneo?”, “What is Uranium?” or “Did you ever make a Malaysian Umbrella before?”. The parent viewer should also take initiative by engaging in discussions and questions they may also have about the content in the program as well.

3. Treasure of the Golden Suns (III): Three Ducks of the Condor

This episode introduces us to Mrs. Bentina Beakley and her granddaughter Webigail Vanderquack. Mrs. Beakley is hired as the boy’s nanny and the adventure continues right along as Uncle Scrooge discovers that there is a second person who owns the same treasure coin. He also discovers that there is a legend connected to the coins. Scrooge then sets off for the Andes

Mountains on his quest to speak with this person. Launchpad McQuack is also introduced to us as his pilot.

Once Uncle Scrooge arrives in the Andes Mountains, he discovers that an individual by the name of Walking Slowly is the owner of the second coin. He agrees to give Walking Slowly his coin in exchange for half of a map that will lead them to the Valley of the Golden Sun where more treasure can be found. However, Walking Slowly turns out to be a tyrant who double crosses Uncle Scrooge. Nevertheless, Uncle Scrooge is able to escape unharmed with the half treasure map while Walking Slowly ends up losing both coins at the end. The negativity of greed is the main lesson given throughout the remainder of the pilot episodes. The importance of family is also reinforced in each episode.

4. Treasure of the Golden Suns (IV): Cold Duck

At the beginning of this episode, Scrooge McDuck and Launchpad McQuack have decided to split up. Uncle Scrooge continues on his quest to find the second half of the treasure map that will lead him to the Valley of the Golden Sun while Launchpad returns to Mr. McDuck's mansion to refill the plane with the extra supplies they will need for their new adventure. On his way back to meet with Mr. McDuck, Launchpad discovers that the boys have snuck onto the plane. As a result of chasing after them, Webigail and Mrs. Beakley are also on the plane. Launchpad cannot return to the mansion so they all fly to Antarctica together.

In Antarctica they run into trouble as a colony of penguins steal their "colorful" clothing and imprison them. Mrs. Beakley successfully saves the day and they are able to escape with the second half of the map. With the complete map in their possession, they now continue on to the location of the Valley of the Golden Suns.

5. Treasure of the Golden Suns (V): Too Much of a Gold Thing

With the full map in their possession, Uncle Scrooge and his crew are able to find the Valley of the Golden Sun. However, El Capitan appears once again and he fights with Uncle Scrooge for the treasure. They both develop Gold Fever and almost die in their battle for the gold. The nephews also develop a small case of Gold Fever. However, El Capitan is the only one unable to recover from the Gold Fever as Uncle Scrooge and the boys remember that their lives are more important. At the end, they do not leave with the Treasure of the Golden Suns; however, they are still happy because they learn to value their family.

6. Armstrong

In this episode we are introduced to an inventor named Gyro Gearloose. Gyro works for Uncle Scrooge and builds a new robot named Armstrong. This robot is able to lift heavy boulders, complete Huey, Dewey, and Louie's homework in seconds, manage Uncle Scrooge's multiple businesses and control satellites in outer space. However, later in the program Armstrong becomes evil and imprisons Gyro and Scrooge. The boys run to Launchpad for help and he short circuits the robot by pouring water over it.

7. Luck O' the Ducks

In this episode, a lying Leprechaun takes advantage of Webby's kindness and naiveté multiple times throughout the story. Early on in the episode he also tries to steal money from Uncle Scrooge's money bin. However, after Uncle Scrooge saves his life, the Leprechaun is forced to show him where the gold is located in his hometown. Uncle Scrooge prepares to leave with the treasure but the Leprechaun fools him and is able to keep the treasure at home. However, the episode ends with the Leprechaun learning from Webby's kindness and he saves Uncle Scrooge from getting hurt.

8. Till Nephews do us Part

In this episode we are introduced to Millionara Vanderbucks. Millionara's plan is to use her charm to gain access to Uncle Scrooge's money. After Scrooge's nephews discover that she plans to marry Uncle Scrooge and send them off to military school they make an unsuccessful attempt to sabotage the wedding. However, at the end Uncle Scrooge discovers that Millionara is just marrying him for money and his true love "Goldie", a girlfriend from the past, shows up.

9. Nothing to Fear

In this episode we are introduced to a new villain, Magica deSpell. She cast a magical fear cloud over the mansion that causes everyone under it to be haunted by their worst fears. She is also another villain after Uncle Scrooge's property. After spending much of the episode running away from their fears, Uncle Scrooge and the boys face up to them and force the magical spell to backfire on Magica. At the end, she runs away as her greatest fears begin to haunt her.

10. The Duck in the Iron Mask

In this episode Uncle Scrooge and the boys travel to a tiny mountain kingdom ruled by his friend Count Roy. Uncle Scrooge reveals his plan to try and convince his friend to invest in his company, McDuck Industries. This episode is based loosely off of Alexandre Dumas' novels *The Three Musketeers*, *The Count of Monte Cristo* and the *Man in the Iron Mask*. The town name, Montedumas, is inspired by Dumas' name and his novel *The Count of Monte Cristo*.

CONCLUSION

This paper discussed how parents could spend time with their children while simultaneously educating and entertaining them using the *Disney's Ducktales* DVD. The different aspects of the stories that could appeal to both parents and children were also touched upon. Using the research performed in the past as a reference, the pedagogical reasoning behind

educating them with a television show was also considered along with the importance of the DVD media format. At the end, a sampling of lessons found on the show was also provided.

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