kidscreen®

engaging the global children's entertainment industry

Q1 2026

Kidscreen TURNS 30

A lot has changed in three decades...but have kids?

An AI tool guide for animation

Where AI delivers real value in workflows

Can YouTube still build kids hits?

Two experts debate the platform's long-term value

BBC STUDIOS
KIDS & FAMILY

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OUR COVER features an original illustration by Cassandra Kirkwood, celebrating *Kidscreen*'s 30th anniversary.

No shortcuts

AS the mom of a former figure skater, when I walked onto the set for a competition scene being filmed for WildBrain's *Finding Her Edge* for Netflix last April, I was struck by how familiar it all felt. Both in a déjà vu way and in a "this is how it's supposed to be" way.

The arena buzzed with nervous energy. Parents clutched coffee cups. Kids stretched, laughed and paced. And in the lobby, there were skating retail vendors selling laces, skate guards, water bottles—exactly the kind of things you'd expect to find at a real competition. Even the printed programs felt authentic because they were filled with actual event schedules and skater warm-up group lists, rather than the blank placeholder pages that so often stand in for reality on screen.

None of this was strictly necessary. The cameras could have framed around the details. The lobby could have been empty. The programs could have been props in name only. But the production chose to get it right—and that choice mattered.

Watching it all unfold, I was reminded that kids are extraordinary detectors of inauthenticity. They may not always be able to articulate what feels "off," but they sense it immediately. And a world that rings false (even in small ways) creates distance, while a world that feels true invites them in.

That distinction is more important than ever at this moment, when kids are surrounded by content designed to capture their attention as quickly as possible. They live inside platforms where trends turn over daily, where visuals are polished but often hollow, and where spectacle can easily outpace substance. In that environment, authenticity isn't just a creative value—it's a competitive advantage.

In that rink and that lobby, what *Finding Her Edge* demonstrated was a respect for the audience; a belief that kids who love skating know what a real competition looks like; an acknowledgment that they notice whether the details line up with their lived experience. And an understanding that when you honor those details, you earn trust—not just in a single episode or series, but in the brand behind it.

For those of us who work in kids entertainment, this is both a challenge and an opportunity. Authenticity doesn't mean making everything gritty or hyper-real. It means grounding stories in emotional truth and cultural specificity. It means doing the homework. It means resisting the urge to flatten or simplify worlds that kids already understand deeply.

As *Kidscreen* celebrates its 30th anniversary with this issue, that idea feels especially resonant. For three decades, the industry has evolved alongside its audience—through shifts in technology, business models and viewing habits. But one thing hasn't changed: Kids always respond to content that respects them—content that sees them not just as consumers, but as participants with real passions, knowledge and emotional intelligence.

Thirty years in, the mandate is clear. The future of kids media won't be built on shortcuts or surface-level representation. It will be built by creators and companies willing to sweat the small stuff—the lobby details, the printed programs, the moments that don't have to be there but make all the difference.

Because when kids recognize themselves in what they're watching, they don't just lean in. They stay.

—Jocelyn Christie

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THE LIST

10 things on our radar this month

1 Media monopoly

Netflix's acquisition of Warner Bros. Discovery's studios and streaming operations is the biggest story in the kids business right now, and probably will be for a few years (even if folks are already tired of hearing about it). The industry has more questions than answers about this purchase, which could reshape the market in significant ways. Will Paramount keep bidding for WBD despite its offers continually being rejected? As *Kidscreen* goes to press, Paramount is suing WBD over its deal with the streamer, and that's sure to make an already ugly process even uglier.

More relevant to the film industry is what a combined Netflix and Warner Bros. theatrical business will look like. Netflix doesn't send many projects to theaters, but that's WBD's bread and butter. And of course, the big question is, what will this mean for kids content? Does it create one less buyer, or will the company that has KPop Demon Hunters, Looney Tunes and Scooby-Doo under one roof lean harder into kids hits?

Either way, the deal is in the early stages of what is likely to be a multi-year process, and more key questions will probably surface as it plays out.

6 Place product here

Mediawan has expanded its funding playbook by partnering with vehicle manufacturers to help finance its new content in exchange for product placement. The latest car company to sign on is BYD, whose vehicles will be featured in the upcoming Miraculous feature film and a special episode of *Miraculous Chibi*.

7 Let's get vertical

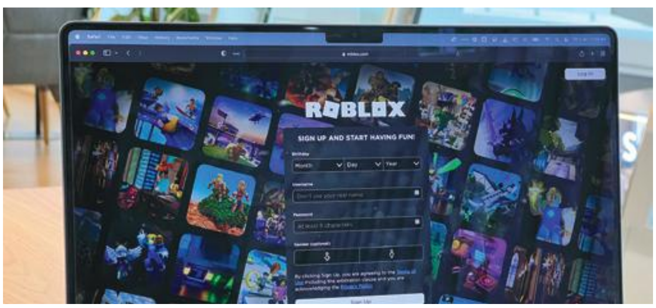
To catch up with Netflix, Disney+ is launching a new vertical video feed later this year that will give users in the US more incentives to log in daily. Millions in China are already tuning in every day for microdrama content online—and this format is quickly evolving into a multi-billion-dollar category.

2 On the ban-wagon

Australia was the first country to implement a kids social media ban, and now France has introduced one that could come into effect in September. Several other countries—including the UK, Norway and New Zealand—are considering the move, and the EU is exploring one that could apply to the whole region. Will bans keeping kids off social become the norm around the world?

3 Open sesame, OpenAI

Has Disney unlocked a path to engagement, or is it opening the door to unknown risks? Its US$1-billion investment in OpenAI will see the studio license more than 200 characters for use on the techco's platforms. This lets Disney retain some control over the wild west of AI, while consumers get to play. But will the inevitable flood of genAI content dilute the long-term value of its most iconic IPs?



4 Beefing up security

Roblox has rolled out Facial Age Estimation as a safety feature to verify a user's age and enable age-appropriate communication with other players. The gaming platform is touting this system as the gold standard for safety, but the AI-powered tech is encountering some early issues that need to be worked out—including mis-aging players and parents stepping in front of the camera for their kids.

5 Getting smarter

The LEGO Group has unveiled a new SMART Play system that amps up the interactivity of its construction sets for kids. A lead collection of Star Wars-branded builds launching later this year will feature a combo of SMART bricks, tags and minifigures that work together to recreate lights, sounds and music from the sci-fi franchise as kids play. Which brand will get this tech upgrade next?

8

The Doctor is in

Blue Zoo Animation Studio is making the first-ever animated Doctor Who preschool series for CBeebies and iPlayer. It's a big deal—if this aged-down version of one of the BBC's biggest properties is a hit, it could expand into a full-fledged kids franchise with content, licensing and consumer products potential.

9

Near or far

DreamWorks Animation's remote workers recently voted to unionize with TAG. It's a milestone for this work-from-home group, which has been fighting for equal treatment to their in-office counterparts since the pandemic. Will remote teams at other animation studios follow suit? We would bet on it.

10

Just zoo it

Last month, *Zootopia 2* surpassed US$1.7 billion in ticket sales to become the MPA's highest-grossing animated film ever. Thanks to this success, Disney will no doubt continue its winning sequels strategy, while studios work to crack the code on international appeal—especially in high-reward markets like China.

Kartoon Studios has teamed up with veteran producer Raphaelle Mathieu on a Winnie The Pooh reboot that will include an animated series, a raft of holiday specials and a licensing program

Making honey

Stakes are high for Kartoon Studios' new take on Winnie the Pooh, but Raphaelle Mathieu is on board to help make it a hit.

BY: RYAN TUCHOW

Former Cyber Group Studios exec Raphaelle Mathieu is kicking off her new venture as an executive producer and sales/finance guru by helping Kartoon Studios taste the "hunny" with its new take on Winnie the Pooh.

Mathieu set up Samax Entertainment in October, offering herself up as an executive producer, co-producer and financing expert who can help connect creators with buyers. Her long-term plan is to build a slate of kids & family projects (both live-action and animated).

Her first is Kartoon Studios' *Hundred Acre Wood's Winnie and Friends*. Kartoon CEO Andy Heyward brought Mathieu on board as an executive producer, and she's busy connecting with potential buyers to set up a splashy launch for the brand.

The studio has big ambitions for *Winnie and Friends*, raising US$30 million in financing from Catalyst Ventures to build a franchise that will include an animated series (208 x seven minutes), multiple holiday specials and an L&M program.

Kartoon is going all in because Winnie the Pooh is one of the highest-grossing media franchises of all time—with an estimated US$50 billion in revenue from retail, home video and box-office sales. And having Mathieu in the mix strengthens the formula for building a hit with this new series, says Heyward. "No one knows the business better than her."

A teaser is available, and the response from buyers has been positive, says Mathieu. She credits this momentum in part to the talent Kartoon Studios has assembled for the series—including executive producer Linda Woolverton, who wrote *The Lion King* and *Beauty and the Beast*; music composer Danny Elfman (*Batman, Beetlejuice*); and showrunner Elise Allen (*Princess Power*).

Several talent and commercial announcements are coming in Q1, and Kartoon was gearing up to break news about a big distribution deal at press time. The studio is also working on expanding the brand with a Winnie and Friends consumer products program.

So far, one of Mathieu's most significant contributions to the series has been tapping into her experience managing global sales at Cyber Group to craft how Kartoon approaches European producers and buyers.

It was her track record building series like *Gigantosaurus* into global hits that led Heyward to reach out to Mathieu early in 2025, while she was still at Cyber Group. Then CGS went into liquidation in the summer, creating an opportunity for them to work together.

For Mathieu, the chance to partner with Heyward on a brand as iconic as Winnie the Pooh was too exciting to pass up.

"He really wanted to team up with someone on the international market [side of the business] who would be able to support the company and work with the same appetite and enthusiasm that he has. And when I saw the first two minutes of the show, I literally fell in love with it."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NOT entirely True.
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VICTORIA State Government
VICSCREEN

Mediawan Kids & Family adapted ***Ki & Hi*** **from the bestselling manga by popular French YouTuber Kevin Tran**

Digital native

As the creator economy matures, Mediawan is betting on digital-first talent to fuel the next wave of globally scalable animated franchises.

BY: RYAN TUCHOW

Mediawan Kids & Family is evolving its business strategy to partner with digital-first creators on original animated series.

Until now, Mediawan has been making shows the traditional way—partnering with a broadcaster to develop an IP—and the Kids & Family division has achieved great success with the Miraculous franchise and *The Three Musketeers*. But the company has recently started shifting its approach to eventually get to a place where 50% of its slate will be developed under a new digital-first model.

Series made this way will initially launch on YouTube, before being sold to international broadcasters for wider distribution.

This "dual-track" strategy is the studio's way of embracing the growing creator economy, says president Julien Borde. The plan is to partner with talented creators with established audiences to produce premium digital-first series based on their content, including vertical videos and micro-formats.

More and more creators with large followings and fresh voices are financing and producing their own shows outside of traditional funding models and experiencing success on YouTube, and Mediawan wants to tap into this opportunity with the ambitious goal of cultivating "the next generation of global franchises," Borde notes.

"This shift is driven by the undeniable market trend of streamers, platforms and broadcasters increasingly demanding not just high-quality content, but also properties that come with built-in, highly engaged fan communities—a hallmark of digital-native content."

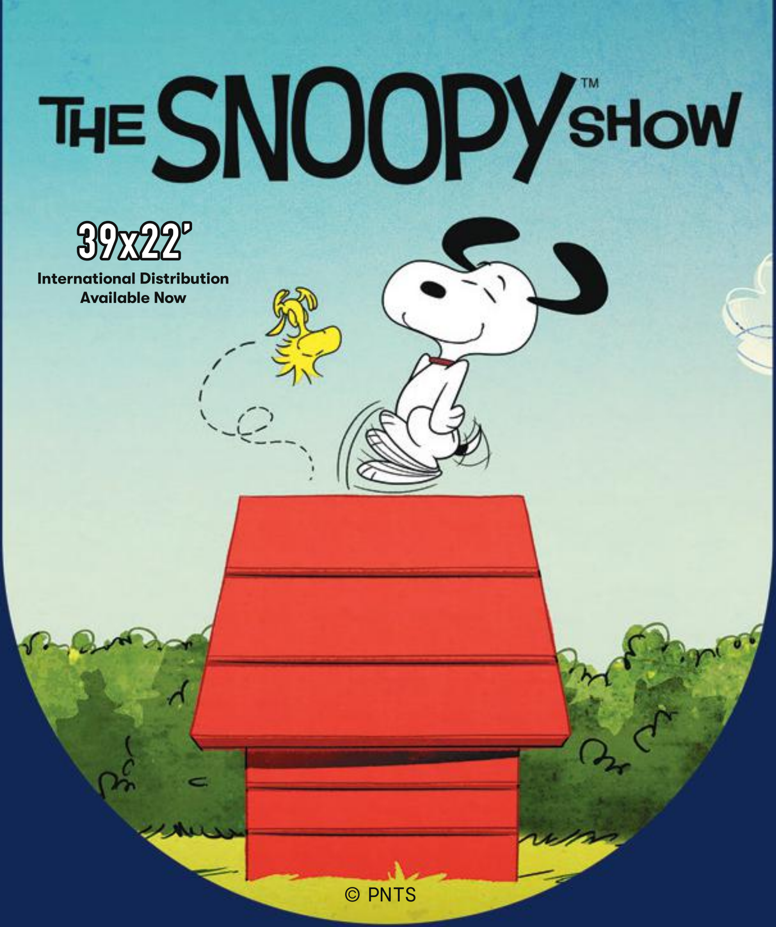
The broad strokes of this digital-first strategy began to take shape when Mediawan teamed up with Kevin Tran—one of France's most influential YouTubers with more than five million subscribers.

The potential to turn Tran's concept of a love-hate relationship between two brothers living in an anime-inspired universe into a long-form series called *Ki & Hi* attracted French commissioner Canal+ and Belgium's RTBF, which debuted the 2D toon in October 2025. *Ki & Hi* is also streaming on YouTube in some territories, and Mediawan is developing short-form content and vertical videos to further engage Tran's followers and fans of the show across platforms.

Another project in the works is what Borde calls a "landmark" partnership with Spanish-language YouTube network El Reino Infantil to build a digital-first franchise around *Wadoo*. This musical preschool series (39 x seven minutes) will launch on YouTube in 2026, and then Mediawan plans to sell it to international broadcasters. Importantly, Wadoo will include micro-formats and music clips as part of its brand portfolio from day one, he adds.

Since announcing its new digital-first strategy at Annecy 2025, an influx of digital brands have approached Mediawan looking to collaborate on expanding their content into long-form series, says Borde. And while it's still too early to share any specific details about these projects, he expects to have multiple franchises—all with baked-in digital-first strategies—ready to announce at Annecy this year.

"I'm thrilled by the prospect of collaborating with an ever-growing pool of diverse digital-native talents, helping them scale their unique visions and content into premium global franchises," says Borde. "The digital space allows for immediate feedback, community-building and genuine fan engagement, which is incredibly motivating and invaluable for IP development." K



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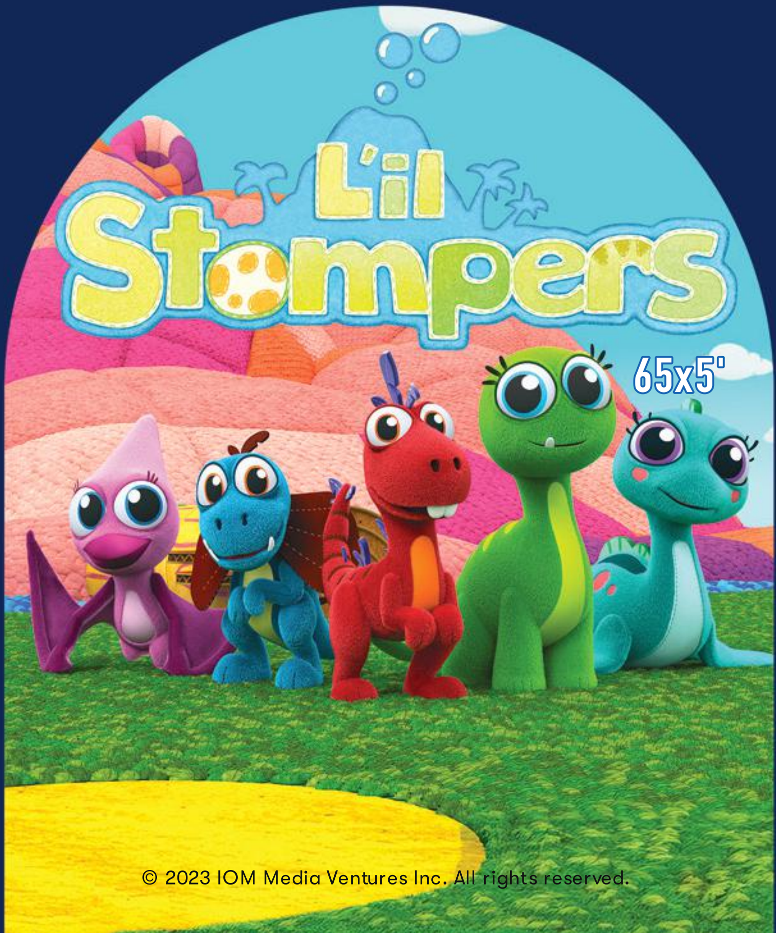


Short, sweet & vertical

How the microdrama trend can be adapted for kid audiences.

BY SADHANA BHARANIDHARAN

A tense moment is unfolding in a crowded high school cafeteria. The resident mean girl strikes again, knocking down a classmate she's bullied for weeks. But this time, the target has had enough—and with a single defiant move, she hurls spaghetti back at her tormentor.

Wondering what happens next? You'll have to check out the next bite-sized episode of *True Heiress vs. Fake Queen Bee*, a hit microdrama with more than 300 million views on market-leading vertical platform ReelShort.

With origins dating back to the 2010s in China—where they're known as "duanju"—microdramas have experienced a surge in international popularity over the past year. And Media Partners Asia projects that the global market outside of China for this vertically oriented entertainment format will reach US$9.5 billion by 2030.

Microdramas typically comprise hundreds of one- or two-minute episodes with snappy arcs, conflicts and cliffhangers. The top titles often feature high-emotion tales of revenge or forbidden romance, with baddies ranging from werewolves to billionaire CEOs.

Think soap operas sliced into tiny pieces for shortform mobile viewing.

They're primarily aimed at adults for now, and a Q3 2025 Ampere Analysis survey shows their appeal is strong among 18- to 34-year-olds, with 46% of global internet users in this age range reporting that they've consumed at least one microdrama on social media. According to the same report, romance, anime and fantasy are the top genres for this format, with YouTube (44%) and TikTok (38%) as the go-to viewing platforms.

"Microdramas sit at the intersection of social storytelling and bingeable episodic content," says Patrik Wilkens, founder of Mournival Consulting and advisor to TheSoul Group (*Slick Slime Sam*). Like many, he sees untapped potential for studios to leverage the bite-sized format and aim for viewers further down the demographic scale.

"Kids are already discovering characters through social feeds, and microdramas can be a bridge between discovery and fandom, matching younger viewers' natural attention rhythms."

There's already some early movement in the kids and teen space. Gigglebug Entertainment notably took a big swing by natively designing its 2D-animated series *Tadpoles* (52 x 11 minutes) for both vertical and horizontal screens. With DR and Ketnet on board as co-pro partners, *Tadpoles* pre-sold to Canal+ last year. Meanwhile, ABC Australia has experimented with bite-sized viewing by repurposing its teen drama *The Disposables* (from Photoplay Films and Dragonet Films) as a 30 x two-minute vertical series for TikTok.

But is the kids industry ready to make a full-fledged leap into microcontent? While there are questions around distribution and profitability, some producers are already testing the waters.

Let's get digital

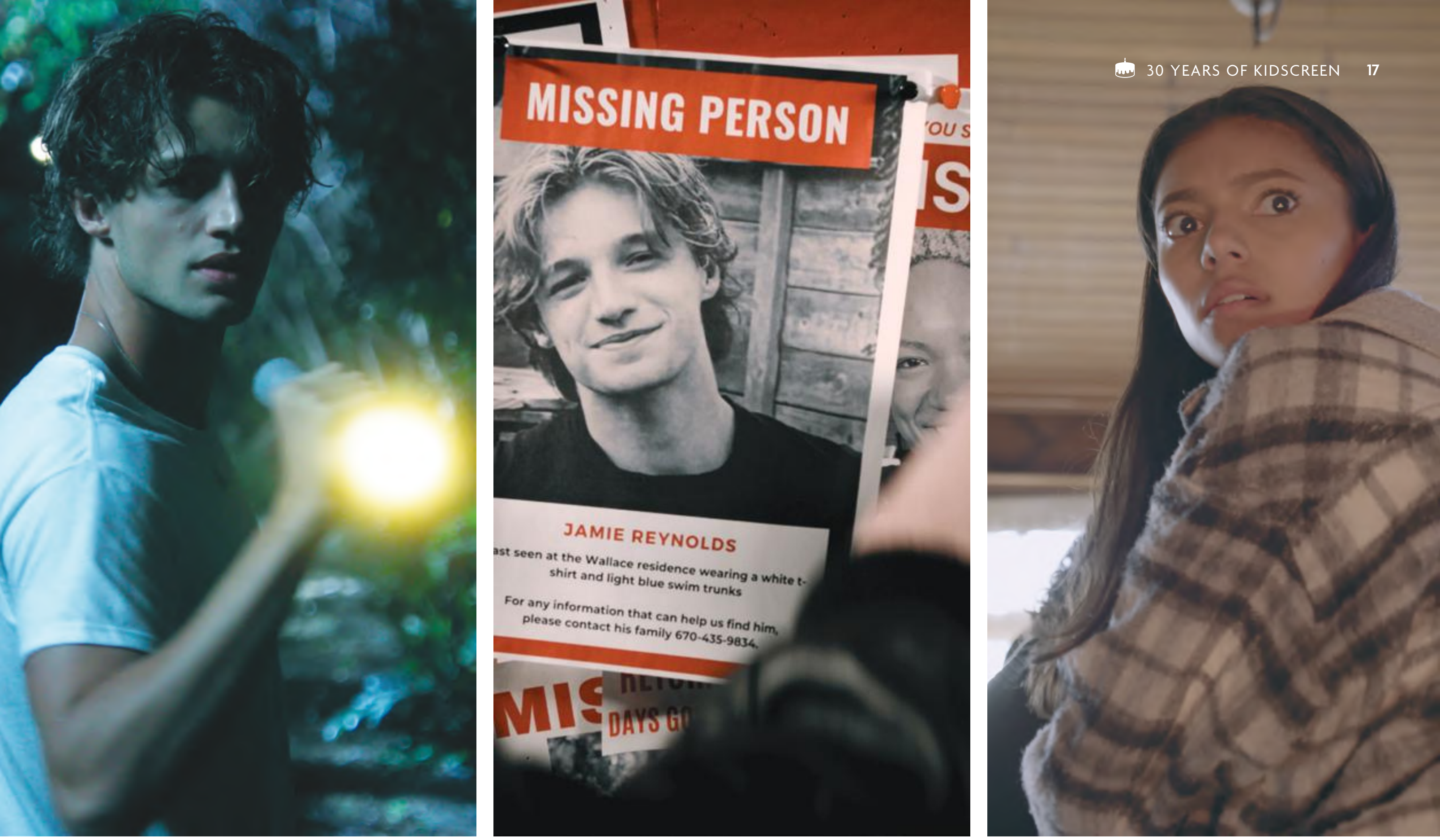
Mediawan Kids & Family has been busy exploring a digital-first strategy, going so far as to ink a deal last summer to produce a YouTube series based on NFT brand Claynosaurz. The prodco is betting on microcontent to accelerate that strategy.

"We are big believers in [this] new form of storytelling," says president Julien Borde. "It's a great way to connect directly with consumers and incubate new ideas originated by new talents."

The studio is working on three microcontent projects that will launch sometime this year. The first of these is a CG-animated series called *Wadoo*, which Mediawan is co-producing with El Reino Infantil—a company known for creating hit YouTube channels for kids.

This preschool toon about a young female dragon is being developed as

In addition to producing exclusive microdramas like *True Heiress vs. Fake Queen Bee*, the fast-growing ReelShort platform has started exploring third-party content licensing in the LatAm market



When Lion Forge saw that mini mystery *Lostlings* racked up 17 million YouTube views with just three shorts, the prodco partnered with TalesVision for a long-form series adaptation

both a "micro-animation" series (100 x one minute) and a regular longer-form toon (39 x seven minutes), says Borde. It will soft-launch in April with a batch of AI-produced shorts on YouTube, using audience feedback to refine the full series, which is due out later this year.

Still unannounced, Mediawan is also working on microdramas based on a French webtoon and a gaming IP. Borde is keeping further details under wraps for now, but he says the time is right to get into this format, given that global adoption for microcontent is picking up.

He's seeing particularly strong growth in key regions like Asia and "high potential" in others. After China, the US is the top international market for microdrama consumption, followed by Japan, South Korea, the UK and Thailand, according to Omdia research from October 2025.

New pilot model

Since 2024, LA-based TalesVision has been using social media to launch short-form vertical content for teen and YA audiences as a way to test concepts and gauge which IPs warrant expansion—essentially treating microdramas as pilot experiments.

It's something of a "pocket pilot" model, notes Stephanie Sperber, president and content chief at *Iyanu* producer Lion Forge Entertainment. She had noticed that the TalesVision title *Lostlings* was doing serious numbers, generating 17 million YouTube views with just three shorts. So last year, Lion Forge signed a deal with TalesVision for a long-form series adaptation of this mystery series.

Featuring a *Stranger Things*-inspired vibe, it takes place in a town where a teen disappears every year, only to return with no memory of where they've been.

Just as telenovela-style microdramas have forged strong female fanbases, there's room to recreate that success with youth audiences, says Sperber. "We're very interested in the YA space, because I think it's a great demo for verticals."

And that interest goes beyond *Lostlings*—Lion Forge has also been quietly developing one of its own IPs to adapt into microcontent. This show will be another YA fantasy, Sperber teases.

Lion Forge is looking for more microcontent opportunities, and Sperber predicts that other producers may tap into this format as both a storytelling testbed and a new pilot model. "Leaning into microcontent for proof of concept is definitely something that we think will be valuable for the business going forward. It really helps in fine-tuning the approach to a full series."

Storytelling avenue

The microdrama boom has also been on the radar of Anthony Leo, president of Aircraft Pictures (*Geek Girl*). From a creative standpoint, he sees the format as a game-changer—effectively reviving the once-declining soap opera genre with modern pacing and distribution.

"There are some really great examples of what you can do with a two-minute YouTube short that gets people hooked immediately on a concept," he says, echoing Sperber and Borde on the incubation potential of the format.

However, Leo also flags that microcontent is not necessarily a gold mine, as he hasn't seen a clear and reliable way for producers to make money at it yet—except for a few shorts going viral and pulling a massive audience on YouTube.

"We've been looking at this format more as a storytelling opportunity—a way to explore things that [can't fit] in a scripted

Mediawan plans to launch *Wadoo* as a micro-toon this spring before following up with a long-form series

series we're developing," he says. Aircraft is working on a yet-to-be-announced long-form series aimed at tweens and teens—with a premise following a group of characters in a school—and Leo says his team is toying with the idea of starting off with microcontent as a way to introduce the cast and tease a bit of their backstory before the launch of the actual show.

"It would be a microdrama told from different characters' perspectives, so by the time we get to the series premiere, audiences have already [familiarized] with the world and the group we're following in the series." The team is still testing whether it's better to release that content months ahead or concurrently with the main show.

Monetization uncertainty

Bite-sized vertical series come with the cost advantages of speedy turnaround and lower budgets. But one of the biggest hurdles Wilkens sees for microcontent in the kids sector is a monetization ecosystem that's still very immature and inconsistent. "CPMs are low, targeting is restricted, and reliance on ad revenue alone is unsustainable. Until platform models stabilize, this will remain one of the biggest structural risks."

He adds that producing for under-13s also means regulatory roadblocks around COPPA, and platform-specific restrictions on personalization and data collection.

Many platforms will offer initial episodes for free, while subsequent ones are paid or ad-based. Omdia data notes that 60% of global microdrama revenue comes from subscription or transactional payments—with average revenue per user (ARPU) up to US$80 per month. But since leading shorts platforms (such as ReelShort, FlareFlow and DramaBox) are targeted primarily to adults with suggestive titles and thumbnails, they're less likely to draw in family audiences.

Before kids producers can profit, micro-content services will need to become more compliant—or existing kids platforms will need to expand into this format.

Wilkens expects the first dedicated kid-safe vertical apps to start hitting the market next year. "By 2027 or 2028, we'll likely see major consolidation, with legacy media companies acquiring the best-performing apps and content houses to catch up and secure audience ownership."

Other considerations

Current microdramas on popular digital distribution platforms are estimated to cost between US$3,000 and US$5,000 a minute to produce, on average. And depending on the budget and the number of episodes planned, producers can potentially take advantage of tax credits.

Leo sees Canada as one of the regions that's well-positioned to offer a leg up, with funding available from the IPF fund (short-form series development program) and Bell Fund (short-form digital series program), among others.

In terms of the content itself, producers have a responsibility to adapt the micro-drama format with younger viewers in mind, says Sperber. "I don't think it should necessarily just replicate what's being done for adults. It means working with smart creators who know how kids consume content at different ages, and how their brains are developing. It should deemphasize the reliance on extremes to keep viewers engaged."

Wilkens agrees, noting that adult microdramas' focus on conflict, jealousy and shock-value won't work for kids and tweens. "That emotional intensity has to be completely re-engineered. Humor, empathy and positive resolution must replace tension and aggression, which makes creative development far more complex."

He recommends relatable stories digging into things like friendship conflicts, family humor and school dynamics as a good place to start. Genres such as comedy, slice-of-life and DIY are strong performers that are easier to adapt for all ages. "Genres requiring deep lore or slow pacing—like fantasy, adventure or moral-heavy education—have a harder time in vertical feeds. They simply can't build stakes in 45 seconds."

ON TREND

Leading the pack

According to Circana VP and Media Entertainment industry advisor John Buffone, 89% of US households with internet access subscribe to at least one SVOD service, and the average number of subscriptions has risen to 5.4 platforms. Much of this growth is coming from households with children under age 18, with nearly all of these homes (98%) paying for some form of streaming, and subscribing to significantly more services on average (7.1).*

Performance-wise, Disney+ is currently the frontrunner among the four most popular streaming services, with five titles in the overall top 10 compared to Netflix's four and one for Prime Video.**

*Circana, TV Switching Study **Circana, Subscription Video Track

Top kids TV series by streaming platform in the US

(The ones in purple are in the overall top 10 among these four streamers)

Disney+

1	***Bluey***	6	*Big City Greens*
2	***Spidey and His Amazing Friends***	7	*Mickey Mouse Funhouse*
3	***Mickey Mouse Clubhouse***	8	*Jessie*
4	***Phineas and Ferb***	9	*SuperKitties*
5	***Puppy Dog Pals***	10	*Wizards of Waverly Place*

Netflix

1	***CoComelon***	6	*Peppa Pig*
2	***Gabby's Dollhouse***	7	*Dragons: Race to the Edge*
3	***Avatar: The Last Airbender* (2005)**	8	*Miraculous: Tales of Ladybug & Cat Noir*
4	***Little Angel***	9	*ALVINNN!!! and the Chipmunks*
5	*Ms. Rachel*	10	*Scooby-Doo! Mystery Incorporated*

Prime Video

1	***SpongeBob SquarePants***	6	*Blue's Clues & You*
2	*PAW Patrol*	7	*Blaze and the Monster Machines*
3	*Peppa Pig*	8	*Dora the Explorer*
4	*If You Give a Mouse a Cookie*	9	*Dino Dana*
5	*Bubble Guppies*	10	*Daniel Tiger's Neighborhood*

Hulu

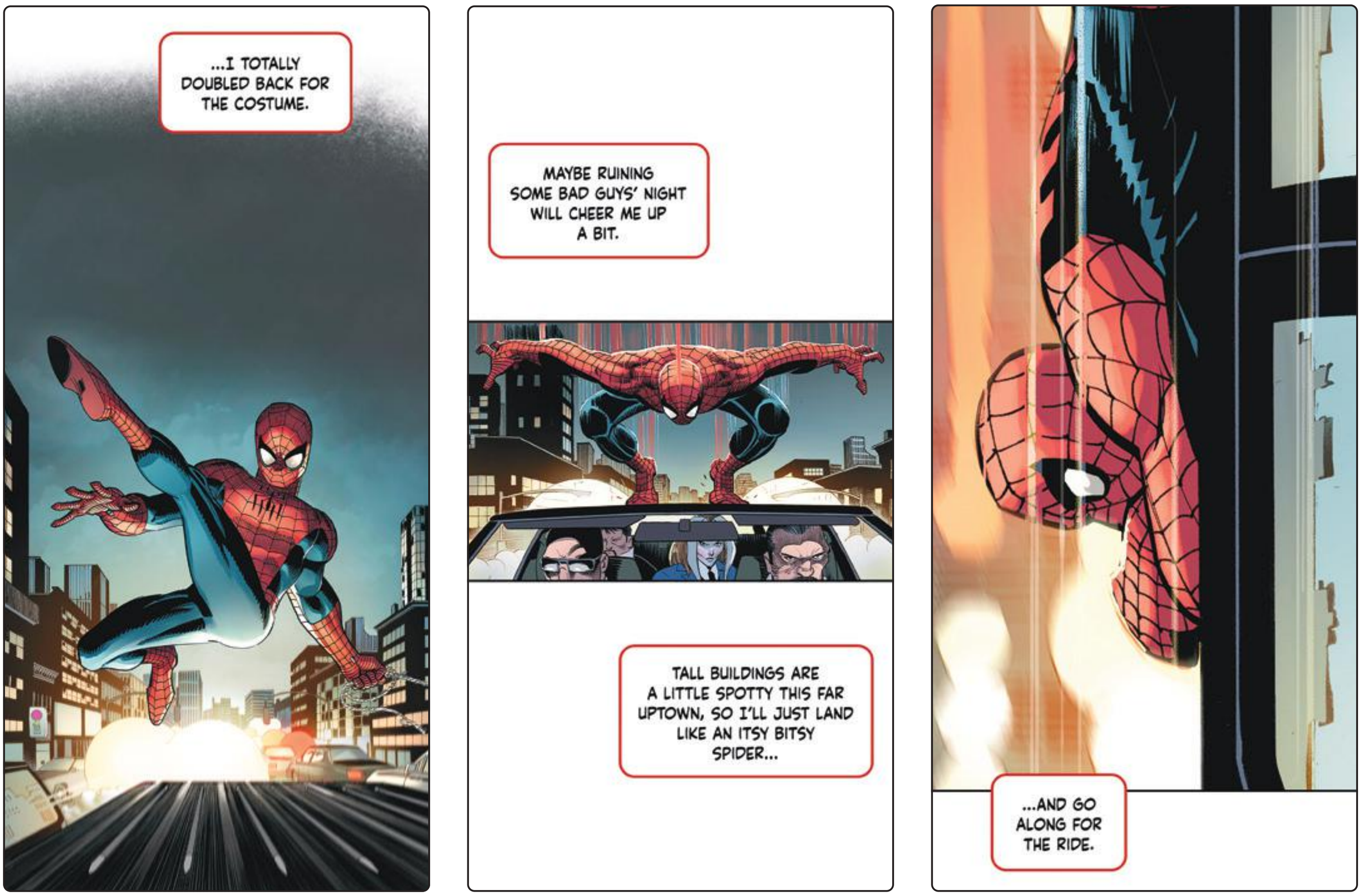
1	*The Amazing World of Gumball*	6	*The Flintstones* (1960)
2	*Curious George* (2006)	7	*Yu-Gi-Oh!*
3	*Gravity Falls*	8	*We Bare Bears*
4	*Phineas and Ferb*	9	*Star vs. The Forces of Evil*
5	*Doc McStuffins*	10	*Chowder*

Source: Circana, Subscription Video Track (based on viewing hours in the US for the 12 months ending September 2025)

Mouse momentum

With a Disney partnership in its pocket, WEBTOON is looking to build a stronger foothold in the US.

BY: SADHANA BHARANIDHARAN



The Amazing Spider-Man (2022) was the first Disney-owned webcomic to debut on WEBTOON in August 2025

US growth is priority number one for WEBTOON Entertainment—and the outlook on achieving this goal is looking brighter than ever, with a family media giant along for the ride.

In August, news broke of a multi-year licensing deal that will add roughly 100 Disney titles (formatted for vertical scrolling) to the webcomics company's eponymous platform—which has around 155 million global monthly active users. This evolved into a much broader partnership a month later, when the Mouse House bought a 2% equity stake in WEBTOON and agreed to collaborate on building a new dedicated digital comics service.

The first deal is all about giving Disney's entertainment brands a vertical-scroll presence on WEBTOON—not just reformatting older comics for a vertical experience, but also creating brand-new WEBTOON series based on characters from the studio's vault. Wasting no time, the partners launched five formatted titles last year, including *The Amazing Spider-Man* and *Disney – As Old As Time: A Twisted Tale*.

"We are actively working with Disney to identify which kinds of IPs are best suited for new original storylines," says Yongsoo Kim, WEBTOON's chief strategy officer and head of global. The two companies are exploring which characters are most likely to capture younger demos, as well as existing franchise worlds that offer fresh and unexplored storylines.

In the second facet of the partnership, the upcoming Disney service provides another big opportunity for WEBTOON to bring its technical know-how to the table. Although Disney has a dedicated superhero-focused platform in Marvel Unlimited, it has never had a single online destination housing all kinds of Disney comic content.

WEBTOON will build and operate this new platform, which will contain a whopping 35,000 archive comics from many of the studio's marquee brands—including

Pixar, Disney, Marvel, Star Wars and 20th Century Studios.

This Disney team-up has been brewing since WEBTOON launched its Nasdaq IPO in summer 2024. "Being listed in the US [is tied into our strategy] to grow in this market," says Kim, who moved stateside from South Korea last year to help support these regional growth efforts. "And, of course, it was really helpful for increasing our brand awareness, hiring and partnerships."

WEBTOON met with Disney not long after the IPO to discuss a variety of potential collaborations and mutual benefits. "They want their IPs to reach larger young audiences [in a new format], and we want to have great content," says Kim, adding that the new Disney service will also carry some non-Disney original comics from the WEBTOON platform.

"It's a kind of sampling feature for Disney fans," he explains—a gateway for introducing comic book readers who haven't yet ventured beyond the Mouse House IPs.

But there's also plenty of groundwork being laid to strengthen interest from webcomic newbies and even fans who aren't necessarily comic book readers (or at least not yet).

One such strategy focuses on Disney+ streaming subscribers, who will have free access to a few curated titles from the digital comics app. It's a new kind of added-value proposition for Disney+, offering more lore and deeper stories about the characters that viewers already know and love.

Even the Marvel Unlimited app hasn't opened up its content without a subscription, so this is a unique move that could increase sign-ups on the upcoming Disney comics service.

On the WEBTOON platform, the vertical content could help drive more tween and teen engagement, in particular. In a move to make the platform more accessible for these younger users, WEBTOON introduced a new "video episodes" feature last fall.

This option allows readers to switch to a more immersive experience that adds sounds, voice acting and some dynamic motion to the comic (such as sound and light effects, speech bubbles and characters moving around).

Making comics watchable increases their appeal for those who have grown up in the TikTok age. "We're always thinking of ways we can capture more of that younger generation, and we know some of them prefer watching videos," says Kim. Users can also manually adjust the speed of these episodes based on the pacing they like best.

While it's too early to explore whether and how this video episodes feature could roll out on the Disney service, he notes that the partners are in talks to have "advanced" features in the service.

WEBTOON is bringing some well-earned product and operation expertise to the table, harnessed from years spent perfecting its own hub. For example, it already understands the importance of speedy content discovery (especially for an activity like reading, which can be more time-consuming).

"On WEBTOON, we built an AI-based engine that recommends titles for users based on a minimal reading history. We really want to have that strong personalized curation system, so the Disney comics app will implement a similar recommendation engine," notes Kim.

He adds that this extra guidance will come in handy—especially for a brand with so many characters and worlds, which might be overwhelming for some new and unfamiliar users.

To support its continued push in the US, WEBTOON will focus on ramping up partnerships to bring in more recognizable IPs—building on deals it signed last year with publishers Dark Horse Comics, IDW and BOOM! Studios.

Maintaining a robust local creator ecosystem is also greatly important to Kim. "Whenever you look at the WEBTOON top 10 trending list, the first five titles always stem from local creators."

Meanwhile, Hollywood is also tapping into the power of the vertical scroll, with Warner Bros. Animation (*Bugs Bunny Builders*) finalizing a deal with WEBTOON in November, not long after Disney. Under this agreement, the studio will co-produce a total of 10 animated projects based on popular WEBTOON comics, including *Elf & Warrior*, *Down To Earth*, *The Stellar Swordmaster* and *Hardcore Leveling Warrior*.

WEBTOON is developing a new digital platform that will house 35,000 comics from major Disney IPs like Star Wars

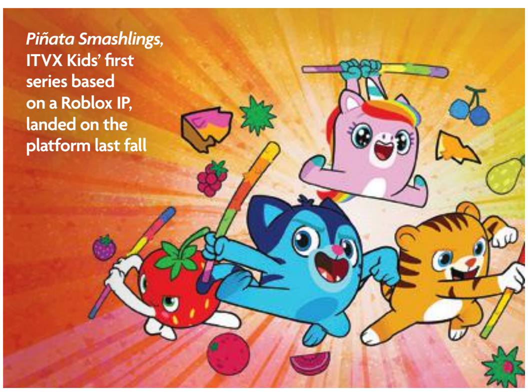
"Our core mission is [to be] a platform for creators and fans," says Kim. "Whether it's WEBTOON original content or IPs licensed from our partners, we want to deliver great content for our fandom."

THE HOOKUP

Kidscreen checks in with new, established and evolving kids content buyers to find out what they're looking for right now.

BY: SADHANA BHARANIDHARAN

Darren Nartey, ITV's head of aquisitions



Piñata Smashlings, ITVX Kids' first series based on a Roblox IP, landed on the platform last fall

ITVX Kids has the UK rights to Nigerian hit toon *Iyanu* and will roll out season two later this year

Goat Girl launched on the streamer earlier this month

When ITV shuttered its linear kidsnet CITV in 2023 to keep up with Gen Alpha's changing viewing habits, the company had a clear plan: Move all children's programming to a dedicated hub on its ITVX streamer and build a library aimed at viewers ages 12 and under. In the two years since that move, ITVX Kids has met some key goals, says head of acquisitions Darren Nartey. These achievements include doubling the volume of content on the hub and balancing out CITV's historic skew towards boys by bringing more gender-neutral, girl-targeted IPs into the mix (such as Barbie, Winx Club and Tara Duncan).

To help grow the platform going forward, Nartey wants to build relationships with a wider range of kids content suppliers. "We're always available for meetings. We want ideas from all over the place to have a slate as diverse as possible."

While specific audience figures for the kids hub aren't available, the streaming platform has more than 40 million registered users overall. "We take our responsibility to serve British kids really seriously," Nartey notes. "I'm a firm believer that 'if you build it, they will come'. Kids are really savvy with discoverability—especially the six- to 12-year-old audience that we target."

What is ITVX Kids looking for?

Though preschool programming is part of the catalogue, it's not currently a high priority. "Across commissioning, co-pros and acquisitions, six to 12 is the age range we're really focused on."

The service will continue pursuing its entertainment-first strategy, steering away from educational content (which other UK pubcasters already cover well). While Nartey is open to a variety of genres for acquisitions, he says comedy is probably the best bet for commissions. "We're also [interested in] live-action co-pros where we can take the UK rights."

In terms of format, ideal episode lengths are seven minutes, 11 minutes or half hours. ITVX Kids isn't looking for anything shorter due to its AVOD model, but Nartey is open to package deals where full-length series reside on the streamer, with companion shorts available on the broadcaster's YouTube channel.

And while movies aren't currently on his acquisition wishlist, specials are an option. "If they have recognizable talent attached, then yes, we would consider it," he says.

Recent and upcoming releases

Last year, ITVX Kids added a handful of Nickelodeon hits to it lineup, including *Tales of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* and *The Loud House*. More recently, its fall rollouts included Toikido's *Piñata Smashlings* (the platform's first-ever series based on a Roblox IP) and quirky book adaptation *Bad Jelly* from Mukpuddy, Cantilever and Sphere Media.

Coming up next, ITVX Kids has secured second-window rights (after Warner Bros. Discovery EMEA) to comedy series *Goat Girl* from Daily Madness, MIAM! and Thuristar. And as the UK home of Lion Forge Entertainment's breakout title *Iyanu*, the service is gearing up to launch the second season (10 x 22 minutes) of this Nigerian superhero toon later in 2026.

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30 YEARS OF KIDSCREEN • SINCE 1996

Game Changers

10 moments that reshaped how kids content is created, financed and consumed.

BY: ADINA PITT

ADINA PITT is a global children's media content & strategy specialist who was most recently VP of content acquisitions, partnerships and co-productions for kids & family at Warner Bros. Discovery.

Thinking about the 10 key kids entertainment moments in the past 30 years immediately transported me to one of my favorite childhood memories. We lived in a house that had a small playroom with a white leather couch, all of our toys scattered about, a white wall on which we could color and paint, and a big television set. On Saturday mornings, we would sit in our pyjamas with our cereal and watch the PBS lineup of *Sesame Street*, *Mr. Rogers' Neighborhood* and *The Electric Company*. Afterward, we would watch *Scooby-Doo* in Spanish. (For years, I thought Scooby's famous line "rut roh" was pronounced "root roh"—dubbing wasn't particularly great back then.)

This memory made me smile. That was our time to hang out with our favorite characters in our special room. And decades later, I would proudly become part of the fabric of the kids entertainment community.

Looking back at some pivotal moments I experienced as a professional, there are several that stand out as game-changers.

1 The cable boom

The 1980s and 1990s were a time filled with optimism, money and growth. Nickelodeon spearheaded the move to cable, and then we saw Disney Channel and Cartoon Network emerge as power brands. We affectionately referred to them as "the big three." The creative culture was front and center.

This was also a period when both on- and off-channel pro-social initiatives were prioritized in kids entertainment. Companies took creative risks, often reaping great rewards. They also had the stick-to-it-iveness to allow brands to be discovered organically and foster their growth. Great care was given to providing kids with safe, fun, innovative and educational IP choices.

2 The billion-dollar club

The financial goalpost of success has been influenced by the remarkable global success of several brands. It's no longer just ambitious to strive to build billion-dollar franchises; it's actually attainable.

3 M&A as the new normal

The expansion and contraction of companies has always existed. However, its impact has been particularly felt at kids companies worldwide. Chances are, if you've worked at a network or platform, you've experienced at least one merger or acquisition. Where will the pendulum land in the kids space, and what will the global kids space look like next?

4 Gaming 3.0 and community

From consoles to computers to handheld devices, games have historically provided kids with entire worlds filled with beloved characters and community. Integrating IPs into some of the most popular gaming worlds took on huge importance, as did the need to build a community around your brand.

5 The Netflix impact

For years, executives would speak of the future and success of the "à la carte" experience for viewers. Netflix proved these predictions to be correct, going through several iterations as a company before setting the standard for the world of SVOD entertainment. This not only changed consumer behavior, it also changed content financing, monetization and distribution models.

6 The YouTube effect

If you think Netflix and the evolution of gaming changed kids entertainment, it's difficult to fully encapsulate the impact of YouTube. Every consumer can be a creator and manage their own brands. It's the ultimate "golden ticket" if you hit it big—and it's equal parts exciting and overwhelming for traditional executives, creatives and consumers.

7 The diversity & inclusion dance

For years, it was critical to strive to represent all kids in IPs. Visible diversity played an essential role in countless brands and creators striving to have authentic and diverse voices—both in front of and behind the camera—and this has now expanded into representation of neurodiversity as well. Executives made it a priority to provide the opportunity for kids to experience the joy of exploring diverse stories and storytellers.

8 The female leader

It was inspiring to see so many women at the helm of kids companies and brands, both big and small. For decades, much of the global kids landscape was shaped in large part by remarkable women. They touched every aspect of kids entertainment, including—but not limited to—content creation, publishing, legal and business affairs, consumer products, programming, ad sales, content distribution, marketing, research and business development.

9 The global voice

You can't reflect on kids entertainment without acknowledging the pivotal role of global voices and styles, as well as the importance of the independent producers and distributors. Highlights include Japanese manga and anime; the incredible storyboards and ideas from France and Canada; the great IPs coming from the UK, Australia, Ireland, Brazil and Africa; and the groundbreaking live-action series from Germany and Latin America. Generations have grown up watching kids content from all over the world.

10 The AI relationship

Everyone needs to learn and get comfortable with AI, even at the most basic level. Bottom line: The more you understand it, the less threatening it feels. The kid consumer doesn't know a world without it.

The future of kids entertainment is in our hands to shape. I'm reminded of the importance of culture as essential for any strategic success. I'm inspired by global voices creating ideas for future generations to love. I'm hopeful that all of the core values that built the kids entertainment industry will be embraced as the landscape evolves. And I'm confident that our industry continues to make space for content that will serve the most important audience in the world—kids.

Bush's Beans was Bluey's first canned goods partner, opening the door for BBC Studios to ink more FMCG deals

Opportunity on aisle two

Brand owners find fresh value in licensed pantry staples that give fans a taste of their fave IPs in everyday life moments.

BY: COLE WATSON

For many emerging kids brand owners, the dream is to bring their IPs to life as toys and collectibles. But in today's market, that goal is getting harder to achieve every year. Between the increasing pressures of tariffs, the growing costs of toy production, risk-averse retailers and consumers keeping an eye on household budgets, new brands have to defy a lot of odds to land on those coveted shelves.

So maybe it's time to consider a different aisle as a retail entry point—starting with what goes in the pantry.

Some of the most common items that millions of consumers regularly stock up on include cereals, boxed pasta, canned goods, bottled beverages, toiletries, snacks and sugary treats. These low-cost goods move fast and account for more than half of all consumer spending in the US for three core reasons: They're essentials that are used in everyday life; most items have a short lifespan; and consumers often need to restock them repeatedly throughout the year.

And unlike toycos, fast-moving consumer goods (FMCG) companies are on the lookout for any brand deal or opportunity they can leverage to help trigger more sales and move record amounts of inventory. Fast-moving goods generated more than US$5.2 trillion in revenue worldwide in 2024, and that figure is expected to increase by 9% year over year until the market reaches US$11.2 trillion in 2033, according to a report published by Deep Market Insights in June.

> These low-cost goods move fast and account for more than half of all consumer spending in the US.

Geographically, North America accounts for 30% of annual FMCG spending, followed closely by APAC (26.65%) and Europe (25.48%).

The FMCG industry as a whole is on the upswing, with food & beverage brands leading the category, says Brand Activation Consulting (BAC) CEO Michelle McLaughlin, who represents the likes of Hormel, Hershey, Reese's, Jolly Rancher and Twizzlers. She notes that the prevailing trend making these brands so attractive to IP owners is that they hit on multiple consumer touchpoints: They're nostalgic, they have the power to appeal to both kids and adults, and they don't depend on an entertainment release schedule to remain evergreen at grocery retail.

For kids brand owners looking to score their first deal, BAC recommends researching FMCG partners in the US market first because it's the top player for forming creative brand collaborations, and it also has fewer food regulations and regional flavor profiles compared to other markets.

However, unlike toy and apparel deals, McLaughlin warns that brand owners will need to be more hands-off and trust their FMCG licensees to not only make their branded food item tasty, but ensure that it meets Food and Drug Administration guidelines to the letter.

"Licensing in food & beverage requires specialized expertise," she notes. "Ingredient and food brand extensions need to meet the same high quality and safety standards as the core product, because consumers assume the brand owner is making it. A failed launch here can do more damage than in non-FMCG categories because it has an impact on the user's quality of life—which is why we carefully vet partners for quality control, marketing capability and sales reach before moving forward with any deal."

When it comes to looking for potential partners in this space, IP owners will need to look for licensees with strong quality control credentials, such as GFSI or SQF certifications, which are necessary for suppliers to sell their products to major retailers, McLaughlin explains. From there, a dedicated sales team, a

Netflix partnered with several brands to roll out Hawkins- and Upside Down-themed foods ahead of *Stranger Things*' final season

proven retail network and the financial ability to invest in promotions can help form the solid bedrock for a strong FMCG campaign.

"Sometimes the right move is partnering with a household name like General Mills or Hormel; other times, a niche company with deep category expertise can execute the licensor's brand vision even more effectively," she says.

Look for the blue label

One major brand that broke into the FMCG category last year is preschool phenom *Bluey*. BBC Studios' EVP of global consumer products Suzy Lee Raia says 2024 was the right time for the blue heeler pup to make a play in this market, after establishing successful programs in toys and apparel over the previous five years. Learning from those experiences, Raia and her team nailed down a formula for developing strong licensing deals by delivering products that translate or capture moments directly from the series, which she calls "show to shelf".

"Applying this concept in the FMCG category isn't always straightforward," explains Raia. "We have to dig into our creativity to make items really stand out and feel like the consumer is getting something that's unique to *Bluey* or featured in some way in the show, versus the same item that's simply wrapped in a brand."

In a key example of this strategy at work, BBC Studios partnered with Bush's Beans in May to roll out a Bluey-branded SKU of baked beans, which have been a staple in the Heeler family's pantry since season one. In addition to branded packaging, Bluey's canned beans also provide links to the Bush's website, where families can discover a variety of recipes inspired by the show—such as chicken nachos, protein mac & cheese and octopus hot dogs—to encourage picky young eaters to try more bean dishes at mealtime.

This deal also figured into BBC Studios' Let's Play Chef campaign for the Bluey brand this year, which generated a wave of other new FMCG partnerships with Lactalis (yogurt), Crunch Pak (fruit snack packs), P&G (diapers) and Home Chef (meal kits). As a result of the successful launch into canned goods with Bush's, BBC Studios also signed a deal with Campbell's in November for Bluey to get her own SKU of SpaghettiOs.

"The short-term goals for us in this category are simply to give families their favorite character on products they love so Bluey can be part of their everyday lifestyle," says Raia. "In the long term, we want to build partnerships that echo the core values of *Bluey*, which are relatable family moments, reminding kids and parents that it's the everyday moments that matter most [for kids to] learn and grow."

Flipping the category upside down

In the lead-up to *Stranger Things* season five's premiere at the end of November, Netflix built a consumer products program with Target that encompassed hundreds of exclusive licensed items, including toys, collectibles and kids apparel. From the outset, FMCG was also a part of this product mix, says Tanya Isler, the streamer's senior director of consumer products for the US and Canada.

She sees Stranger Things as a perfect brand for this category because of its deep roots in the '80s era of American pop culture and its in-world references to both fictional and real-world food brands such as Eggo waffles, Coca-Cola and Surfer Boy Pizza. For past seasons, Netflix has bolstered the show's presence in the FMCG space, teaming up with Coca-Cola in 2019 to sell more than half a million cans of the revived "New Coke" and creating a 14% jump in Q4 sales for Eggo products when season two premiered in 2017.

"Each season, the products change based on what's on screen and new for the fans to discover," says Isler. "With season five, we really leaned into nostalgia, asking partners to consider bringing back packaging from the 1980s, or even reimagining their package designs and campaigns to travel back to that moment in time."

Netflix challenged its partners to dial up their creativity for the final season's campaign, motivating Eggo to launch its first-ever strawberry-flavored waffle; Chips Ahoy! to roll out a new cookie inspired by the Upside Down rifts; and Doritos to bring back its '80s logo and packaging with a Pizza and Cool Ranch flavored SKU.

FMCG deals like these are invaluable because they allow the fandom to amp up their viewing experience and immerse themselves further into the brand, says Isler.

"FMCG is steeped in so much innovation, and the trends change at a rapid pace," she notes. "We see a desire for a variety of food options across the board, as well as a desire from fans to incorporate FMCG into their regular lives. It's not about a snack or candy item that sits on a shelf in collector packaging, but about those moments during the day where a fan can tap into their fandom to add some fun and excitement to their everyday [lives]." K

Pikachu and Eevee strut their stuff at the Natural History Museum's Pokémon pop-up shop

Museum pieces

Licensing, retail collabs and character-driven activations are helping museums connect with kids in ways that traditional exhibits alone can't.

BY: COLE WATSON

Operating in a cultural heritage, arts & tourism market that's crowded with options, the world's 100,000-plus museums are having to rethink how they go about connecting with kids—and licensing may be the key to staying relevant.

The UK is currently a hotbed for these location-based experience collaborations, according to data presented at last year's Brand Licensing Europe by Licensing International and Circana. The region saw a whopping 682.9% surge in licensed service earnings in 2024, including museums, theme parks, hotels and restaurants. Nonprofit licensing was also the UK's fastest-growing category that year, with a 16.8% uptick in sales from museums signing new partnerships with a mix of brands for both kids and adults.

"Collaborating with kids entertainment brands is a fantastic way for us to broaden the reach of the museum and its licensing program into new audiences and retailers," says Louisa Skevington, licensing manager for the Natural History Museum. "It's a way of grabbing a kid's attention with their favorite characters, and then engaging with them in new ways through our historical topics and expertise."

When Skevington joined the London-based museum in 2024, her team was in the midst of a major licensing push, setting up partnerships with the Roald Dahl Story Company, Hasbro for Peppa Pig and, most recently, The Pokémon Company International. She explains that her museum chose to dive deeper into licensing in order to add more consumer product touchpoints through which guests can physically interact with the museum at home.

"Brands such as Roald Dahl and Peppa Pig have strong aesthetic styles and instantly recognizable characters, which makes them exciting to work with," says Skevington. "However, as the Natural History Museum is a less tangible brand in this way, we have to be creative in how we introduce our brand alongside them, such as through fun facts and the knowledge behind the design/development process."

These agreements resulted in the museum also teaming up with leading regional retailers Marks & Spencer (for Roald Dahl) and Tesco (for Peppa Pig) to manufacture and distribute three waves of co-branded kids apparel designed to extend the reach of each collab beyond the museum's e-commerce site and physical gift shop.

While neither of these partnerships evolved into a full-on immersive exhibit, Skevington developed and then promoted an Extraordinary Explorers nature theme for the Roald Dahl launch and a wider focus on dinosaurs, animals and outer space inspired by Peppa's curious personality.

To tie together Peppa Pig and the Jurassic theme, the team set up standees of Peppa and Georgie wearing dinosaur costumes in the activity playroom for preschoolers, while the apparel collection depicted the show's characters adventuring with animals and other prehistoric creatures.

Living in a Pokémon world

Taking a different approach, the Pokémon brand launched a first-ever UK pop-up shop at the Natural History Museum in January, offering a new range of exclusive merchandise spanning plush, apparel, trading cards and on-site meet-and-greet opportunities with Pikachu and Eevee.

This marks the second museum partnership for The Pokémon Company International's EMEA team—the first was a four-month-long exhibit at the Van Gogh Museum in 2023 to celebrate the nonprofit's 50th anniversary. In addition to a range of exclusive merch, the partners also worked together to create six Pokémon paintings inspired by Vincent van Gogh's famous works and exhibit them for a limited time.

Museums are a growing category of interest for TPCI, which is looking for more culturally relevant destinations through which fans can immerse themselves in the brand, says EMEA licensing director Mathieu Galante. The Pokémon brand has also developed a massive multi-generational audience of kids and adults, which makes it a prime candidate for enriching the museum experience and making it a must-visit destination for the fandom's legion of domestic and international visitors.

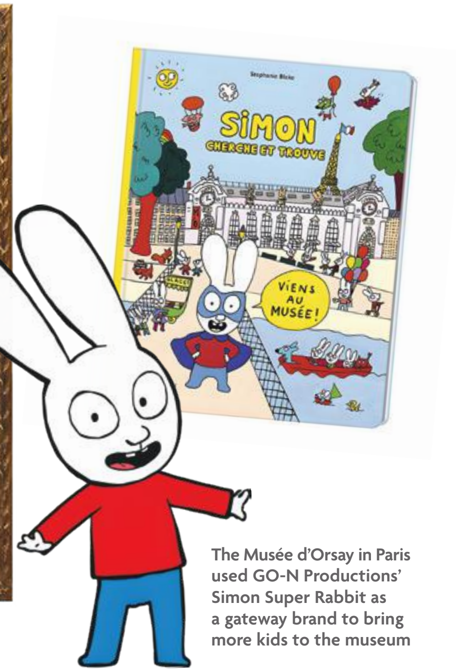
For Galante, the ideal museum partners are those that can deliver experiences reflecting Pokémon's core values of science, adventure and nature in one tight package.

"Both [the Natural History Museum and the Van Gogh Museum] offered exactly that," says Galante. "Vincent van Gogh's documented love of Japanese art and culture created a natural bridge between the two worlds. Equally, the Natural History Museum has a sense of wonder and a connection to the living world, which is at the heart of the Pokémon brand."

In addition to this work in the EMEA region, TPCI is building museum programs in Japan and the US to similarly widen its reach in other core markets. Initiatives that are underway include a Pokémon x Kogei traveling exhibit showcasing more than 70 custom works by Japanese craftsmen; as well as The Pokémon Fossil Museum, which is slated to make its first international appearance at the Field Museum in Chicago this May.

Heroic opportunity

One prodco that's eager to do more museum collabs is GO-N Productions, which got its first taste in 2024 when it partnered with the Musée d'Orsay in Paris on a Simon Super Rabbit activation. Co-founder Eric Garnet says the studio was inspired to pursue the opportunity after seeing a recent increase in partnerships between European museums and animated brands, including Pokémon, One Piece, Paddington Bear and Barbapapa. And the Simon franchise was



The Musée d'Orsay in Paris used GO-N Productions' Simon Super Rabbit as a gateway brand to bring more kids to the museum

an easy "oui" for the French art museum because it could serve as an entry point to bring families with preschoolers and young children through the door.

"Simon perfectly embodies the meeting point between popular culture and the museum world," says Garnet. "Preschoolers are at an age where they learn, experiment, grow and absorb everything around them. Going to a museum is naturally part of that journey—even if, like many children, it may not be their first choice for a fun destination at the start."

Working with its French licensing agent Home Made Licensing, the Musée d'Orsay was originally looking to collaborate with a family-friendly IP that could support a co-published title about the museum, but this quickly expanded into an on-site activation and a much wider merch program after the nonprofit's head of publications recognized the value of an alliance with a growing preschool brand like Simon.

To kick the collaboration off, Simon's original publisher L'école des Loisirs published a "hide-and-seek" book called *Come to the Museum!*, illustrated by the IP's creator Stephanie Blake to show Simon and his friends jumping into iconic paintings found at the museum. At the same time, the Musée d'Orsay built a dedicated kids corner in its ballroom to offer activities including a reading area focused on various French animators, creative workshops with giant coloring posters, and a play and discovery space.

Meanwhile, Home Made Licensing leveraged its network of brand partners to develop a co-branded collection of consumer products ranging from staple SKUs like apparel, stationery and plush, to more experimental items such as yo-yos, magnifying glasses, kaleidoscopes and ink stamps.

"The collab proved quite challenging, mainly because the project required coordination between several teams and organizations," explains Garnet. "With so many stakeholders involved, the decision-making process was sometimes slower than expected, but we were able to move the project forward at a steady pace with regular coordination meetings and clear task distribution."

This program took nearly two years to come to fruition, but Garnet is proud of the outcome—most of the branded consumer products sold out, and the museum reported a significant uptick in museum visitors for the year. Based on these strong results, the Musée d'Orsay launched a second run of the Simon Super Rabbit activation late last year.

"Parents who attended the event have often told us that, thanks to Simon, they were finally able to take their children to a museum (when previously there would be little interest), and that their kids came out smiling," says Garnet. "Building on our recent experience, we now plan to expand the concept to other museums across the European markets where Simon already has a strong foothold, such as Spain, Italy, the UK, Scandinavia and Germany."

30 YEARS OF KIDSCREEN • SINCE 1996

Game Changers

10 milestone moments that changed kids brand licensing—and pop culture.

BY: MAURA REGAN

The past three decades have been transformational for the world of brand licensing and consumer products. From toys that created a cultural moment, to the rise of the internet and social commerce, each era shifted the industry and reshaped how consumers connect with the brands they love. These 10 turning points didn't just make headlines; they redefined how we create, sell and experience licensed products for kids.

1 The internet revolution

The rise of the internet didn't just change culture—it rewired it entirely. The internet's rise brought forth new retail frontiers and reshaped how shoppers connect, discover and purchase products. As e-commerce exploded, so did consumer choice, making brand licensing more vital than ever. Licensing today has evolved in step, as a source of trust and visibility for consumers in an environment with infinite options, helping them navigate endless digital aisles with confidence.

2 The COVID-19 pandemic

Few global events have reshaped product development like the COVID-19 pandemic. Suddenly, licensing teams had to reimagine collaboration, approvals and development cycles to achieve results remotely. Technology evolved at lightning speed, streamlining previously cumbersome processes. Necessity spawned innovation, and the industry emerged more agile and connected than ever.

3 Fast fashion

The rise of fast fashion forever changed the speed-to-market equation. From its beginnings in the fashion industry, the ethos moved beyond apparel into other categories. Where toy development once took more than a year, today's consumers expect merchandise from their favorite properties in real time. This shift forced licensors and licensees alike to rethink timelines, manufacturing and product refresh cycles to meet consumer behavior and expectations.

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4 The Disney Princess line

When Andy Mooney created the Disney Princess line in the early 2000s, he unified decades of storytelling into a cohesive brand universe. Before that, Disney characters lived within their individual worlds. The Disney Princess franchise transformed the company's IP into a collective powerhouse, spawning everything from apparel to theme park experiences. It remains one of the most successful and enduring examples of licensing innovation over the last 30 years.

5 The Harry Potter franchise

Harry Potter first achieved publishing success, then went on to become a cultural and licensing phenomenon. The expansion from page to screen to product created a blueprint for multimedia storytelling that continues to inspire franchise-building today. From wands and wearables, to theme parks and collectibles, Harry Potter showed how deep storytelling fuels enduring brand ecosystems.

6 YouTube

In the 2000s, YouTube radically changed how—and how quickly—content reaches kids. It upended the traditional development pipeline, eliminating the need for the greenlights, production cycles and seasonal programming windows of linear TV. This immediacy didn't just disrupt viewing habits; it also redefined the licensing playbook, creating overnight demand for characters, stories and worlds emerging organically from the platform.

7 Tickle Me Elmo

In 1996, Tickle Me Elmo became a national phenomenon, turning holiday toy aisles into scenes of frenzy. More than a must-have product, it was a masterclass in brand synergy, combining emerging interactive technology with the warmth and familiarity of a beloved character. The plush toy perfectly captured Elmo's essence, proving that successful licensing isn't just about putting a logo on a product. It has the power—when done right—to infuse a brand's spirit into physical form.

8 Nickelodeon

The launch of Nickelodeon—and its meteoric rise through the 1980s and 1990s—redefined kids entertainment for an entire generation. The channel introduced a fresh, irreverent voice that spoke to younger viewers rather than at them, empowering them to be loud, silly, curious and unapologetically themselves. Nickelodeon didn't just entertain; it shifted the dynamic and tone of children's programming, setting a new standard for what kids content could be, and delivering some of the biggest hit brands the market has ever seen.

9 Social commerce and the rise of creator-led brands

Social media has progressed to become a place where Millennial and Gen Z consumers are shopping. Through creators serving as trustworthy brand representatives, to in-app retail channels on social platforms, brands have had to adjust their strategies to meet this new frontier. The creators themselves have also evolved from merely endorsing products, to becoming the product—turning their personal brands into licensing powerhouses. Social commerce has blurred the line between content and commerce, giving rise to a new generation of licensors who command loyal, built-in audiences.

10 Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA)

The explosion of kids content in the internet era created an urgent need to regulate children's programming and safeguard young viewers. As streaming platforms, apps and social video became primary touchpoints for kids, COPPA established essential guardrails to protect their privacy and safety. In turn, it pushed licensors and content creators to adopt more responsible, compliant approaches to engaging their youngest fans.

Driven at times by creativity and at others by necessity, the past 30 years have ushered in innovation for the consumer products industry, with no signs of slowing. Looking ahead, as technology, consumer behavior, retail markets and industry trends continue to rapidly shift, licensors and licensees alike will rise to meet these landmark cultural shifts, moving the industry forward and defining what comes next. k

30 YEARS OF KIDSCREEN • SINCE 1996

Kids through time

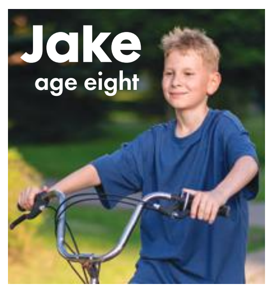
What has changed, what hasn't—and why childhood still matters.

BY: JANE GOULD

When *Kidscreen* first launched in 1996, a nine-year-old somewhere was racing home to catch *Boy Meets World*, completely unaware that a call-waiting beep might interrupt their evening. Thirty years later, today's 10-year-old is curating their digital identity across multiple platforms, code-switching between Discord servers while their parents worry about screen time, mental health and a world that feels infinitely connected, yet also disconnected. What happened in between? Everything. And nothing at all, somehow.

For three decades, *Kidscreen* has chronicled the evolution of kids media, tracking the seismic shifts from broadcast to streaming, from appointment viewing to on-demand everything, and from collective experience to personalized algorithms. But beneath the technological transformation lies something more fundamental—the experience of being a child itself has been reimagined.

Let's look at how six typical kids across the decades discovered their worlds, navigated friendships, adopted new technologies and, ultimately, found their identities. What has fundamentally changed? What remains remarkably constant? And what does it all mean for those creating content for today's evolving generation?



1996

Jake's world has boundaries—physical ones. "It's getting dark" means it's time to go home. His mom doesn't know exactly where he is after school, and that's normal. But she knows he's probably at Trevor's house, or riding bikes at the park, or maybe at the arcade. He'll turn up by dinner.

Friday night is sacred: It's TGIF on ABC. Jake watches *Boy Meets World* and *Sabrina The Teenage Witch* with his sisters, all of them commenting on the same moments at the same time. On Saturday morning, he's up early for cartoons—*X-Men*, *Power Rangers*. There's a rhythm to it; a shared cultural calendar. Everyone in his class has seen the same episode of a particular show and laughed at the same funny moments.

His biggest worry? Finishing homework or acing a test. The internet exists—but it's not yet part of his daily life. Identity is formed face-to-face, in real time, with in-the-flesh rewards, lessons and consequences.

2002

It's Saturday morning. Jessica hops into the living room in footie pajamas, pops in a *Barney* VHS tape and settles onto the couch. Mom makes breakfast. The same episodes play on repeat until the tape wears out. There are 10 or 15 videos in Jessica's rotation. Everyone in the house can recite them and sing every song.

Parents know exactly what their kids are watching because they oversee their family's well-displayed video tape collection, and

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there are only so many options. Co-viewing happens naturally because the TV is in the shared space. Repetition is built into the format—you have to get up to change the tape.

Parents feel good about this. The content is enriching. Their child is learning, problem-solving, following narratives. Parents need a break from their kids, so they happily welcome more content into their living rooms—Jessica can watch alone while her parents decompress, make dinner, answer emails and manage the household.

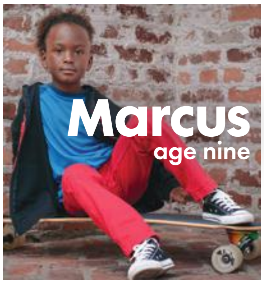
2007

Maya's world is expanding, pixelating and becoming something new. She still plays outside, walks to her best friend's house, hangs out at the mall—but the real action happens on AOL IM after school. Her "away" message is an art form, carefully crafted to signal mood, drama and availability.

She's starting to experiment with online identity-making. Social hierarchies are going digital, and the rules are being written in real time. A screenshot of a private conversation can be forwarded. A photo from Friday night's dance can be tagged without permission. The boundaries between private and public are blurring.

For fun, Wednesday night means one thing: *American Idol* for the whole family. Maya is learning to multi-task as she texts her friends, votes on her phone and checks message boards. It's the first wave of media becoming participatory, not just consumable. She and her friends have watch parties, turning television into a social event they control.

This is the golden age of personalization—with a boom of dedicated kids channels and programming blocks, Maya and her friends embrace content just for them. *High School Musical*, *Hannah Montana*, *SpongeBob SquarePants* and the *Nickelodeon Kids' Choice Awards* are in their peak watch years, cementing generational markers that will define childhoods.



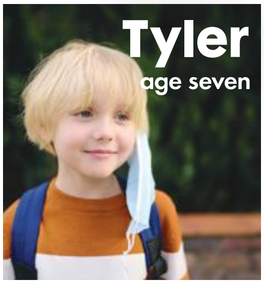
2013

Marcus doesn't watch TV—not in any way his parents would recognize. He watches YouTube. Hours of it. His favorite creators feel like friends. He knows their upload schedules, their inside jokes, their personal lives. When they collaborate with other creators, it's an event.

YouTube is where he curates his identity. Every video post or follow is considered, filtered, captioned with the right balance of transparency and social risk. He checks his likes compulsively and deletes posts that don't perform.

But something new has entered Marcus's consciousness—the world, and his world, are problematic. School shootings aren't rare anymore. Political divisions aren't just adult problems. And his generation increasingly has something to say. Marcus and his friends talk openly about issues, organize online and find communities that share their values. He and his peers are more informed and enabled than previous generations, all while still navigating the universal challenges of simply growing up.

2020



Tyler and his family are in the thick of the COVID-19 shutdown. He attends school from the kitchen table on a Chromebook propped on a stack of cookbooks. For Tyler, "school" has become a grid of faces. Play has shifted, too. Instead of recess, he has Minecraft breaks—building worlds that feel more predictable than the one outside. His friends show up as avatars. He leans back into content that he loved when he was four. It comforts him.

Tyler is absorbing more than adults realize. For him and his cohort, 2020 isn't just a year—it's an imprint; a moment when school, safety, connection and childhood itself were rewritten in real time. And even at seven, he is developing a sense of awareness, empathy and digital fluency that will shape how his generation engages with the world.

Tyler and his friends are learning to think flexibly, cope collectively and hold big feelings in small bodies. He will carry forward a new relationship with time, technology and community. His childhood is shaped by isolation, innovation, resilience and an understanding that the world can change literally overnight.

2026

Zara's world is a choose-your-own-adventure story across platforms. She watches YouTube when she wants long-form content; TikTok when she wants to see what's trending; streaming platforms when her family is in the mood for a movie night.

She pops into Roblox to play a game, and her friend group there spans three time zones and two continents. She's never met them in person, but her "gaming" friends are her best friends.

Zara has a broad spectrum of hopes and worries. The phrase "mental health" is part of her daily vocabulary. Her school has wellness check-ins and mindfulness apps. She and her peers are more emotionally literate than any generation before them, and also more anxious.

Zara and her friends have access to more content, connection and information than any other generation of kids in recent history. She is constantly visible and constantly surveilled—by algorithms and peers and parents who can track her location in real time. And yet, when she talks about what matters most, it sounds remarkably familiar: her friends, her family, figuring out who she is, being understood, belonging.

What has shifted?

Over the past three decades, the tools have transformed. The pressures have multiplied. The visibility is constant. But the core developmental work of children—exploring their worlds, navigating friendship, building identity, seeking autonomy, finding their people—remains exactly the same. What's changed is the context in which that work happens.

For content creators, this is the essential tension. Kids need the same things they've always needed—stories about belonging, characters who get them, worlds where they can see themselves and imagine new possibilities—but the relationship with content itself has fundamentally changed. It's no longer something they just consume; it's something they inhabit, remix, respond to and even create themselves.

Today, the algorithm has replaced the parent as content curator. A child's viewing is personalized and often invisible to the adults in their life. And this AI-personalized content that adapts to interests, mood and attention spans is hard to compete with. It's both miraculous and deeply unsettling.

Parents feel overwhelmed. They see their child's relationship with screens intensifying. They read the studies about attention spans, language development, social-emotional learning.

Regardless of what era they grew up in, kids like Jake, Jessica, Maya, Marcus, Tyler and Zara talked about the same things: wanting to belong and to be entertained and understood; navigating friendships; and figuring out who they are. The vocabulary changes, but the emotional core is identical.

They all had a teacher who changed their life and a friend who laughed at the exact same shows. They all experienced a split-second of pure joy that felt infinite; a time when they had to work up the nerve to raise their hand or speak up; and a moment when they felt unstoppable. They all thought they were the only ones who felt the way they did, until they found their people and realized they weren't alone.

Childhood, at its core, hasn't changed. The need to be seen, to matter, to connect is constant and eternal.

Beneath the technological transformation lies something more fundamental—the experience of being a child itself has been reimagined.

The hard work of connection

In the past, kids had siblings, neighbors, friends, playdates, parks, school. Connection was ambient and assumed. But in 2026, parents worry about their kids being lonely and unable to find those connections.

What got lost? Unstructured time. Physical proximity. Boredom that leads to creativity. The necessity of face-to-face negotiation. The friction of waiting, sharing, taking turns. School has become an important outlet for guaranteed interaction, but the challenges of actual connection remain.

Yet there's reason for optimism: Parents and educators, increasingly aware of these challenges, are actively creating solutions. Kids themselves are finding new ways to build authentic connection—from gaming communities and creative collaborations, to in-person gatherings that feel more intentional than ever. They also find the content that makes them feel something and helps them better understand what they're going through.

The conversation has shifted from whether connection matters, to how we can facilitate it better.

The question for the next decade is: Can we create content that enhances connection rather than replacing it? Content that serves the child's developmental needs and respects the fact that kids need the same things they needed 30 years ago, regardless of technological capability?

What matters most

Content creators need to hold onto universal truths and contemporary context. The stories that resonate across decades are the ones that understand the timeless emotional work of growing up. But the stories that feel vital right now are those that understand what it's like to do that work in this moment, with these tools, under these pressures.

The best children's content has always done both. *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* spoke to timeless needs—you are special, you are loved, your feelings matter—in a way that felt specific to the moment. *Sesame Street* has always tackled universal themes of friendship and learning while reflecting the diversity and challenges of contemporary urban life.

More recently, shows like *Bluey* have demonstrated this balance brilliantly, honoring timeless family dynamics while reflecting contemporary parenting and childhood experiences. And *Dora the Explorer* pioneered interactive learning that felt both educational and empowering. These creators understood that great children's content serves both the child and the moment they're living in.

Today's creators face a more specific complex challenge: How do you create content that acknowledges the realities of growing up in a surveilled, optimized, always-on world while still offering kids what they've always needed—safety, joy, imagination, connection?

How do you compete with algorithmic personalization without becoming just another optimized feed? How do you create shared cultural experiences in an era of infinite, isolated content consumption? How do you serve kids' needs when parents are overwhelmed, and kids themselves are performing identity before they've figured out who they are?

These aren't rhetorical questions. They're the essential challenges for the next era of children's media.

What's next?

As we look toward the next decade, the pendulum is already swinging. Parents are pushing back against infinite scroll. Schools are banning phones. Kids themselves are gravitating toward analogue experiences—vinyl records, film cameras, board games. There's a hunger for friction, for limits, for the kind of experiences that can't be optimized.

Gen Alpha will have something no previous generation has had—a lifetime of data about what growing up in a digital-first world does to humans. They are already making different choices that we can't predict. They'll invent new norms, new boundaries, new possibilities.

The need for connection isn't going away. Content can be part of the solution—creating shared experiences, facilitating real connection, building communities that exist both online and off. But only if we're intentional about designing for connection rather than just for engagement.

Kids are telling us what they need. When you listen to them—really listen—they're remarkably consistent across decades about what matters: authenticity, representation, stories that "get" them, characters who feel real, worlds where they can see themselves and imagine beyond themselves, and pure joy through laughter.

The opportunity for children's media in the next decade:

- Lead with these truths in creating content that respects kids' intelligence and emotional complexity.
- Resist the pressure to optimize for watch time over actual value.
- Remember that the goal isn't just to capture attention, but to serve development.

Getting it right

Kids are always kids; it's the childhood that keeps changing. This simple truth contains both the challenge and the opportunity. We can't stop childhood from evolving, and we shouldn't try to. Technology will continue to advance, culture will continue to

shift, challenges will continue to arise, and kids will continue to adapt in ways we can't fully predict.

But we can hold onto what we know to be true across all three decades: Kids need to be seen. They need to belong. They need stories that help them make sense of their world. They need adults who understand them without trying to control them. They need space to play, to fail, to figure out who they are.

The content we create matters. It's not just entertainment; it's part of the infrastructure of childhood. It shapes how kids understand themselves, their relationships and their possibilities.

Over the last 30 years, *Kidscreen* has documented this journey—from appointment television to algorithmic feeds; from shared cultural moments to personalized content bubbles; and from childhood as a protected space to childhood as a surveilled performance. The next decade will bring transformations we can't yet imagine.

But whatever changes, one thing remains—the kids are counting on us to get this right: To create content that serves them, not just our metrics, while keeping in mind that behind every view, every download and every engagement stat is a real child doing the real work of growing up.

That's the responsibility and the privilege of this industry. That's what the last 30 years have taught us. And that's what the next 30 years are depending on us to remember.

DEBATE

Is YouTube still the best place to build long-term content success?

Children's media experts Jo Redfern and Peter Robinson weigh in on this critical question.

YES

BY: JO REDFERN

YouTube isn't perfect, but in my view, it is the cornerstone platform on which to build long-term content success.

I don't say it's the *only* platform, because long-term success comes with a multi-platform strategy, where content is distributed across many media touchpoints. But YouTube is the *best* place for kids content creators and producers to start to build. Why? Because as it stands, traditional commissioning has failed most creators, and that distinction matters now more than ever.

For kids, YouTube is more than entertainment. It's their search engine, creative outlet and fandom hub. According to the *PARK USA Summer 2024* report by Precise TV, 84% of kids ages 10 to 12 engage with YouTube regularly. And other research pegs their average time spent watching YouTube at around two hours per day.

To them, it isn't just another platform; it's their media infrastructure.

Algorithm vs. opportunity

Many argue that YouTube's algorithm is unpredictable. That's a fair point. But unpredictable compared to what?

Traditional commissioning currently offers zero predictability for most creators. If those making kids content think they can trust TV gatekeepers to do right by their IPs, building them an audience and supporting their business models, then I have a bridge to sell you.

I heard first-hand at MIP Junior how brutal it is out there for creators and producers. ScreenSkills even said that last year was "the most challenging in decades, with as many as three-quarters of freelancers out of work, prompted by a significant downturn in commissioning." No wonder creators are taking matters into their own hands.

While YouTube's algorithm is fickle, it's also meritocratic, in theory. At least on YouTube, creators can build audiences through strategic use of metadata, testing, learning, showing up consistently and making the best-quality content they can.

And the reach opportunity is undeniable. YouTube is the first place kids go to for video content, whether it's to watch

YouTubers played pivotal roles in *A Minecraft Movie*, with several popular creators making on-screen appearances and others helping behind the scenes with ideas and design

sports highlights or see what their favorite creator has uploaded since last time.

To ignore YouTube is to ignore your audience, and there's no excuse for that.

The new tube

What else has changed that makes YouTube super-attractive to those making kids content? YouTube has become TV.

There's a heated debate around what that actually means, but if we take it to mean that kids are watching YouTube in their living rooms on the biggest screen in the house—then yes, YouTube is TV to kids.

What they watch may not look like the TV-level storytelling we grew up with, but it's made for an audience that uses YouTube by default, and it reads as "native" to that generation.

Additionally, to engage more quality creators, YouTube is supporting content where production values and narrative are higher. This means fewer low-nutrition cat videos and more opportunity for quality kids storytellers whose creations *will* end up on the living room screen.

This kind of empowerment is tangible. At a time when production costs are falling and traditional commissioning remains inaccessible to all but a few, YouTube offers actual access.

Creators can build IPs without permission, they can test and iterate without needing a commissioner's notes, and they can find audiences faster than any previous generation could dream of.

YouTube's barriers are low, giving storytellers who would have spent years pitching gatekeepers a chance to build their businesses. Not every creator will succeed, but the opportunity exists—which is more than the traditional system is offering.

Nor does YouTube exist in a vacuum; it is part of the youth media flywheel that powers everything else. No other platform offers distribution, community, discoverability and fandom engagement simultaneously. Even Roblox builders rely on YouTube for marketing and referral, and in turn, players share their gameplay videos and avatar outfit creations there.

A Minecraft Movie would not have been the massive success it was without YouTube. Fact.

It's true that there are navigation challenges, but to me those are not deal-breakers, because every platform has trade-offs. Traditional TV came with commercial breaks, inflexible scheduling and cancellation/decommissioning risk.

The question isn't whether YouTube is perfect—it's not—but rather: Can you afford to develop your audience elsewhere when kids live there?

We can debate whether YouTube *should* be the infrastructure layer of kids entertainment, but we cannot debate whether it *is*.

JO REDFERN is the founder of Futrhood Media and a leading kids media strategist. Through her company, she specializes in platform-first audience strategies for Gen Z and Gen Alpha across sports and entertainment—particularly YouTube, Roblox and short-form social media video. Her recent clients include ITV Studios, 9 Story Media Group and The Premier League.

NO

BY: PETER ROBINSON

More than 10 years ago, at a very snowy Kidscreen Summit in New York, I stood on stage talking about *Charlie Bit My Finger* and LEGO stop-motion shorts—grassroots hits that proved creators didn't need TV to find fame.

Five years later, in a much warmer Miami, I was back arguing that we had to redefine "quality". Kids saw authenticity as polish, personality as production value, and YouTube as the new TV guide.

YouTube remains one of the richest, most diverse sources of entertainment and education. And quite honestly, it's hard to argue against its virtues. So today, there are compelling reasons why YouTube is the best place to build long-term content success.

But I'm not so sure the platform that built a generation of fandoms will serve the next one as well.

YouTube used to feel like discovery. You could stumble across a LEGO animator from Poland, a singing family from Utah, or a slime experiment that became a craze. But serendipity has been replaced by sameness. Algorithms now favor retention over curiosity.

Kids don't choose what to watch; the feed chooses for them. And while creators can still find audiences, they're finding it harder to keep them.

That's not a creativity problem; it's a platform design problem.

The algorithmic chokehold

Over the past decade, YouTube has perfected the art of keeping audiences watching—including kids. But watching is not necessarily enjoying. Watchtime metrics continue to rise, but not always in line with satisfaction.

I call this Algorithmic Decay, when repetition beats originality and volume trumps value. "Quality" creators are incentivized to churn out more, not better.

The result is an ocean of mid-tier content, sprinkled with some excellent content standing tall and ensuring that YouTube remains a staple.

But I believe that quality does matter. Kids content has always been a pipeline

2007's *Charlie Bit My Finger* quickly became YouTube's most-watched video at the time, and it has since racked up almost a billion views and spawned a range of copycats

for storytelling craft. And the magic of YouTube has always been its serendipity and diversity. (I remember being obsessed with *Charlie the Unicorn* more than 15 years ago, and Oats Studios' early work nearly a decade ago.)

But when attention is the only metric that matters, stories can lose their rhythm; humor can lose its timing; and experimentation can disappear, replaced by sameness.

And it's hard to argue that AI is not about to supercharge this sameness. We're already seeing a flood of synthetic kids content: nursery rhymes generated at scale, character voices cloned, thumbnails optimized by machine. The coming years will test whether we can still tell the difference between something made for children and something made for the algorithm.

The money problem

Then there's the economy. Yes, the market is hard on all platforms for kids content. Monetization on YouTube Kids is inconsistent—and Shorts, while wildly popular (especially in my house), has not had an obvious economy for many creators. The result is a platform that rewards instant hits and burns out long-term builders.

In research I presented at Kidscreen Summit 2025, I argued that kids IPs should be measured by cost-per-fan in the future—and by that I mean how efficiently a piece of content builds lasting affinity, not how many minutes it traps.

But that's hard to achieve on a platform where sustainability depends on a single line of code. One algorithmic tweak can erase years of audience-building. For small studios, that's existential. Without a functioning economy, quality declines, audiences disengage, and the algorithm—starved of good content—spirals further.

What's being lost

We're seeing a widening gap between what's viewed and what's valued. The IPs and channels that built long-term trust—including Bluey, Ms. Rachel, MrBeast's philanthropy arcs, and even legacy brands like Nickelodeon—are now struggling to sustain attention without algorithmic reinforcement.

Kids want and need stories, but they're being trained to expect them in 20-second bursts.

Parents feel it, too. The YouTube Kids app segmentation is confusing, ad policies are pressured by legislation, and the discovery experience is chaotic. YouTube was once where families bonded around shared fandoms. But increasingly, it's where they negotiate screen-time rules.

What needs to change

If YouTube wants to remain the backbone of kids media—something I still believe it could be, and that we certainly need it to be—it has to rediscover its soul. Here are three shifts that could help:

1. Elevate curation over automation. Build human-led editorial layers—especially within YouTube Kids—that are led by educators and trusted creators, not code. In fairness, this is practiced now to an extent.

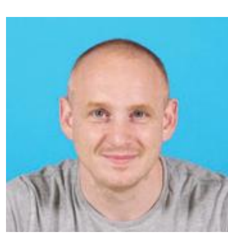
2. Reward narrative completion, not just watch time. Value stories that end well. Developing minds need lessons and resolutions, not loops that never end.

3. Invest in creator sustainability metrics. Track community return and repeat engagement, not only retention curves. Reward creators who build lasting audiences.

Ultimately, I don't think YouTube's biggest opposition is TikTok or Roblox. It's trust erosion. When creators can disappear overnight, audiences learn that nothing lasts, and that's a challenge for an industry built on fandom and care.

Someone—maybe YouTube (because this isn't just a YouTube problem), or maybe the next platform—needs to make long-term engagement financeable through both content paydays and product sales.

Kids and families still crave great stories. They just need a system that believes in them as much as they believe in the screen. K



PETER ROBINSON is the founder of Gone With, a research and strategy agency focused on kids & family audiences. With two decades in media consulting, he helps global brands grow reach and relevance by building fan bases, engaging early adopters, and ensuring audience insight drives content and strategy.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30 YEARS OF KIDSCREEN • SINCE 1996

Game Changers

10 tech innovations that have transformed childhood.

BY: ADAM WOODGATE

ADAM WOODGATE is VP of research solutions for The Insights Family, the leader in marketing insights related to kids, parents and young adults in 22 countries. For more information, visit theinsightsfamily.com.

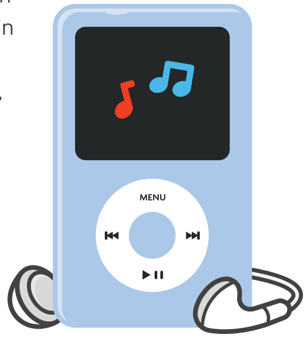
The children of 1996 watched scheduled television, rewound VHS tapes and phoned friends on landlines. Thirty years later, their own children navigate a landscape so transformed that it would be unrecognizable to their younger selves. Based on The Insights Family's research, here are my picks for the 10 technological leaps forward that have most profoundly reshaped what it means to be a child.

1 The internet

Before the internet revolutionized nearly every aspect of modern life, accessing home entertainment meant a cable subscription, a trip to the video shop or waiting for a program to start. Today, kids and teens are averaging an hour and 41 minutes online each weekday—the top activity after sleep and school—and two hours and 15 minutes on weekends. By connecting creators and audiences directly, the internet has created a borderless universe of content.

2 MP3 players

Apple's iPod arrived in 2001 with a simple promise: "1,000 songs in your pocket." MP3 players transformed how young people engaged with music, letting them carry their entire musical world wherever they went. This portability made music a constant companion, and kids ages three to 18 currently listen to music and audio for 46 minutes per weekday.

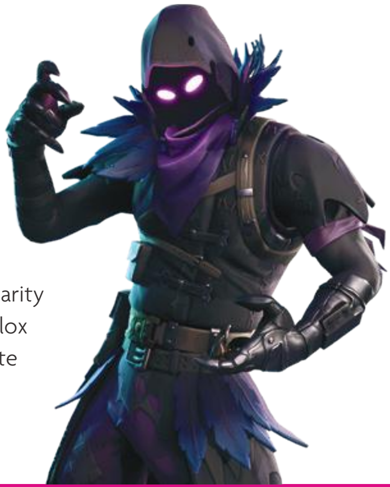


3 Touchscreen devices

Neither the iPhone (2007) nor the iPad (2010) were designed for children, but kids quickly adopted tablets and gravitated towards smartphones as they got older. Entertainment became portable and let children curate their own media lives for the first time. Six- to 12-year-olds spend an average of nine hours a week on smartphones and nearly six hours on tablets.

4 Minecraft, Roblox and Fortnite

Metaverse games deserve their own category. These worlds act as virtual playgrounds for building, creating and exploring—sparking imagination in ways that traditional entertainment can't. Popularity scores among three to 18s put Roblox at 15%, Minecraft at 12% and Fortnite at 7% (excluding China, where only Minecraft is available).

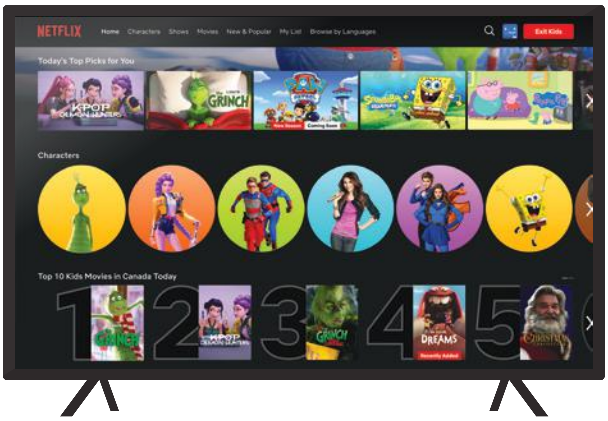


5 Gaming consoles and handhelds

Gaming consoles have been in living rooms since the 1970s, but innovations since 1995 have significantly transformed the gaming experience. Online multiplayer platforms (Xbox Live, 2002) and the Nintendo Switch's hybrid design in 2017 made it social. Modern gaming emphasizes creativity (one in eight kids ages six to 12 build video games as their top activity) and connection (socializing ranked third, with around 10% of kids listing this as their number-one pursuit).

6 YouTube

When the very first video (*Me at the zoo*) was uploaded to YouTube in 2005, few could have predicted its dominance in children's entertainment. The platform launched formats that were unlikely on linear TV—and remain so—ranging from tutorials to influencer content. Music videos lead viewing (34%), followed by gaming (30%) and shorts (25%). Today, every kids brand needs a YouTube strategy.



7 Video streaming services

Netflix began streaming with just 1,000 titles in January 2007—letting families choose what they want to watch, when they want to watch it. Other SVOD services followed, turning video rental shops into relics within a decade. Across the countries surveyed, Netflix is typically the most used subscription video platform, dominating on-demand viewing among kids.

8 Social media platforms

Although social platforms like Instagram and TikTok are not aimed specifically at children, they've reshaped how they communicate. TikTok encourages quick, snackable vertical videos, letting kids avoid uninteresting content. Usage among six to 12s is substantial (Instagram 65%, TikTok 58%), and even higher for 13 to 18s, driving connections with peers, influencers and family.

9 Broadband and mobile connectivity

Without broadband and 4G/5G, most of the previously mentioned innovations would be frustrating if not impossible. Connectivity, speed, reliability and quality underpin streaming, gaming, apps and the entire digital transformation of childhood.

10 Generative AI

At the risk of sounding repetitive, AI was never designed for children—yet by Q1 2025, 27% of three- to 12-year-olds had used platforms like ChatGPT or Copilot, and another 30% planned to. Kids are creating, learning and coding, as AI disrupts content, creation, distribution and interaction simultaneously.

These 10 innovations share a common trajectory: Each has given children more control. From passive viewers to curators of personalized media, today's kids exercise unprecedented agency over the entertainment they consume. The challenge for the next 30 years will be ensuring that technology empowers rather than exploits them. K

AI Tool Guide

AI products are flooding the market, competing for animation studios' time and money. Here's what you need to know about the tools producers are actually using to solve the biggest pain points in the production process.

BY: RYAN TUCHOW

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Writing, Storyboarding & Script Analysis

So far, AI products that focus on supporting the writing and storyboarding process are really analysis tools that look at scripts and do the time-consuming work of counting shots, characters and VFX. The key point here is that these tools aren't doing the writing for you, but giving you an early sense of red flags (like a huge cast of characters or a ton of VFX shots in one episode) so you can plan ahead and make choices before animation has started and changes become more costly.

ChatGPT

COMPANY: OpenAI

WHAT IT DOES: This mainstream chatbot can respond to user prompts with text and images, and it also has a voice mode that can create speech. Since 2022, the industry has been using it to do everything from brainstorming ideas and writing emails, to research and even creating art. Some folks *Kidscreen* spoke to said they even use it as a creative sparring partner to get feedback on scripts. At its best, it's a tool that can help with ideation and bouncing ideas around during the story development phase.

PRICING: There's a free option, plus paid tiers ranging from US$20 to US$200 per month that include early access to new features.

WHY IT STANDS OUT: "It is very useful to break down your story into shots," says David Kwok, CEO of Tiny Island Productions. "I never use it for generating images because it's quite slow." Particle6 Productions' senior video editor and AI generator Heather Mills adds: "This tool is great at understanding nuanced dialogue and tone in scripts. If there's something not quite right in a specific scene, you can use the Canvas interface (a split-screen editor) to highlight parts of the dialogue, and then prompt the tool to create specific tonal and emotional shifts. We'd use ChatGPT at a more micro level to improve rhythm of dialogue and emotional beats within a single scene, rather than a whole script."

DeepSeek

COMPANY: High-Flyer

WHAT IT DOES: Like ChatGPT, this Chinese large-language model can help brainstorm ideas for story development, answer questions and analyze data. For writers and producers, it can examine a screenplay and provide information—including detailed descriptions of shot types and camera angles, which can be fed into image and video generation tools.

PRICING: There's a free tier and a pay-as-you-go model for its API.

WHY IT STANDS OUT: "Besides ChatGPT, DeepSeek is a great assistant," says Kwok. "For story, I normally use ChatGPT and DeepSeek. What we really need now is to give [DeepSeek] a story, let it break it down into shots for you, and then use it to generate videos."

AS the industry grapples with AI, the conversation around its use is shifting—from fear and rejection to a more pragmatic focus on how to adopt the technology ethically, sustainably and legally. In some cases, AI is increasingly viewed as less of a creative threat and more of a business necessity, as producers face growing pressure from buyers to deliver projects faster and at a lower cost.

To lift the curtain on this often confusing and overwhelming software market, *Kidscreen* presents its first-ever AI tool guide. Rather than attempting to catalogue everything available, this resource focuses on the products producers say they're actually using, highlighting tools that help save time, reduce costs and streamline workflows.

We also asked production experts to weigh in on where these tools deliver real value, which parts of the production process they make easier, what long-standing challenges they can help solve, and how they stack up in a fast-growing field of competitors.

Gemini

COMPANY: Google

WHAT IT DOES: Billed as a creative partner for the pre-production phase, Gemini analyzes a script's pacing and dialogue in seconds, as well as breaking down a shot list and highlighting scenes that might be ambitious for an indie budget. It's also a potentially powerful tool for storyboarding, since it can generate images and also act as a director by critiquing composition, lighting and focal length, and noting how a shot fits into a script's narrative flow.

PRICING: There's a free tier that lets you upload up to 50 pages a month, an Advanced tier for US$20 per month (up to 1,500 pages) and an Enterprise level (up to 3,000 pages) that starts at US$20 per user per month.

WHY IT STANDS OUT: "This tool excels at big-picture analysis of an entire script," says Mills. "Since Gemini is a Google-based company, and therefore connected to Google Search, it can also check facts across the whole script in real time. And when prompted, it can identify pacing, story beats and character arcs throughout the whole script—essentially giving you a summary of the story. A great use case for both [Gemini and ChatGPT] is uploading a section of a script and the corresponding section of storyboard, and then asking if the tone and emotion in the script are reflected in the cinematography displayed in the storyboard. You could then prompt either tool to generate alternative shots that reflect the script better."

Scriptsee

COMPANY: Motion Tech Lab

WHAT IT DOES: This AI-powered pre-production platform helps writing and production teams more effectively plan out their stories before storyboarding begins or cameras start rolling. It can analyze TV and film scripts in minutes to break down the number of characters, locations, props and effects that will be required. It can also analyze story arc and emotional flow by examining the script's language. Scriptsee uses 27 AI models combining natural language processing and large-language models to identify and label different parts of a script. It can analyze a 30-minute TV script in under two minutes, and a feature-length script in seven.

PRICING: There's a pay-as-you-go tier that costs US$125 per script, or a monthly subscription for studios at US$600.

WHY IT STANDS OUT: "This tool uses AI to break down scripts into data and identify emotional arcs in the story, at the same time highlighting production risks like budgeting and scheduling," says Mills.

David Kwok created this VFX test with Dreamina and animated it using Luma, to see if AI could produce massive VFX shots like those in Hollywood movies

ScriptSense

COMPANY: The Cinelytic Group

WHAT IT DOES: ScriptSense can generate script coverage reports that include a logline, subgenres the project fits into, similar titles and a breakdown of characters. There's also a chatbot that provides answers to questions like how many locations are in the script and whether there are any stunts, making it easy for producers to keep track of what a script requires. It can also offer suggestions for simplifying a story to cut down on costly elements—flagging if there are numerous set designs, costumes and props, for example.

PRICING: A pro tier is available for US$99 a month for one user, providing five script coverage reports monthly. There's also a free tier that delivers one script report a month, and an enterprise tier for unlimited users.

WHY IT STANDS OUT: "It's very impressive," says Evan Baily, president of Consolidated Baily. "I haven't used it for a long time, but the last time I did, it not only gave very smart notes on a screenplay, but also feedback on buyers and other equity investors that might be interested, [notes on] how to simplify to cut the budget, [and] casting suggestions, including an awareness of the social following of various actors that might make the project more attractive to financiers in specific territories."

Image Generation

A key part of the development process is creating mood boards, playing around with character designs, and generating art that can describe the tone of a project. These tools can save time and effort by automating the mechanical work of manually editing a piece of art, removing elements from it, or extending its background.

Dreamina

COMPANY: ByteDance

WHAT IT DOES: Dreamina's multiple capabilities include image and video generation, text to image, editing and up-scaling. Creators can also make avatars that realistically lip-sync, plus generate AI-composed music that the program matches to the content and pacing of the video. ByteDance has integrated Dreamina into its AI-powered video editor CapCut, so consumers don't have to jump between tools.

PRICING: Tiers range from free to US$84 per month.

WHY IT STANDS OUT: "Dreamina will probably continue to be one of the key AI-generated content players in the market," says Kwok. "Its image and video generation are getting stronger and stronger. It is slowly developing the full set of AI tools for production, [and] it has several breakthrough AI developments for animation."

Using Dreamina, Kwok generated this virtual K-pop star, then created TikTok videos in which the character sings and dances realistically

Firefly

COMPANY: Adobe

WHAT IT DOES: An AI image, video and mood board generator, Firefly has several features for quickly creating and editing art, including an image editor that can change backgrounds, colors and objects in existing images. To make sure the tool is commercially safe, Firefly's first model was trained on licensed images from Adobe Stock and public domain content for which copyrights had expired. Beyond generating images and videos, it can also layer on a soundtrack, voiceovers and narration to videos.

PRICING: There's a free limited version, and paid plans range from US$10 to more than US$150 per month, including unlimited access to video generation.

WHY IT STANDS OUT: "I used to use it quite a bit, as the result is realistic, but the quality is losing out to the rest," " says Kwok. Adds creative consultant and director Daniel Efergan: "Adobe is working hard to discover how AI generation might fit into the industry's creative practice. Its approach to working with a licensed dataset is the right one (although it still comes with certain legal and ethical complications), but in my experience, its Firefly models don't perform as well as others out there."

Flux

COMPANY: Black Forest Labs

WHAT IT DOES: Flux can generate new images and edit existing ones based on user prompts. Unlike most image-generation tools, it lets users use both images and text to prompt the model to do anything from simple clean-up to making significant changes, like adding snow to a picture. Black Forest offers several image generation models and APIs based on its Flux model.

PRICING: Flux's API pricing ranges from US$0.04 to US$0.25 per image.

WHY IT STANDS OUT: "One of Flux.2's secret superpowers is its ability to up-res images," says Baily. "Try it if you've been iterating extensively on an image in Nano Banana, because image quality tends to deteriorate across multiple iterations, and Nano Banana struggles to restore sharpness and detail, even if you give it reference images for the sharpness and detail you're trying to reconstruct." Adds Kwok: "Flux used to be the best tool to generate realistic humans, but it is costly. Now there are more and more tools catching up, and at a lower cost."

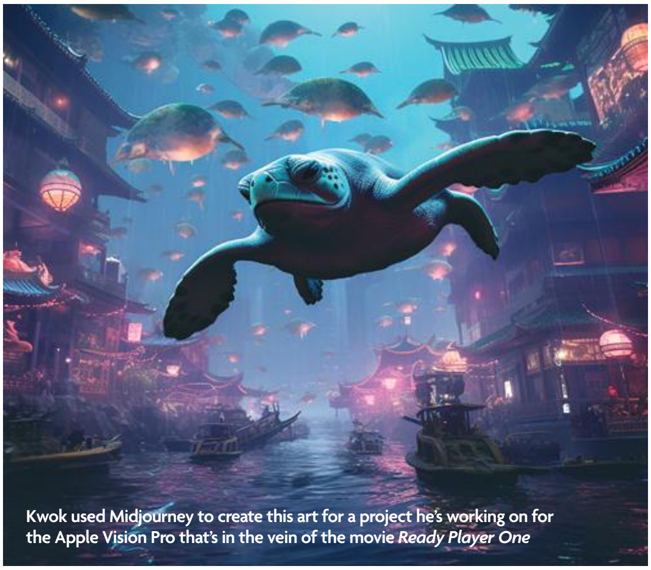
Higgsfield

COMPANY: Higgsfield

WHAT IT DOES: It's an image and video generator that can also edit videos and create selfies in different styles based on existing photos—useful for creating social media profiles for fictional characters. Higgsfield claims to stand apart from other tools because it gives creators a lot of control over camera movements. Users can generate shots that simulate advanced filming techniques like overhead shots and dolly moves.

PRICING: Tiers range from US$8 to US$75 per month.

WHY IT STANDS OUT: "A tool used for both image and video generations, it gives us the opportunity to test out multiple AI models in one program, so we can easily compare results and choose the model that is best suited to the project in terms of style," says Mills. And Kwok notes: "For fancy camera moves, this is really good."



Kwok used Midjourney to create this art for a project he's working on for the Apple Vision Pro that's in the vein of the movie *Ready Player One*

Kling

COMPANY: Kuaishou

WHAT IT DOES: This Chinese AI tool can create complex motion and animations, change the background of existing footage, and handle various camera movements. It can also fix poorly generated lip-syncs.

PRICING: Plans range from US$120 to more than US$2,000 per year (paid monthly or annually), including access to image and video models and priority features.

WHY IT STANDS OUT: "It understands the prompt for animation way better than most tools," says Kwok. And Mills adds: "This is game-changing in AI terms because character/object consistency is an issue that crops up all the time on most AI video generators. The motion on both 2.6 and O1 is also now pretty fluid, with more understanding for realism, depth and complex human movements."

Midjourney

COMPANY: Midjourney

WHAT IT DOES: Midjourney is a text-to-image generator with the capability to create detailed images from simple prompts and upscale its outputs. Users can also upload images, and Midjourney will customize the art (color palette, atmosphere, etc.) to the look of a specific character. Plus there's a bot available through the social media app Discord that users can prompt, and a model specifically for creating anime-style art. A major caveat: Disney, Universal Pictures and WBD have filed copyright infringement lawsuits against Midjourney, alleging that its models were trained on stolen art.

PRICING: Plans range from US$10 to US$120 per month, including features like unlimited video and image generations.

WHY IT STANDS OUT: "This tool excels at creating cinematic photographs with minimal prompting," says Mills. "From a single prompt, it offers four options with subtle differences, so you can choose the tone and style of the image easily." However, Kwok notes: "This [was] the best image-gen tool initially, [with] good aesthetic sense. But due to cost and other tools catching up, I stopped using it."

Nano Banana

COMPANY: Google

WHAT IT DOES: Built on the foundation of Google's Gemini 3 technology, this tool has powerful capabilities for creating and editing images. It also connects to Google Search, so it can easily take an input like the image of a plant and provide information on its care and growth. It can also create storyboards from a single image, complete with potential types of shots and camera movement—all handy uses for producers who are strapped for time and money.

PRICING: Plans range from US$12 per month for individuals, to US$80 a year for studios.

WHY IT STANDS OUT: "It can do remarkably consistent reconstructions of characters and scenes from new camera angles—great when you're planning a scene," says Baily. "And the ability to work with it iteratively in a Gemini chat is very helpful." Kwok adds: "This is a breakthrough for fixing shots, and the Pro is even better. But Dreamina has the same ability. Whatever Nano can't fix, I will use Dreamina for."

Stable Diffusion

COMPANY: Stability AI

WHAT IT DOES: This text-to-image and image-to-image generator can make photorealistic art. Launched in 2022, Stable Diffusion has had time to simplify its process, so the tool is easier to use. It has some capabilities for creating videos or motion from still images, and there are lots of tutorials and support to help those who are new to using it.

PRICING: There's a free tier, plus paid plans ranging from US$20 to US$40 per month.

WHY IT STANDS OUT: "Together with ComfyUI, this is a superb tool, especially for those who want control," says Efergan. "Security usage is good, as it's run locally. However, you probably need powerful hardware to run it. And whoever uses it must be tech-savvy. Stable Diffusion's suite of models have been deeply embedded in the open-source community for a long time now (at least in 'AI time,' which feels similar to dog years). As such, the support, community and iterations that have developed around these models are immense."

Veo 3.1

COMPANY: Google DeepMind

WHAT IT DOES: Veo creates short videos in a variety of animation styles—boasting more realistic animation, better adherence to prompts and improved visual quality when it comes to turning images into videos. Creators can put two images in, and Veo will generate a video that blends them together. It can also handle shadows and lighting for a more natural look. On the way is the ability to cut out any details and have the AI reconstruct the background and surroundings so the image still looks realistic.

PRICING: It's accessible through a Google AI subscription, with plans ranging from US$26.99 to US$339.99 per month, depending on storage.

WHY IT STANDS OUT: "This is a pretty good tool for animation," says Kwok. "But it is too expensive for beginners who are just learning it."

Video Generation

Video generation tools can solve some familiar challenges in this part of the process, including giving producers a cheaper and faster way to create teasers or show off the tone and feel they're looking for in later non-AI versions. Many broadcasters and studios have (or are developing) rules governing the use of AI in pitch materials and productions. And while some are taking a more selective approach and using it just in the early parts of the process, others are going all out and doing the bulk of the work with these tools.

ComfyUI

COMPANY: Comfy Org

WHAT IT DOES: For users who want to combine AI models and operations together, ComfyUI is a free open-source software that lets users build AI-powered workflows. A ComfyUI workflow can generate any type of media, including images, video, audio and AI agent.

PRICING: The basic plan costs US$20 per month, with an enterprise option available.

WHY IT STANDS OUT: "ComfyUI is the bedrock of many people's AI-driven workflows, and I would suggest that right now, most serious pipelines will be using ComfyUI at some point," says Efergan. However, it comes with complexity because "unlike a tool such as Runway or Veo, you tend to deal with the guts of the process—which is powerful when it works, but when it doesn't, it can send you into a spiral of unfathomable errors."

Grok Imagine

COMPANY: xAI

WHAT IT DOES: Text-to-image generation, text-to-video and image and video editing are among Grok Imagine's features. It has different models, including a fun one that delivers more dynamic camera movements and comedic animation. And it's fast, according to David Kwok.

PRICING: Plans range from US$30 to US$50 per month, with an agency tier priced at US$200 per month.

WHY IT STANDS OUT: "When you submit an image to it, the image is animated with a prompt within seconds—it's almost real-time," says Kwok. "You can adjust the animation accordingly with the prompt to see how it reacts, and it is very useful for quick results. It has both a normal and a fun mode, and the latter is especially useful for character animation."

Marey

COMPANY: Moonvalley

WHAT IT DOES: Marey is a video generator that can transform 2D scenes into 3D environments so animators can direct the camera as if they were on a live-action set. Plus, the tool can pull motion from a reference video—such as water falling or lightning striking—and apply it to new subjects or scenes to create realistic physics. It can also extend videos and add effects, while preserving a scene's original look and motion, which could cut down on the time and cost of having to reshoot footage. Users can simply drag objects into the video to move elements, instead of entering prompts. This tool aims to be a mix of production-grade outputs built on a model that's trained only on licensed, high-res footage.

PRICING: Users can generate 1080p videos using AI trained on fully licensed data, with plans ranging from US$14.99 to US$149.99 per month. Enterprise pricing is also available.

WHY IT STANDS OUT: "Moonvalley's Marey is an attractive proposition: A video-based foundational model trained solely on licensed content," says Efergan. "Its creative outlet (Asteria) is producing some of the most progressive integrations of AI into its practice, and this approach can be seen in Marey's features and workflow, as it has the potential to be extremely useful to filmmakers and animators. This opportunity is sometimes let down by the quality of the model's outputs, although this is changing all the time."

Runway Gen-4.5

COMPANY: Runway AI

WHAT IT DOES: Introduced on December 1, Runway Gen-4.5 boasts that it creates cinematic and highly realistic videos. Users can make complex scenes with multiple elements, life-like physics (something AI models tend to struggle with) and facial detail. It also creates stylized, expressive motion in animation. In one case study, producers of the live-action series *House of David* for Amazon used Runway to create photorealistic visuals in a VFX-heavy scene in just a few weeks, compared to the four or five months it would have taken by more traditional means.

PRICING: There's a free tier, with paid plans ranging from US$12 to US$76 per month, plus an enterprise tier with custom pricing.

WHY IT STANDS OUT: "[Runway Gen-4.5 is] one of the most advanced and recent video generation tools," says Mills. "It promises to deliver superior physics simulation, fine-grained temporal control, and high-fidelity motion that rivals actual footage." Kwok notes: "This is a very good tool. The only challenge is the cost for beginners."

Sora

COMPANY: OpenAI

WHAT IT DOES: Sora creates images using ChatGPT Images, meaning that users can tap into ChatGPT's advanced instruction and customization options. Once images are made, users are then able to generate videos from them. It's worth noting that in December, OpenAI signed a landmark licensing agreement with Disney to add more than 200 characters from the studio's brand portfolio into Sora. And a selection of UGC content made in Sora featuring Disney characters will be made available on Disney+.

PRICING: It's available through ChatGPT Plus at roughly US$20 per month, or US$200 per month for the Pro plan, which includes faster generations and the highest video resolutions.

WHY IT STANDS OUT: "Sora's output is very natural and realistic compared to the rest. But again, the price is too high for beginners who are just learning the tool," says Kwok. Adds Efergan: "Although Sora's launch came with a grand fanfare, I've found that it's never quite felt like a tool for creative professionals. It lacks the features that enable more granular control, meaning generations involve a mix of prompting and luck, and limit communication from creative practice."

Particle6 used Seedream and Nano Banana Pro (with Higgsfield as the tool provider) to recreate historical locations for the 10-episode series *Streets of the Past*, which premiered on The History Channel in the Netherlands last month

Audio & Music

Whether it's putting an AI-generated voice over a script or storyboard to quickly check a script's pacing and timing, or making a rough music track to level up an animatic right before a presentation, the following tools aim to make the critical audio stage easier for producers.

ElevenLabs — COMPANY: ElevenLabs

WHAT IT DOES: This voice AI platform offers services such as text-to-speech, AI agents for customer service, voice cloning and dubbing in more than 20 languages. It can also create music and make voice clones. The company is building a library in which producers can license, with permission, virtual replications of famous voices. Matthew McConaughey and Michael Caine have already signed up to lend their voices to it. Imagine the opportunity for productions of any size to "cast" famous actors without having to work around their schedules or pay typical movie star rates.

PRICING: There's a free tier, along with paid monthly plans ranging from US$1 to more than US$1,000 for businesses.

WHY IT STANDS OUT: "This tool is used for generating realistic-sounding voices for which you can adjust the speed, tone and variation of speech," says Mills. "It can produce voices with realistic and emotive intonation that perfectly replicates human speech."

Suno — COMPANY: Warner Music Group

WHAT IT DOES: Users can enter a prompt, and this AI tool will generate music and songs in a variety of styles. Paid subscribers retain commercial rights to their music and can use it for any purpose, such as in the background of music videos or as part of an album.

PRICING: The free plan lets users create 10 songs daily, while paid monthly tiers offer up to 500 songs for US$8 (Pro) and up to 2,000 songs for US$24 (Premier).

WHY IT STANDS OUT: "It generates full-length, high-quality songs, either with lyrics or just instrumental tracks, from simple text prompts. You can change the mood and style of the music to suit the needs of the project," says Mills. Kwok also praises it: "This is the best tool for music and song creation. I cannot think of any other tool that's better than Suno." k

Sparking success

Ember brings three tools together to automate production.

Seeing demand from producers needing to be faster and save money, Canadian animation software company Toon Boom has been building an AI-powered suite of tools called Ember to streamline production and automate repetitive tasks. Its features are also available as optional add-ons to the company's Storyboard Pro and Harmony (animation software) products, creating a more integrated experience.

Most AI tools on the market handle one or two production tasks (although this is starting to change), and building Ember is Toon Boom's answer for studios that can't afford to spend the time—or money—researching and testing several different tools to determine which one works best for each production need.

By and large, producers are also looking for an efficient, end-to-end pipeline so they don't have to jump from tool to tool, says Toon Boom CEO Colin Bohm.

Ember combines software from three different vendors into one pipeline to make some key parts of the animation process easier. The tech uses Bria AI for image manipulation, ElevenLabs for creating rough voice tracks using AI voices, and Google Gemini for script analysis. Toon Boom picked these software providers specifically because their tools respect copyright, which is of paramount concern to artists, says Bohm.

On the script side, Ember can check how many scenes are in a script, what camera movements there are, and any potential props that appear—helping storyboard artists work up boards without spending hours manually breaking down a scene. AI can handle this work in minutes, says CTO Francisco Del Cueto.

This tool also saves time in storyboarding. To check how long an episode is and how much time the dialogue takes up, artists would traditionally have to record themselves saying all of the dialogue. But Ember can automate this by creating a first pass of rough audio tracks. This isn't meant to be the final product, but it saves time for the artist, especially since boards for TV sometimes have to be made very quickly, adds Del Cueto.

Ember doesn't have prompt-to-image capabilities, but it can upscale an image, expand an existing image's background or erase elements that artists don't want—all uses that could potentially shave hours of time from an artist's schedule.

This tech is expected to save studios between 5% and 10% of both time and budget compared to producing with traditional tools, says Bohm. And those savings can be expected to increase slightly if the storyboards are particularly complex and would take more time for humans to break down.

Toon Boom is committed to developing Ember further, with plans to invest over the next 18 to 36 months, adds Bohm. One key update in the works will let AI clone an artist's voice from a small sample, so the artist can have their voice over the board reading at the speed they want.

Also on the way is a library of sound effects that will identify the sounds needed in an analyzed script and provide them to artists. This will save them from having to hunt down the sound effects in a library outside of their pipeline.

There's also a tool for animation in-betweening in the works, which will erase the need for other tools that require a lot of prompting and clean-up work to get right.

The industry is seeing a shift in how animation is produced in real time, and AI is creating opportunities for producers to change how different parts of a production pipeline work, adds Bohm.

Toon Boom is having more and more conversations with its clients about AI becoming a necessity. And while adoption is happening at different pacing, it's certainly happening, so the company wants to be ready. "If this is a nine-inning game, we're only in the first." —RT

30 YEARS OF KIDSCREEN • SINCE 1996

THEN NOW NEXT

Thirty years in kids entertainment feels less like a straight line and more like a series of sharp turns. Some were obvious at the time. Others only made sense in hindsight. And a few are still unfolding.

Platforms have risen and fallen. Business models have stretched and snapped. And through it all, kids kept moving faster than the adults trying to reach them. But one thing has remained true through it all: This industry never stands still for long.

To mark *Kidscreen*'s 30th anniversary, we paused to look back—and to look ahead. What follows isn't a history lesson or a victory lap. It's a snapshot of an industry shaped by constant change, creative risk and a stubborn belief that what we do matters deeply.

Please join us as we celebrate three decades of proudly supporting that. And here's to bravely embracing whatever comes next.

30 YEARS 30 VOICES

Kidscreen asked 30 influential figures from across the kids entertainment landscape to share their thoughts and lessons learned from the last 30 years.

What would surprise your 1996 self most about where the industry is now?

My younger self would be amazed at how dramatically kids have evolved from passive viewers to active creators shaping the stories and experiences they consume. Back then, children were limited to watching what broadcasters offered. Today they use technology to engage, influence and drive content across every platform. While content is still king, kids today are the emperors.

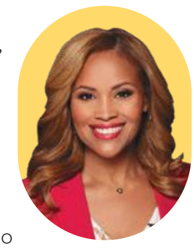
The world of content is now limitless, with endless opportunities to create meaningful experiences for young audiences. We still need to ensure that kids have access to and can discover quality content, but it's exciting to have the means to create new ways to engage and inspire them.

Agnes Augustin — president and CEO, Shaw Rocket Fund

My 1996 Disney Channel scheduler self would be utterly floored by anime's global, mainstream dominance—a true cultural titan that's no longer niche! But the real jaw-dropper is the emergence of AI in animation. The notion of computers assisting artists, generating designs or creating entire sequences would seem like pure science fiction.

My optimism for kids content and animation remains strong. Animation's presence on every streaming service is undeniable, yet established evergreen IPs often benefit from algorithm recommendations. However, daring new ideas are breaking through in new ways, forming vital connections with kids and families. This proves that good ideas truly come from everywhere: Content is king, data is queen, and 'glocal' is the secret sauce.

Julien Borde — president, Mediawan Kids & Family



Young people have always shaped culture, but what would have surprised 1996 me is how fundamentally their behavior is now driving the entire industry. Today's kids move seamlessly between formats and expect worlds to be available everywhere. This fluid engagement has pushed us to think in ecosystems, not episodes—broadening how stories are built, sustained, marketed and shared.

What keeps me optimistic is that even as technology and platforms change, children's curiosity and wonder never do. They're engaging with stories in smarter, more dynamic ways, which pushes us all to innovate. Great content always breaks through, and today we have better tools to understand what kids respond to.

When you combine strong creative instincts with real behavioral insight, there's enormous room to build characters and franchises that last a lifetime.

Ayo Davis — president, Disney Branded Television

What would thrill my 1996 self is how much choice, control and community kids finally have! Back then, we tried to engineer that with all sorts of creative hacks, but technology finally caught up with ambition.

What might trouble that younger me is how difficult discoverability has become—reaching kids at scale is now quite the puzzle. Obviously, two sides of the same very valuable coin.

Amy Friedman — founder and president, Redhead Consulting

1996 TO 2026 TIMELINE

JANUARY 1996
Kidscreen launches as a leading global resource for the kids entertainment industry.

FEBRUARY 1996
Disney Online launches a kid-focused web service.

JULY 1996
Tickle Me Elmo plush hits shelves, becoming a holiday craze.

SEPTEMBER 1996
Blues Clues launches on Nickelodeon's Nick Jr. block.

What happened to television? I loved TV...I watched it all the time. I was so enthralled with appointment viewing—gathering with my friends to watch what are now the classics. There was a sense of community when sharing time with the people you love to laugh at the same fun content. And for a while, I was hard-pressed to find it again...until I looked a little closer. Until I watched my teenager during the pandemic share screens with her friends on FaceTime while they watched some soapy reality TV together. Or when I could hear my younger kid arguing, laughing and playing with his friends on Roblox, as if they were in the same room.

The delivery system has changed dramatically, and that would have seemed impossible to my 1996 self, but the experience is the same. Sharing ideas, reactions, emotions and experiences is still important.

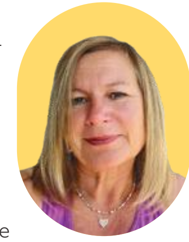
I have always focused on who our audience is, and encouraged my team to do the same. If we all have the same end goal—to entertain and ultimately put a smile on a kid's face and heart—our day-to-day tasks will fill our soul.

Athena Georgaklis — freelance executive producer (formerly with Nelvana and Teletoon Canada)

The 1996 me would be floored by the sheer abundance: Kids now carry a global studio in their pockets, with tens of thousands of shows, channels, games and creators just a swipe away. But I'd be just as shocked that discovery and quality control have gotten harder, not easier—parents are swimming in choice, while many of the biggest platforms feel like a digital Wild West. We traded guided choices with limited doses for chaos, while trusted brands—not parent agency—became the most valuable currency in kids media.

The next frontier is co-creation (with guardrails): Kids using AI, games and immersive worlds to not just consume stories, but to make them and connect them to real-life passions while learning to be critical, ethical and resilient digital citizens. Done right, this is a golden age of creativity and personalized learning. Done wrong, it's disturbing manipulation and more inequality.

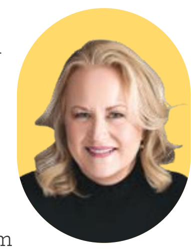
Michael Levine — children's learning & media expert (formerly with Noggin and Sesame Workshop)



I wouldn't have thought that so little regard would be given to children, considering that they're our future; or that broadcasters would be so risk-adverse. Broadcasting should be focusing on this area because it's easier than ever to target kids and parents by marketing to them through all available media platforms. Children need strong programming and attention-building content. I wouldn't have thought it would be such a struggle!

However, I see our business as cyclical. The buying will come back from broadcasters. I do think that as creators and distributors, we have so much power right now to be gatekeepers ourselves, and to build content using focused campaigns that include L&M and direct marketing campaigns from the onset. We also see brands as buyers breaking through to attract audiences.

Tatiana Kober — president, Bejuba! Entertainment



My key takeaway is 'compression.' It began in the '90s in retail product categories and age demos. Regional retailers that failed to innovate either perished or were acquired by larger competitors. Video games—both handheld and console—emerged, capturing kids' attention and stealing shelf space from traditional toys, accelerating children's growth out of dolls and action figures.

This shift likely fueled the rise of 'kidult' trends, as children quickly aged out of toys and now seek to recapture nostalgic aspects of their youth that flew by too quickly.

I am inspired by the rich content in the market today, emphasizing messaging around empathy, teamwork and caring for our world—themes that resonate with both kids and parents, and more importantly, that encourage kids to act. In the case of Miraculous, I want to create licensing programs reflecting the compelling content we create that encourages kids to feel like they can be a hero and make a real difference in the world.

Kids today are more aware than ever of global issues, and they genuinely want to contribute to positive change. That gives me tremendous optimism for the future generations.

Roz Nowicki — global head of consumer products, Miraculous Corp

OCTOBER 1996

Discovery Kids Channel launches.

NOVEMBER 1996

DVDs enter the market, reshaping the entertainment landscape.

Bandai releases Tamagotchi in the US.

APRIL 1998

Toon Disney launches.

Netflix kicks off its online DVD-by-mail service.

JULY 1998

Cartoon Network creates cartoonnetwork.com, introducing games, videos and early digital extensions of the channel.

NOVEMBER 1998

The Powerpuff Girls launches on Cartoon Network.

MAY 1999

SpongeBob SquarePants debuts as a sneak preview, before its official launch on Nickelodeon in July.

SEPTEMBER 1999

PBS KIDS launches in the US.

MARCH 2000

PS2 launches, eventually becoming the best-selling game console of all time.

The dot-com bubble bursts, leading to a recession, which eventually affects kids media markets worldwide.

What has been the biggest creative risk that paid off in the industry?

If you define 'the industry' as traditional players only, I'm surprised at how little innovation there has been in formats and genres. But if you draw the circle more broadly (YouTube, vertical video, video games, apps, podcasts, plus all the stuff kids are watching/playing/listening to that isn't made for them), there's been an explosion.

And that's nothing compared to what's coming. AI will usher in an era of hyper-tailored content, further empower creators, and collapse the boundaries between formats. We need to invent new business models that align with what's coming—or at least catch up to what already is.

Evan Baily — president, Consolidated Baily

Trusting artists is key. The creator-driven era that started in the late '90s and early '00s ushered in a new wave of talent and cartoons that still is felt today. I grew up in the '70s and '80s, when there were no contemporary cartoons made by individual creators—everything was a toy commercial.

In this era where success is defined as 'phenomenon or nothing,' there is so much fear of not succeeding that testing and data has become the rule, and there is not a lot of room for gut instincts anymore. But from my perspective, true phenoms are totally unique and stand out; they're like nothing that came before.

Craig McCracken — animation producer, Warner Bros. Animation

AUGUST 2000

Dora the Explorer premieres on Nickelodeon.

APRIL 2001

Yu-Gi-Oh! gets a US premiere.

MAY 2001

MGA Entertainment launches the Bratz toy line.

SEPTEMBER 2001

9/11 happens.
In the following months, younger viewers flock to kids channels to escape the news.

OCTOBER 2001

The Walt Disney Company buys Fox Family Worldwide.

Degrassi: The Next Generation premieres on CBC. (It goes on to run until 2015.)

NOVEMBER 2001

WB's *Harry Potter and the Philosopher's Stone* premieres, casting a big-screen spell over the entire world.

Disney acquires The Baby Einstein Company.

MAY 2002

Columbia Pictures' *Spider-Man* premieres, spawning a mega-film franchise.

How has your personal philosophy about kids audiences evolved?

My personal philosophy has remained the same: We have a mission to fuel kids' imaginations with relatable, engaging and entertaining content that provides joy, laughter, community and thought.

Kids still attach to characters and stories. They want to get immersed in imaginary worlds through series, movies, imaginary play, games and experiences. This seemingly doesn't change—although how content is delivered continues to evolve.

Margie Cohn — president, DreamWorks Animation

The change from linear to on-demand viewing has transferred power to the audience to decide what they watch, where and when. Kids audiences still want the same things: authentic relatable characters, action, laughs and great stories. The question now is, are we serving the audience or the algorithm, and are they the same thing? I suspect not.

Fundamentally, the anatomy of a hit hasn't changed. When an IP resonates so profoundly with an audience that they don't just want to watch it, they want to share it, play it, read it, eat it, wear it, sing it and experience it immersively IRL, then it's a hit, regardless of how it's consumed or what platform it's on.

Patrick Egerton — co-founder and chief content officer, Cheeky Little Media

This industry is transforming faster than ever. My advice is to not just embrace the change, but lean into it. The entertainment landscape is no longer defined by traditional studios or linear models; fandom now emerges from unexpected platforms and personalities.

With AI and new creative tools democratizing production, talented storytellers can build world-class creative with high production values at low cost. Success today comes from understanding where audiences live and how they engage—and being bold enough to experiment ahead of the curve.

Chris Williams — founder and CEO, pocket.watch

I'm not sure if it's that kids are getting older faster, or if they were simply not given the credit that was due in past decades, but it's very clear to me that they are becoming sophisticated at a young age, with the ability to process complex ideas and emotions well beyond what was recognized previously.

That emotional connection is exactly that—it's emotional and can't be taken for granted. And it's critical to build on that connection by staying true to those values; otherwise you risk losing them and the community they've built.

Suzy Raia — EVP of global consumer products, BBC Studios

Coming from a background in child development, my philosophy about young audiences hasn't really changed in 30-plus years. I still look to Piaget and the idea that kids' growth path doesn't change; only the context does. I'm also fond of quoting Jeff Bezos, who says that few people ask him what's *not* going to change, which he finds more important than what will.

Part of me believes that Generations Alpha and Beta will seek new balance with media. While their parents are reading *The Anxious Generation* and applauding technology and social media bans, kids themselves are rethinking their relationship with devices ('rawdogging boredom'), perhaps driven by paralysis of choice.

My other mind sees social gaming platforms becoming 'everything' spaces—the lounge and the cinema, in addition to the game room. How will this change communal cultural experiences?

David Kleeman — SVP of global trends, Dubit

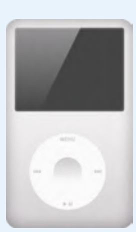
Kids aren't passive viewers; they're insightful, curious collaborators in the storytelling process. Honoring their voices, embracing their imaginations, and creating with a deep sense of responsibility for their experiences isn't just important, it's essential.

One of the hardest leadership lessons has been finding the balance between protecting the essence of our work and evolving how we deliver it. Staying rooted in the mission is critical, but so is trusting our teams to experiment and innovate. You can't navigate industry change by clinging to what's familiar. You have to embrace transformation with purpose.

Kay Wilson Stallings — EVP and chief creative development & production officer, Sesame Workshop

NOVEMBER 2002

SARS breaks out, eventually cutting international toycos and retailers off from their Chinese manufacturers. (Some shift to manufacturing in other countries to cope.)



APRIL 2003

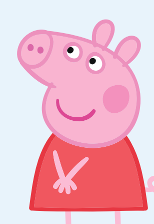
iTunes Store launches, creating a market for audiobooks and music content.

JUNE 2003

Jim Henson's kids buy back The Jim Henson Company from EM.TV & Merchandising.

MAY 2004

Peppa Pig premieres in the UK.



SEPTEMBER 2005

Cable channel PBS Kids Sprout launches—later becoming Sprout, then Universal Kids, and staying on air until March 2025.

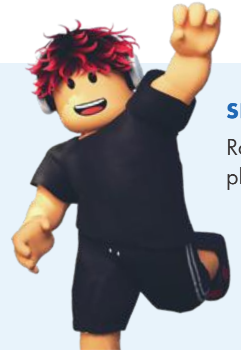
Aardman, which hasn't produced a kids show since 1980, launches *Planet Sketch*, co-produced with Decode Entertainment.

FEBRUARY 2006

China bans TV shows and movies that blend animation with live-action actors.

MARCH 2006

Nickelodeon signs its first-ever co-development deal in Japan with NHK, leading to a content exchange between the two channels.



SEPTEMBER 2006

Roblox launches a platform for PCs.

What's the most defining moment you've witnessed in the kids space in the past 30 years?

[For me it's] the paradigm shift in how kids consume content. We moved from 'appointment television'—where networks like PBS, Nickelodeon and Cartoon Network dictated when and how children watched—to a fully on-demand, user-driven model. Kids now choose what they want, when they want it—whether that's binge-watching an entire series or dipping into short-form, three-minute content.

This evolution fundamentally reshaped storytelling, engagement and brand-building, and it stands as the defining moment for both Gen Z and Gen Alpha.

Brands and IP owners are now meeting fans where they are and where they want to be, whether that's on social platforms, in UGC ecosystems or at fan conventions. The landscape now demands a multi-platform presence and a higher standard of responsiveness.

Fans are more invested, more vocal and more connected to the brands they love than ever before.

Jennifer Coleman — SVP of licensing & marketing, Konami Cross Media NY

Thirty years ago, I would have said [the most defining moment was] video games in the home; 20 years ago, I would have said the rise of the internet; 10 years ago, it would have been the emergence of social and digital media. And today, it's surely AI and streaming.

This is as it relates to what is distracting kids. Where their eyeballs are going for advertising is clearly the move from terrestrial TV viewing to mobile short-form content. All of these are serious game-changers for the toy and kids business.

Jay Foreman — CEO, Basic Fun!

One of the biggest shifts has been the eventization of content. Thirty years ago, a movie premiere or TV debut was largely a standalone moment. Today, it's an ecosystem that spans platforms, products and experiences, all designed to build anticipation and participation. From *Star Wars: The Phantom Menace* to *Stranger Things*, and from Minecraft to Wicked, the coordination between studios, retailers and licensees has turned launches into shared cultural events, changing how we tell stories and how audiences connect with them.

In the 1990s, content flowed in one direction, from studios and networks to audiences. Today, social platforms and streaming have given kids and families real power to shape stories in real time through creators and fandom.

Properties like Toy Story, Jurassic Park and Harry Potter continue to evolve because they've stayed true to what made them beloved in the first place. It's proof that great storytelling and strong brand worlds can endure for decades.

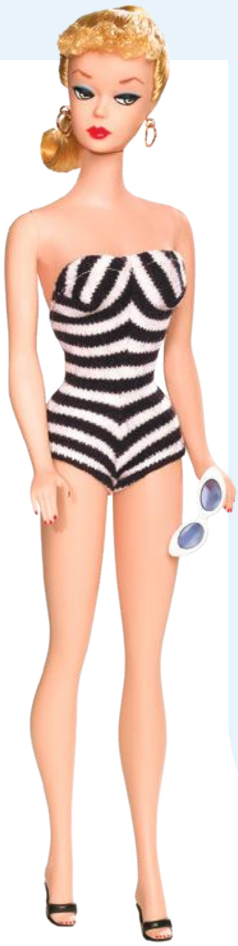
Tim Kilpin — president of toys, games, licensing & entertainment, Hasbro

NOVEMBER 2006

Nintendo Wii hits the market.

OCTOBER 2008

Disney stages a franchise-first theatrical release for *High School Musical 3*.



MARCH 2009

Mattel's legendary doll brand Barbie celebrates her 50th birthday.

SEPTEMBER 2009

Nickelodeon rebrands its dedicated Noggin preschool channel as Nick Jr.

DECEMBER 2009

The first *Angry Birds* video game is released on mobile devices.

What has been the single biggest disruption to how content travels?

The advent of SVOD, AVOD and TVOD platforms—and the ability to post straight to YouTube, Amazon Direct, Google Play and iTunes to monetize directly—have been hugely disruptive. If it weren't for the restriction on interest-based advertising for kids content on YouTube, the acceleration to that model would have been conclusive.

In 1996, there was so little animation produced that when we had an ITV or BBC commission, we signed the toy and home video deal pretty much the next day, and wide sales around the world were guaranteed for 10 years. Now the definition of a hit is a series that sells to the 'big five,' rates well and is commissioned for a second season; otherwise the property tends to fall to back catalogue within five years.

Genevieve Dexter — founder & CEO, Serious Kids

JANUARY 2010

This year marks the start of a new demographic cohort, Gen Alpha.

MARCH 2010

Pixar's *Up* becomes the second animated film to score an Oscar nomination for Best Picture, after *Beauty and the Beast* in 1992.

NOVEMBER 2010

The most expensive animated kids movie of all time—*Tangled*—hits theaters.

JULY 2011

The final Harry Potter movie breaks box-office records as the highest-grossing kidlit adaptation ever.

How has the definition of a 'hit' changed for you?

The definition of a hit now means looking beyond ratings. When I first joined the industry, most of my deliverables were in the space of ratings KPIs and how that would affect not just the way curation, acquisitions and original productions were done, but also how our leaders were assessing a lot of our performance.

Now, the definition of a hit feels a lot more well-rounded (and much more difficult to achieve, though the returns are exponentially higher). Today's hit is defined by the franchise wheelhouse model—going beyond just a piece of content and how it rates on TV, to the content becoming a trendsetter, being everywhere, turning kids and families from mere viewers into ambassadors and evangelists.

It's no longer enough to have high ratings on a single platform or territory.

Leslie Lee — consultant, Marvel Studios

AUGUST 2011

Netflix launches its first kids section, signaling a new growth strategy. (Its first original children's series, *Turbo FAST*, debuts in December 2013.)

NOVEMBER 2011

Sandbox video game *Minecraft* rolls out on personal computers.

MARCH 2012

The Disney Junior programming block launches as a separate channel.

MARCH 2013

Sesame Street becomes the first non-profit YouTube channel and the first kids media outlet in the US to hit a billion views.

JULY 2013

Penguin and Random House merge to form a kids publishing behemoth.

The FTC amends its Children's Online Privacy Protection Act (COPPA) to include social networks and mobile apps.

AUGUST 2013

PAW Patrol debuts on TVOKids (Canada) and Nick Jr. (US)

OCTOBER 2013

Toy giant Mattel launches in-house studio Playground Productions.

JANUARY 2014

Kidoodle.TV launches its OTT streaming service, joining happykids.tv in this growing landscape.

What does "kids entertainment" mean today that it didn't 30 years ago?

If someone told me in 1996 that streaming gamers and unboxing videos would be kids entertainment in 30 years, I probably would have hoped they were joking. On the other hand, this new reality also means new approaches such as immersive experiences, and I'm excited about those.

Good storytelling and humor have been around since humans could communicate. We still need these to make sense of the world. And they'll always be a part of entertaining kids.

What's been the biggest creative risk that paid off in this space? Trust. That's the best bet we've made. Trusting artists, writers and show creators to make creator-driven series.

Linda Simensky — Cinema & Media Studies lecturer at University of Pennsylvania (formerly with Duolingo, PBS KIDS, Cartoon Network and Nickelodeon)

Kids entertainment is more sophisticated and varied than it was 30 years ago (when I first assigned my *Bob the Builder* rights to HIT Entertainment back in 1996). Today, there are many more TV shows, movies and games to choose from. The storylines are more advanced, less patronizing, more diverse, more inclusive. The animation is more advanced, too, with more exciting action.

It's been a tough market for selling original content these last few years, but I'm optimistic that 2026 will see a change.

Keith Chapman — founder, Keith Chapman Productions

NOVEMBER 2014

For the first time in 11 years, Frozen dethrones Barbie as the top toy brand for girls in NRF's annual holiday survey.

FEBRUARY 2015

YouTube Kids launches.

OCTOBER 2015

Miraculous—Tales of Ladybug & Cat Noir premieres on Disney EMEA.

APRIL 2016

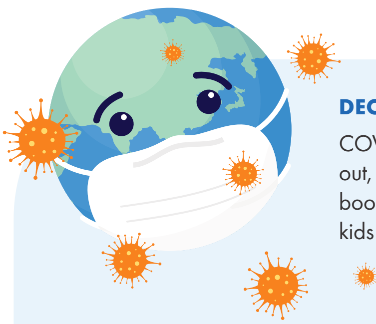
NBCUniversal completes its acquisition of DreamWorks Animation for US$3.8 billion.

What has been the hardest leadership lesson you've learned through industry change?

The only constant is change. The hardest leadership lesson has been learning to embrace that change rather than resisting it. Every disruption—and there have been many, and challenging ones, too—has produced new creative opportunities. Whether it's emerging technologies (including AI), corporate consolidation, shifting audience behaviors, fewer content buyers or smaller budgets, we have to lean in, stay resourceful and find ways to tell our stories more efficiently...and sometimes even more effectively.

The creativity, tenacity and passion of today's storytellers keep me optimistic. They're using new technologies and platforms to ensure their stories are seen and celebrated by audiences around the world.

Karen Miller — CEO, Hidden Pigeon Company



DECEMBER 2019
COVID-19 breaks out, leading to a huge boom in viewership as kids are stuck at home.

JANUARY 2020
Britain exits the EU, cutting off UK producers from European resources like Cartoon Forum.

FEBRUARY 2021
The NFT trend takes off, with kidcos wondering if it's the next big thing. (It wasn't.)

MARCH 2021
Roblox goes public and tops US$45 billion on its first day.

NOVEMBER 2019
New streamer Disney+ launches.

Oasis Animation unionizes, kicking off unionization efforts at other North American studios.

SEPTEMBER 2019
YouTube launches a US$100-million kids content fund (following an FTC settlement) and stops running ads around kids content.

FEBRUARY 2019
Mattel's TV division gets a revamp and becomes Mattel Television.

SEPTEMBER 2017
Toys "R" Us files for Chapter 11 bankruptcy.

MARCH 2017
Nintendo Switch hits the market.

What advice would you give to someone just starting out in this industry?

Learn as much as you can and try to make the most of it. There are many opportunities out there, and being curious and sociable will lead to the most—and best—opportunities.

Focus on honing your skills, building a strong network and gaining hands-on experience. Be prepared for setbacks by staying persistent, cultivating a unique personal brand and style, and creating your own content to showcase your abilities and passion. Most importantly, have fun!

Casey Collins — SVP and head of consumer products, NFL

Learn the business as well as the creative. You need to understand rights, financing and how deals come together, because that's where good ideas turn into real shows. Stay adaptable, because this industry changes fast, and you'll need to adjust without losing your grounding. If you can mix creative thinking with commercial awareness and a willingness to evolve, you'll find your place.

Letting go of certainty has been the hardest lesson. The industry moves quickly, and the models we rely on don't always carry forward. You have to lead through that change with clarity, even while you're adapting yourself.

Staying open, guiding your team through uncertainty, and making decisions without perfect information become part of the job. It's challenging at times, but it's ultimately what keeps you growing.

Ed Galton — CEO, CAKE

AUGUST 2021
Sony acquires anime streamer Crunchyroll as the genre's popularity soars.

APRIL 2022
WarnerMedia and Discovery merge to form Warner Bros. Discovery.

SEPTEMBER 2022
Generative AI goes mainstream as OpenAI releases DALL-E 2 to the public.

JANUARY 2023
Nickelodeon recognizes The Animation Guild in TAG's largest production worker win.

YouTube shuts down its original kids content program.

FEBRUARY 2023
Sky Kids linear TV channel launches.

APRIL 2023
The Super Mario Bros. Movie brings in more than US$1 billion, legitimizing video game adaptations.

Toy rivals Mattel and Hasbro join forces for the first time in co-branding deals.

MAY 2023
The Writers Guild of America goes on strike for five months, putting pipelines on hold.

JULY 2023
Barbie is the highest-grossing movie of the year, kicking off a scramble for toy-based films.

FEBRUARY 2024
Paramount shuts down Nickelodeon's subscription-based Noggin app.

MAY 2024
9 Story and Brown Bag Films are the first in the industry to release a precedent-setting public AI policy.

DECEMBER 2024
HBO declines to renew its output deal for *Sesame Street*, clearing the way for the classic show to make its way to Netflix.

JANUARY 2025
The first babies in Generation Beta are born.

What's the most underrated skill today's producers need?

Intuition. I'm not sure if intuition is a skill per se, but it is a natural awareness of truth and authenticity that requires a constant refocusing away from distraction and noise (of which there is much!).

A creative writing teacher/mentor of mine at the University of Toronto called it your shit detector. Listen to it when it goes off!

Kids are far smarter than us. They're little buddhas. You can't lie to them unless they let you. They're blank slates and can detect a cynical offering sooner than any of our ill-guided hopes to capitalize on it.

Frank Falcone — president and creative director, Guru Studio

What's the biggest format or genre that's poised for reinvention?

Over the last 30 years, I've watched children's entertainment migrate through more eras than a geologic timeline—from Saturday morning appointment-viewing and first-run syndication, to the 24/7 kids cable boom, to streaming, digital and now whatever universe we're currently inventing in real time.

Through all of these shifts—technology, regulation and platforms rising and collapsing—the two constants were always great characters and great stories. But with AI now capable of generating both, convincingly and at scale, we may be witnessing the first true disruption of those constants.

The pace of change today is staggering; it feels like we've compressed decades of evolution into a few short years. Hard to imagine where we'll be 10 years from now... but I suspect that imagination itself may be the next frontier that gets reinvented.

Andy Heyward — CEO, Kartoon Studios

What keeps you optimistic about the next generation of kids content?

Our kids media industry has the most passionate and imaginative people—and that's never changed. I'm optimistic because we are living in a 'creator-first' moment in time, and we care deeply about storytelling that teaches, inspires and connects.

The next wave of content will fuse creativity, research and innovation to make high-quality, big-hearted stories at more accessible scales.

Angela Santomero — co-creator and executive producer of *Blue's Clues*, *Blue's Room* and *Blue's Clues & You*

I am always optimistic and inspired by the audience we serve. There have never been more tools for kids to use to explore creativity and storytelling, and to shape the world around them.

Our purpose remains consistent: create exceptional content and play experiences that resonate, bring joy and stand out with kids. However, the context in which we deliver on that purpose has shifted, with changing platforms of choice, greater expectations for interactivity, and the accelerated speed at which ideas spread and take hold. That is the challenge ahead of us, and it's one we are excited about.

For Spin Master, innovation is central to what we do, and our goal is to maintain a culture that prioritizes creativity and unlocks the full potential of our brands. That means investing in innovation and always challenging ourselves to find the white space.

We stay open to experimenting and trying new things—all in the spirit of developing incredible storytelling, engaging digital playgrounds and entirely new categories of play, while keeping kids at the center of what we do.

Christina Miller — board of directors, Spin Master

FEBRUARY 2025

US President Donald Trump launches the first in a series of tariffs that will rock the consumer products industry.

JUNE 2025

Netflix agrees to carry TF1's content in France, kicking off a wave of streamer-broadcaster carriage deals in Europe.

JULY 2025

The US eliminates all funding for public media, signaling the end of the Corporation for Public Broadcasting.

JULY 2025

Sky Kids stops commissioning content.

AUGUST 2025

Netflix releases *KPop Demon Hunters*—and it quickly becomes the streamer's biggest movie ever.

SEPTEMBER 2025

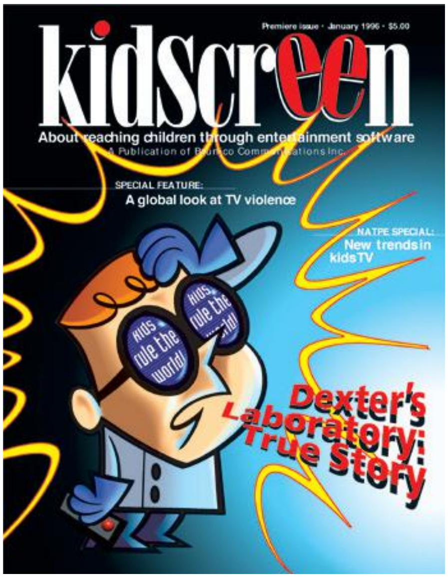
Iconic Canadian animation banner Nelvana halts production.

SEPTEMBER 2025

Telecom Rogers stops contributing to the Shaw Rocket Fund, effectively defunding a key kids content financing source in Canada.

DECEMBER 2025

Australia's ban on social media for all children under age 16 goes into effect. **And the story continues...**



TIME CAPSULE

Looking back, looking forward

BY: KEN FAIER

IT feels like just yesterday I wrote the 20th-anniversary article about the launch of *Kidscreen* magazine. Well, here I am 10 years later, maybe wiser, but certainly older. I want to start by saying that I still love what I get to do every day in this wonderful world we call the kids entertainment industry. That said, I'm not 100% sure how to define what "the industry" is anymore.

One thing I know is that when I wrote about the 20th anniversary 10 years ago, I wasn't thinking about the impact of AI. Or the dramatic speed at which traditional television would decline while streaming and creator platforms became the dominant force. I wasn't thinking about Roblox or TikTok or *Steal a Brainrot*. Or the speed at which trends explode into our consciousness and fade months later. Or how today's kids are talking about things that I sometimes have never heard of, let alone fully understand.

I even wonder if they still like what we call traditional storytelling. I think they do—but they also like other things. And that coexistence feels like one of the defining truths of where we are now.

Where it all started

Let me start at the beginning. Back in 1995, Brunico's founder Jim Shenkman had an idea. I had joined the company straight out of university in 1989 and was working closely with Jim, often serving as his shadow and doing my best to keep up with him. It was already an amazing journey—one that gave me the opportunity to meet and learn from key leaders across the film and TV industry. That experience also gave me a front-row seat to how the kids business really worked.

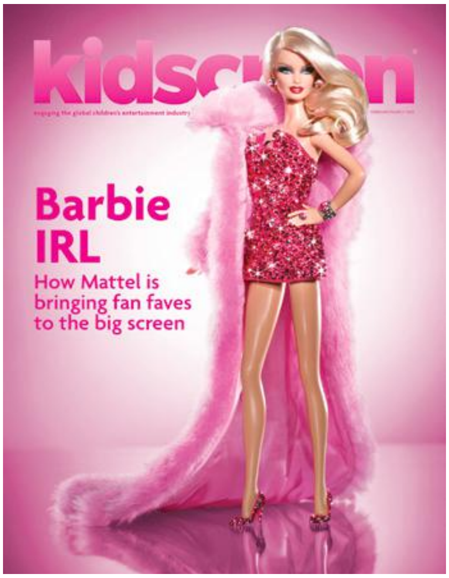
The idea for the magazine was to create a platform that brought together execs from disparate industries who were all engaging kids and their families—whether with content, products or services. *The Hollywood Reporter*, *Variety*, *Broadcast* and others didn't really cover the kids industry in a meaningful or consistent way, unless it was from a big-studio perspective.

There was no single place where the kids business, in all its complexity, could see itself reflected. So there was an opportunity.

The foundation of the kids industry has always been independent producers and creators, who brought something fresh to the world of kids. Looking back over 30 years, some of the biggest IPs came from these indies: Power Rangers (kind of), Bananas in Pajamas, Peppa Pig, Bluey, Miraculous, even PAW Patrol. Many of the biggest hits were not generated inside the studio system.

Of course, there have also been lots of successes from Hollywood, but the true breakouts often came from an indie mindset. And *Kidscreen* was built to support that creative core.

Kidscreen brought the global kids industry together into a cohesive whole, sharing one context. It was about reaching children through entertainment. And it gave us all a platform to share our successes and failures—and to learn from each other. In many ways, it helped turn a fragmented business into a connected community.



Since its first issue published in January 1996 (far left), *Kidscreen* has shared business intel, chronicled the industry's growth and analyzed pivotal moments

With Mark Smyka as the founding editor and me as the founding publisher, along with Jim's business plan and head of sales Joan Lambur in place, off we went in 1995 to talk to people about it. And the first issue of the magazine came out the following year.

When we launched, it was in the middle of a global proliferation of dedicated kids channels from major networks in the US—namely Nickelodeon, Cartoon Network and Disney Channel. Their expansion into hundreds of countries drove the beginning of the golden age of the kids business. This led to the rise of mini-majors that went on to generate billions of dollars in economic value across the supply chain, from creation through distribution, and then onto consumer products, services and experiences. It was a period defined by growth, optimism and scale.

Along the way, the industry gained more knowledge about trends and where things were heading. *Kidscreen* played a meaningful role in that gathering and sharing of intel. It became a place where the business could pause, compare notes and look ahead.

Change as the only constant

I recall when PVRs came out, allowing people to record content and watch later. I thought, "Uh-oh—that could change things." When the iPhone came out, I thought the same thing. Then it was YouTube. And now it's AI. Each shift felt disruptive at the time—and each one reshaped how kids discovered, engaged with and loved content. But in hindsight, those moments now feel less like disruptions and more like signposts.

We have gone from a world where we pitched buyers as gatekeepers to one where we need to think about how we can go direct to the consumer. What does it all mean? How do we stay relevant in these new realities?

Change has always reshaped our industry, and kids are not afraid of change. They love new things. They also love being fans. That hasn't changed. That's what we need to remember.

Our job is to create and serve fans. For me, it has always been about working with creators to achieve that goal. Everything else is just execution.

I asked ChatGPT about the next decade, and here's what it said: "Ten years from now, a hit kids property won't be a show—it will be a persistent universe. It will live in the cloud; be playable on any screen (or no screen, via AR glasses); offer both linear narrative and infinite-play options; and its value will be measured less by viewing hours and more by time spent creating within it."

I spent the holidays thinking about that. When I look at recent headlines about Disney investing in OpenAI and allowing (with guardrails) fans to create content with Disney characters that could end up on Disney+, it struck me as a brave move. There has been pushback, but the reality is that Disney is testing new ways to invite fans into the creation loop.

I have also had to force myself to stay open to new ways of doing things. Someone once told me that innovation is about looking at a challenge without blinders on. Instead of saying "no way," stop for a second and ask "why not?"

That mindset helped guide Epic Story Media, the company I launched almost nine years ago in partnership with my co-CEO Steve Couture and our core team. We have continued to add new divisions—including a mobile game company, a Roblox game development division and, most recently, a toy company—in order to be as 360 as possible. Our goal is to help creators and IP owners better serve their fans, wherever those fans choose to engage.

That sounds easy. It's not. But after 30 years in this business, I've learned that the hard things are often the ones that are the most worth doing.

So here's to the next 30 years of asking "why not?"

KEN FAIER was the founding publisher of *Kidscreen*, and is now CEO of Epic Story Media and its various subsidiaries, including Night Market Games.

COOL NEW SHOWS

KIDSCREEN SUMMIT EDITION

BY: RYAN TUCHOW & SADHANA BHARANIDHARAN

After another tumultuous year for getting projects off the ground, Kidscreen Summit 2026 promises to be a showcase for pent-up creativity and development. Here are a few of the standout new series sparking conversation and attracting early interest.

Catchapulko

Co-producers: Superprod Animation (France), Wheel In Motion (UK)
Format: 78 x seven minutes
Style: CG animation
Budget: Around US$10 million
Status: The next step is securing broadcasters, as well as toy and licensing partners.
Delivery: 2028

TV director Charles Vaucelle (*Pat the Dog*, *Vet Academy*) created this series about an adorable rainbow-colored marsupial who lives in Venezuela's Canaima National Park. The only one of his kind, Catchapulko is innocent and defenseless, making him a target for predators like jaguars, capybaras, tamarins and otters, as well as a kooky zoologist. But his zany physical abilities let him leap, twist and bounce around the jungle to escape their clutches. Catchapulko is at ease among trees and rocks, but he has an intense fear of water—which means he's always in for a challenge when crossing a river or trying to escape a crocodile. The show's slapstick focus should cater to a growing global demand for non-verbal humor, and the team is looking at plush toys as a major licensing category for this playful creature-based IP.

Pepper

Co-producers: Millimages (France), L'Incroyable Studio (France)
Format: 52 x 11 minutes
Style: 2D animation
Budget: US$8.1 million
Status: A bible and three scripts are ready.
Delivery: Q4 2026

What if your dreams literally turned into reality? That's what the protagonist of this original concept from Millimages deals with on a daily basis. Every morning, Pepper wakes up to find that some element of her dream has ended up in the real world. And that can be fun when it's something cool (like living the pop star life), but it can also spiral into chaos when it's something like her mom turning into a dragon. The fantasy premise also introduces a mysterious dream stone that could potentially help Pepper reverse her enchantment—if she can figure out how to use it in time. Nicolas Le Nevé *(Lupin's Tales*) is attached to direct the series, and Millimages will oversee distribution. *Pepper* is coming off a good showing at Cartoon Forum 2025, where its screening generated buzz and attracted the second-highest number of buyers.

Creatures of Sonaria

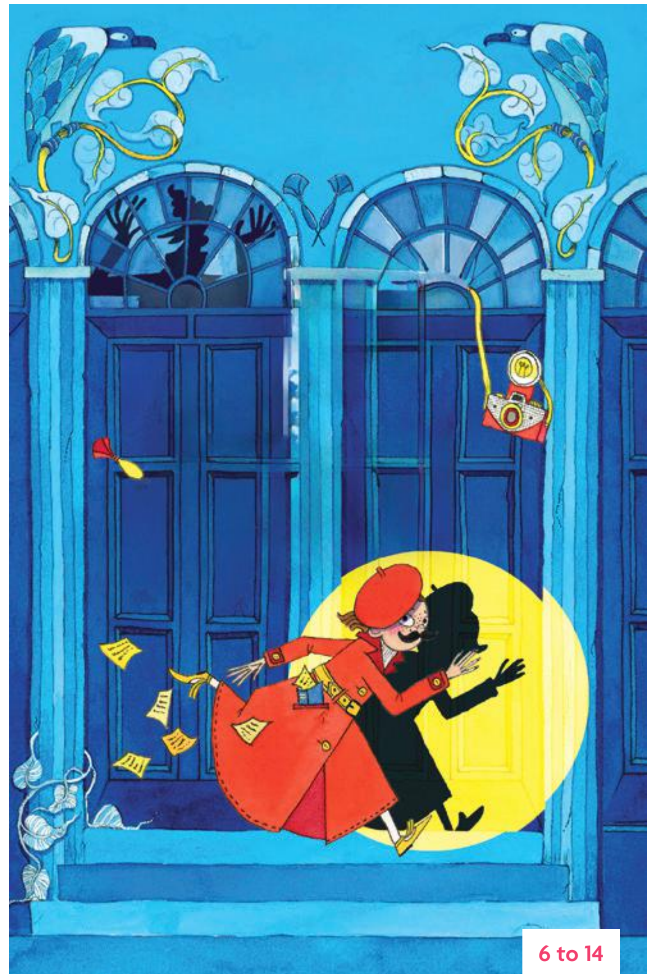
Co-producers: Wind Sun Sky Entertainment (Canada), Striker Entertainment (US), Twin Atlas (US)
Format: 10 x 22 minutes
Style: 2D/CG animation
Budget: US$6 million
Status: A pitch, series bible and artwork are available, and a pilot script has been funded. The studio is now looking for financing, distribution and co-producers.
Delivery: Fall 2028

In Sonaria, young creatures battle for a chance to be crowned the world's fiercest fighter. This epic action-comedy is based on the highly popular Roblox game of the same name, which has racked up 1.7 billion visits on the platform. Its TV adaptation focuses on a scrappy dragon named Raven, who attends the least desirable school for battling in all of Sonaria. While undergoing difficult training, she makes friends, faces rivalries and engages in action-packed battles as she works to prove herself. In addition to fight scenes, the antics of Raven and her friends bring a dose of comedy into each episode, and a larger mystery about a looming threat to the world plays out across the season. Catherine Winder (*Invincible, Star Wars: The Clone Wars)* is an executive producer, and Michael Ryan (*Wolfboy*) is the show-runner. At the heart of this adventure is the message that even the smallest hero can make a big impact.

Family Mode

Producer: Igloo Animations (Ireland)
Format: 52 x five minutes
Style: 2D animation
Budget: US$2.8 million
Status: There is a bible and one script available. Igloo has applied for Screen Ireland development funding—with a plan to make a computer game simultaneously with the series—and it's looking for co-producers, distributors and broadcasters.
Delivery: Q4 2028

Bluey meets Super Mario in this comedy about a family whose everyday challenges reach a new level of crazy because they live in a video game. In one episode, the floor turns into actual lava in a game of The Floor is Lava, while another about a trip to the supermarket ends in an epic battle against monster food. To level up from these wacky adventures, the family has to learn new skills—like teamwork and resilience—while dealing with video game elements like timers, rewards and power-ups. The gaming aesthetic of *Family Mode* makes it perfect for video game extensions, and Igloo (which recently delivered the series *Holt* to RTÉ) is aiming to develop a game in parallel with the series.



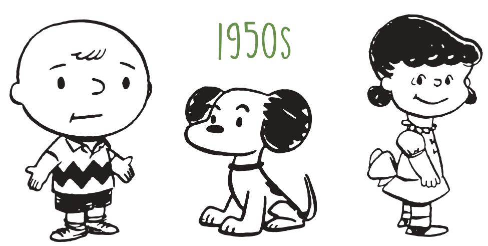
Montgomery Bonbon

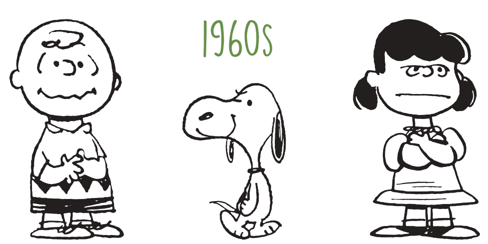
Producer: Trustbridge Entertainment (US)
Format: 10 x 22 minutes
Style: Live action
Budget: US$7 million to US$10 million
Status: In development, with a series bible and a pilot treatment available.
Delivery: 2028

Montgomery Bonbon has earned a reputation as the world's greatest detective. But the renowned sleuth has a big secret: Bonbon is actually an 11-year-old girl named Bonnie Montgomery, who dons a disguise—complete with a trench coat and fake moustache—to solve twisty mysteries that baffle most grown-ups. This live-action comedy adapts a book series from British stand-up comedian and writer Alasdair Beckett-King and illustrator Claire Powell that's published by Walker Books (which is owned by Trustbridge). In each episode, Bonbon finds a new clue to a larger mystery that plays out across an entire season. (In season one, it's a murder in a museum and the theft of a priceless statue.) Mark Oswin (*Danger Mouse*) is writing scripts and developing the series for TV. He's focused on telling devilishly funny mystery stories that see smart kids running circles around foolish adults, along with some high stakes as Bonnie tries to protect her secret identity.

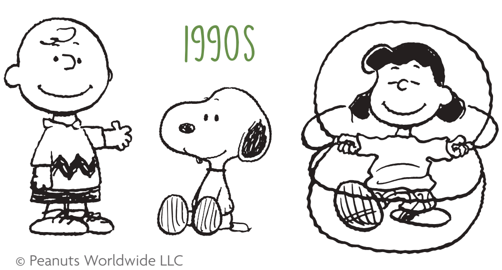
BACK TO THE DRAWING BOARD

THE BEAGLE HAS LANDED





The *Peanuts* characters have evolved over the years, from the simple comic strip style of the 1950s to the animated character designs of today



Charles M. Schulz's *Peanuts* comic strip made its debut in seven US newspapers in 1950, building off of a weekly series of one-joke panels called *Li'l Folks* that was first published in the *St. Paul Pioneer Press* in the late 1940s. While *Li'l Folks* didn't have a recurring cast, it introduced many of the key elements that would go on to make Schulz's most famous creation so special, including the wise-beyond-their-years kid cast and their character designs.

The *Peanuts* gang evolved over time. For example, Snoopy started out looking and acting just like a regular dog before he was given more anthropomorphic qualities, such as human-like reactions and walking on two legs instead of four. And the strip was initially "much more grounded in reality," with kids playing in the neighborhood and Charlie Brown being more of a prankster, says Paige Braddock, creative director emeritus at Charles M. Schulz Creative Associates.

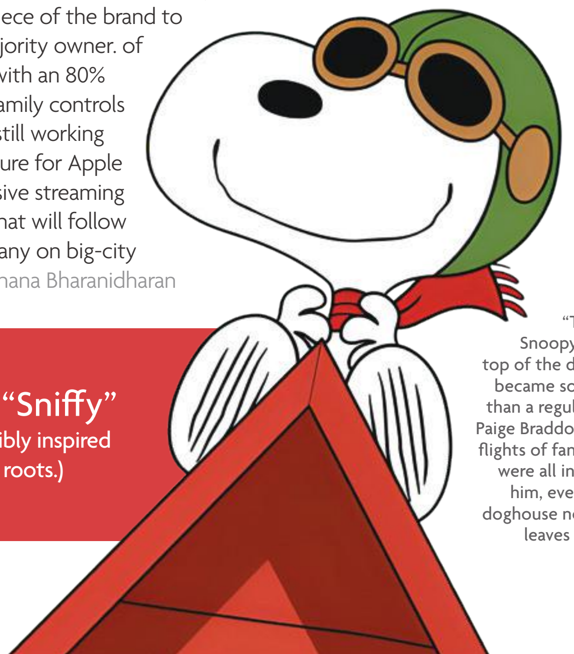
"It wasn't until the mid '50s that Schulz allowed *Peanuts* to be more than just humor-driven." she adds. "Around that time, we begin seeing the character traits and trials that would give the comic so much depth—unrequited love, self-doubt, questions of faith. By including not just the highs, but also the lows of the human experience, Schulz tapped into something universal."

Various cultural moments and real-world shifts also influenced how Schulz developed and expanded the strip's characters. "There's a documented link between the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King and the addition of Franklin," Braddock says. "And there are slower, more subtle things, like the girls' wardrobes shifting to include more pants in the 1970s."

In January 1960, the comic strip made what was at the time a very unconventional leap into animation, not with a TV series or feature film, but with a campaign of car commercials for the Ford Falcon. The classic special *A Charlie Brown Christmas* followed in 1965.

"It's interesting to note that Schulz wasn't drawing the characters in the strip in a way that allowed for full turnarounds in animation," says Braddock. "The characters had stylized designs, enormous heads and very short limbs. I'm sure this created unique challenges for the animator, Bill Melendez, who did all of the early animation related to Peanuts."

The franchise has continued to grow since those early days, expanding into CG animation in 2015 with *The Peanuts Movie* from 20th Century Fox and Blue Sky—its first full-length feature in 35 years. It has also connected with Gen Alpha, thanks in part to a steady stream of specials and series from WildBrain, including *Snoopy in Space* and *The Snoopy Show*. In December, WildBrain agreed to sell its remaining piece of the brand to make Sony the majority owner. of Peanuts Holdings with an 80% stake (the Schulz family controls 20%). WildBrain is still working on an untitled feature for Apple TV+ (the IP's exclusive streaming home until 2030) that will follow Snoopy and company on big-city adventures. —Sadhana Bharanidharan



"The moment Snoopy climbed on top of the doghouse, he became so much more than a regular dog," says Paige Braddock. "He took flights of fantasy, and we were all invited to join him, even though his doghouse never actually leaves the ground."

FUN FACT

Schulz's initial names for the dog included "Sniffy"

He ultimately chose "Snoopy" at his mother Dena's suggestion—possibly inspired by "Snuppa", a Norwegian term of endearment. (Dena had Norwegian roots.)

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