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A Guide to Changing Channels

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Disney Junior

Imagining Industrial Intertextuality

Kyra Hunting and Jonathan Gray

At the 2008 International Radio and Television Society and Disney Digital Media Summit in Burbank, California—an event that allowed academics a rare peak under Disney's hood—various Disney staffers repeated Chairman and CEO Bob Iger's declaration that the company was now in the business of selling not shows, not films, but three key commodities: Disney, ABC, and ESPN. The rationale offered by some staffers was that in an era of ever-increasing competition for viewer attention and of bittorrenting, selling brands not texts would be a more reliable method of holding onto viewers, of ensuring that they watched in Disney's preferred (i.e.: fully monetized) settings, and of swatting away competitors who could only fight them one text at a time. Certainly, in the last decade, much has been said in both the media industries and media studies about the power and importance of branding (Johnson 2012). In this chapter, we contend that Disney Junior provides a relatively new form of programming, one that aims as much at selling the channel itself and indeed the entire Disney name/brand and "family" of texts as at selling any particular program or character on that channel.

The chapter also argues that Disney Junior represents a rich example of intertextuality being used as an economic strategy. Intertextuality is more regularly discussed in the realm of textual analysis, or is used to explain more linear models of extension and adaptation of a single intellectual property in modes of industrialized intertextuality such as spin-offs, franchises, sequels, remakes, and ripoffs. But in exploring Disney Junior's more ambitious experiment in connecting a wider network of disparate programs and characters textually, generically, and technologically, we see something more intricately interlaced and multidirectional that has received less academic discussion to date. Given that Disney Junior takes minimal "sponsorships," no traditional advertising, and receives carriage fees reported as low as 14 cents per subscriber (Fritz 2014), much of the channel's economic value to the parent company may be indirect, lying in its ability to create and promote brands. Towards this end, the channel offers a tightly

woven net of Disney intertexts. In doing so, it provides an example of how intricately channels can be constructed, so that texts constantly feed back into one another and connect viewers to the sprawling corporate network that is Disney, selling not just texts but a family of them. Disney Junior is all the more important, for aiming to be a child's entry point to the larger intertextual kingdom of Disney—it is, as the channel's slogan states, "where the magic begins"—while simultaneously using intertextuality to leverage parental nostalgia and good will.

WHERE THE INTERTEXTUAL MAGIC BEGINS . . . AND CONTINUES

Not all of Disney Junior's characters and shows feed directly into a larger Disney franchise, for cross-promotion takes a great deal of time, energy, and often capital (Copple Smith 2012) that cannot be expended on every show in a programming lineup. Nevertheless, Disney Junior's executives have not been coy about the role they hope they will play in introducing young viewers to the Disney brand. A year after the channel's introduction, a *New York Times* article described then Disney-ABC Television Group President Anne Sweeney as devising "her fast-growing TV portfolio to retain children as they grow," and quoted her as saying that "these children are the Walt Disney Company's most important audience [. . .] they're the future, and this is their first introduction to our brand" (Barnes and Chozick 2013). Meanwhile, Gary Marsh, president and chief creative officer for Disney Channels Worldwide, described Disney Junior prior to its launch as "an entry point into the world of Disney for young kids, creating a world [. . .] that captures the magic of Disney and its classic heartfelt storytelling and timeless characters beloved by generations" (Morabito 2011).

Consequently, the ties between the channel's programming and the Disney family are plentiful. For instance, *Mickey and the Roadster Racers* follows new adventures of Mickey, Minnie, Donald, Daisy, Pluto, Goofy, and Pete. *The Lion Guard* spins off from famed Disney film *The Lion King*; centered on Kion—Prince of The Pride Lands, and child to *The Lion King*'s Simba and Nala—and his friends, while bringing back many of the film's original characters, even if only briefly. In each case, the shows introduce Disney Junior's target audience of under-eight-year-olds to some of Disney's most iconic characters while also aiming to capitalize upon parents' nostalgic relationships to Mickey, Simba, and friends, luring them in to the channel with the promise of familiarity and reliability. The intertextuality, in other words, works both to introduce Disney to children and to entice parents to deliver a whole new generation of viewers.

But of course Disney is not just talking mice and lions. Thus *Sofia the First* follows a young girl "from the village" whose mother married a king, rocketing her into life as a (Disney) princess. She is aided by the magical Amulet of Avalor that allows her to communicate with animals and summon other Disney princesses in times of need. Quite practically, then, the amulet acts as a portal for Disney princesses to appear to Sofia and the viewer, building audience familiarity with the characters. However, beyond the occasional Disney princess visit to the show, the strongest service performed by *Sofia* for the Disney family is arguably to introduce "princess culture" more generally.

As the opening theme song explains, Sofia attends a princess school (alongside teachers Flora, Fauna, and Merryweather, the Three Good Fairies from Disney's *Sleeping Beauty*) where she's "gotta figure out how to do it right" and where she's "finding out what being royal's all about." Sofia is a handy device, therefore, to "teach" child viewers what it means to be a (Disney) princess and to provide a venue to update this definition. The inclusion of Flora, Fauna, and Merryweather and, occasionally, other princesses introduces a small cast of Disney characters to child viewers, thereby directing them to the larger Disney universe while, in savvy fashion, also seeding the narrative with characters to whom parents may have nostalgic, fond attachments, thereby directing the Disney universe into *Sofia*.

Similarly, *Jake and the Neverland Pirates* is situated within the realm of Peter Pan, following child pirates Jake, Izzy, Cubby, and their parrot Skully in a quest for gold doubloons and adventure in Neverland. Many of the markings of the Peter Pan franchise are present: the titular setting, forever-antagonist Captain Hook, Mr. Smee, and Tick-Tock the Crocodile, flying fairy dust, and Peter himself has appeared. More broadly, the central characters are siblings, and their status as children serves as no impediment in their continual battles with Captain Hook—indeed, it is framed as a boon. The world is, predictably, tamed somewhat for the younger age group, as Hook has "challenges" with the protagonists, rather than trying to kill them, and the melancholic absence of parent figures in *Peter Pan* is not broached in *Jake*. But once again the show works simultaneously to familiarize child viewers with one of Disney's key franchises, and to co-opt parents' nostalgic relationships with Neverland.

The degree to which *Mickey and the Roadster Racers, The Lion Guard, Sofia*, and *Jake* draw heavily from and feed into existing Disney characters and worlds is admittedly unmatched by Disney Junior's other regular shows; however, loose intertextual ties, echoes, and shadows abound elsewhere. Invoking the Disney-trademarked Tomorrowland in its title, for example, *Miles from Tomorrowland* follows a family of space explorers. The show began in 2015, the same year as the theatrical release of *Tomorrowland*—contributing, therefore, to a coordinated revival of the Disney-trademarked amusement park venue Tomorrowland—and the same year as the much-anticipated re-entry of now-Disney-owned *Star Wars* to the popular cultural orbit. The fact that *Miles* was picked up when, according to Nancy Kanter, executive vice president of original programming and general manager of Disney Junior Worldwide, the channel was looking specifically for a "space adventure" (Owen 2015) suggests that this looser form of intertextuality, in this case related to genre, may be strategic. Mark Hamill's highly publicized appearance as a voice actor in early episodes of *Miles* and the circulation of a short on Disney Junior teaching kids the "Chopper Dance" with a character from DisneyXD's *Star Wars Rebels* further encouraged viewers, at least parents, to make connections between these texts and sister channels.

Similarly, though *Henry Hugglemonster* was based on a best-selling book, the series about a world of adorable monsters launched in April 2013, two months before the theatrical release of Disney/Pixar's *Monsters, Inc*. sequel, *Monsters University*. *Goldie & Bear*, too, is situated in a fairy tale world that officially originates in Hans Christian Anderson and other folk tales, but that Disney colonized as its own through *Sleeping*

Beauty, Cinderella, and other famous retellings and have continued to claim ownership over with the ABC series *Once Upon a Time* and live-action remakes of its animated classics. Kanter has bluntly described *Goldie & Bear* as designed to "keep these classic stories, and classic characters, in kids' minds" (Steinberg 2015a). Even *Doc McStuffins*, while not connected *directly* to any other Disney property, alludes to Disney's *Toy Story* franchise with the combination of talking toys and animation that is reminiscent of Pixar's visual style. "Loose" intertextual ties such as these may, of course, not activate for many viewers, yet we should not underestimate their relative importance to Disney, as they ensure that Disney Junior constantly grows seamlessly into and out of other Disney properties, characters, and stories.

THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF CHARACTER-BASED CHANNEL BRANDING

Recognizable characters were essential to the early success not only of Disney Junior's programming but its construction of an identity for the channel as a whole. While among several series imported from a previous preschool programming block on the Disney Channel, Playhouse Disney, *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* represented a first real success (Grosz 2011) and proved instrumental in early branding efforts for the new channel (Weisman 2010) by flagging Disney Junior's strong connection to the Disney brand and its classic characters. The logos and idents developed for Disney Junior visualized this connection, reworking the letters in "Junior" to resemble new and classic Disney characters, with the first and most basic version transforming the "i" into a variation of Mickey himself.

In later years, Disney Junior's use of idents would continue to demonstrate the channel's dual function of introducing new character brands specific to its youngest viewers while incorporating classic Disney. For instance, during a single afternoon's viewing in 2016, one could see the transforming logo highlight Disney Junior originals from *Miles from Tomorrowland*, to continuing hits like *Frozen*, to familiar and classic Disney favorites like *Dumbo* or *Lilo and Stitch* (see Figure 19.1). The *Frozen* ident hangs Anna's signature burgundy cape around the N in Junior, while offering Elsa's braid to the dot of its I, and a huge pair of Sven's antlers to its R; meanwhile a *Dumbo* ident turns the U into a big-top tent, puts huge Dumbo ears and yellow cap on the I's dot, and dresses the R in the red coat of Timothy Q. Mouse. These shifting idents propose to parents that even the newest offerings of Disney Junior are securely part of a Disney tradition.

Disney Junior's evocation of well-known Disney characters clearly connects it to the larger Disney brand and makes its potential for inculcating "future brand loyalty" (Barnes and Chozick 2013) immediately evident. However, Disney Junior has also aimed to stay competitive by rapidly responding to changes in the children's television market. In 2011, Paige Albiniak identified "co-viewing, live-action, and digital platforms" as hot areas for children's television, and Disney Junior has, indeed, emphasized co-viewing (the watching of children's programming by parents alongside their children) and digital platforms extensively by drawing on the Disney brand. Many other channels are experimenting with co-viewing too, of course, but Disney Junior's relatively innovative strategy has been to focus on corporate brands, not specific franchises alone. By using

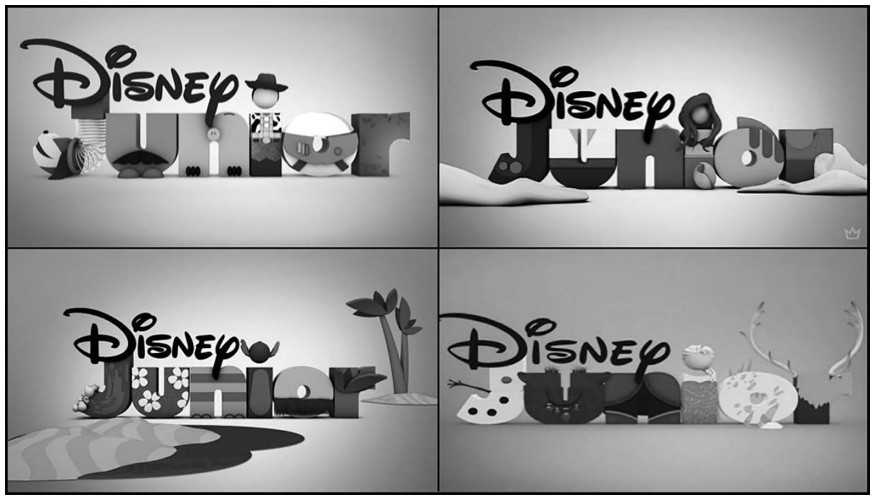

FIGURE 19.1 *Channel idents introducing Disney Junior audiences to characters and iconography from classic Disney properties.*

characters from legacy Disney properties, Disney Junior aims to leverage parents' nostalgia not just to encourage them to put on the channel while they exit the room, but also to entice them to watch alongside their children. Co-viewing may deepen the relationship a child has to a show—s/he is not just watching television, but watching with a parent—but it is also economically important for Disney Junior, given that the channel has no traditional advertising and instead focuses on limited "sponsorships." Many of these sponsorships are targeted at parents (advertising diapers, cleaning supplies, and learning websites, for instance) and hence are based on the expectation of parents' presence while the channel is being watched. More broadly, of course, parents may be more likely to buy toys and other merchandise not only from shows they feel positively towards but from shows set in worlds to which they, as parents, have strong nostalgic ties. Consequently, the use of recognizable characters and genres can do double duty for Disney from a co-viewing and advertising perspective.

This combination of discovery, nostalgia, and continuity can be seen elsewhere in Disney Junior's advertising and programming. While the channel touts its lack of traditional advertising to parent viewers, it does, in fact, have lengthy breaks between shows that include one or two outside "sponsorships" but consist mostly of ads for Disney Junior series and products as well as promotional "shorts." For example, the "Unlock the Adventure" shorts features children describing classic Disney princess films. "Muppet Moments," introduced five months before ABC's *The Muppets* premiered, depict Kermit and friends in playful segments talking to preschoolers. Disney Junior also airs classic Disney films in a series called *The Magical World of Disney Junior*, encouraging family viewing while promoting other Disney texts. In each case, the nostalgic value of these characters exists alongside the possibilities of the discovery of new characters in which younger kids may become interested.

These shorts were used to great effect to prepare viewers for the channel's 2016 series *The Lion Guard*, a show that in many ways is emblematic of Disney's multifaceted approach to intertextuality, co-promotion, and co-viewing. As early as August (three months before *The Lion Guard*'s premiere), Disney Junior began airing a "Night Light" short telling the basic story of *The Lion King* using finger puppets and a child's voice-over. These shorts aired three to four times a month starting in October and provided the necessary backstory for children who had never seen *The Lion King*, while simultaneously appealing to parents by reminding them of the pleasures of a well-known film as experienced through the eyes of a child. Meanwhile, Disney Junior worked hard to reinforce continuity with *The Lion King* via an attempt to "preserve 'The Lion King's' hand-drawn appearance" (Galas 2015) and the casting of James Earl Jones (Mufasa) and Ernie Sabella (Pumbaa) to reprise their roles. Nancy Kanter, executive vice president of original programming and general manager of Disney Junior Worldwide, said of the series that "we look forward to introducing a whole new generation of kids to both the Disney legacy characters and to new friends and heroes" (Baysinger 2014), but the preservation of the original's "look," songs, and scenes make clear an interest in pleasing those already familiar with *The Lion King* as well. Disney appears to have been successful in appealing to both sides of its dual-audience: *The Lion Guard* garnered 33% of its premiere's high ratings from adults 18-to-49 (Kissell 2015). Adults are an expected part of the children's television viewing audience, exemplified in the concept of co-viewing, but nostalgia appears to have garnered *The Lion Guard* an unusually strong adult audience. By contrast, Disney Junior's next premiere, *Elena of Avalor*, ranked number one in total viewers of a series broadcast on a kid's television channel in 2016 but received only 26% of its audience from the 18-to-49 demographic (Milligan 2016).

So far, we have illustrated how Disney Junior's various characters and worlds connect to other texts, worlds, and genres in the wider Disney family. At first glance, then, its intertextual unity may be seen as directed *outward* from the channel—from *Sofia* to Disney Princesses, from *The Lion Guard* to *The Lion King*, or so forth—and *inward* from the Disney universe inasmuch as it aims to entice parents to deliver their children unto Disney, but not *laterally* between shows. Crossover episodes are made slightly less likely by the different styles and worlds that make up Disney Junior's shows, but they would not be impossible: Doc McStuffins could easily be given a branded Disney toy such as Sheriff Callie, or Miles could visit a planet of Hugglemonsters. This lateral intertextual unity, however, exists in abundance in the shows' paratextual iterations, where it is common to see the characters travel together. Indeed, as any observer of Disney should know, its texts are only one small part of an industrial strategy that always includes its toys, merchandise, and other paratexts too. Disney Junior's toy licenses were among the fastest growing in 2013 (Fritz 2014) and its character brands have also been hits when translated to books (Raugust 2013) and apps (Kissell 2014).

At all these paratextual sites, Disney Junior's characters and shows regularly "hang out" together: one can buy Disney Junior storybooks that collect tales from across the channel's shows: (see Figure 19.2) *Disney Junior Magazine* similarly unites them; the Disney Junior Guess Who? game is one of many that places characters alongside each other; the Disney Junior DJ Shuffle and Get Up and Dance series offer music from across

the shows; one could buy the Disney Junior Valentines and Lollipop Kit to unite Sofia, Mickey, Minnie, and Jake; pencil or pen sets regularly bring together various Disney Junior characters; the Disney Junior Wall Calendar rotates between characters; Huggies diapers unite several Disney characters in one pack; and so forth. Meanwhile, quite apart from specific merchandise uniting the characters, they are regularly juxtaposed as paratexts in retail spaces. Disney's online store has a specific Disney Junior page, and offline one also finds Disney Junior sections in Toys 'R' Us, Target, and other major retail outlets, where a plush Henry Hugglemonster is likely to sit on the shelf next to a plush Lambie or Kion. As such, the shows no doubt benefit from impulse buying "add-ons" or supplements, when parents go looking for a specific item from a specific show, yet relent to buy more or are forced to find something else instead. In such situations, moreover, we might expect a certain degree of reinforcive familiarity, wherein children and parents alike come to know the entire Disney Junior family well, even if one show or character is especially beloved.

Here, it is worth stopping to contemplate how rare such groupings are within the media universe, at least at the level of merchandise: where, for instance, does one find a CBS book that collects stories about *Big Bang Theory, NCIS*, and *The Good Wife*? Or where is the AMC *Risk* game that has zombie hoards battling for global supremacy with meth dealers and 1960s admen? Significant paratextual extensions have long been part of children's franchises, but Disney's particular paratextual articulations unite characters from within the same channel—not just from within the same franchise or narrative world.

Intertextuality as an industrial strategy is also present in Disney Junior's utilization of digital media extensions through its TV Everywhere strategy and its extensive array

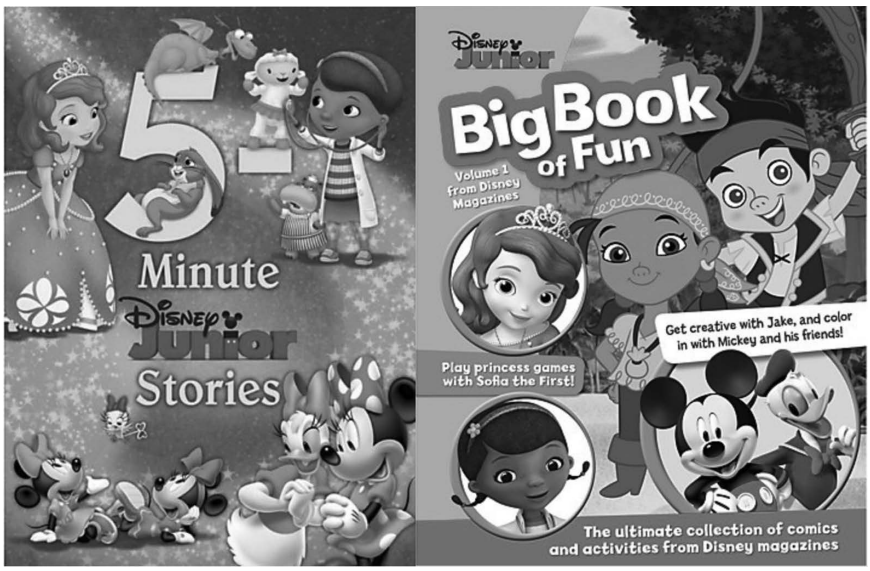

FIGURE 19.2 *Licensed storybooks collecting tales from across the channel's programs.*

of digital transmedia brand extensions. The use of apps for distribution of Disney Junior programming is described as a way for Disney to "keep up with its tiniest viewers" (Barnes 2013) who increasingly have access to mobile devices and a desire to stream content (Steinberg 2015b), but Disney Junior's use of apps for both viewing and interactive content is more complex both economically and in relationship to the way their content is presented along intertextual lines. Disney's act of releasing some series like *Sheriff Callie's Wild West* on its *Watch Disney Junior* app before cable (Steinberg 2015b) demonstrates its willingness to embrace digital streaming, indicating that promoting the visibility of its new brands and characters was prioritized over traditional premiere strategies. Once driven to the *Watch Disney Junior* app by streaming first strategies, families can see exemplified the channel's dual investment in character brands and the coherent Disney family of brands. The *Watch Disney Junior* app simultaneously reinforces each of Disney Junior's individual brands by promoting "character pages" with full episodes, digital shorts, and interactive games while also creating a sense of a Disney Junior family—and indeed of a broader Disney family—by creating sections around themes like "Winter Wonderland" that include videos from multiple Disney Junior shows as well as short videos that include characters from across Disney Junior's programming.

Looking at Disney Junior's apps, we can see how interactive digital strategies have evolved to increasingly promote interaction and play with characters from both its own stable and the larger Disney library. While initially Disney Junior and Disney apps were kept separate, newer apps like *Disney Color and Play* combine interactive coloring playrooms for Disney Junior characters with coloring activities for classic Disney characters and Pixar characters. Similarly, *Disney Story Theater* provides options for kids to create puppet shows with *Sofia*, *Sheriff Callie*, and *Frozen* characters. In each case, users who are drawn to images from either Disney or Disney Junior when choosing the app are given opportunities to discover more Disney character brands (see Figure 19.3). Moreover, these apps and games often emphasize distinctive genre elements and iconography associated with famous Disney characters or films, providing viewers with a visual media vocabulary that is then echoed in Disney programming and merchandising. Young viewers may first encounter the iconic wizard's cap in a *Sofia the First* coloring book based on the episode "Cedric's Apprentice" but will encounter it again in the film *Fantasia*, on top of a Sorcerer Mickey plush set a few feet away from a Sofia doll in a local Disney Store, and as the centerpiece of their visit to Hollywood Studios at Disney World.

Iconographic intertextuality can also be seen throughout Disney Junior's apps. The *Sofia the First: The Secret Library* in the *Watch Disney Junior* app is structured as a hidden object game with many of the hidden objects specifically evoking classic Disney princesses, while the *Miles from Tomorrowland* hidden object game relied so thoroughly on science fiction iconography that it could be confused at first glance with a *Star Wars* game. Discussing Disney Junior's interactive app-based episodes, called appisodes, Lauren DeVillier, the vice president of digital media for Disney Channels Worldwide, described the advantage of the format as allowing kids to "take an active role in the story" while giving "our shows a whole new life on another platform" (Winslow

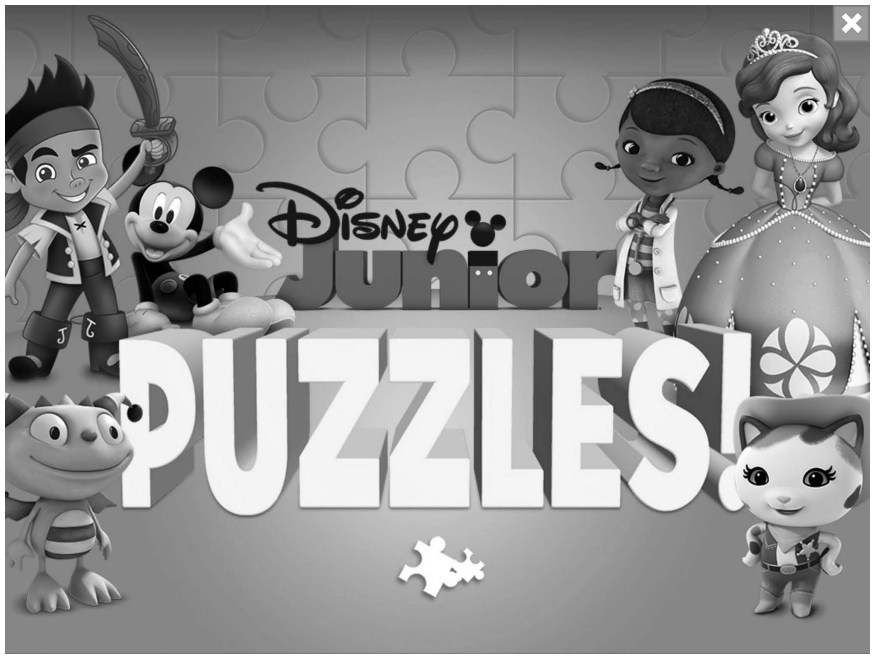

FIGURE 19.3 *Disney Junior app content uniting the channel's characters around "puzzle" activities.*

2013). While, undoubtedly this is an appeal of the unique appisode experience, this statement downplays the extent to which both elements are already key parts of Disney Junior's programming and brands, whose complex intertextuality and use of strongly genre-identified content encourages viewers to make active connections between texts in a rich (Disney-centered) media ecosystem that crosses platforms both through digital viewing platforms and extensive multimedia and merchandising brands.

CONCLUSION

Whether children's and parents' first encounter with Disney Junior comes via app, the cable channel, or even a storybook, they will likely find not only a character or show but also an integrated channel brand. From its earliest branding efforts, Disney Junior employed intertextuality as an industrial strategy—an evolution of Disney's ongoing experiments with television intertextuality since *Disneyland* in 1955 (Anderson 1994, 134). Ranging from breakout hits incorporating well-known Disney characters to looser intertextual relationships, Disney Junior uses its platform to usher children into the Wonderful World of Disney while encouraging parental good will and co-viewing through appeals to nostalgia. Disney Junior's earliest ident reminded viewers that it "all started with a mouse," yet its strategy of industrial intertextuality shows that the mouse is now just one member of an interconnected Disney family of which even and especially the youngest viewers are invited to become a part.

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