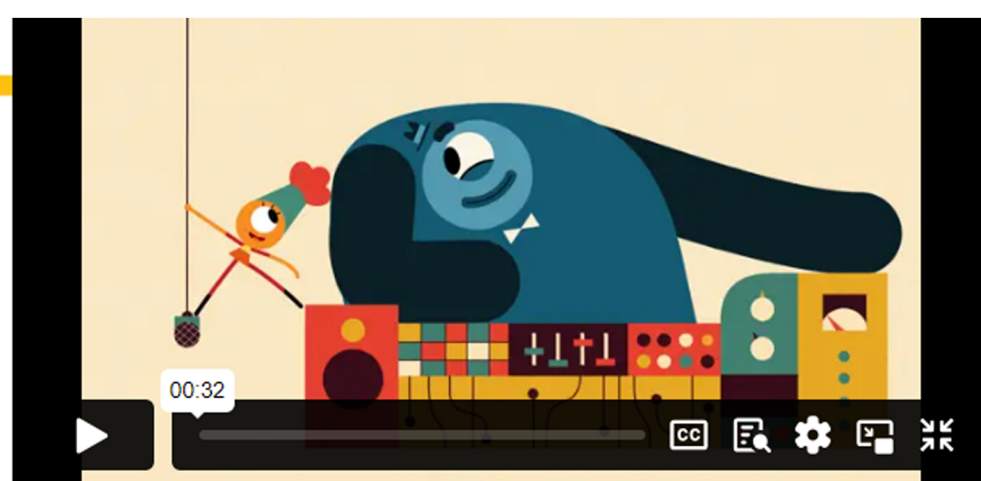




# TOON TIME

**Leading distribution executives weigh in on the styles, tones and narrative techniques needed to make an impact with kids today. By Mansha Daswani**

Generation Alpha may be unlike any other demographic kids' media executives are used to catering to. A huge majority are spending at least part of their busy days on gaming. And they're consuming all kinds of content, from the beautifully animated, expensive-to-make shows on broadcasters and streamers all the way through to made-on-a-shoestring-budget videos found across the creator economy.



Jasmine & Jambo is among the series being rolled out by France's Dandelooo.

been focused on setting a clear content strategy that will allow the division to take advantage of all the opportunities in the market today. Working in tandem with broadcast partners, digital and consumer-products teams has been key "to make sure that we are pulling together and approaching the audience at the same time and really harnessing what the characters and stories are about and ensuring that we're giving the best opportunity for our shows to land. [We're] also making sure that there's consistency in how our characters are presented and that they embody the characteristics and the joy that the shows are about. It's essential for this audience as they're coming up now, particularly in preschool, that they are able to connect and see the characters that they love and see the stories that they enjoy in many places, and that they can dig deeper and learn more and understand more. That sort of access is important for kids today. And that's what we're working on accomplishing with our content."

Of course, being everywhere doesn't mean you will automatically have a hit on your hands. And figuring out exactly what will move children to consume the content, play the game and plead with their parents for the merchandise is an ever-evolving conundrum.



Banijay Kids & Family's *Topo Gigio* has been rebooted for contemporary audiences.

Pietzsch says she and her team use a track record of success to determine if a brand should be resurrected. "We always look at what's at the heart of the IP. What do we love most about it? What is it known for? And then, can it still be relevant for kids today and how can it be made that way?"

And even though kids are spending a lot of their time consuming shows that were made in a gamer's basement with a webcam or shot-on-iPhone

TikTok videos, producers continue to invest in cutting-edge animation technology to ensure they have the tools at their disposal to tell stories the way they want to—and at the budgets the market is now demanding.

"We are all pushed to create more innovation by the market itself," says Ulli Stoeff, CEO and producer at Toon2Tango. "Quite some money has been taken away from the market. So at the moment, budgets are a little bit tighter. We have to be really innovative and cost-effective in order to produce great shows with the utmost creativity. That almost cries for innovation."

Animation innovation has always been part of the DNA at Cyber Group Studios, with the company most recently experimenting with real-time animation. Raphaëlle Mathieu, the company's COO, calls using Unreal Engine a "game-changer." Its use is "complementary" to the company's traditional animation pipeline. "It gives us more possibilities, more flexibility and more ability to speak in a language that is appropriate to the content or to the cost-effective need of creating content with budgets that are

require the whole series to be there, unlimited, at any given time," HARI's Prigent says. "That is making it a bit challenging for us to get the pay services to come in and have these multiple windows. In that sense, FAST channels work much better, I think, because it's linear still."

Even just choosing promotional art for a show can be difficult, Dandelooo's Pétry-Sirvin notes.

"One of the platforms is saying that they are looking for sticky programs. They're talking about the thumbnail choice. The kid has to click on something they recognize as a brand or something extremely striking. That scares me; I have to say. It's good in a way because it's the essence of what the show is about. But at the same time, your series is judged on a very small image. You cannot explain what it's about and how good it's going to be. It's a way of judging that is extremely harsh. You have to be extremely impactful on two centimeters."

Tapping into social media is key. "You can really start creating or building momentum before the launch and then just keep

feeding social media, even if it's only snippets," ZDF Studios' Pietzsch says. "Behind the scenes, pictures from the cast or the crew, it just creates such a buzz even before you launch. And that's really helping on a lot of our brands as well."

"We have created this series of walled gardens that makes finding content

"When you look at where they spend their video time, increasingly there's this 'yes/and' point of view among all consumers, but especially among those under the age of 20," says media cartographer and thought leader Evan Shapiro. "YouTube is one of the first places that they'll go for video content. Netflix is the second place. Twitch is a place that they spend a tremendous amount of time, but then also Disney+. There's this real acceptance of the idea that I'm going to jump from free media on social video to premium video on a subscription platform and back and forth. The idea that publishers don't see social video as premium video is a big mistake. They're going to miss a whole generation if they don't pay attention to social video consumption, which younger consumers see as equal to premium video."

Gaming is a primary entry point into content for this demo, as is TikTok. So, it's incumbent upon IP owners to be everywhere.

"If you own a really big brand like Snoopy or Teletubbies or something like that, it makes a lot of sense to make a deal with an Apple or a Netflix because they're going to pay you enormous sums of money to get exclusive access to that intellectual property," Shapiro says. "However, if you're an IP rights holder or a producer of content, 50 percent of the value that you're going to get out of your intellectual property from this point forward is going to come from what most people call the creator economy, but what I call the community economy."

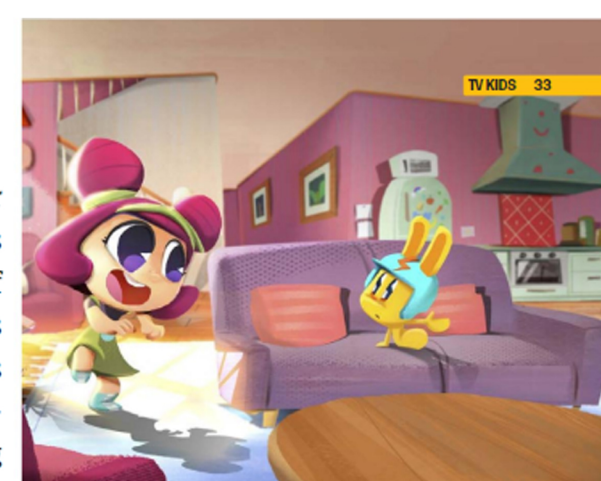
If you focus solely on the "gatekeeper economy," Shapiro says, "you're going to leave so much of your relationship with your audience and the value you can get out of your intellectual property if you do not practice in the community economy."

A little over a year into her appointment as managing director of a new kids and family unit at BBC Studios, Cecilia Persson has

"For preschool, we need our brands to have high visibility," says Delphine Dumont, the chief commercial officer at Banijay Kids & Family. "As a result, there is currently a big demand for well-known IP, and we are seeing increased interest in the revival of classic shows. At Banijay Kids & Family, we are home to iconic shows such as *Topo Gigio* and *Mumfie*, which have been lovingly reimagined for today's preschoolers."

"Discoverability is, of course, a key factor for everybody," observes Katharina Pietzsch, Director at ZDF Studios Junior department. "If you already have a known brand, it's just simply easier to find. But we've actually been rebooting classic IPs for a long time, and not just for the streamers. There's always been a trend to revisit classic properties. It's not a trend that is new. It's sometimes an easy way or a safe bet; your chances for success might be higher."

Successfully executing a reboot is no easy feat, Pietzsch notes. "It's really important to keep the DNA, so parents can recognize the original. They will still see what they loved about it. Sometimes it's really fun to work with subtle references, inside jokes, visual references, character names, voices, iconic lines. Parents really go for that. We get a lot of feedback from properties where the new version is really different look-wise from the original. And that's a tricky part because a lot of people don't like that. Keeping something visually and tonally from the original keeps the DNA alive."



Toon2Tango is working with Baboon Animation on the CGI series *Bek and the Bunnies*.

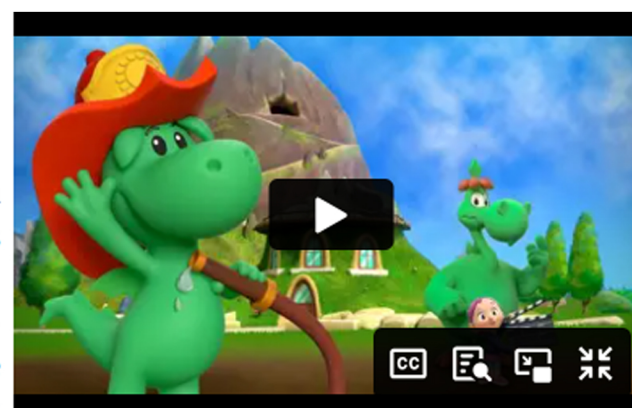
getting smaller. Or when you need to create content that is digital-native."

In subject matter, meanwhile, commissioners are looking for "lovable characters who spark empathy, who are experiencing everyday situations that kids can relate to, but also emotional intelligence," reports Sophie "Kido" Prigent, head of sales at HARI. "And a lot of comedy. With all that, if you can bring the family to watch the shows together, then you tick so many boxes."

Emmanuèle Pétry-Sirvin, producer and head of international at Dandelooo, also references the enduring demand for comedy but adds that commissioning partners are also "asking for more meaningful programs. Parents and broadcasters don't want kids to just be eyeballs anymore and be entertained, but they want to have takeaways. Not in an educational or preachy way, but intertwined into the story to have things that are helping kids feel better about themselves."

As for how kids find your show, though, that remains a challenge that the entire sector is grappling with. "Distributors need to ensure content is as visible as possible," Banijay's Dumont explains. "As a platform-agnostic business, we have the freedom to work with any platform and are open to non-exclusive deals, in order to maximize availability and strengthen our viewership."

The exclusivity question is in flux, especially as broadcasters look to up their presence in the free on-demand space. "They



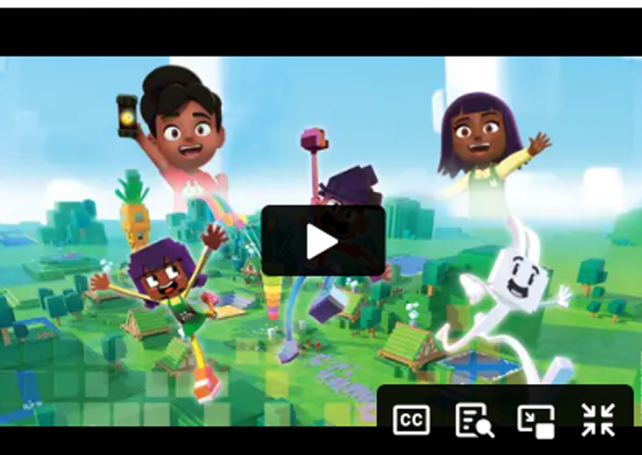
ZDF Studios is offering up the updated take on the beloved *Grisu* brand.

incredibly hard," says Shapiro on the discoverability question. "We've also oversaturated the market in storytelling to a certain extent. We've created a massive paradox of choice issue for publishers and audiences. The more choice you give consumers, the fewer choices they will actually make. I think that's why testing things out and building audience and community in direct-to-consumer relationships is incredibly important. Just because you sell a show to Netflix doesn't mean they're going to surface it well and it doesn't mean anyone's going to see it. If you operate exclusively through the gatekeeper economy, even if you're lucky enough to sell a show to a gatekeeper, the odds that it's going to get a second or third season are decreasing at a very rapid rate."

On what's ahead, Shapiro says, "Disruption is now the operating system of the ecosystem. Generation A is going to be extremely different than every generation that came before it, more so than previous generations because of what they just went through in their most formative years, but also because they are so technologically savvy. They factor it into who they are and what they do. Change is now a constant state and you're going to have to be OK with that. And if you're not OK with it, that's OK—but don't be in the entertainment or media business."



HARI's *Grizzly & the Lemmings* has been a huge hit on YouTube.



Cyber Group Studios' *Press Start!* is headed to Peacock.