



“Where Happily Ever After Happens Every Day”: Disney’s Official Princess Website and the Commodification of Play

—Meghan M. Sweeney

A few years ago, it seemed that princesses were a dying breed. One sign of their decline was the explicit mockery of saccharine Cinderella stories in the Shrek movies. In *Shrek the Third*, for example, a simpering, beautifully coiffed Snow White transforms into a hard-rock heroine, ready to fight her enemies to the tune of Led Zeppelin’s Viking-inspired “Immigrant Song.” Another sign was the proliferation of fairies, from *Sesame Street*’s fairy-in-training Abby Cadabby in 2006 to Disney’s Fairies franchise, begun in 2005 and built around a pixie named Tinker Bell. Fairies, after all, have magic wands and can fly. What princess can compete with that?

Disney, the main purveyor of princess (or Princess¹) consumer goods, has repeatedly demonstrated the enduring power and prestige of the princess archetype nonetheless. Despite the parodies in the Shrek films and the competition from rival gangs of

fairies, Disney’s Princess films (featuring Cinderella, Ariel, Belle, and other heroines) continue to remain popular, in part because, as one of the three biggest media groups in the world (“Sectors”) and the largest licensor of supplementary products (Hatch), Disney has unprecedented opportunities to shape the lives of consumers. The trademarked Princesses, like many other Disney staples, are not simply characters in films but painted faces on sippy cups and backpacks, flesh-and-blood creatures at theme parks, and the subjects of their own website. Thanks to Disney’s mastery of corporate convergence, they are literally almost everywhere.

For years, critics of Disney culture such as Henry A. Giroux have scrutinized Disney’s ability to “monopolize the media and saturate everyday life with its ideologies,” arguing that the dreams fashioned by Disney “must be interrogated for the futures they

envision, the values they promote, and the forms of identifications they offer" (7). While many of these critical explorations, by writers like Giroux, Elizabeth Bell and her colleagues, and Jack Zipes, focus on the products and resorts of the Disney studio, in this article I will interrogate Disney's web presence as manifested in its official Princess website, <<http://disney.go.com/princess>>, in an effort to examine the ways that Disney uses this new media platform to commodify play and to create a compelling, profitable vision of girlhood.

Like other websites geared toward children, the Disney Princess site is frenetic: it almost bursts from the screen with huge blobs of bright, oversaturated colour. Each click (or even twitch) of the mouse brings a new blip or beep or the possibility of a new form of play. Awash in sugary signifiers like animated fairy dust and soaring string music, it immediately reaches out to a dual implied audience of young girls interested in princess culture and their parents (primarily mothers) who have purchasing power. Like other corporate websites, the Princess site features custom-made online games and activities in addition to products, blurring the boundary between ludic activity—activity with elements of playful spontaneity—and brand-specific advertising.

In turning my attention to this site, I recognize the challenges of examining potentially ephemeral texts like websites. I acknowledge a point made by

Claudia Mitchell and Jacqueline Reid-Walsh that, unlike traditional media, "websites are continually in flux" and may be "summarily altered or obliterated" for a variety of reasons (142). In fact, since I began exploring the Princess site, Disney has made several cosmetic changes and a few substantial additions.² Despite their mutability, web texts like these are nonetheless worth interrogating, in particular for the way they seem to promise interactivity. Differing from televisual entertainment, which tends to be more passive, web environments (including those run by corporations) "can evoke feelings of telepresence, a perception of being present in a gaming environment" (Lee et al. 134). Users may be led to feel as if they are agents in this multi-sensory world and that they are individually hailed by characters within it. This happens immediately on the Princess site, when the seductive introductory voice-over welcomes the user to the "enchancing world of Disney Princess, where *your* princess dreams come true." Despite the subtle stress on "your" and the emphasis throughout on individual choice, however, the user's actions at this corporate site are carefully controlled and regulated, a form of rigidity that is out of touch with a wide variety of contemporary media strategies that allow for user flexibility and interactivity.

As Henry Jenkins has noted, the cooperation between multiple media industries has helped create a culture of convergence, a culture that has relied



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upon audiences who actively seek out the media experiences they desire (2). Jenkins emphasizes that models of passive media spectatorship, in which producers and consumers occupy separate roles, are outdated. The surge in collaborative web models and the emphasis on interactivity—frequently termed Web 2.0—has meant that children are not merely targets of global media organizations, but rather they also have multiple opportunities to be active, critical, and resistant producers. They may have the chance to disseminate their own interpretations of commercially produced material through online fan-fiction communities or other venues. Such possibilities allow consumers to expand and challenge the “authorized” versions of texts that have been made available to them and to connect to a broader network of other empowered consumers-turned-producers.

While children—particularly older children and teenagers who have been steeped in the language of consumer media from a young age and who have greater access to a variety of communities—may be active agents in the production and dissemination of information, corporate entities can have restrictive effects on consumers nonetheless. After all, as John Storey emphasizes, “To deny that the consumers of the commodities produced by the capitalist culture industries are cultural dupes is not to deny that the capitalist culture industries seek to manipulate” (132). While I want to avoid regarding Disney as a monolithic institution, or what Bell and her colleagues refer to as a “master trope for all the symbolic meanings of late-capitalist society” (“Introduction” 5), I maintain that mapping the specific ways in which texts like the Princess website restrict interactivity is an important step toward expanding user agency in other venues. In

an effort to situate Disney's website within princess culture more broadly, I begin by exploring Princess marketing strategies, emphasizing the way they intersect with Disney's notions of Princesses, play, and girlhood. I then turn to the website itself, where I examine how the child user is encouraged—through the use of engaging audio clips, visual flourishes, and outright flattery—to view herself as the special friend or willing maidservant worthy of a Princess's attention, moves that I construe as a heavy-handed reinforcement of Disney's consumer ideology.

The Enchanting World of Disney Princesses

While it may seem that the Disney Princess line has been around since the days of Walt, it began officially in 1999. As Lisa Orr observes in her article on Barbie and "the Princess Convergence," it started with "the unlikely premise of lumping eight princesses together as a single brand to be marketed, despite their differences of race, centuries, and even species" (9). It was an idea conceived by a former Nike executive, Andy Mooney, who observed that young girls came to "Disney on Ice" shows dressed in "generic princess products." Sensing an opportunity, he and a team went to work generating Princess paraphernalia: "All we did was envision a little girl's room and think about how she could live out the princess fantasy. The counsel we gave to licensees was: What type of bedding would a princess want to sleep in? What

kind of alarm clock would a princess want to wake up to?" (Orenstein, "What's Wrong"). The products they came up with have very little to do with real princesses and more to do with ideal formulations of girlhood. While the word "princess" may connote both untouchably aloof royals and bratty divas, Disney is careful to make sure its Princesses connote neither. In books, DVDs, and web materials, Disney—sweetly but aggressively—promotes virtues like kindness and filial devotion alongside fanciful fashion play. This marketing of the Princess line has had a powerful influence; in a survey of mothers of preschool girls, Disney found that women used terms like "inspiring," "compassionate," and "safe" to describe Princesses (Orenstein, *Cinderella* 24).

On the website, these charmed beauties include Snow White, Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Ariel, Jasmine, Belle, Pocahontas, Mulan, and Tiana. Mulan, who is not a "real" princess within the confines of her narrative, and Pocahontas, whose clothes are less traditionally "princessy" (Orenstein, "What's Wrong"), are not included on all Princess products, however. Since they are also the two Princesses whose narratives are connected to non-fairy-tale sources and thus do not follow a conventional romance plot, such an elimination is not surprising.³ In recent years, Disney has extended the reach of its Princess line by developing new products geared to adult consumers: as the blurb on one book states: "Every little girl

has a favorite Disney Princess—and for that matter, every grown-up girl, too!” (*The Art*). The idea is that the princess archetype, given its contours by Disney, offers the possibility of romance and transformation for females of all ages. Most notable, perhaps, is the variety of wedding options Disney offers to grown-up Princess enthusiasts, including wedding rides in Cinderella’s coach and designer wedding gowns that echo those of the Princesses. By donning glamorous (trademarked) frills—by playing a grown-up game of dress-up—a consumer can literally transform herself into something worthy of a Disney dreamscape.⁴

The persistent and comprehensive marketing strategy of Disney Corporate Products (DCP) has paid off: their worldwide retail sales of licensed products exceeded thirty billion a few years ago, with the Princess franchise earning around US\$4 billion in retail sales a year (Lisanti). To maintain this success, Disney carefully patrols public perception of Princesses, fending off potential rivals by reminding consumers of its primacy. Mary Beech, Vice-President and General Manager of Global Studio Franchise Development at Disney, articulates its position: “We keep the brand alive with moms that trust Disney as the authentic and original princess brand” (“Disney Princess Power”). Disney’s marketing campaigns have been so comprehensive that they can lay claim to authenticity. Princesses existed before Disney, certainly, but never with such coherence and force.

Beech’s comments also tap into the ideology of the good mother—“moms that trust Disney” are discerning enough to separate the true princess from the false. They can recognize that the princess proliferation only further cements Disney’s role as the king of princesses.

In much of its corporate rhetoric, Disney maintains the myth that the desire for all things princess is natural for most girls (and many women). Andy Mooney’s story of the birth of the Princess franchise at an ice rink is part of that, and so are the multiple references executives make to the princess “play pattern”—a quasi-scientific term used within the toy industry to describe the way that children are expected to play. For example, DCP spokesperson Gary Foster emphasizes that “[p]retending to be a princess is an ‘innate play pattern’”: “The Disney princesses touch a chord that is naturally there with a very large majority of young girls” (Woods). Similarly, in language that seems unassailable in its science, Beech matter-of-factly says, “We are hitting a key developmental pattern for little girls, ages 2 to 5, that are enamored with princesses” (“Disney Princess Power”).


Words and phrases like “truly,” “innate,” “strikes a chord,” “naturally,” “key,” and “developmental” all underscore Disney’s investment in regulating childhood in order to market the brand. If Disney is perceived as fulfilling desires or contributing to children’s development rather than arbitrating taste, its products seem above reproach, since they

are produced by a benevolent but knowledgeable nurturer. Even as it carefully constructs a rhetoric of naturalness, however, Disney must also emphasize choice: consumers must feel that they are choosing Disney because they want to, not because they are being persuaded to do so by an advertising juggernaut. Disney invites consensus, expertly convincing consumers that they are in control, all the while minimizing agency and carefully patrolling brand boundaries.


When it comes to the Princess side of the Disney business, it is important to note that Disney princesses (if not Princesses) have been around for as long as most people can remember. The pre-1960s princesses like Snow White set the standard for princesses ever after: they have helpful woodland playmates, perpetually cheery dispositions, and flowing gowns. These are “Walt’s princesses,” created while Disney himself was alive (Do Rosario 38). The princesses created in the past two decades tend to be somewhat more proactive, and yet, as critics have noted, their more ambitious dreams are dramatically curtailed or made possible only through the intervention of a prince: as Marjorie Worthington notes, “Aladdin takes Jasmine on a magic carpet ride where she can see ‘A Whole New World,’ the Beast offers Belle a library full of the books she loves, Ariel’s desire to walk on the earth and ‘get some answers’ transforms into a desire to marry Prince Eric and become a ‘Part of [His]

World,’ while Mulan rejects the Emperor’s offer of a position in his government and returns home to care for her father and be wooed by her superior-officer-turned-suitor” (32). Their difference from the earlier princesses is largely an illusion; in the end, most of them (except for the “optional” Princesses, Mulan and Pocahontas) are engaged or married teenagers.

Tiana, the central character in the 2009 film *The Princess and the Frog*, seems at first to offer a dramatic departure from the others in the Princess pantheon. In fact, Disney cannily anticipates possible backlash against classic Princess culture by creating a hyperbolic alternate “princess” within this film: a greedy (but ultimately good-hearted) friend of Tiana who thinks of nothing but marrying a prince.⁵ As the movie unfolds, it becomes clear that Tiana, who harbours no dreams of kissing frogs, embodies the qualities of a “true” princess, one who can speak to a modern audience: she is hard-working, gutsy, and upwardly mobile. Even when she marries her prince at the end, she remains unlike a princess, given that her only palace is the restaurant that has been her dream throughout the film.⁶ Still, Tiana has several proper princess signifiers, including a gorgeous gown, a flashy wedding ring, beaming royal parents-in-law, and a cheerful disposition. Her princess power is tremendous: as the bride of Prince Naveen, her kiss has the power to transform them both back into their original human forms. Before she becomes a princess,



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Tiana is perpetually overworked and exhausted; she is subject to (subtle, Disneyfied) racial prejudice. As a princess, though, Tiana is the proprietor of a tony restaurant, where rich and poor, black and white, alligator and human can commingle freely. Hard work makes her deserving, but being a princess gets her what she wants. In the end, despite her apparent differences, Tiana largely adheres to the conventional Princess model.

These Princesses, then, *appear* to be diverse in their racial backgrounds, their historical eras, and the styles of their clothing—the last quality being one of the most important markers of “diversity” for Disney. While they offer enough variation to appeal to a range of consumers, however, their differences only solidify a unified idea of “Princessness.” As artifacts like the Disney picture book *What Is a Princess?* by Jennifer Liberty Weinberg make clear, all Princesses, dressed in their iconic pinks or yellows or blues, are basically the same: generically brave, loyal, kind, and fashion-conscious.

Despite this basic sameness in a Princess line that is already so limited, however, some researchers argue that Princess play might actually provide children with the opportunity to critique restrictive gender narratives. In an effort to examine how “young girls read and respond to constraining story lines,” ethnographer Karen Wohlwend undertook a “microethnographic” study of a kindergarten classroom in which children played with Disney Princess toys as a part of a writing workshop. After such play, Wohlwend reports, these children “rewrote plots they knew by heart and subtly altered character roles to take up more empowered identity positions in child-ruled imaginary spaces” (58). They responded to the gendered narratives of Princess culture in surprising ways, stretching stereotypical

male-female roles. Wohlwend's study emphasizes the complex and productive social negotiations that occur as children play together. She focuses on face-to-face play, although she does argue that toy websites with social networks (including Disney websites) "are important new spaces for young children to play, write, and transact identity texts" (81). In contrast to the potential that she sees in such new media spaces, however, the Princess web "game" to which I now turn emphasizes a one-on-one interaction with a Princess and an individual child user rather than broader social networks. Moreover, while it is important to remember that real children use texts to their own ends, often manipulating them in productive and surprising ways, corporate-sanctioned spaces often work to impede such creative activity. Unlike social doll play or video games in which children may revise narrative structures and make decisions that have palpable consequences, the Disney Princess site offers few creative opportunities. While almost any site may "unintentionally offer avenues for subversion" or resistance on the part of the child user (Mitchell and Reid-Walsh 147), this site minimizes those possibilities by carefully regulating the user's behaviour.

The Enchanted World of Disney Princesses on the Web

When a user first enters the website, she is greeted by soaring music, chirping birds, and infinity-sign swirls of pink fairy dust, all of which send a subtle

message about the omnipotence of Disney. "Welcome to the wonderful world of Disney Princess," a mellifluous female voice murmurs, "where happily ever after happens every day." This catchy phrase, with its alliterative W and its pleasing repetition of *hap*, suggests that the remote happy endings of fairy tales are now made more tangible and attainable on the web.

After the loading screen animation, all of the Princesses reveal themselves. They stand in a semicircle, coyly glancing at us, with the newest Princess, Tiana, front and centre. Until the user makes a move, the Princesses blink, giggle, glance demurely off to the side, put a finger to their lips, beam brightly, and curtsy. They look as we expect them to look: as idealized, slightly infantilized images of beauty. From Disney's early days, according to Bell, "artists sketched the flesh and blood on . . . folktale templates with contemporaneous popular images of feminine beauty and youth, their sources ranging from the silent screen to glossy pin-ups" (109). Even the modern Princesses fit this mould: they are all wide-eyed ingenues. As in other forums, the "princesses never make eye contact when they're grouped: each stares off in a slightly different direction as if unaware of the others' presence" (Orenstein, "What's Wrong"). Each Princess offers an eager welcome when a user's cursor hovers over her, however.

At this stage, while the user may choose to click

on a variety of icons, such as “Movies,” “Products,” or “Parenting a Princess,” the primary activity—the one encouraged by the dulcet tones of the voice-over—is to “select a Princess to visit her enchanting world.” The voice-over and the “Select a Princess to Begin Playing” sign seem to emphasize that game playing is the primary reason to visit the site. If a user decides to purchase any of the multiple Princess products available here, including DVDs, diapers, and customized phone calls from a favourite Princess, so much the better. Disney does not need to stoop to pop-up ads or flashing icons that clamour for attention, however, but rather, this website engages in some of the shrewder techniques of advergaming, a term that describes this immersive mix of entertainment and advertising.

As a strategist at an entertainment agency aptly puts it, speaking in industry lingo, advergaming “incentivize consumers to visit retail outlets or even purchase directly online. The natural interactivity of games provides the perfect stimulus and ongoing communication channel between brands and their customers” (Jaffe). Sandra Calvert, director of the Children’s Digital Media Center at Georgetown University, is less sanguine about this activity and warns her readers that marketers are increasingly using “stealth techniques whereby consumers are immersed in branded environments, frequently without knowing that they are being exposed to sophisticated marketing

campaigns” (212). Sites like *Candystand.com*, sponsored by Wrigley, allow users to “Play Free Online Games,” for example. They might take the “Haute and Bothered NYC Fashion Challenge,” a fashion game (connected to a web miniseries) that touts the virtues of LG phones. Users thus become involved in a branded experience, voluntarily interacting with ads rather than feeling bombarded by them. While for advergaming like “Fashion Challenge” the product is secondary to the game—users do not choose to play primarily because they like LG phones—Disney’s use of advergaming is different. Many corporations have to promote the ludic experience vigorously in order to render their products invisible. With Disney, the products are the lure. At *Candystand*, for example, a user might decide to play the *Pixie Hollow* game because she already feels a connection with Tinker Bell or with Disney products more broadly.

On Disney’s main Princess website, the situation is similar: users are there because they actively want to spend more time in Disney’s worlds, virtual or otherwise, and the commercial messages may seem like part of the fun. This kind of advergaming creates a unique set of concerns for those interested in child development, especially since young children may not see Disney’s Princesses as products but as personalities who interact with them directly on the web. As Calvert cautions, “During the stage of preoperational thought, roughly from age two to age seven, young children

are perceptually bound and focus on properties such as how a product looks.” This puts “young children at a distinct disadvantage in understanding commercial intent and, thus, in being able to make informed decisions about requests and purchases of products” (214).⁷ Web environments present challenges, since they are not subject to the same regulatory practices as television. As Calvert reminds us, the safeguard known as the “separation principle” established by the Federal Communications Commissions—which mandated that transitions between advertisements and programs must be distinct and that products cannot be integrated into program content—does not apply to the web (223). Indeed, many of the regulations created by the FCC were specific to televisual formats.

In 1998, the Children’s Online Privacy Protection Act was put into place; additionally, the Children’s Advertising Review Unit (CARU), an organization created by the advertising industry, “has made some attempt to regulate the newer interactive technology marketing practices” (Cai and Zhao 138). The CARU guidelines are limited, however. According to this organization, “On Websites directed to children, if an advertiser integrates an advertisement into the content of a game or activity, then the advertiser should make clear, in a manner that will be easily understood by the intended audience, that it is an advertisement” (National Advertising 9). This directive is crucial, since children, more often than adults, tend to think that

ads are simply part of the content of a website and click on them without realizing they are ads (Cai and Zhao 139). On the Princess site, the kinds of cues that are present in television to distinguish advertisements (phrases like “after these messages,” the grouping of advertisements, and subtler clues like voice-overs) certainly are not present, but neither are the cues that are commonly found online. Measures aimed at protecting children online like ad labels and bridge windows (a pop-up window that “reminds children that they are about to leave the original website and enter an advertiser’s website” [Cai and Zhao 139]) are not applicable. The Princess site, after all, is not just in the business of selling products like tiaras and light-up Cinderella shoes; it sells a whole way of life, and the desire for the lifestyle feeds the desire for the products.

In part because Disney does not engage in some of the more strenuous advertising strategies common to other products geared to children, such as fast food and cereal brands, it can claim to be a key figure when it comes to protecting children on the web. It was, according to its own corporate website, “an early leader in COPPA [Children’s Online Privacy Protection] implementation,” and it has developed technologies that allow it to support claims of privacy protection (“Internet Safety”). This carefulness about its public persona is typical: as Bell and her colleagues suggest, no part “of the Disney terrain is absent of border guards” (“Introduction” 7). It is because Disney

is seen as unassailable, however, that it is immune to some critiques that might otherwise be levied against it. By doing as the disembodied, godmotherly voice-over has urged us—that is, “select[ing] a Princess” to begin playing—we can see the specific ways that Disney creates seamless transitions between play and consumption.

At this juncture, I select Belle, the heroine of *Beauty and the Beast* (1991), for further discussion, since in many ways she is the “perfect” representation of Princesshood, embodying the contradictions of the more contemporary Disney heroines.⁸ On the website, she stands on the right-hand side, blinking and bobbing with the rest of the group. Clicking on her triggers an audio clip of the godmotherly voice-over: “Let’s go visit Belle!” With a few swirls of pink fairy dust, the user is taken to a pastoral landscape where Belle, dressed in her iconic yellow gown from the film, greets visitors with comments like “Bonjour! How are you?” and “You’re an *amazing* friend.” A user soon realizes that, in this game, Belle will not be a playable character. Instead, the child user will have the “privilege” to be her assistant.

Like the other Princesses at this stage in the game, Belle both expresses delight at the user’s presence and lets her know what exciting event is about to take place (in this case, her father’s invention fair). Next, Belle invites the user to help her prepare for this fair, following the invitation with one of these phrases:

What do you say? Would you like to help me prepare for it?

I hope you have some time to help me prepare for it.

It would be nice if you’d help me get ready for it. Could you, please?

I know! You could help me get ready for it!

Preparing for it will be fun. Can you help me?

Could you please help me prepare for it?

Would you please be my guest and help me prepare for it?

These invitations are interspersed with phrases that refer us back to the urtext of the film, offhandedly reminding us of the names of other characters as well as Belle’s fondness for libraries, roses, and her horse Philippe. If a child has not seen the film or been exposed to any other books about Belle, she will not be at a loss: the web world can operate as either an introduction to or an enhancement of the film *Beauty and the Beast*.

From the first click, Belle entices the user with words like “nice” and “fun” and, perhaps most



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compellingly, a catchword from the film: guest. While the skeptical player might ask why being a guest is linked to “helping out,” those who yearn to enter the sumptuous world of Belle might be seduced by the chance to be a guest. After all, “Be Our Guest!” is the command uttered by the enchanted servants in one of the more famous Busby Berkeleyesque musical numbers in the film. In this scene, Belle sits in awe as the cutlery comes alive, twirling up to the ceiling and diving into a soup tureen, while platter after platter of French food is displayed for her eating pleasure. These servants have been wasting away for years, feeling as if their life is meaningless; as the dapper Lumiere puts it: “Life is so unnerving for a servant who’s not serving. He’s not whole without a soul to wait upon.” Fortunately, Belle provides them with this opportunity to practise their craft. A guest is no mere visitor, according to the logic of the film, but someone *special*, privy to the spectacular performances of the hired help. Consequently, when Belle asks the user to “please be [her] guest and help [her] prepare” for the event on the website, she is inviting the child already familiar with the film to remember what a joy it was for Belle herself to be a guest. Now, in this new medium with its tantalizing sense of immediacy, it is the child's turn to be honoured, to become simultaneously guest and helper.

All of the Princesses follow a similar pattern in their “games”: they express a spirited acknowledgement of their rapport with the child, a vigorous invitation to help with a job, and a reminder of (or an introduction to) elements from their respective films. Princess Jasmine, for example, makes two statements in this regard: “Friendship is very important to me. Especially my friendship with you. . . . Guess what’s happening today? We’re

going to have a special royal tea. I really could use your help. Do you think you might?" Ariel, the Little Mermaid, says, "Hi there! It's always fun to see you!" She later adds, "Didja hear? We're having a tea party today! . . . There's so much to do. I can count on your help, right?"

The responses of these Princesses can usefully be read from an Althusserian perspective that acknowledges the ways that subjects are interpellated into ideology. All of the Princesses presume that the user will willingly recognize herself as the "friend" who is being hailed directly and that she will eagerly agree to help. By being hailed in this way, the user is flattered into thinking that she is the unique "you" of the website's discourse. As she recognizes herself as the subject⁹ of this invitation, the user is in turn subjected to the meanings and patterns of Disney's compelling world view.

Thus interpellated, the subject is expected to continue playing. (If the user is uncertain how to proceed, the female voice-over periodically intones: "Click on the play button to start your adventure!") Once the user does so, she is rewarded with another affirmation of friendship or with warm thanks. Belle, for example, utters one of the following phrases: "It's kind of you to help me today." "I find it wonderful when friends like you help me." "Being kind and helpful is a nice way to be, don't you think? I do, too." "Your friendship is like a thoughtful gift." A similarly

ebullient Jasmine offers a similar rotation of sound bites: "You know, our friendship really makes me smile!" "Are you sure you're not a genie? Your help is like a wish come true!" "Thank you for helping." "You're a very special friend for helping me." Like so many other Disney-approved values, being helpful is construed as unambiguously good. In other words, help is what is expected of all users—there is no room for dissent. Belle and her friends already anticipate the user's acquiescence and they register their approval of it (a powerful incentive to keep on helping). They emphasize that helping does not mean *working*, but making a wish come true or being like a genie. Of course, it is not just the Princesses who are being helped here: the child user is also helping to cement Disney's vision of a pliant young girl, a little princess who loves Princesses.

The language of the site also suggests that this love is reciprocated. The Princesses stare with limpid cartoon eyes at the child user and hail her directly: they are always already friends. Hailing the child is not unusual in children's media—the television program *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* frequently did so, referring to the child viewer as a "television neighbor." As Mark Shelton insists, however, "the explicit term used by Fred Rogers, 'neighbor,' implies proximity rather than relationship: 'neighbors' are those who live near us; 'friends' are those we know well" (184). While he may have occasionally used the word

“friend,” Mr. Rogers allied himself with children as a neighbour. As the show demonstrated, a neighbour may be someone we know well or someone we have not yet met: it evokes the richly varied relationships of a community.

The term “friend” brings different expectations. A friend is someone we know more intimately, and a “crucial feature of friendship is that it is a reciprocal relationship between two people with both affirming it” (Dunn 2). While “friend” may suggest varying degrees of intimacy, this reciprocity is a key feature. In the case of the Princess website, the child does not need to develop a rapport with a character before having the title bestowed on her: being a good friend simply means agreeing to spend more time with these Princesses-as-products, listening to their speeches, and “helping” them when asked. “Friendship”—a potent signifier—is emptied out, divested of its most important characteristics, including earned trust.

On the surface, this Princess game, like many of Disney’s other materials, seems to be about “good values”: kindness, loyalty, helping out. In this, Disney is adhering to one of the core principles of the Children’s Advertising Review Unit (CARU): “Advertisers are encouraged to capitalize on the potential of advertising to serve an educational role and influence positive personal qualities and behaviors in children, e.g., being honest and respectful of others” (National Advertising 5). By

explicitly promoting values such as these, Disney deflects attention from the more commercial values that it promotes implicitly. The game creates a new context for experiencing friendship, one that seems to be benign and social but is actually programmatic and commercial. Phrases like Jasmine’s “You’re a very special friend for helping me” are particularly coercive, since they link the idea of being special to doing what one is asked. Behind their blankly beautiful faces, the Princesses are hucksters reminiscent of Tom Sawyer, selling the idea of “helping” as something “fun”—and selling themselves in the process. Such persuasive rhetoric calls to mind another of CARU’s guidelines, which insist that advertising “[c]laims should not unduly exploit a child’s imagination. While fantasy, using techniques such as animation and computer-generated imagery, is appropriate for both younger and older children, it should not create unattainable performance expectations nor exploit the younger child’s difficulty in distinguishing between the real and the fanciful” (7).¹⁰ If we bear in mind Calvert’s reminder that “children under age eight may well believe that they are really interacting with branded characters” (216), then the language of the Princesses is all the more troubling.

The next stage of the game, in which each Princess recites a fairly lengthy monologue that sets the scene, also makes claims on the child’s friendship, reinforcing


important elements in the Princess mythology and revealing to the user what her special role will be. The user, now a passive listener, cannot bypass the monologue—there is no way to override it. In other words, any time the user decides to visit the enchanting world of Belle, she must listen to her recite the following:

Well, today's the invention fair. It's one of my favorite days of the year. My father has been an inventor since I was a young girl. You know, some of the town used to think he was a little odd, but since he's won so many prizes for his inventions, everyone knows what a genius he really is. In fact, the invention fair's become one of the village's favorite celebrations. No one would miss it for the world. Young and old, farmers and shopkeepers, men and women, boys and girls, everyone! And when they do come, everyone wants to look their very best. Even I think it's fun to dress up in something *beautiful* for the invention fair. Uh oh—with everything that's going on, I almost forgot. I promised Mrs. Potts I would have a spot of tea with her at the castle—right now! And I still haven't decided what to wear to the fair today. Will you please choose something for me? You will? Well, thank you! I think we should hurry! The invention fair is today! I know with your help, my father will be very proud. Thank you so much.


As with the opening salutation, the structure of all of the Princesses' monologues is similar: there is, in every case, an important event (a ball, a tea party, a fair), but because the Princess is too busy to dress herself (she has to make pastries or beignets, pick flowers or berries, choose tea, practise a dance, or groom a horse), she needs her special friend to help her perform some lady-in-waiting work. It is also something of an emergency—exclamatory phrases like “right now!” and “we should hurry!” pepper the monologues. These serve to add a sense of excitement and quicken the pace of the otherwise sluggish “game.”

Once the user is whisked off to her chosen Princess's dressing room, the game becomes an online version of paper dolls. She is asked to select an item to cover her head (like a bonnet or a tiara), a necklace, an outfit (usually smothered in lace), and something to clutch (like a reticule or a riding crop). The outfits all vary depending on the perceived essence of the character: Jasmine's clothes include harem pants and crop tops that showcase her midriff, presumably since these items serve as signifiers of an exoticized Middle East. Pocahontas, representing generic and grossly inaccurate notions of “Native Americanness,” wears outfits with leather fringe and feathers.

Even for the user who is unaware of these dubious constructions of gender and ethnicity, this online version of paper dolls clearly lacks the delightful



Oddly, though, the website's monologues consistently downplay creative and transformative potential of clothing, choosing instead to emphasize its conventional functions



tactile quality that makes dressing up so pleasurable in the first place. Still, such online clothing may be appealing, particularly for children who have been charmed by the magical possibilities of clothing in Princess stories. As Carol Scott argues, clothing in fairy tales “provides a tangible shape to future roles and a promise of the dramatic transformations that life offers” (157). Clothing, for all of its gendered limitations, also has the ability to transform the ordinary into the extraordinary, changing the course of the narrative, particularly for characters like Cinderella and Mulan. The idea of dressing up these and other Princesses, for whom clothing has been so crucial, may be a heady prospect. Oddly, though, the website's monologues consistently downplay the creative and transformative potential of clothing, choosing instead to emphasize its conventional functions, as in Cinderella's pert statement to the user: “It's important that, as a princess, I set a good example and look my very best. After all, many of the king's subjects will be there to welcome us.” Sleeping Beauty echoes this sentiment: “Since everyone will be in attendance, it's important that, as their princess, I look my very best.” Far from “break[ing] the rules of the ordered world” (Scott 151), dressing up here becomes a way of capitulating to custom. It becomes a duty to be performed, something that a princess—and by extension a child-as-princess—should want to do simply because it is what is expected. Sleeping Beauty and Cinderella are part of the older generation of Princesses, but even the more modern Princesses have constrictively conventional attitudes toward clothing. In particular, Belle in the monologue above goes so far as to suggest that dressing up is a way of securing paternal pride. She even makes the child user an accomplice: “I know with your help, my father will be very proud.” It is by being

“pretty as a princess” rather than possessing strong personal qualities that Belle can ensure her father’s fond feelings. As the monologue has emphasized, it is her father who is the “genius” inventor, not Belle.

After the dressing portion of the “adventure” begins, the game takes another turn. While the user is in the process of choosing an ensemble, Belle pops her head into the dressing room to provide encouraging remarks: “Thank you for helping me pick my dress.” “You are very talented at picking out clothes to wear.” “What you’ve chosen is very nice.” Since the idea behind the “game” is that all of the Princesses are too busy to pick their own clothing, this appearance is surprising. It seems to support the idea that a child might lose interest if she is not consistently encouraged—or that, caught up in the pleasure of sifting through virtual clothing that is not clearly branded, she might forget the primacy of Disney’s brand. Moreover, the Princesses’ remarks themselves, like those regarding friendship earlier, are empty. Literally everything the child picks is perfect: she is “talented” and helpful, and there are no consequences for any action. Such meaningless, bland language highlights the fact that this is not a game at all, let alone the “adventure” that was promised. Instead, the game confers “special” status on every user, perhaps whetting the user’s appetite for more Princess play that, given the limitations of the games, must be fulfilled at the commercial portion of the site.

In all of its media outlets, Disney works to shape perceptions of what “special” means. According to its Consumer Products site, Disney Princess merchandise helps each little girl conceive of a world where “balls are held in her honor and princes fall in love at first sight.” Feeling “as special as a princess” is important since, as Disney dramatically puts it, “for a little girl, the desire to feel special is more powerful than a magic wand” (“Disney Consumer Products”). The potency of a magic wand cannot compete with the sumptuous, indulgent worlds Disney creates, where every girl is led to believe that she is special—and where to be special means to be the centre of attention. In this Princess game, Disney-inflected notions of “specialness” serve as a substitute for agency. Users may not have the power to act in any meaningful way, but they are encouraged to feel exceptionally important, chosen to be included in an elite, royal society. They are invited to engage in the titillating aspirational fantasies that only Disney can help them create.

As the game ends, it becomes clear just how severely the site’s constrictive script limits a child user’s options.¹¹ By this stage, each Princess has built anticipation for her upcoming event—the fair or parade or festival for which she must carefully dress. Belle, for example, has informed the user that “[i]t’s going to be an unforgettable fair” and that “[n]o one would miss it for the world.” Unfortunately, however,

the child user becomes that “no one”: just as the fair is about to begin, the game itself ends and the user is praised for selecting “a lot of lovely things.” She may choose to print a picture of the Princess in her new clothes, start the “game” again, or click “next.” By clicking “next,” she is given a charm or a bracelet because, as Belle says yet again, “we’re such good friends.” She is then sent to a page that is, according to the voice-over, “a magical place for your princess charms and bracelets collections,” where a user is encouraged to log in and collect virtual jewelry. It is only by registering for an account (with, the voice-over reminds us, the help of a parent or grown-up) that a user may print out special bracelets and charms and save them for her next visit.

In this way, the game ends with the opportunity to “legitimize” the child user’s relationship with a Princess by placing it within Disney’s corporate purview. Such an ending emphasizes that what is truly valuable here is not ludic activity but “lovely things”: the clothes that the user has chosen, the charm bracelets that she may collect—and, from Disney’s perspective, the user’s email address and demographic information. The user (or the consenting adult) will also receive “Disney Princess communications”: “Enchanting Games,” “Princess Stories,” and “Personalized Wishes,” as well as (unless they deliberately choose not to) “information and offers from the Walt Disney Company family of businesses.”

The fair or parade where a princess (and her child “friend”) might have the opportunity to interact with others or even, in Belle’s case, to become an inventor never takes place. While the Disney Corporation may add more truly interactive content over time, it is telling that the first and primary game takes the shape that it does. It mirrors and even amplifies many of the problems that critics have had with Disney throughout the years: its strict gender codes, its “erasure or repression of difference” (Bell, Haas, and Sells, “Introduction” 7), and its commodification of play. Despite all of the sumptuous clothing, decorated dressing rooms, and animated Princesses, there is a pervasive sense of emptiness.

Such emptiness can be assuaged simply by moving on, however, and the rest of the site offers a number of other ways to play Princess. As with all of the worlds Disney creates, the site seems to go on indefinitely. By clicking on “Preschool” and then on “Disney Princess,” users can listen to music from a Princess party, watch videos, and print Princess pages to colour. In a section meant for adults, “Parenting a Princess,” users have options to make Princess Crafts, Princess Recipes (like Cinderella’s Mini Cheese Ball Mice), view a royal photo gallery, and join a Princess parents group where one can share “stories of everyday life with a princess”—solidifying the link between Princess and child-as-princess. While a user can consume many of the features of the site without

spending money, by clicking on “Products” she can also head to the Disney Store to “Shop . . . for Princess Dreams.” Such a transition from playing to shopping is natural, easy, just one more way to enhance one’s relationship with Princess friends. At the Store, every type of Princess paraphernalia awaits the eager user/ maidservant/special friend/princess, who is urged, with a parent, to take on the most important role of all: loyal consumer.

The Disney Princess website is only one part of the complex web of texts that forms Disney Princess, but it serves a crucial cultural function. As a legitimate Disney site, it has an aura of authenticity; as a site with a dual implied audience of young children (specifically girls) and their parents (specifically mothers), it is a key

way to shape consumers and to track online habits. Its vacant-eyed, chirpy Princesses have been made into paragons of virtue and taste; here, emptiness is packaged as innocence, and its sanitized world view is encoded as safe. Although the site emphasizes words like “select,” “choose,” “adventure,” and “game,” its limited possibilities for action and the emphasis on having rather than doing ensure that users have little agency. In other words, by making “interactive play” mean little more than a choice between pink and purple, purse and bouquet, the site curtails the web’s expansive possibilities. It leaves us with a vision of the next generation of Princess consumers, making their way to a happily-ever-after that is only and always a click away.

Notes

¹ To differentiate them from generic “princesses,” I use the capitalized Princess when referring to Disney’s trademarked brand. I recognize that Disney is not alone in creating princess culture, however. As Lisa Orr maintains, princess consumer goods have become so successful in part because others, like Mattel (the manufacturer of Barbie) have followed Disney’s blueprint (15). Orr makes a convincing argument that Mattel and Disney both “seem to

reach similar conclusions on how princess culture is deployed and how it successfully influences consumers” (10).

² For example, when she first appeared on the site in fall 2009, Tiana was inert, “unanimated,” but she has since been updated and can now smile, move, and wave her hand like the other Princesses. It is worth noting, however, given how quickly media platforms

change, that this site has remained relatively stagnant, with no new interactive content since its initial publication on the web. (As of this writing, Disney is planning to integrate Rapunzel into its Princess pantheon, but has not yet done so.)

³ Marjorie Worthington suggests that one other reason Mulan and Pocahontas are not always included is because the films do not adhere to the passive princess model. She also speculates whether their status as non-white Princesses affects their frequent exclusion from the lineup (39).

⁴ It is important to know when and where one can wear princess clothing, however. One visitor to Disneyland Paris was told she would not be admitted because she was wearing a dress that made her look too much like a Disney Princess. Her daughter, who was also wearing a princess costume, was allowed to wear her gown (Dolan).

⁵ In an equally canny move, Disney gently spoofed the more precious aspects of its own Princess culture with the live-action film *Enchanted* (2007), while still insisting that the film is “not a parody and it’s not making fun of anything. . . . It’s a giant love letter to Disney classics” (Barnes). As Orr notes, the irony within the film “does not seriously threaten commercialism” or the heroine’s happy ending (26).

⁶ Tiana refers to her restaurant as “Tiana’s Place” on the website. In the film, this is the name used on the menus, but the sign says “Tiana’s Palace.” *The Princess and the Frog: The Essential Guide* explains this with a caption: “Did you know? Young Tiana wanted to call her restaurant ‘Tiana’s Place.’ Now that she’s older, Tiana prefers ‘Tiana’s Palace.’ The term “older” here means aspirational: “place” is mundane, but “palace” confirms her royal status.

⁷ Other psychologists challenge the Piaget age-stage model of cognitive development, emphasizing that even older children who may have the ability to recognize the persuasive intentions of ads may not be all that different from younger children in terms of their ability to resist them. As Agnes Nairn and Cordelia Fine argue, there are “scarce empirical grounds for the assumption that persuasion knowledge enables a child to make a practical independent and informed assessment of the potential effects of advertising on their consumption behavior” (450).

⁸ While the film seems to allow Belle the freedom to shape her destiny, it nonetheless promotes restrictive notions of gender identity. Even though Belle rebuffs the boorish villain Gaston (who is adored by the lesser belles of the town), she still swoons over tales of Prince Charming and eventually meets her own prince (temporarily in Beast’s clothing). For more on this point, see Cummins.

⁹ For Althusser, the process of recognizing oneself as the subject being addressed is always an act of ideological misrecognition. The “I” being recognized is in fact an “I” created by ideology, in the imaginary space opened up by the act of being hailed.

¹⁰ The word choice here is telling: CARU (which is, after all, part of the advertising industry) seems to suggest that it might be possible to *duly* exploit a child’s imagination, if the ad follows proper procedure.

¹¹ Peggy Orenstein maintains that most sites geared toward small girls (like *Barbie Girls* and *Ty Girlz*) are similar, with an emphasis on fashion or shopping. In a paragraph discussing the Disney Princess site, she concludes that it could be “crowned the dullest of them all” (*Cinderella* 162).

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