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## Can Disney Build a Better Mickey Mouse?

By JESSE GREEN

**H**E was the only time I was happy," said Maurice Sendak.

Mr. Sendak, who based the character of Max in his children's book "Where the Wild Things Are" on Mickey Mouse, is an exact contemporary of the cartoon rodent: both were born in 1928. "I was around 6 when I first saw him," he said. "It filled me with joy. I think it was those primary colors so vivid and pure, taken up with the most incredibly beautiful animation, reminding you of Fred Astaire. Oh! And his character was the kind I wished I'd had as a child: brave and sassy and nasty and crooked and thinking of ways to outdo people." The joy leached from Mr. Sendak's voice. "Not like the lifeless fat pig he is now."

Mr. Sendak is hardly alone in mourning the mouse's decline. "Boring," "embalmed," "neglected," "irrelevant," "deracinated" and, perhaps most damning, "over" are some of the adjectives that cropped up in recent interviews with people in the cartoon, movie and marketing businesses. And strangely for such a well-known figure, Mickey doesn't even have a back story: no clearly defined relations, no hometown, no goals, no weaknesses. According to David Smith, director of the Disney archives, the company maintains no "biography" of the character; he is who he is.

But Mickey is not just another property that Disney owns: he's the hallmark, the frontman, the ambassador for its theme parks, the logo on its business cards. A significant portion of the Disney empire is built around this strange creature. And yet, at a time when the company is already facing an almost cartoonishly daunting litany of travails — a hostile takeover bid, the loss of its highly successful partnership with the animation studio Pixar, mass layoffs at its own animation studio, the very public campaign by Roy E. Disney, nephew of Walt, to dethrone the C.E.O., Michael Eisner — his appeal is apparently starting to slip.

Publicly, the company maintains an optimistic stance. "In my world," said Andy Mooney, chairman of the consumer products division, "a character that generates \$4.5 billion a year in retail revenue and is at least four times larger than any other character in the world except Winnie the Pooh" — which Disney also controls — "doesn't need refurbishing." According to Mr. Mooney, Mickey has "98 percent unaided awareness for children 3 to 11 worldwide," and has started to appear again as a "real favorite" among girls 8 to 12 and, surprisingly, boys 13 to 17.

The company acknowledges that revenue from Mickey merchandise, measured as a portion of all consumer products, has shrunk significantly since 1997. What Disney doesn't acknowledge is that Mickey's reputation, measured in conversations with industry watchers, is shrinking even more. Still, signals of the Mouse's distress have lately begun to seep out, almost unconsciously, from the soul of Disney's business: its storytelling. In a video game called "Kingdom Hearts" — which has sold more than 4 million units since its release in 2002 and is frequently cited as evidence of Mickey's continuing relevance — the mouse barely appears. Instead, he is relegated to a subplot that seems eerily allegorical. According to the game's Web site, evil marauding aliens known as the Heartless are threatening the Kingdom. (Roy Disney has called the company under Mr. Eisner's

leadership rapacious and soulless.) "There's turmoil in Disney Castle," it says. "King Mickey is missing."

The company has indeed made quiet attempts to find him. In 2002, Disney marketing officials set up a Mickey "situation room," stocked floor to ceiling with thousands of examples of mouse merchandise, to show executives from every division, brought in for tours, that the character was inconsistent and in need of refocusing. (Licensees were somewhat randomly producing four different generations of Mickey likenesses.) At around the same time, said a branding executive who did not wish to risk reprisals by allowing his name to be used, Disney "put out feelers" among animators for ideas about remaking the Mouse. Disney officials deny it, saying that the 18-month program of special events and new product releases that commenced on his 75th birthday, last November, was not an attempt to revive a flagging brand but merely a company-wide effort at "showcasing" Mickey more successfully. But it is not immediately clear how the 75 giant Mickey statues they gave celebrities to decorate might do that.

"Companies at times let a character linger because they are not sure what to do with it and fear going the wrong way," said Avi Arad, CEO of Marvel, which has revived its classic Spiderman character. "So they do nothing. Mickey right now doesn't have a dialogue. He's not carrying any banners. Maybe right now he doesn't stand for anything but nostalgia. Nostalgia is fine, but it is not enough."

Whose nostalgia it is makes a crucial difference. Some marketers said that these days, Mickey merchandise is mostly bought by parents — an ominous sign. Martin Brochstein, executive editor of the Licensing Letter, calls Mickey "irrelevant to a huge generational chunk that grew up on 'Sesame Street' or Nickelodeon but really had no contact with Mickey unless they went to one of the theme parks." According to Cindy Levitt, vice president of Hot Topic, a mall-based fashion retailer, kids themselves are buying clothing featuring SpongeBob and, of all things, the Care Bears. To be popular with today's hipster teens and 20-somethings, she said, a character "has to have originated in their youth. It has to be from the 1980's." Mickey, she added, doesn't "register" with her clients. "He's too old. He's their parents' character."

So how did Mickey come to be seen by so many people as an out-of-touch Rat Pack leftover, cashiered to Anaheim and Orlando, all but playing golf with Gerald Ford? How can something so beloved become so empty? And what can Disney do about it?

"It all began with a mouse," Walt Disney liked to say. Well, not quite. In 1928, Disney lost control of the rights to a previous creation called Oswald the Rabbit. All but bankrupt, he hastily sought to develop a new character that would be a distinct individual instead of a vaudeville stooge. Along with Ub Iwerks — the only animator who stayed with him — he replaced the rabbit's long floppy ears with two black disks and came up with one weird creature. Not just physically, though as mice go, he was pretty irregular, with his giant feet, widow's peak, plunger hands and hose-like limbs.

More surprising was his personality; if it was based, as many people say, on Disney himself (he provided the voice), you've got to wonder about Walt. The original Mickey — who made his public debut in "[Steamboat Willie](#)," the first synchronized-sound cartoon — was only partly civilized: uninhibited, bare-chested, rough-and-ready to the point of sadism. His chums were farmyard animals like Clarabelle Cow and Horace Horsecollar, and, like most cartoon characters of the period, he blithely trafficked in fistfights, drownings, dismemberments. For violence, the shipboard shenanigans of "Steamboat Willie" far exceed those in "Steamboat Bill Jr.," the Buster Keaton feature that inspired it. In one sequence, Mickey tortures various animals — banging cow teeth, tweaking pig nipples — in order to produce a rendition of "Turkey in the Straw."

But that richly drawn, disreputable character, born of desperation and betrayal, got watered down almost from the moment he was introduced. Disney's first licensed merchandise — a Mickey Mouse writing tablet — appeared in 1929, by which point the first Mickey Mouse Club had already been established (along with its code

of behavior). The cartoon, originally drawn for adults, was repositioned for the millions of children who took Mickey to heart. And although Mickey for a while remained a playful, conniving underdog, like Huck Finn or Charlie Chaplin's Tramp, he gradually got less mischievous. "He couldn't have any of the naughty qualities he had in his earlier cartoons," said Mr. Smith, of the Disney archives, "because so many people looked up to him. The studio would get complaints in the mail."

So, sometime in the mid- to late 1930's, Mickey settled down. Barnyard cohorts and rail-riding adventures gave way to suburban domesticity with his non-wife Minnie ("They just lived together as friends," said Mr. Smith. "For a very long time") and their unexplained nephews. At the same time, Mickey's perverse qualities were grafted onto his new supporting cast — Donald Duck and Goofy, especially — who by the 1940's, according to Mr. Smith, eclipsed the mouse in popularity. Like Walt, whose politics started a rightward drift after a studio strike in 1941, Mickey was no longer a hungry Depression prole; by the time he started shilling war bonds, the transformation from amoral Huck Finn to virtuous, conservative Aunt Polly was complete.

Mickey had transformed visually, too, from the elegant semi-abstraction of 1928, when his face was basically just an array of seven circles, into something cuter and less boldly graphic. Though the ears were barely altered (they floated around his head so that no matter which way he turned you always saw them straight on), everything else gradually became more "real" and "expressive." The cheeks puffed out, the limbs acquired volume and the eyes, formerly just pupils floating in a vague sea of white, got moored into upright ovals. The overall effect of these changes was that Mickey came to seem less ratlike, more human — and far younger. In an only partly silly investigation, the paleontologist Stephen Jay Gould used calipers to measure drawings of Mickey at three different stages and compared the resulting proportions to those of living animals. His conclusion was that Mickey, while aging chronologically, had become "progressively more juvenile in appearance." Indeed, he had become an infant.

A baby visually yet an upstanding citizen morally, he was so internally contradictory that he ceased to suit any particular story. In any case, as the moviegoing public's taste for shorts diminished, Mickey had fewer animated outlets; he appeared in 118 cartoons before 1960 but in only two thereafter. Disney managed to keep him before the public by having him "play" other characters: Jack in "[Mickey and the Beanstalk](#)," for instance, or Bob Cratchit in "[Mickey's Christmas Carol](#)." But in the process he shed what was left of his own story. What replaced it, said Jim Hardison, creative director of Character — a company that "revitalizes" icons like Popeye and the Rice Krispies spokes-toons Snap, Crackle and Pop — was the story of Disney itself.

"If I was looking for the crossover point where Mickey's story morphed into the Disney story, it was 'The Sorcerer's Apprentice,'" said Mr. Hardison, referring to the Mickey segment of Disney's 1940 classic, "[Fantasia](#)," in which the mouse, as an aspiring magician, attempts to harness his master's tricks. "That's where he cemented his place as the source of Disney magic. Magic is such an important characteristic of Disney, but it wasn't an important characteristic of Mickey. Once he becomes magical, he is no longer the everyman underdog. He went from being the little guy against the world to a symbol of what Disney does."

And so a logo was born. A brilliant one, at that: any close approximation of the two black ear-disks is enough to say "Disney" anywhere in the world. "For the sheer power of the graphics," the sculptor Ernest Trova once said, "Mickey Mouse is rivaled only by the Coca-Cola trademark and the swastika." By making itself inseparable from its beloved mascot, Disney made it impossible to see Mickey and not think of the company that backs him — one whose public profile is a lot more controversial than that of your average stuffed animal.

"There is the dark side of the Disney reputation," said Mr. Hardison, referring to things like the 13-year legal battle over the rights to Pooh and the Sonny Bono Copyright Extension Act, for which Disney lobbied so aggressively that it became known as the Mickey Mouse Protection Act. (Had that bill not passed Congress in 1998, Mickey's 75th birthday would have been his last as an exclusive character; now he belongs to Disney at

least until 2023.) "Disney says, 'We are basically selling happiness,' " Mr. Hardison continued. "But that requires a sort of ruthless efficiency that tends to undermine the whole fun-loving image they present. Over time, that shadow story has gained some traction with the audience, and as the symbol of what Disney stands for, Mickey can't help but pick up a little bit of that shadow."

Mickey doesn't have many options, though, for new stories. It's the job of the Corporate Brand Management group — often referred to as the Mickey Police — to ensure, as Maria Gladowski, a consumer products spokeswoman, put it, that the efforts of the company stay true to the core values and personalities of each character. The official list of Mickey's current attributes reads like a Boy Scout pledge: "funny, fun-loving, high-energy, optimistic, good-natured, can-do spirit, helpful, trustworthy and adventurous." As a result, mostly retired from the movies, Mickey only appears where he cannot talk: as merchandise and as a giant mute host at the theme parks. For what would he say? Without a story of his own, he is less and less able to inspire or entertain. "He is in danger," John Updike wrote in the introduction to a book of Mickey art that Disney published in 1991, "of seeming not merely venerable kitsch but part of the great trash problem, one more piece of visual litter being moved back and forth by the bulldozers of consumerism."

Even there, Disney is in a difficult position. The company would like to have Mickey make more money — Mr. Mooney of the Consumer Products division thinks the mouse could bring in an additional \$1 billion a year in North America. Some think Disney could do even better; Marshal Cohen, chief analyst at NPD Group, a market research company that has worked with Disney on occasion, said: "The Mickey brand is undervalued in the consumer's purchase power. You could probably grow the brand another 40 percent."

In the past few decades, Disney's attempts to get the mouse out of his trap veered between pathetic stabs at hipness ("Mickey Unrapped," a hip-hop CD) and so-called character-slapping — putting Mickey just about anywhere someone might see him. Mr. Hardison said this technique only works with the youngest consumers — teens are already sophisticated enough to sense the oversell — and thus dilutes the brand. Recognizing this, Disney has, in the last few years, whittled down their Mickey merchandise by as much as 30 percent, said Mr. Mooney. At the same time they've tried to get more bang from the merchandise they've retained. T-shirts featuring the "vintage" Mickey Mouse were given away to youngish celebrities, placed in fashion spreads and on the runway at Dolce & Gabbana — a technique aimed at creating longterm demand instead of instant return.

A new Mickey TV show on the Disney Channel, planned for early 2006, may also help. But the holy grail of character marketing is a blockbuster movie. Disney is making two films for their mascot — one in which, for the first time, the mouse is rendered in 3-D animation. But, as if in acknowledgment of the damage that an unsuccessful film can do, the company is releasing them direct to video.

In any case, the heart of the matter isn't the marketing; it's the storytelling. And while a wide range of industry experts agreed that Disney needed to put new Mickey content in front of kids' eyes, their detailed suggestions for fixing his character were so various and contradictory, it's no surprise that Disney has seemed unsure which way to turn. He needs to be more high-tech. He must go back to his roots. He has to have edge. He should be a patriot. He has to be mischievous like contemporary cartoon characters. He should come in different "flavors," as Spiderman does ("classic" and "theatrical"), to appeal to different audiences. He has to be specific. He has to be universal. Mr. Arad, of Marvel, all but said Mickey needed to have his head examined. "Decide who is the guy under the ears."

Art Spiegelman, author of the "Maus" books, thinks he knows the answer. "How would I renovate Mickey for our times?" he said. "Easy. Make him gay. He's half way there anyway. You keep the voice the same as it's been; beyond having him take a passionate interest in Broadway musicals and occasionally wearing pink shirts, you don't have to do much. You just have to change the world around him."

Underlying Mr. Spiegelman's suggestion is the idea that Mickey should be taken back from children: that his evolution from pig-nipple-tweaker to bland role model should be reversed. After all, Homer Simpson is loved by both kids and parents. Disney can't really afford to turn its figurehead into a controversy, though. "I don't feel the need to present Mickey in a new way," Mr. Mooney said. "In fact, I would say that, with all that's going on in the world, people would prefer Mickey to be this standard bearer for everything that's positive and good in life rather than go back to the presentation that Walt originally did for adults."

But people like Mr. Sendak, who learned to love Mickey as a startling work of art and as an unlikely avatar of survival, don't want him to be more shiny, synthetic and likable. For them, the mystery isn't what Disney should do with him; it's why he lasted so long with nothing left to say. They want him retired if he can't be restored to what he (and America) was in 1930: an underdog struggling to secure his safety in a ridiculously dangerous world.

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