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# **Video nasties: re-thinking the relationship between video entertainment and children in Britain during the early 1980s**

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## **Key words**

VHS; Betamax; video nasties; kidvids; distribution; British media history

## **Abstract**

Published work which addresses video's formative years in Britain typically frames children in one of two ways: either as victims of 'video nasties', or as scapegoats used by social guardians and policymakers to further a profoundly moralistic, censorious, agenda. The centrality of youngsters to this historical moment cannot be denied, but there is much more to be learned about their relationship with video entertainment during the early 1980s.

It would be unreasonable to suggest—as some have—that, because the video industry lacked governmental regulation between the years 1978 and 1984, video distributors were so 'brash and out for profit' that they disregarded children's welfare. On the contrary, and as this article will reveal, many distributors traded in an array of videos intended specifically for a child audience, ranging from age-appropriate feature films to cartoons to non-fiction education videos, while others dealt exclusively in children's entertainment. Indeed, far from simply being irresponsible peddlers of horror and pornography, some companies went to great lengths to appeal directly to youngsters—including companies that would be subsequently prosecuted for trading in 'obscene publications'. Situating the video boom in its historical context, this article examines how distributors marketed 'kidvids' in the trade and consumer press, and how they sought to promote children's product that was not only designed to entertain, but also to educate.

## **Introduction**

Sony's Betamax and the Japan Victor Company's VHS systems first entered the British market in 1978.<sup>1</sup> As in other territories which had already welcomed Video Cassette Recorder (VCR) technology (namely, the US and Japan), hardware and software manufacturers were keen to emphasise the revolutionary potential that home video could have on the day-to-day lives of normal people. In one respect, video gave people the opportunity to sidestep TV scheduling by 'timeshifting';<sup>2</sup> in another, it provided them with new choices, offering them 'the chance to watch great movies and alternative entertainment in [their] own home' and 'the kind of films that will never be screened at [their] local cinema.'<sup>3</sup> For Britain, this was to be an exciting period of technological and cultural change. It was also to be a time of booming commerce, as thousands of 'self-starting' British entrepreneurs began riding the video wave, investing thousands of pounds in establishing their own distribution companies, mail-order membership clubs, and retail/rental outlets.<sup>4</sup>

The rapidity with which video boomed in Britain took most by surprise, and it wasn't long before social guardians and news media outlets began expressing concern about, first, the kinds of video programmes that were being offered, and second, who had access to them. From mid-1982, following a series of complaints made to video trade magazines about the explicit ways that sex- and horror-themed titles were being advertised, the media began to voice concern that children were at risk of being psychologically harmed by viewing violent (and mostly European) horror films: what journalists were calling 'video nasties.'<sup>5</sup> Moreover, religious campaigners such as Mary Whitehouse, Conservative MPs such as Graham Bright, and a number of child

psychologists, went so far as to claim that the threat that video posed to a child's well-being was akin to that of illegal drug use or disease,<sup>6</sup> and it was not unusual for the press to 'portray the growth of British video retail outlets as an "epidemic" and video entrepreneurs and retailers as "filth merchants".'<sup>7</sup>

Most published work on Britain's early flirtations with video recount these scenarios, and broadly represent the ways that the nation's children have been contextualised in academic and popular discourse relating to the video boom: either as victims of a new and little understood technology,<sup>8</sup> or as scapegoats used by social guardians and policymakers to further a profoundly moralistic, censorious, agenda.<sup>9</sup> However, while the centrality of youngsters to the video nasty panic cannot be denied, there is much more to be learned about the relationship between children and video entertainment during the period, not least in terms of the roles played by Britain's early distributors when trying to appeal to a young audience. It is true that the video industry lacked governmental regulation between the years 1978 and the passing of the Video Recordings Act in 1984, but it would be unreasonable to suggest that all video distributors were so 'brash and out for profit' that they somehow disregarded children's welfare.<sup>10</sup> On the contrary, many distributors carried a whole range of videos intended specifically for children, ranging from age-appropriate feature films to cartoons to non-fiction education videos, while others dealt exclusively in children's programming. Far from simply being irresponsible peddlers of horror and porn, some companies went to great lengths to appeal directly to youngsters.

The present article will explore how Britain's early video distributors sought to cater to a children's market during the technology's formative years. Informed by an

examination of contemporaneous trade and consumer periodicals, business ephemera and distributor catalogues, it will illustrate the economic strategies employed to market youth-oriented material to parents and their offspring. An assessment of specific distributor case studies will show how children, rather than simply being victims or political pawns, were also a targeted demographic in their own right.

### **The rise of the ‘kidvid’**

In *Videoland: Movie Culture at the American Video Store*, Daniel Herbert argues that, because Hollywood studios were cautious about licensing their films for home consumption in the late 1970s and early 80s (due, among other things, to fears of piracy), ‘many early [North American] video distributors gained their foothold by releasing “side-stream” content,’ such as ‘workout tapes and children’s programming.’<sup>11</sup> In the UK, however, things were slightly different. Of course, Hollywood was just as resistant to video in Britain as it was elsewhere in the world, but for the majority of Britain’s new independent distributors, the acquisition of feature films nevertheless remained of primary interest, with most companies having gained their foothold in the burgeoning video market by eluding the big studios, and trading in films that they had acquired from independent theatrical distributors.<sup>12</sup> Whereas some ‘side-stream’ cassettes—including concert videos of rock bands, sports titles and cartoons—were available (there was even a distributor solely dedicated to the likes of do-it-yourself gardening videos),<sup>13</sup> for the most part, these kinds of products were mostly featured as appendages to highly eclectic, feature film-heavy, catalogues,<sup>14</sup> and it wasn’t until mid-

1982 that independent distributors started to fully recognise the profits to be amassed from directly targeting the ‘visual, video generation.’<sup>15</sup>

There are a couple of reasons why 1982 became the opportune year for distributors to heavily promote children’s videos (or ‘kidvids’ as they came to be known).<sup>16</sup> One is that, because the video trade was repeatedly finding itself under scrutiny for allegedly providing children with access to violent horror films, companies were keen to offset negative media attention by presenting themselves as outwardly child-friendly. This was certainly true of distributors that had been named and shamed in the press for trading in video nasties which, as a result of the negative publicity, started to more heavily advertise their children’s ranges at the height of the panic. Examples include Go Video, whose publicity materials for *SS Experiment Camp* (Sergio Garrone, 1976) had provoked several complaints to the Advertising Standards Authority; as well as Astra Video, which had distributed widely controversial cassettes such as *Snuff* (Roberta and Michael Findlay, 1976) and *I Spit on Your Grave* (Meir Zarchi, 1978).<sup>17</sup> However, these companies constituted the exception, not the rule, as very few were prompted to venture into children’s programming for these sorts of reasons. In fact, most had a kidvid range long before the video nasty furore had begun (not least Go and Astra).<sup>18</sup> It was therefore merely an unfortunate coincidence that the first industry-wide push on kidvids in early summer of 1982 (discussed below) occurred within weeks of the term ‘video nasty’ being coined.<sup>19</sup>

Therefore, the second—and, I would argue, main—reason why 1982 became the ideal year to promote children’s videos was due to the market’s desperate need for product diversification. When the VHS and Betamax systems were first launched in

Britain, there were only a handful of distributors offering a small amount of product to a small number of customers (most often, by mail order), but by mid-1982 there were over 80 distributors collectively supplying approximately 5000 titles ‘to almost 10,000 outlets.’<sup>20</sup> The video market that had once been celebrated for its choice and variety had suddenly become chaotic, as distributors and shop owners scrambled to find new means of making their product distinctive in order to credibly rival their many competitors. Indeed, distributors which in 1981 would have released between twelve and twenty titles onto the market in one go,<sup>21</sup> were now having to ‘cut back’ and release only two to five at a time,<sup>22</sup> while the video dealers which would have found themselves buying ‘virtually every film that was released’ in the late 1970s—because (like the rest of the business) they were ‘not sure what they were doing’<sup>23</sup>—were now having to ‘cherry-pick’ specific titles that (they hoped) would guarantee a profit.<sup>24</sup> With some in the trade believing that feature films were likely to go out of fashion very quickly, as the video-renting public quickly moved from one ‘overnight hit’ to the next,<sup>25</sup> children’s programmes, as part of a genre that not been fully exploited, were anticipated to have more staying power. By targeting a child audience directly, distributors and their clients wished to stabilise their businesses because, unlike “[f]lavours of the month, blockbuster titles,<sup>26</sup> children’s videos were hoped to generate repeat viewings and have a longer shelf life as a consequence.<sup>27</sup>

These predictions were given credence by a number of contemporaneous empirical studies, one of which revealed that ‘children watch almost as much video material as adults,<sup>28</sup> and another which claimed that the core VCR market was made up of people aged between 23 and 35: ‘precisely those people who have the most young [sic.] children.’<sup>29</sup> And with one distributor, Richard Price Trade Associates (RPTA),

claiming to have sold 2,000 copies of Video Play-box 1 (Leslie Pitt, 1980) in 1981 alone (see Figure 1),<sup>30</sup> kidvids were expected to have the commercial endurance required to help companies survive rationalisation. Indeed, by 1983, children's tapes were deemed to be so popular that a number of children-only membership clubs were established (such as KIDEO<sup>31</sup> and Junior Video at Home<sup>32</sup>) to accommodate the slew of products being offered by almost every distributor, including subsidiaries of 'giants' such as Warner, Metro Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM), Rank, Twentieth Century Fox and Cinema International Corporation (CIC); home-grown independents such as Intervision, Mountain, Guild, Astra, Go, Fletcher, Home Video Productions (HVP), VCL, Videomedia and Derann; British subsidiaries of foreign independents such as Video Tape Centre (VTC), ACE Europe, Media and ArTel (which had the aptly named 'KidVid' series); and local 'special interest' labels such as Longman Video (an offshoot of an historic educational publisher). The kinds of kidvids being released at this time were just as varied as their distributors, yet two primary strategies were typically adopted in marketing them.

**[Figure 1 here]**

The first was to promote kidvids as having a function beyond that of mere entertainment: assertions that were especially welcome in response to pro-censorship case-makers who claimed that videos were at best mindless, and at worst dangerous. Conversely to such claims, children's video entertainment was promoted as beneficial, as being able to supplement parenting, by keeping children occupied when the schools were closed during the summer, Christmas and Easter holidays. In select cases, a video's alleged educational value was promoted, as a further marker of value. The



second strategy was to place kidvids in a cheaper price bracket than feature films and children's titles that were being offered by major companies such as Metro Goldwyn-Mayer (MGM)—which stocked a number of widely popular Tom and Jerry cartoons—and Rank—which was handling Disney's UK distribution at the time. The remainder of this article is dedicated to exploring how, and with what success, distributors exploited these strategies.

### **The purported benefits of kidvids**

In 1982, Britain's premier independent video distributor, Intervision, ran an ad promoting its first ever, full-colour, children's entertainment catalogue. 'When the weather is unreliable, so are the kids,' it professed. The ad was published in the trade paper *Video Business* in the lead up to the national school summer holiday period (hence the knowing hat-tip to England's notoriously bad weather), which would see state schools close for six weeks, and thus leave parents with the task of having to find childcare arrangements or other means of keeping their youngsters occupied. Published in conjunction with a special report on the rise in popularity of children's videos, the ad appeared to be communicating to storeowners—and, by proxy, their customers—that videos were an easy solution to the stresses that the school holidays can cause parents: namely, keeping demanding children occupied when the schools could not. Indeed, 'Finding family entertainment [was] child's play,' allegedly, thanks to the company's diverse range of children's programming, all of which (it was claimed) had never been shown on TV or in British cinemas (such as the animated features *Rip Van Winkle* [Will

Vinton, 1978], *Treasure Island* [Will Vinton, 1976] and *Jack and the Beanstalk* [Gisaburo Sugii, 1979]).<sup>33</sup>

Intervision's approach to marketing children's fare was indicative of practices across the board, with the majority of distributors using familial referents and empathetic rhetoric in their marketing to appear in line with parental needs. For example, in the summer of 1983, ADB Video appeared to be offering its customers virtual childcare, when it promoted the animated characters of *Fables of the Green Forest* (Director unknown, 1978) and *Tales of La Manca* (Kunihiko Yuyama, 1980) as 'ENGLAND'S NO.1 BABYSITTERS.'<sup>34</sup> Other distributors (perhaps more cynically) presented themselves as a remedy for inevitable school holiday tedium, by honing in on the assumed completest impulses of demanding children, and releasing multi-volume series. This was true, for instance, of Mountain Video, which promoted the launch of its nine-title 'Cartoon Collection'—including *Party Laughs*, *Nobody's Boy*, *Fun Time* (all 1982) and others—as a solution to 'school holiday boredom' (Figure 2), while ACE Europe serialised the five-part thirties serial 'The Phantom Creeps' (1939) across two volumes of *Childrens [sic] Fun Show* (circa 1982).

**[Figure 2 here]**

Some companies used other, more ambitious, means, to stimulate the minds of young people, by promoting their kidvids as novel and, in some cases, interactive. For instance, in late 1982, Go Video—under its 'Kidivid' label—released *The Bumper Fun Video Annual* (Various, 1982), a programme modelled on the widely popular comic book 'annuals' that were marketed at Christmastime and which typically featured a

range of stories featuring popular characters from notable child weeklies, such as the Beano and the Dandy. The Bumper Fun Video Annual, similar to Go's much more rudimentary Video Comic from 1980 (Figure 3), was comparable to a comic annual on the grounds that it contained a compendium of cartoon stories featuring popular characters; in this instance, the likes of Superman, Laurel and Hardy and Felix the Cat. Similarly, Channel Video's release of My Video Party (Director unknown, 1983)—yet another compendium of cartoons and other vignettes, promoted in the lead-up to Christmas 1983—was sold with a 'colouring and activity pad' which children were supposed to use when instructed during the programme, to complete 'puzzles' and 'dot-to-dot' activities.<sup>35</sup> This was a strategy comparable to an earlier gimmick initiated by Odyssey Video, which, upon the release of Return to Oz (Walter Murch, 1985) in 1983, provided dealers and wholesalers with colouring sheets of the film's main characters, which were to be freely issued to children each time the tape was rented.<sup>36</sup>

**[Figure 3 here]**

All of these examples demonstrate how distributors used knowledge of surplus time and a prospected lack of stimulus for British children to present their kidvid range as being able to provide a service that extended beyond the usual parameters of entertainment. However, another (arguably more daring) tactic exploited by companies during weeks of school closure was to foreground the alleged educational benefits of children's videos in advertising. One such distributor was VCL who, under its 'Family Video' label, re-released its Animal Kingdom video from 1981 (directors and dates unknown) during the Christmas period of 1982: a cassette that was promoted as 'educational' on the grounds that it was allegedly 'filmed on location in Africa,' and

that it would, one is to assume, have exposed British children to cultures that they would have been unfamiliar with. (These claims of verisimilitude were made in spite of the fact that, as the video cover rightly stated, Animal Kingdom was comprised of ‘entertaining, yet educational, cartoons,’ and not live action sequences.)<sup>37</sup> Similarly, during the two-week Easter break in March 1983, VCL lined up a number of cartoons for release, again under the pretence of ‘education,’ including *Ivanhoe* (Leif Gram, 1975) and *The Black Arrow* (Leif Gram, 1973). Neither of these cartoons was originally produced with the British education system in mind. They were, in fact, Australian TV movies. Yet VCL keenly publicised their pedagogical benefits regardless. For example, promotional copy provided to the trade press singled out the historical elements of *The Black Arrow* (‘set in the turbulent 15<sup>th</sup> century with the War of the Roses in full flow’), using its grounding in British history to validate the company’s claim that its cartoons were produced ‘not only with an eye to entertainment but with an eye to education too.’<sup>38</sup> Likewise, HVP marketed its August 1982 releases of *The Adventures of Reddy the Fox* (Director unknown, 1978), *The Adventures of Buster the Bear* (Director unknown, 1978) and *The Adventures of Ultraman* (various, 1979), with the kinds of rhetorical questions used to assess schoolchildren’s literacy comprehension in contemporaneous storybooks: ‘Why is Reddy Fox in trouble with Farmer Brown’s Sheep?’; ‘Who won’t let Buster Bear share his fish?’; ‘Will Ultraman save the universe?’<sup>39</sup> As with the aforementioned VCL releases, these programmes were not originally created for young British audiences: *Reddy the Fox* and *Buster the Bear* were Japanese adaptations of two classic stories by the American author Thomas W. Burgess, while *Ultraman* was a Japanese TV show from the 1960s-70s. Yet, HVP heavily pushed their potential to educate, perhaps in light of growing concerns surrounding the

availability of foreign horror films in British video shops,<sup>40</sup> telling the trade press that, in spite of the videos' non-British origins, ““Americanisms” [sic] have been Anglicised so as to not confuse our minors [sic] spelling efforts.”<sup>41</sup> In so doing, the company presented itself as an organisation that had the welfare of the nation's children at the forefront of its business practices and thus, unlike those more disreputable companies being reported on by the media, could be trusted to deliver age-appropriate material that could benefit child audiences.

Perhaps the most notable of all efforts to promote the pedagogical potential of video during this period came from Longman Video, a company established in late 1982 as a subsidiary of the educational book publisher Pearson Longman. Founded to target children and other special interest markets, it had education at the vanguard of its marketing agenda.<sup>42</sup> Longman's promotional material would repeatedly draw on the company's scholarly history, using its reputation to connote moralistic qualities such as care, reliability, and trustworthiness—qualities associated with people of high social standing, not least, school teachers. For example, in Longman's first trade campaign, an advert in *Television and Video Retailer* explained to readers how the company was ‘backed by 250 years’ experience of providing entertainment and information for all ages.’<sup>43</sup> Identifying binaries between the old (Longman's legacy in educational publishing) and the new (its associations with a booming video market), as well as that between entertainment (stimulus) and information (education), worked to present the company as one that not only had longevity and historic success, but also that it was tune with the way that technology was headed, and the benefits it could provide for children and their families. Not wanting to appear a distributor out for profit at all costs, Longman positioned itself as a video brand that could communicate successfully with

children, and as a company, which, by offering ‘specially crafted programmes of quality for children from pre-school to teenage level,’<sup>44</sup> took a much more measured approach to video than has been implied of other distributors of the period. Being the first company to secure a distribution deal with a high-street book wholesaler, Bookwise, further underscored Longman’s commitment to doing for home video what it had been doing for educational books for the last two and a half centuries.<sup>45</sup>

With promises of video programmes for a wide-age range and a drive to exploit video’s potential as a new means to occupy the nation’s young, companies such as ABD, Go, HVP and Longman went to great lengths to convince people of the benefits of video with titles that would not only keep children entertained (and thus, as per some companies mentioned above, out of their parents’ hair), but schooled as well. However, for all that education and stimulus were thought to be of key interest to consumers, there was another, an arguably more crucial factor that had to be heeded if kidvids were to be as popular as distributors hoped: namely, how much said products were going to cost consumers.

### **Quality and affordability**

Videos, generally speaking, were not cheap commodities. In 1982, feature films that were released onto video could retail to the general public for as high as £40 per cassette (approximately £99 today), and were typically rented out from shops for anywhere between £1.50 and £4.00 per night (around £5.00 to £13.00 today).<sup>46</sup> As a result, it was relatively uncommon at this time for people to buy videos, but, in light of the kidvid’s

assumed ‘repeatability’ factor, and as a means of incentivising parents into purchasing videos outright, distributors would, in most cases, price their children’s videos lower than their other releases. For example, VCL—whose ‘Cartoon Carousel’ range included animated versions of Robin Hood (Zoran Janjic, 1971), A Christmas Carol (Leif Gram, 1970) and Moby Dick (Richard Slapczynski, 1977)—and ArTel Video—whose ‘KidVid’ range included various Tin Tin and Fred Bassett cartoons—trade-priced their kidvids at £16.00 and £16.20 respectively,<sup>47</sup> while CIC ‘lined up Woody Woodpecker and his Friends, at £18.50.’<sup>48</sup> Mountain and Longman, similarly, marketed their kidvids at the competitive price of £19.95,<sup>49</sup> while Fletcher Video ‘pegged’ the prices of its Popeye the Sailor Man cartoons ‘back to £29.95,’ in the run-up to Christmas 1982.<sup>50</sup> Cheaper pricing was achievable because most of the content featured on kidvids was relatively old, dating mostly from the 1930s to the 1970s,<sup>51</sup> meaning that it was either very cheap to license, or, in the case of public domain material, free. Such programmes would also typically have running times of an hour or less, meaning that, in comparison to feature films, they were less costly to manufacture, as less tape was required. As a result, budget pricing could be justified, as a healthy profit, it was assumed, could still easily be made.

Low-pricing had two desired consequences. In one respect, it was designed to increase appeal with VCR owners in a flooded market. As mentioned in the previous section, children’s videos were a relatively new commodity, so cheapness was hoped to translate into broader product exposure, especially during summer and at Christmas and Easter, when time was pressed and gifts were bought. Also, the fact that such programmes were purchasable at a cheaper cost contributed to the projected flexibility of the kidvid: if a tape was bought by a member of the public, it could be watched again

and again, without it ever having to be returned to a rental outlet, avoiding costly late fines in the process.

It is important to note that, while the affordability of the children's videos was central to their appeal, it was also crucial for the distributors to ensure that people's perception of the quality of the material was not affected by the cheap price tag. One way of achieving this was for companies to release children's programming that was likely to be relatable to those parents who would be purchasing or renting the videos on their child's behalf. Thus, Mountain's release of Max Fleischer Studio's Superman cartoons from the 1940s 'performed ... well' in the summer of 1982,<sup>52</sup> no doubt due to the superhero's longstanding legacy in children's popular culture, in addition to the recent theatrical success of the live action family blockbuster, *Superman II* (Richard Lester and Richard Donner, 1980). Similarly, around the same time, ACE Europe released a series of compendium videos including *Childrens Fun Show* (sic) parts 1 and 2, *Kids Cartoon Hour*, *Kids Cartoon Capers* (sic), *Fun Parade* and *The Bugs Bunny Show*, featuring a mix of live action serials and cartoons dating as far back as the 1930s, ranging from *Dick Tracey*, *Superman*, *Popeye*, *Felix the Cat*, as well as *Bugs Bunny* and *Daffy Duck*; Videobrokers released a series of *Laurel and Hardy* cartoons; RPTA launched the *Playbox Fairy Tales* series, which traded on the 'classic' status of stories by the likes of Hans Christian Anderson and the Brothers Grimm, including *Beauty and the Beast* (Fielder Cook, 1976), *The Magic Well* (director and date unknown), *The Little Match Girl* (director and date unknown), *The Mermaid Princess* (director and date unknown) and *Thumbelina* (director and date unknown)—some of which were voiced by Peter Hawkins, who was most famously known for providing the voice of Captain Pugwash in the popular children's cartoon from the 1960s;<sup>53</sup> and, in the summer of



1983, Select Video released a series of notable classics likely to resonate with parents, including Popeye and Friends in Outer Space (1961), Lassie (various), Zorro (various), The Lone Ranger (various) and Flash Gordon (various).<sup>54</sup>

Some companies went to great lengths to stress that their products' quality was akin to their corporate counterparts, in spite of their videos being a fraction of the cost of those offered by major distributors. A case in point is Fletcher Video. All of its children's features released in 1982 were acquired from Rankin/Bass Productions, a company that had some success with its critically acclaimed adaptation of *The Hobbit* in 1977. However, rather than capitalising on this relatively recent success, Fletcher instead employed an angle that had been utilised by Mountain and Intervision as early as 1980, and drew on factors it believed would be more likely to guarantee sales among parents and kids, tellingly stressing to the trade press how its forthcoming kidvids 'compare[d] very favourably with Walt Disney products.'<sup>55</sup> There are number of reasons why the Disney comparison was useful—or, indeed, essential. Perhaps most obvious was Disney's status as a pivotal family brand, whose identity 'rested on the legacy and value of the classic animated feature films produced by the company over several decades.'<sup>56</sup> It therefore made business sense for Fletcher, which was a relatively small outfit, to (like Intervision and Mountain before it) draw direct comparisons between itself and the American monolith. Also, and to Fletcher's advantage, Disney's video output by 1982 was very limited. Indeed, following the failed lawsuit against Sony over the Betamax system's capacity to duplicate copyrighted material,<sup>57</sup> Disney remained fearful of piracy and prioritised the release of compilation videos of old cartoons and serials over the release of its more cherished features which it could repeatedly re-release in cinemas to large box office returns.<sup>58</sup> As a result, none of the

available Disney videos, in spite of them being official branded products, carried the weight of the company's most iconic (and bankable) fare, and comprised mostly of anonymous compendiums, such as *Cartoon Festival* parts I, II and III. Fletcher, thus, was able to fill a void in the market by releasing videos that were not simply 'comparable' in style to well-known Disney animation, but, in some instances, were in fact alternative versions of fables that had been made popular in cinemas by Disney itself, including *Pinocchio* (Giuliano Cenci, 1971), *Cinderella* (Bass and Rankin, 1970), *Sleeping Beauty* (Bass and Rankin, 1972), *Snow White* (Bass and Rankin, 1972), *Robin Hood* (Bass and Rankin, 1972) and *Alice In Wonderland* (Bass and Rankin, 1972). Such releases, it was hoped, would have resonated with parents: they may not have carried the cachet of the classic Disney versions, but they were the closest thing available at that time.

Another string to Fletcher's bow was that the Disney Corporation had, at this point—unlike Fletcher (and most other independents)—refused to make its videos available for sale to the general public: they could only, as per a rigid leasing agreement with wholesalers, be rented out.<sup>59</sup> The leasing system required video-shop owners to lease as much as twelve at a time, for a period of six months. For some of the smaller operations, this was an unreasonable demand, and one that had been satirically likened to fascism in the trade press (see Figure 4) on the grounds that it:

serves to increase the lack of flexibility to the dealer by forcing him [sic] to stock a range of titles (not all of which can be said to be blockbusters) for a longer of period of time than he [sic] would choose. These titles must be

pushed upon library members for rental at the expense of titles paid for in full simply to ensure that they pay for themselves.<sup>60</sup>

While the article quoted here also goes on to recognise that the Disney brand would hopefully ensure that people would rent the videos ‘again and again,’<sup>61</sup> the leasing system remained too risky for owners of smaller shops who had to stock less titles than their bigger rivals, and who relied on a greater turnover of titles to keep their catalogues fresh and appealing to their clientele.<sup>62</sup> Something else for shop owners to bear in mind was the ongoing discussion in the trade press that the video market had become over saturated. Therefore, Fletcher, by releasing videos that were not only destined to be familiar to parents and children alike because of their Disney associations, would have no doubt appealed the storeowners at this time, who, because of the stringent market, did not want to restrict themselves to stringent contracts that may not result in the profits they yearned for. Stocking Fletcher products was a much safer bet because, as with other titles released by the majority of UK independents, if one title was not performing as well as it hoped, it could be sold on to a member of the public with no fear of legal repercussions.

**[Figure 4 here]**

Fletcher, by releasing the aforementioned kidvids, tapped in to the wants of video dealers and the general public, not only by recognising the appeal for children’s content, but also by offering a product akin to those of the major studios. Indeed, its summer 1982 range of children’s cartoons allegedly ‘sold out in 36 hours’, with the company having sold a reported 5000 units to ‘nearly every wholesaler’ in the

country.<sup>63</sup> At a time of market uncertainty, this would appear to indicate the value being placed on the child not as morally corrupt or deviant, but, rather, as a child. Tapping into childish wants and characteristics—the sort that the press feared were being lost through exposure to home video from small unregulated firms—was, conversely, a central component to the kidvids' success.<sup>64</sup>

## **Conclusion**

Kidvids continued to grow in popularity into and beyond the summer of 1983, with Video Business reporting that children's releases accounted for 6-7% of the 'overall video market.'<sup>65</sup> Many distributors were foregrounding children's titles in their promotional materials more so than ever before. This was true of Mountain and Atlantis, the former of which had reportedly 'doubled its turn over' since deciding to specialise in children's programming at the beginning of the year, with one notable title, the animated sf fantasy Techno Police, being said to have sold 7,500 copies; while the latter (a much newer company) claimed that it had sold 2,500 copies of the animated feature, Treasures of the Snow.<sup>66</sup> Consequently, 'more concentrated promotional campaigns' were initiated 'by majors and independents alike,'<sup>67</sup> including Intervision, whose new 'Halo Collection' (which was made up of reissues of family-centred films it had first released in 1979), 'guarantee[d] to please even Aunt Edna.'<sup>68</sup>

Of course, trading in reputable programmes of this sort did not protect independent firms for the onslaught of the Video Recordings Act (VTA) in 1984, which made it a legal requirement for all distributors to submit their entire catalogues for

certification to the British Board of Film Classification. For many of the independents, the cost that was involved in having material passed by the BBFC was simply too high. As a result, many of the distributors discussed in this article went bankrupt, or were absorbed into other companies, or left the industry by the mid-1980s. However, not all companies were affected in these ways.

Longman Video, for instance, was able to use capital from its book publishing division to have its entire catalogue re-certified and continued into the 1990s with success in the new video sales—or ‘sell-through’—market. New companies also began to spring up, many exploiting the strategies used by the earliest distributors which had initially made children’s videos so successful, especially when it came to retail pricing. Fresh independent companies such as Video Gems, for instance, retailed children’s cartoons for as low as £6.99 (some three pounds shy of most other sell-through cassettes of the period),<sup>69</sup> as well as for majors such as Disney, who—in a way not dissimilar to Fletcher some years previous—entered the sell-through market in 1986 with a variety of cassettes retailing between £9.99 and £12.99.<sup>70</sup> And just as Mountain, Intervision and Fletcher had unofficially used the Disney brand to offset the cheapness of its kidvids in the early 1980s, Disney here used its ‘nationwide popularity... collectability and the timeless quality [of its] products’ to dispel any questions that may have been encouraged on account of its uncharacteristically low-priced sell-through tapes.<sup>71</sup>

These examples go some way to support the long-held theory that the VTA discriminated against independent distributors with low capital and disreputable company images, in favour of the higher-profile majors.<sup>72</sup> But it also illustrates how the innovative steps made by the various self-starters discussed in this article provided the

industry with the footing it needed to stabilise in the early-to-mid 1980s. For all that children's relationship to the video nasty looms large over academic and popular discourse, this article has shown how the more anodyne aspects of the video business have remained under-discussed to the detriment of historical understanding. Indeed, in contrast to media reportage surrounding horror films, children were, I have argued, at the forefront of the promotional strategies of distributors, who stocked a variety of affordable 'video nicies' that were promised to aid parents, and to educate, as much as entertain, young people.

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## **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> Graham Wade, *Film, Video and Television: Market Forces, Fragmentation and Technological Advance* (London: Comedia, 1985), 22.

<sup>2</sup> Paul McDonald, *Video and DVD Industries* (London: BFI, 2007), 36-40.

<sup>3</sup> *Intervision Pre Recorded Video Entertainment Catalogue* (1979), 2.

<sup>4</sup> The term 'self-starter' was originally used by Prime Minister Margaret Thatcher in reference to her idealistic notion of free-thinking entrepreneurs who '[came], as it were, from nowhere, and [made] it to the top'. John Corner and Sylvia Harvey, 'Introduction: Great Britain Limited,' in *Enterprise and Heritage: Crosscurrents of National Culture*, edited by John Corner and Sylvia Harvey (London:

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Routledge, 1991), 8. Kate Egan was the first to employ the term specifically in relation to Britain's early video distributors (several of which came from working-class backgrounds). See Egan, *Trash or Treasure: Censorship and the Changing Meanings of the Video Nasties* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2007) 49-50. On British video culture and class, see, for example, Charles Robinson, 'Hard times in Yorkshire now redundancy money is spent,' *Video Business* 2.15 (October 1982), 48.

<sup>5</sup> Julian Petley, *Film and Video Censorship in Modern Britain* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), 1-32. John Martin provides what is arguably the most accessible breakdown of 'video nasty' reporting in the 'Nasty Times' section of *Seduction of the Gullible: The Truth behind the Video Nasty Scandal* (Cornwall: Stray Cat publishing, 2007), 14-95.

<sup>6</sup> On video's perceived—and oft-contested—'threat' to children see *Video Violence and Children*, edited by Geoffrey Barlow and Alison Hill (Kent: Hodder and Stoughton, 1985). On the comparisons made between video and illegal drugs, see Martin Roth's introductory chapter to the aforementioned volume, 6.

<sup>7</sup> Egan, *Trash or Treasure?* 87.

<sup>8</sup> Roth, 'Introduction', 6.

<sup>9</sup> Petley, *Film and Video Censorship*, 25-30; Egan, *Trash or Treasure?* 90-5.

<sup>10</sup> Nigel Wingrove and Marc Morris, *Art of the Nasty* (Surrey: FAB Press, 2009). This quote appears as part of the blurb on the back cover.

<sup>11</sup> Daniel Herbert, *Videoland: Movie Culture at the American Video Store* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2014), 156. On the issue of Hollywood's initial resistance to home video, see, for example, McDonald, *Video and DVD Industries*, 109.

<sup>12</sup> Johnny Walker, 'Rewind, playback: re-viewing the video boom in Britain,' in *The Routledge Companion to British Cinema History*, edited by I. Q. Hunter, Laraine Porter and Justin Smith (London: Routledge, forthcoming); see also Julian Upton 'Electric Blues: The Rise and Fall of Britain's First Pre-recorded Videocassette Distributors,' *Journal of British Cinema and Television* 13.1 (2016), 19-41.

<sup>13</sup> I am referring here to Michael Barratt Home Video, established by the former present of the BBC's Nationwide television programme. Barratt was rumoured to be, in the late 1970s, 'the highest paid current affairs BBC man'. On Barratt and his move into home video see Graham Wade, 'Michael Barratt—where is he now?' *Television and Home Video* (February 1981), 37-41. Upton also devotes some space to Barratt in 'Electric Blues,' 23-6.



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<sup>14</sup> For example, Intervision's first catalogue was primarily made up of feature films, with only a few pages dedicated to 'Special Interest Features.' See Intervision Pre Recorded [sic] Entertainment Catalogue, 28-31.

<sup>15</sup> Anon. 'Today's children are a visual, video generation,' *Video Business*, 2.11 (Mid-July 1982), 12.

<sup>16</sup> 'Kidvid' was a term coined by US adult film producer/distributor Nigel Bloom, who pioneered children's video entertainment in the US with his Family Home Entertainment (FHE) label. See Frederick Wasser, *Veni, Vidi, Video: The Hollywood Empire and the VCR* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2001) 107.

<sup>17</sup> On Go Video see Petley, *Film and Video Censorship*, 24; on Astra Video see Mark McKenna, 'A murder mystery in black and blue: the marketing, distribution and cult mythology of Snuff in the UK,' in *Snuff: Real Death and Screen Media*, edited by Neil Jackson, Shaun Kimber, Johnny Walker and Thomas Joseph Watson (London and New York: Bloomsbury), 121-36.

<sup>18</sup> See, for example, Teresa Simmons, 'Cartoons for kids,' *Video World* 3.5 (May 1981), 60-3.

<sup>19</sup> Peter Chippendale, 'How high street horror is invading the home,' *the Sunday Times* (23 May, 1982).

<sup>20</sup> Tim Smith, 'A temporary lull—or has software bonanza come to an end at last?' *Video Business* 2.10 (July 1982), 20. See also Brian Oliver, 'Has time come to reduce flood of new releases?' *Video Business* 2.10 (July 1982), 26; and Walker, 'Rewind, playback.'

<sup>21</sup> Distributors would typically release new titles in a quarterly cycle.

<sup>22</sup> Oliver, 'Has time come ... ?' 26. The distributors covered in the article include 'major' companies such as CIC, EMI and Warner, as well as successful independents such as VCL, Go and Intervision.

<sup>23</sup> These quotes are evidently hyperbolic, but they are also very much in keeping with the trade reportage cited elsewhere in this article. They are taken from the only first-hand published account of video shop ownership in Britain: Harry Pearce's self-published book, *Video Nasties: The True Story of Court Cases, Cock Ups & Collateral Damage* (2013), np.

<sup>24</sup> Smith, 'A temporary lull ... ?', 20. See also Anon. 'Software overkill?' *Television and Video Retailer* (June 1982), 24.

<sup>25</sup> As Maureen Bartlett (managing director of Videomedia) explained to *Video Business* in July 1982: 'Many dealers have been neglecting the children's market ... They have been a bit short-sighted.'

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Children's tapes are not "here today, gone tomorrow" like feature films.' See Bartlett cited in Anon.

'Today's children...' 12.

<sup>26</sup> Anon. 'Software overkill?', *Television and Video Retailer* (June 1982), 24.

<sup>27</sup> Anon. 'Today's children...' 12.

<sup>28</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>29</sup> Jan Maulden (head of Longman Video) quoted in Graham Wade 'Longman—a new chapter,' *Television and Video Retailer* (November 1982), 52.

<sup>30</sup> Anon. 'Today's children...'

<sup>31</sup> Anon. 'Kideo club in time for Christmas', *Television and Video Retailer* (November 1982), 9.

<sup>32</sup> Anon. 'Another children's video club,' *Television and Video Retailer* (January 1983), 8.

<sup>33</sup> Intervision ad, *Video Business* 3.11 (Mid-July, 1982), 13. See also Anon. 'Today's children...' 12.

<sup>34</sup> Ad for ADB Video, *Video Retailer* 2605 (1983), 27.

<sup>35</sup> Ad for Channel Video's My Video Party, *Television and Video Retailer* (March 1983), 23.

<sup>36</sup> Anon. 'Your company guide,' *Kideo Business*, supplement issued with *Video Business* 3.22 (25 July 1983), 8.

<sup>37</sup> *Animal Kingdom* video sleeve (VCL), emphasis added.

<sup>38</sup> Anon. 'Easter cartoons from VCL', *Television and Video Retailer* (April 1983), 15.

<sup>39</sup> Ad for Home Video Productions' 'Video for Children' releases, *Television and Home Video Retailer* (August 1982), 45.

<sup>40</sup> Egan, *Trash or Treasure?* 86-7.

<sup>41</sup> Anon. 'Distributors aware of children's holidays', *Television and Video Retailer* (August 1982), 21.

<sup>42</sup> Graham Wade, 'Longman—a new chapter in video?' *Television and Video Retailer* (November 1982), 52.

<sup>43</sup> Ad for Longman Video, *Television and Video Retailer* (November 1982), 53.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*, emphasis added.

<sup>45</sup> Anon. 'Longman opt for video retail—through bookshops,' *Television and Video Retailer* (February 1983), 11. See also Paul Campbell, 'The Longman "way of thinking" will point the way to success,' *Video Business* 2.17 (November 1982), 18.

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- <sup>46</sup> Anon. The – Er – *Beginners' Guide to Video*, supplement issued with *Video World* (November 1982), 43.
- <sup>47</sup> On VCL's pricing see Anon. 'VCL feature cartoons,' *Television and Video Retailer* (November 1982), 14; on ArTel's pricing see Anon. 'Anything to keep the kids quiet at the sign of the horse,' *Television and Video Retailer* (March 1983), 25.
- <sup>48</sup> '...caution is needed,' 28.
- <sup>49</sup> Anon. 'More quality tapes available—but careful ordering is essential,' *Video Business* 2.18 (Mid-November 1982), 34; Wade 'Longman—a new chapter in video?', 54.
- <sup>50</sup> *Ibid.*
- <sup>51</sup> '...caution is needed,' 32.
- <sup>52</sup> Anon. 'More quality tapes available...' 54.
- <sup>53</sup> Anon. 'Fairy Tales,' *Television and Video Retailer* (November 1982), 16.
- <sup>54</sup> Select Video Ad, *Kideo Business*, 3.
- <sup>55</sup> Anon. 'Silly season?', *Television and Video Retailer* (August 1982), 16. In May 1980, Mountain published an advert in *Video World* for the video release of a Japanese cartoon, *Nobody's Boy* (director unknown, 1970), in which it was compared to the Disney adaptations of *Snow White* and *Pinocchio* (see *Video World* 2.5 (May 1980), 31). A couple of months later, Intervision, in an advert for the film *The Great Balloon Adventure* (Richard A. Colla, 1978), went even further than Mountain, claiming that the film in question 'beats the best of Disney.' See *Video World* 2.8 (August, 1980), 67.
- <sup>56</sup> MacDonald, *Video and DVD Industries*, 117.
- <sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, 116-8.
- <sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*, 117.
- <sup>59</sup> See, for example, Anon. 'Six more rental-only Disney movies', *Video Business* 2.10 (July 1982), 8.
- <sup>60</sup> Grant Endersby. 'At £2 a night 4500 rentals are needed to break even', *Video Business*, 1.12 (March 1982), 34.
- <sup>61</sup> *Ibid.*, 34.
- <sup>62</sup> See, for example, Paul Salvadori, 'Disney, Twentieth, RCA/Columbia—are they "on a different planet"?', *Video Business* (letters pages), 2.10 (July 1982), 38.
- <sup>63</sup> Anon. 'Silly season?' 16.

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<sup>64</sup> Egan, *Trash or Treasure?* 90—5.

<sup>65</sup> Brian Oliver, 'Children's videos are growing up,' *Kideo Business*, 1.

<sup>66</sup> Brian Oliver, 'Your company guide,' *Kideo Business*, 2-8. Citation at 4.

<sup>67</sup> Oliver, 'Children's videos are growing up,' 1.

<sup>68</sup> Anon. 'No nasties,' *Video Business* 3.22 (25 July 1983), 6.

<sup>69</sup> Anon. 'Marvel comic stars set for Video Gems,' *Video Week* (8 September 1986), 4.

<sup>70</sup> Anon. 'Low cost Disney,' *Video Week* (8 September 1986), 4.

<sup>71</sup> Jackson quoted in *ibid.*

<sup>72</sup> On this issue, see the comprehensive documentaries *Ban the Sadist Videos: Part 1* (David Gregory, 2005) and *Video Nasties: Moral Panic, Censorship and Video Tape* (Jake West and Marc Morris, 2010).