



Life Of The Party. Alan Hassenfeld, chairman/CEO of Hasbro, says hello to Barney at a party the toy manufacturer threw for the Purple One during Toy Fair, held last month in New York. Hasbro is helping Lyrick Studios, creator of the "Barney" series, celebrate the dinosaur's 10th anniversary as a star of PBS and home video. Lyrick expects to finish a birthday-party program, "Barney's Hollywood Surprise," for broadcast later this year. Video will follow in 2000.

Toy Fair Provides Video Inspirations

Licensed Products Increasingly Making Move To Small Screen

BY ANNE SHERBER

NEW YORK—In the early 1980s, when Hasbro's My Little Pony made the leap from retail to Saturday-morning cartoons and then video, the small plastic horse with its bushy, colorful mane was seen as trotting in the wrong direction.

Until then, licensed toys had generally been born of TV and video programming, not the other way around. But at the 96th annual American International Toy Fair, held Feb. 8-15 in New York, it was apparent that My Little Pony's journey had paved the way

for numerous others.

Video producers and distributors both big and small now come to New York in search of successful toy, book, and comic book properties that have the potential to translate into TV and home video programming.

Dan Capone, director of marketing for family entertainment at Warner Home Video, says he visits Toy Fair "to see what the heat is on Warner's current properties and to look for new properties."

Capone's plans for the show included visits to franchisees of "Batman Beyond," a cartoon series airing on the WB network. The first video, from Warner, streets May 18, following a pattern that the studio hopes to repeat.

Also on his agenda were Warner stalwarts Mary Kate and Ashley Olsen and cartoon character Scooby Doo, who is soon to star into a direct-to-video movie. Capone hints that the feature will be a cornerstone of the studio's fourth-quarter release schedule. Warner got a taste of the character's popularity when sales of a made-for-video special, "Scooby Doo On Zombie Island," exceeded expectations.

Capone says Warner looks for a well-established brand in its quest for children's acquisitions. He notes that the company "would never" put out a video whose concept didn't already have

a high profile as a toy, book, or similar product. "Video should never be the first mover," he says.

Warner's Pokemon property, which began life as a video game, is now a successful toy line and a WB children's program.

Significantly, Pokemon is also receiving a limited video release from a small San Francisco-based comic book distributor. Results will dictate expansion of the property.

Godzilla is another property being fully exploited. Peter Dang, executive VP of Sony Signatures Film and Television Licensing, notes that the franchise grossed \$400 million at retail last year. He announced at Toy Fair that the venture has acquired seven Godzilla movies never before released in the U.S.

Dang says Sony's Columbia Pictures will give the features a "Rocky Horror Picture Show"-style theatrical push—focusing on college campuses and midnight showings—before introducing the films to home video in the fourth quarter. The marketing of the movies will dovetail with Sony's Godzilla Origins toy line.

Meanwhile, Columbia has begun pre-production on a sequel to last summer's feature "Godzilla." Trying to broaden audience reach, the new film will include another monster—possibly Mothra, a favorite from the time when both creatures dominated the big

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Who Will Get The Source-Tagging Task, DVD Replicators Or Box Makers?

TAG, YOU'RE IT: DVD replicators and box makers are doing an Alphonse/Gaston act in source-tagging (Billboard, Feb. 20). Neither wants to place the tags inside the box, but they're agreed it's a job someone must do. So each is politely deferring to the other while awaiting direction from the studios.

Replicators are odds-on favorites to get the task, which will require lots of manual labor until expensive, automated equipment is in place. And none of the effort will be reflected on the bottom line, except perhaps to shrink it. At best, the costs will be passed along to retailers. However, some observers think those on the supply side may have to grin and bear the expense, which could be 15 cents to 20 cents per tag applied by hand at the start.

"We're not going to make the investment until the studios let us know," says a source close to Amaray/Joyce Molding, the leading DVD box maker. "We're not going to make any money on this, so we really don't want to do it." He doesn't expect a call to action. "Hollywood is contacting us just to cover their bases." The cost of automation is estimated at \$100,000 per machine, or \$500,000 for the five units thought to be the minimum for a major-league operation.

The music industry's inability to adopt source-tagging reportedly accounts for much of the hesitation. Amaray purchased a CD source-tagger, capable of handling 75,000 boxes a day, only to see it gather dust. "We're still waiting to use it," the source adds.

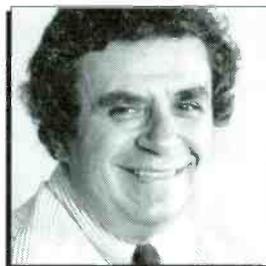
Richard Marquardt, who oversees replicator Warner Advanced Media Operations, suggests that box makers could be pushed to the front of the line as a way to limit the scattering of raw material inventories across the country. Noting the growing population of replicators, he says, "That's simplest." Whoever tags, retailers will absorb the costs, Marquardt adds. Nimbus Manufacturing VP Paula Tait also expects Amaray and box makers Alpha Enterprises and Warner Media Services to be involved, at least to the extent of teaching replicators how to apply the strips.

Two wholly incompatible systems, Sensormatic and Checkpoint, are under discussion. "We don't know what the chip is yet or where the location is," according to Tom Rooney, entertainment sales manager for Panasonic Disc Services in Torrance, Calif. Tags require uniform placement, or else checkout clerks run

the risk of not erasing the anti-theft code and releasing product that sets off exit-door alarms.

"We need a fairly predictable target," says one executive. He places it slightly above and slightly to the left of the disc, in back of the UPC stripes outside the box. That way, a checkout wand can be designed to read both simultaneously.

THE BIO BIZ: A&E Home Video is revamping its "Biography" series in an effort to turn it into "a really successful video genre," says David Walmsley, director of home video for A&E Television Networks. The idea is to make "Biography," a retail brand almost in spite of itself, into a "cohesive group of programs."



by Seth Goldstein

A&E has dropped the price of new and catalog releases to \$14.95 from \$19.95, spruced up the packaging, and better organized its categories of famous people. The logo on the latest releases—including those in newly created collections such as "Great Entertainers" and "Legendary Women"—will be in bright red, the same as the "Biography" on the cover of A&E's magazine. Catalog is being converted over time. "We want a real consistent look," Walmsley adds.

"Biography," the video, hasn't been a slacker. Walmsley says the company expects to move 1 million units this year via retail and direct response, including the Internet—"significantly greater" than in 1998. "We're looking for big growth," he adds. The new price is the door-opener for retailers who've been reluctant to take on the line. "Nineteen ninety-five does not work as well in some of the bigger chains," acknowledges Walmsley, who promises, "We're going to make up the difference on volume, definitely."

He predicts "Biography" will penetrate discounters and supermarkets, as well as gaining "deeper placement among existing customers." Book chain Barnes & Noble, which has featured "Biography" for several years, should benefit. "They agree with us" about the changes, Walmsley says. The biggest publisher of biobids, A&E thinks the time is right while it retains a near exclusive. Its revamped strategy may deter others, such as the Lifetime cable network, from entering the field. "We've gotten it right this time," Walmsley says. "We've hit the nail on the head."



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