

# Children's television can portray the frantic and inane repetition of our lives to perfection

March 16 2016, by Olivia Carter, University Of Melbourne

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Off goes the Pinky Ponk after another busy day of frantic inconsequence.  
Author provided

I have a confession to make. Yesterday my 18-month old Joe finally sat through an entire TV show without moving – and I was ecstatic!

I realise the general view out there is that we need to limit screen time throughout childhood and adolescence. And I agree with that general sentiment. I also have genuine admiration for the few parents that manage to raise their children TV-free.

At the same time I just cant help sharing my 7-year old daughter's gratuitous pleasure as she watches a crayon being pulled from a child's nose during a recent episode of her new favourite program, [Operation Ouch](#). I also marvel at how the same show manages to explain to primary school children in less than three minutes how [3-D printing of living tissue can be used to rebuild body parts](#)

I am less interested in the random "save the day" antics of the countless cartoon characters that are currently capturing the imagination of my 4-year-old Max. But I have to admit that I have enjoyed watching the preferences of my children change as they have each slowly transition from baby to toddler and beyond. Each new favourite show or character provides a little window into their psyche.

Over the years there are a few shows that stand out in my memory but none more than the British-made [In the Night Garden](#). For all three of my children, no other show has been able to engage the kids earlier or for longer. The episodes aimed at 1- to 3-year-old children are 30 minutes in contrast to the 5 minute slots that are generally aimed at this age group.

I have often watched the show wondering why it is so different to the others. Most shows share the same use of bright colours, jingly noises and cute characters but Joe has little interest in the other shows. At least not enough interest to stop him from diving headfirst over the couch for the 26th time.

It seems the show's ability to captivate [young children](#) has polarised parents into those that love the show for its ability to engage very young children versus those that consider the nonsensical names and strange sound effects annoying and even damaging to young minds.

I personally don't worry about Joe being "damaged" by the show but I

also don't buy into the range of "developmental benefits" claimed on the show's [website](#). In fact given the show's unique ability to engage the youngest minds I had assumed there might be more science behind it.

But after a day of digging through the literature, I see that there is very little factually known about the positive or negative effects of the show, nor is there a clear evidence base underpinning its design. I do give the show's producers credit though for having an impressive general insight into what little kids like.

From a more psychological perspective I also marvel at how the show manages to distil the very essence of intent and urgency in the total absence of goals, consequence and seemingly any plot at all. Indeed, if I had to guess, I would say that what sets this show apart from the others is its ability to portray purpose without any clear goal.

At any given moment it is very clear that whatever the characters are doing is somehow extremely important and requiring cooperation and frantic effort by all. But from one moment to the next it seems that nothing actually happens. Like an impossible Escher stairwell, the purposeful purposelessness is pure genius. It allows the youngest children to engage without the need to fit each subsequent moment of the show into a broader plot.

In many ways, the show reminds me of one of the most famous video's in psychology created as part of a [research study by Heider and Simmel in 1944](#). The video involves nothing more than a rectangle (with a section that can be opened and closed) and "three geometric figures shown moving a various directions and at various speeds."

When asked to describe the movie observers attributed a wide variety of mental states, emotions, motivations and purposeful activity, despite clear awareness that they where simply watching shapes move around on

a screen.

More than 70 years later the same tricks of choreographed movement give life to the tiny wooden "family" of Pontipines and the Wattingers that busily go about their day purposefully lining up and following each other from location to location.

As little Joe sits absorbed in the movement and colour of the show I would love to know what (if any) thoughts or goals he is attributing to these creatures. Or if it is more like the unavoidable and often inexplicable compulsion that adults have to slow down for a closer look when passing the scene of an accident, or to spend a lunch hour watching stupid cat video's (my own disinterest in cats has luckily spared me from this second fate).

What does Joe think as he watches Makka Pakka's repetitive, frantic and senseless stacking, cleaning and re-stacking the rocks? Does he question the lack of reason behind these action, or does he consider it equal to my own repetitive, frantic and apparently senseless behaviour: *pack dishwasher, unpack food from bags, put food in fridge, pull food out of fridge, organise clothes into piles, put food back in fridge, distribute the previously created piles of clothes to different parts of the house, unpack items from the dishwasher and put them in drawers*. One endless and inane cycle that is repeated over and over and over again.

Is this life imitating art? Or art imitating life? I am not sure. But I will defend the show's genius in distilling the essence of purpose without a plot. It seems it is the unique combination of these two features that gives this [show](#) its unparalleled capacity to hold my Joe's attention for a full 30 minutes – just enough time to cook dinner and unpack and repack the dishwasher a couple more times.

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