Consulting the Archive – Exploring Nelvana’s Care Bears Night Light

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As a child, around seven years old, I remember attempting to pry a little, red plastic heart off of the rear end of my first Care Bears stuffed toy. I would eventually own other Care Bears stuffed toys, as the television cartoon series produced by Canadian entertainment company, Nelvana, became more popular with kids from 1985-88. Eventually, there were dozens of different kinds of Care Bears – re-populated primarily through the release of the feature-length movie, appropriately titled, *The Care Bears Movie* (1985). The film introduced fans to a variety of anthropomorphic friends of the original Care Bears gang – this first roster of characters had originated in drawings on greeting cards prior to Nelvana converting them into animated characters. One of the new characters from the movie was a lion, another one was an elephant, another was a lamb, and so on. There was variety and personality in the Care Bears ‘universe’, but the stuffed toys had one common feature that stood out – that indignant heart-shaped seal on their butts. I never managed to pry it off as a kid, but I did take note of how important authenticity and branding was to the Care Bears franchise. I have reason to recall this childhood moment because of another Care Bears ‘toy’ which I recently became acquainted with through the Michael Hirsh collection at the Media Commons Archive of the University of Toronto.

 Rachel Beattie, the assistant archivist at Media Commons, had provided me with the finding aid for the material in the collection. There was a wide variety of textual material and artifacts, but a box of children’s toys seemed most interesting for my research. Once I had access to the box, it was a matter of rooting through the different toys to find the Care Bears item I was interested in. From the finding aid, the item had been listed as “plastic battery-operated toy” and was categorized as ‘ephemera’. I did not know what to expect, but based on the size of the box and that the toy was not clearly visible once one removed the lid, the toy was likely small and not stuffed. I removed a Rupert (the Bear) jigsaw puzzle and then a Rupert wool sweater and then a Caillou t-shirt. The items unlocked more memories – Rupert reminded me of the advertisements on television in the 1980s, the wool sweater took me back to my summers in England as a child, and the Caillou t-shirt recalled the many trips to the children’s section when I worked for Rogers Video in the late 1990s and primarily functioned as a re-stocker of VHS rentals. Ironically, when I uncovered the Care Bears ‘battery-operated toy’ it seemed rather unfamiliar.

 The ‘toy’ was a night-light for children. The Care Bears character, ‘Tenderheart Bear’, was an obvious choice to be represented – he was the main character in the cartoon and the Care Bears character most like a real bear because of his light brown fur colour. Although what I had in front of me was clearly Tenderheart Bear as revealed by the heart insignia on his belly (a distinguishing feature for individual Care Bears first known as a ‘tummy symbol’ and later as a ‘belly badge’), he was not a light brown colour. This toy was more orange-brown, like a cheap basketball – the kind one would see in an elementary school’s gymnasium. Tenderheart was represented in a stately pose for a Care Bear – standing tall with one arm raised high above his head. In that raised hand, Tenderheart holds three balloons – green, yellow and orange. I might have thought that there was colour-fading from being near a window perhaps; however the heart ‘tummy symbol’ was a bold, bright red. Tenderheart appeared to be glancing up at the balloons – three plastic orbs attached to separate plastic pegs which connected to his hand. Sadly, one of these pegs had come loose and dangled under the raised arm, with its green orb attached at the end. The wire that presumably runs through all three pegs was exposed. I could not see inside the balloon orbs, but I conjecture that each balloon had a small electric light inside. Tenderheart was placed on a yellow, ‘lumpy’ plastic stand. His feet appeared to push into the lumpy mass. Given that the Care Bears had their cartoon home in the clouds, there was something odd about the lumpy stand not being coloured white with some blue wisps painted onto it. Overall, the colour scheme of the night-light was not what one might expect. This ‘discolouration’ seemed antithetical to the branding which I had noticed as a child to be so important to the Care Bears merchandise.

 Standing at about seven inches tall, the toy would fit nicely on any size bedside table. After turning Tenderheart over, functional features were revealed including a port for an adapter plug and a small gear for adjusting the intensity of light coming from the plastic balloon-orbs. Then, sure enough, there was the familiar red plastic heart on Tenderheart’s tush. The heart wasn’t a seal, but instead was simply painted over the section of plastic fur. The heart was the brand and pointed to the authenticity of the item. Turning Tenderheart upside down accessed the compartment for two AA batteries. The cover flap for the compartment was wedged shut. Printed on the flap was, “Designer Collection. Copyright to American Greetings Corp 1984. Distributed through Cleveland. Made in Hong Kong.” It seemed that I would be unable to restore the functionality of the night-light, so I returned the artifact to its ‘mini-collection’ box.

 The night-light representing Tenderheart makes it difficult to guess whether this was the only model for Care Bears night-lights in 1984 or whether it was part of a series. Tenderheart is the main character in the cartoon, so it was possible that the night-light was not part of a series. Although the fonds that encompasses the Michael Hirsh collection had no clearly-marked textual documents with information about the toy, I was able to discover additional related information about the item through a web search. *Etsy.com* is an e-commerce website focusing on handmade and vintage items. This site had a listing for a Care Bears night-light. The photograph attached to the listing revealed a very similar night-light to the Tenderheart light. The night-light listed on Etsy was of the character, Wish Bear, and instead of plastic balloons he was holding up a yellow star. Fortunately, the owner of the item had a series of photographs for the night-light, including one of the base of the toy. Based on the printed information from the cover flap, it would seem that this night-light was indeed part of a series, along with the Tenderheart light.

 The listing on Etsy had additional valuable information. The Wish Bear night-light was in working condition and the owner added details about the functionality of the item. Supposedly, this night-light plays a song as well as lighting up. The song plays when you push a button on the ‘lumpy’ stand – which in this case is a white-with-blue-wisps representation of a cloud. The Tenderheart light did not have a similar button. At this point, I had to ask the question – was the Tenderheart night-light a prototype? The manufacturer and distributor details would seem to suggest that it wasn’t; however, it may have been the first model of the series based on some of the obvious design flaws (e.g. colour issues).

 The Michael Hirsh collection did not have clearly-marked textual documents about the night-light; however another box presented me with a presentation guide, dated from September 22nd, 2000. The presentation provided an overview of Nelvana Limited – the company that produced the original Care Bears television cartoon series and first two feature-length movies for the franchise. Nelvana was co-founded by Michael Hirsh in 1971. The cover of the presentation was marked in pen, “nelvana before corus” and I conjecture that its contents were organized in anticipation of making the $540 million sale to Corus Entertainment which happened that month. The presentation contents provide a general corporate overview, details on production and distribution, branded consumer products, new media and a financial summary. Nelvana is presented as an “Integrated Family Entertainment Company” with merchandizing as one of its nine revenue components. A circular graph situates merchandizing (toys and other products) as being positioned with equal value within the Nelvana network. Nelvana states that its corporate strategy entails building a vertically integrated children’s entertainment company. It might be claimed that merchandise was not an ancillary market to the cartoons and movies any more than the opposite being the case (especially given that Kenner manufactured a line of plush Care Bears teddy bears prior to their existence in animated media). Nelvana’s mission statement is in bold print – “to fully exploit a valuable base of characters and consumer brands”. The Care Bears are identified as part of a roster of “globally recognized characters” in the Nelvana portfolio. In fact, in this regard the rhetoric of the presentation would suggest that the Care Bears are part of a fictionally-based ‘star system’ in the Nelvana network.

 There are two Hirsh collections in the fonds at the Media Commons archive – one accessioned in 2003 and another in 2008. Brock Silversides, the director of the Media Commons and its lead archivist, provided me with some valuable information about the collections. The collections have similar material, mostly relating to Nelvana. The night-light was pulled from the 2008 collection, which Hirsh gifted to the University of Toronto. Brock explained that Michael Hirsh chose Media Commons for archiving his personal collection through a connection to Media Commons established by Canadian film director, Ron Mann. The Hirsh collections are Michael Hirsh’s personal archive, while the Art Gallery of Ontario has the corporate Nelvana collection (perhaps where I could find information about the night-lights). The AGO’s collection is currently not being curated which makes public access unlikely. The AGO collection contains a video master of every Nelvana production and animated cels for every production. The corporate Nelvana collection was offered to UofT; however they declined for reasons of limited storage space. Brock believes that the Hirsh collections at UofT are historically valuable because they contain business documents that shed light on the formation and sale of Nelvana. It is ironic that the night-light is broken because Brock had made a site visit to Hirsh’s warehouse and intentionally avoided choosing deteriorated or ratty material. Brock was eager to preserve the ephemera because he claims that these are the types of items that are often thrown away over time. The ephemera artifacts are kept in the cold storage or acclimatization room because Brock and Rachel are not trained in the particular materials (i.e. cloth).

 The Tenderheart night-light is an artifact with historical significance because its ‘flaws’ suggest that it may have been a prototype or a first-run of manufacturing in a more successful series. There are historically significant questions to be asked regarding the importance of saving prototypes for entertainment brands as they might reveal developments and a set of priorities in the branding[[1]](#footnote-1). The Tenderheart night-light did not chromatically match with the cartoon Tenderheart, however, the heart-shaped seal on his rump indicates the intent to clearly brand the night-light as part of the Care Bears franchise. If the night-light is not a prototype, but simply an attempt at variation, does this indicate that the Care Bears brand was looking to broaden definitions on what distinguishes a Care Bears bear from other fictional bears? Could it indicate a crisis in representation as the Care Bears brand was failing to define itself in 1984? Perhaps this is what prompted the creation of the cartoon series which brought Nelvana to the brand. Without textual documents to contextualize the night-light, most questions have to be answered conjecturally. This is likely the most historically significant aspect of the artifact – the night-light does not tell the historian enough on its own. In a media archive, ephemera can be understood as ‘dependent’ artifacts which can contextualize other artifacts, but require contextualization themselves.

 Brock aptly states that his philosophy in media archiving and preservation is to bring together related collections. In the future, he hopes to acquire for the university both the AGO’s corporate Nelvana collection and Corus Entertainment’s archive. Brock sees a greater unification and consolidation of materials related to Michael Hirsh being necessary in order to provide - “a richer trove of material for a researcher”. The night-light is a visually-attractive artifact which could be displayed in an exhibition. However, the ‘unification of archives’ which Brock aims for may be necessary prior to an exhibition because as evidenced through the night-light, there is not enough information at present to properly explain the artifact and its significance to the history of Nelvana. With the Media Commons’s issues of storage space, funding and staffing (generally issues for most archives) understanding more about the Tenderheart night-light is really just a matter of time and space.

1. I discovered an interesting textual document dated from 1978. It was a letter from a series of written correspondence between LucasArts and Nelvana regarding specifications for a Chewbacca-based animated cartoon. This particular letter stated on behalf of LucasArts that Nelvana was required to change the ‘pink-nose’ of the Chewbacca character to a ‘black-nose’ because they seemingly wanted to reinforce the specific ‘Chewbacca brand’ as opposed to the general ‘Wookie brand’. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)