

Toon telly wises up to kids' tastes

Richard Kilgarriff tells **Kate Bulkley** why healthy food will boost Turner's precocious children's channels and how he will get TCM fighting fit



Richard Kilgarriff

Turner Broadcasting System Europe

As the head of Britain's most successful bouquet of commercial children's channels, Richard Kilgarriff is a man building himself a remarkable reputation in one of the toughest kids' TV markets in the world. But right now, the 36-year-old former producer, presenter and entrepreneur is moving Cartoon Network, Boomerang and Toonami into something that he hopes will be not only good for the bottom line but also good for the country.

Backed by surplus cash from last year's strong ratings performances on the Turner kids channels, Kilgarriff, senior vice-president and general manager of UK Entertainment Networks, Turner Broadcasting System Europe, has been working on a major new project for more than a year. The project is called *Elfy Food* and is a set of animated programmes that champions healthy eating for children.

At a time when *Jamie's School Dinners* on Channel 4 has prompted a rethink in Government policy, the two-minute toons are meant to alert kids to the benefits of eating good food by re-branding and re-positioning fruit and veg to make them more exciting and, hopefully, more palatable to youngsters weaned on McDonalds and Coca Cola.

In a twist on the superhero theme, in *Elfy Food*-land the elf heroes get their superpowers by eating healthily; the evil bad guy has very bad indigestion and is called Lord Frankfarther (geddit?).

According to Kilgarriff, Prince Charles is interested in voicing one of the characters: the good-guy Grand Elf, of course. There's also a quest, lots of scary bad guys and everything kids demand in a modern-day epic – Kilgarriff laughs as he describes his Tolkein-esque project as a sort of "Lord of the Onion Rings".

"Everyone thinks that public service is the job of the BBC but I think if you've got an audience, and particularly a kids' audience, then you've got a responsibility... We think this issue of how kids eat is bigger than any one broadcaster," says Kilgarriff, whose initial investment in the show is £125,000.

One refreshing thing about Kilgarriff is that even as you form the question about how there must be a commercial reason for a big, bottom-line-oriented, US-owned company

to be singing a public-service tune, he has already beat you to it. And as for accusations that Turner is jumping on the bandwagon, Kilgarriff's enthusiasm for the project is obviously genuine.

Of course, Turner only began looking at the issue after the childhood obesity issue began to gather attention in the press and in government.

"It started as a defensive measure when the first white paper on obesity was commissioned and our food ads looked like they were under threat," admits Kilgarriff.

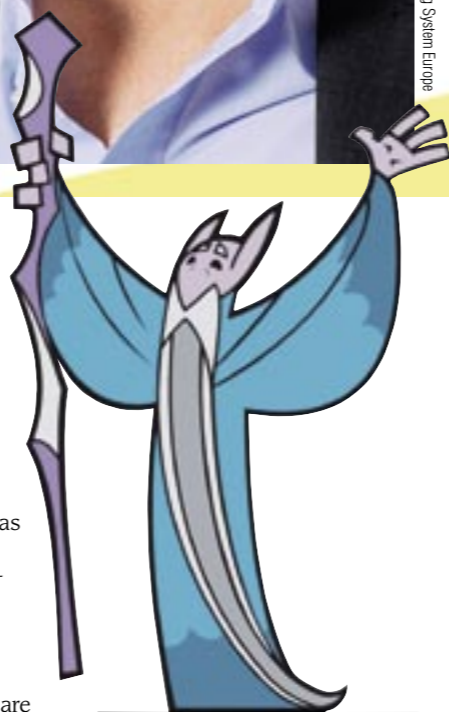
"We thought, well, we'd better be seen to be doing something. It doesn't help us having unhealthy kids and it doesn't help any of us having the perception that kids are unhealthy because of TV."

Elfy Food, which should launch this autumn, is the latest innovation that Kilgarriff has brought to his three kids channels and Turner Movie Classics, the fourth network placed under his wing last July.

Goodwill alone doesn't pay the bills

Last year, an ambitious loyalty reward programme called Truckatoon rewarded one loyal viewer a week with a truckload of toys (a second truckload went to a local kids charity in the winner's town) and boosted Saturday morning ratings for Turner's leading kids channel, Cartoon Network, by 20%.

Now Kilgarriff is trying to figure out how to turn the positive feelings that viewers and film stars all seem to have for Turner Classic Movies into a positive revenue stream. TCM makes money in continental Europe – but in



TOONAMI

Boomerang

CN
CARTOON NETWORK

TCM
TURNER CLASSIC MOVIES

Turner Broadcasting System Europe

[Elfy Food] started as a defensive measure when the first white paper on obesity was commissioned and our food ads looked like they were under threat... It doesn't help any of us having the perception that kids are unhealthy because of TV

Richard Kilgarriff

the UK, with severe competition from Sky Movies, it struggles.

"I worry about things not making the best of their situation. Everyone loves TCM from David Puttnam to Bafta to cabbies in Glasgow. I see my role as trying to monetise that goodwill. I have some things up my sleeve. It might not lie in the traditional TV model but lie off channel in a more entrepreneurial thing," he says cryptically.

Dressed in jeans, scuffed Paul Smith shoes and a casual shirt and jumper Kilgarriff seems an unlikely candidate for a company with the corporate DNA of Turner's owner, Time Warner.

Kilgarriff laughs when asked if he thinks he has changed since the days when he converted a caravan into an art deco cinema and drove it to the Cannes Film Festival to raise his profile and showcase some shorts he had produced. "That wasn't entrepreneurial, that was mentalpneuerial," he chuckles.

Following the Cannes stunt, he went on to produce an award-winning breakfast show for Virgin Radio, then ran the programming for Rapture, a niche youth channel plagued by an identity crisis.

Turner planning an Adult Swim?

During the internet boom he was headhunted by a Turkish billionaire to head up a video-on-demand service that was way ahead of its time and, like Rapture, soon tanked.

So how does he see his role at Turner, where he has propelled the kids channels to the highest share among 4- to 15-year-olds in the UK? "I think my job is to toe the party line but to pull it sideways and elasticate it from time to time to keep us moving forward."

"Richard has many strings to his bow," says Dan Brooke, controller of digital channels at Channel 4. "He's very relaxed and doesn't take things too seriously but he's obviously able to be very serious because he's got high

The cost of entry right now in DTT is really high and those people who are willing to pay right now are those who are likely to lose out the most (that is, the terrestrial channels) Richard Kilgarriff



Turner Broadcasting System Europe

up in a company where they don't promote jokers."

Some industry wags think that Turner missed the boat on Freeview, failing to secure a berth on the UK's fastest growing new TV platform. It's clear that Kilgarriff has been in the camp pushing for a move onto DTT, but he says he also understands the "very good" economic reasons why the company is biding its time; Turner does have a hybrid version of Cartoon, Boomerang and TCM on pay-DTT service Top Up TV.

"The cost of entry right now in DTT is really high and those people who are willing to pay right now are those who are likely to lose out the most (that is, the terrestrial channels)," says Kilgarriff.

But he confirms that finding a terrestrial window for Turner's content, either in partnership with a terrestrial broadcaster or as a standalone channel, is very much under discussion at Turner House in Soho.

"DTT is really the poster platform at the moment and everyone is looking at it. We have to look at it for the long term and if the investment makes sense then we will – and if not, we won't..."

Kilgarriff indicates he would be very surprised if Turner hasn't launched another UK channel in the next year. It is unlikely to be for kids because the market is saturated.

When pressed, he talks about the US success of a block on Cartoon Network entitled "Adult Swim" featuring *Futurama* and *The Family Guy* that has out-rated late-night talk shows Jay Leno and Letterman.

Kilgarriff, who was married last year (in fact in the same week he was promoted at Turner and given TMC to manage) has learned many lessons in just over three years at TBS. He believes children will learn lessons from the programmes like *Elfy Food* and is as excited by all this as he hopes the young viewers will be. But is he sure about Lord Frankfarther? Kilgarriff has a twinkle in his eye when he assures me: "Don't worry, kids love fart jokes." ■