

SCREENING WINKY-DINK

“I know you’re used to just watching TV shows, but this show is different!” – Jack Barry



From 1953 to 1957, on Saturday at 10am, the first generation of American children to grow up with screens in their houses received a lesson on interactivity. *Winky-Dink and You*, a CBS production, prefigured *Sesame Street* and other Children’s Television Workshop shows in its calls for viewer participation, but the physicality of Winky’s approach has never been equalled.

Winky-Dink, a star-haired moppet, was a cartoon who lived in a screen. A buttoned-down adult, Jack Barry, inhabited the house that contained Winky’s screen. Jack and his assistant, the comical Mr. Bungle, helped Winky with his adventures, enlisting the help of the child audience along the way.¹ Jack called what the viewers were doing “playing Winky Dink,” not “watching Winky Dink.” That’s because the children at home “helped” Winky through parts of the show’s narrative by using their Winky Dink kits. Kits were made up of “Magic Windows,” or plastic sheets that overlaid the television screen, and crayons “made of special oils and dyes” to mark up the plastic. You could get a Winky-Dink kit for fifty cents, and they were sold both in stores and by mail. Those possessing Winky-Dink kits could connect the dots and draw automobiles when a character needed to get out a jam, or write letters in special spaces in order to decipher clues to word puzzles. Those not possessing Winky-Dink kits, as Jack would often remind the viewers, would not have as much fun while watching the show; like the decoder ring, another toy of the era that

required a financial investment from children, possession of a Winky-Dink kit separated the show’s viewers into two separate and unequal classes.

Winky-Dink and You, when ‘played’ rather than ‘viewed,’ broke down the screen barrier between the characters of the show and the child viewers. Often, Jack would draw on the ‘inside’ of the screen, showing viewers how to follow the lines he had laid out; this trick also made it seem as though Jack were on the inside of the television set, communicating directly with the viewer, rather than being actually located in a distant studio. This impression was reinforced by an extended instructional segment in which Jack interacted with a representative child viewer, a pigtailed ‘Helen from Pennsylvania’. The camera showed Helen, in her living room, with Jack on the television; Jack walked Helen through the operation of the Winky-Dink kit, speaking directly to her and responding to her actions.

Why was Winky-Dink the last television show to ask kids to mess directly with the TV screen? Playing Winky-Dink required a fair amount of instruction from the program’s host. It was Jack’s job to make sure that the Winky action in the living room moved in carefully choreographed patterns. Jack told the viewers when to take out their magic windows, instructed them how to rub the plastic overlay onto the TV screen (from the inside out to all four corners), and even mediated between siblings (“one of you take the black and the red crayons ... one of you take the yellow

and the green”). Jack also needed to make sure that the viewers knew when to erase the drawings they had made, so that the screen will be clean for the next drawing. Coloring outside of the lines was not an option; the free-handed and freethinking would not reap the benefits of the show. But perhaps the best explanation for the dead end that was Winky-Dink comes from a viewer who recounted his Winky memories online: “My father wouldn’t buy me a Winky-Dink kit, so I took the liberty of using my own crayons to draw on our new TV set.” The Winky opus has recently been reissued on DVD, screen-and-crayons kit included; today’s parents may purchase at their own risk.

ENDNOTE

¹ Surprisingly, this character is NOT the namesake of the proggy experimental band Mr. Bungle, who, according to their Wikipedia page, named themselves after a puppet character featured in a 1960s instructional film *Lunchroom Manners*, which in turn was shown on a Pee-Wee Herman HBO special which ran in the 1980s. This writer would not be surprised, however, if the makers of “Lunchroom Manners” had gotten their Mr. Bungle ideas from Winky.

Images Left A viewer draws on outside of the screen. Image courtesy of Bob/TV Party; **Centre** Winky-Dink; **Right** The host Jack Barry on the inside of the screen. All images courtesy of Billy Ingram/TV Party.

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