Episode Book

EPISODE #5680

The Teletubbies Were Engineered, Not Accidental

PUBLISHED	2 October 2026 at 14:40 UTC
DURATION	28:22
LISTEN	myweirdprompts.com/episode/teletubbies-designed-for-toddlers/
HOSTS	Corn, Herman, Hilbert
SCRIPT MODEL	deepseek-flash
VOICES	chatterbox-regular (chatterbox-local)
PIPELINE	V5.2
BOOK GENERATED	19 October 2026 at 17:38 UTC

SYNOPSIS

What if the strangest children's show ever broadcast was strange on purpose? This episode digs into the real origin story of Teletubbies: Anne Wood and Andrew Davenport's 1994 pitch to the BBC, the developmental science behind a show built for two-year-olds, and the mid-nineties technology that shaped what ended up on screen. From the baby sun as an emotional cue to the tummy TVs that solved an impossible scale problem, from voice trumpets engineered around a perceptual limitation to giant rabbits that were literally bred as livestock — almost nothing about Teletubbyland was an accident. We close with Po: the smallest, reddest, most mischievous Tubby, and the voice question that makes her the strangest of the lot.

TRANSCRIPT



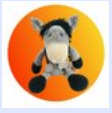
Corn

What if the most unsettling children's show ever broadcast was unsettling on purpose? Not by accident. Not because somebody wasn't paying attention. Because a team of people sat in a room, looked at the research on how two-year-olds process the world, and built something that would land in exactly the way it lands.



Corn

That's Daniel's question this week. He wrote in — and he's right that we've poked at the Teletubbies before — but he wants the origin story this time. Who were these people? Anne Wood and Andrew Davenport. What was engineered versus what just happened? Daniel's specific angle is that a lot of what looks strange and inexplicable about that show was actually calculated decisions, plus the technology that happened to be available in the mid-nineties. And then there's Po. Daniel calls her, quote, "arguably the strangest of the lot." He wants to know why.



Herman

He's not wrong. Rewatching it as an adult is a completely different experience than watching it in diapers. The baby sun alone.



Corn

The baby sun deity, as Daniel puts it.



Herman

Right. And here's the thing that makes this a real episode rather than a nostalgia trip — the answers exist. Wood and Davenport have both talked about this in detail. The weirdness wasn't a mystery. It was a design.



Corn

So it wasn't an accident. It was engineered.



Herman

Every bit of it. Start with 1994. The BBC puts out a call for pitches for a new preschool programme. Eleven other companies bid.



Corn

Nine feet of Tinky Winky against eleven competitors.



Herman

And Ragdoll wins. Anne Wood's company. She's the producer, veteran of children's television, and she pitched a show aimed at an audience that, in her words, had never had programmes made for it before. Two and three-year-olds.



Corn

Which is the part people skip past. Everyone remembers the show. Almost nobody remembers that it was aimed lower than anything before it.



Herman

That's the whole thing. Davenport came at it sideways. He had a BSc in Speech Sciences from University College London. He'd trained intending to be a speech therapist. He was working as a puppeteer and co-writer on Ragdoll's Tots TV when he and Wood started talking about a show for a younger audience built on developmental rationale rather than educational rationale.



Corn

Say more about that distinction, because it sounds like the whole thesis in one line.



Herman

Educational rationale means you're teaching something. Letters, numbers, colours. Developmental rationale means you're designing around where the child actually is — what they can perceive, what they can process, what makes them respond. Davenport's own words were that makers of children's TV tended to come from a teaching background,



Herman (continued)

and that this portrayed a situation alien to the culture of the younger preschool child. Children that age learn by self-motivated experimentation. So he built the show around that instead of around a curriculum.



Corn

And the astronauts.



Herman

The astronauts. He and Wood had just been to the Smithsonian in Washington, and Davenport was struck by something. NASA astronauts coming out of landing capsules in those bulky suits looked like toddlers in nappies. Oversized heads, foreshortened legs. He said it struck him as funny that at the pinnacle of human achievement, the figures that emerged looked like that.



Corn

So he built a show about spacemen.



Herman

He devised characters based on spacemen, with limited language, mirroring the emergent speech of young children. They drew up what they called a picturebook of technological babies and took it to the BBC. And they were unnerved to find that the eleven other companies bidding had brought lots.



Corn

They brought a sketchbook. Everyone else brought a portfolio.



Herman

And they won anyway. Premieres thirty-first of March, nineteen ninety-seven, on BBC2. Three hundred and sixty-five episodes. Over a hundred and twenty countries. Forty-five languages. Three hundred and thirty million pounds generated in the first two years.



Corn

Which is where I want to slow down, because the money number is the boring number. The interesting question is what the money was being spent on. What was actually on screen.



Herman

Ask it.



Corn

What's the baby in the sun for?



Herman

Functionally, exactly what it looks like. Davenport's explanation is that a gurgling baby is one of the easiest ways of getting a response out of anyone, even another baby. And by laughing, the baby in the sun also lets the children know when they're supposed to be laughing along.



Corn

It's a laugh track made of an infant.



Herman

It's a cue. And it's more than a cue. Contemporary coverage at the time added that babies like to see babies, and that the sun baby's intent expressions and reactions reassure viewers that all is well — or let them know something is about to happen. It's doing emotional bookending. It opens the episode and it tells you what register you're in.



Corn

So the single most unsettling image in the show is a piece of user interface.



Herman

It really is. And here's the honest caveat — nobody has found a definitive creator statement about why specifically a baby's face inside a sun. The function is documented. The visual itself, the choice of a sun specifically as the container, that's not been attributed anywhere I can find. So there's a gap in the record.



Corn

The most-asked question about the show and the paperwork just says "and then someone put a baby in a sun."



Herman

That's roughly where it sits, yes.



Corn

Okay, tummy TVs.



Herman

This is my favourite one, because it's the purest example of a constraint producing the aesthetic. The BBC stipulated that real young children had to appear in the show. Actual toddlers, on camera. Which creates an immediate problem — the Teletubbies are enormous. Tinky Winky is nearly nine feet tall in costume. You cannot put a nine-foot creature and a two-year-old in the same frame without it looking like a hostage situation.



Corn

So you shrink the child instead.



Herman

You shrink the child. Davenport put televisions in the Teletubbies' tummies specifically to solve the scale difference between the monster-size Teletubbies and the young children. The screen becomes the meeting point. The child appears at a size that's plausible next to the Tubbies because the child is inside a screen that's part of a Tubby.



Corn

The frame does the work.



Herman

The frame resizes reality. It's the same trick as a picture-in-picture on a news broadcast. You're not changing the person, you're changing the box they're standing in.



Corn

Voice trumpets next.



Herman

Voice trumpets are the one I'd put on a poster. Davenport's research found that young children rarely listen and watch at the same time.



Corn

Hold on.



Herman

It's a strange fact and it's the one that unlocks the show. A small child watching television is either looking or listening. Not both. They're not dual-tracking the way an adult does.



Corn

So speech arriving out of nowhere is wasted.



Herman

Speech arriving out of nowhere is wasted, and worse, it's confusing. So the voice trumpets — those periscope things that rise out of the ground — they turn the Tubbies' heads. That's their job. The trumpet rises, the Tubbies turn to look at it, and that physical movement is the signal to the child: something is about to be said, look at the source, now listen.



Corn

They built a mechanical attention-grabber because the audience couldn't multitask.



Herman

They built a stage direction that the audience could actually perceive. It's the closest thing I know of to a television show designing around a perceptual limitation instead of ignoring it.



Corn

And the gibberish.



Herman

Davenport is adamant about this one. His position is that it is a genuine language the Tubbies have. It has a proper grammatical structure, and what they say is meaningful to the children.



Corn

That's a strong claim.



Herman

It's a strong claim and I'll be honest, I'm not sure it's ever been independently verified in the way he phrases it. But the design intent behind it is clear — the point isn't that the words mean something in English. The point is that the speech pattern mirrors the emergent speech of toddlers. The rhythm, the repetition, the sing-song rise and fall. A



Herman (continued)

two-year-old hearing it hears something shaped like their own attempts at language. It's comprehensible in cadence even when it isn't comprehensible in vocabulary.



Corn

So it's not nonsense. It's a dialect of almost-speaking.



Herman

That's a better phrase than mine.



Corn

Repetition.



Herman

Davenport's line is that children like the security of repetition, and repetition keeps things simple and familiar. But the knock-on effect is the interesting one. Repetition lets a child predict. If the same thing happens in the same order every episode, the child gets to be right. And being right is a cognitive reward. They're not just being soothed by the pattern, they're training deduction on it.



Corn

So the show teaches by letting the audience guess correctly.



Herman

Over and over. That's why the structure is so rigid. The rigidity isn't laziness. The rigidity is the teaching.



Corn

The rabbits.



Herman

The rabbits are where it gets dark.



Corn

Go on.



Herman

Wood explained that the rabbits needed to be big to fit in with the scale. You can't have a nine-foot Tinky Winky standing next to a normal rabbit, it destroys the world. So they needed enormous rabbits. And the only ones available that size had been bred on the continent to be eaten.



Corn

As livestock.



Herman

As meat. And their breeding had given them enlarged hearts. Wood said almost weekly the animal trainer would greet her in distress and tell her another one had died.



Corn

The giant rabbits that hop across the grass while the Tubbies dance were, in real life, dying off-camera on a weekly basis.



Herman

Because their hearts were too big for their bodies. Which is a sentence I never expected to say about a children's show.



Corn

So the most surreal element of the whole production was the one with the most ordinary explanation. They needed big rabbits. Big rabbits were being farmed. The farming killed them.



Herman

Nobody designed the dying. That was the part nobody designed.



Corn

What's Wood's description of the set itself?



Herman

Teletubbyland. She called it a cross between the land where television comes from and a nursery rhyme land. They live in a Tubbytronic Superdome and there's a sentient vacuum cleaner called Noo-Noo.



Corn

A cross between where television comes from and a nursery rhyme land. That's a set designer describing a set designer's job.



Herman

It's also the most honest description of the show anyone ever gave. It's literally a television landscape. Grass that's too green, hills that are too smooth, and a machine that eats things.



Corn

So we've got the baby sun as an emotional cue, the tummy TVs as a scale fix, the voice trumpets as a perceptual workaround, the gibberish as a mirror of toddler speech, the repetition as a deduction trainer, and the rabbits as a livestock casualty. That's the whole show.



Herman

Every piece of it.



Corn

So now Po. Daniel's call. He wants to know why she's the strangest of the lot, and I think he's right, but I want to hear you argue it.



Herman

She's the smallest. She's red. She's got a circular antenna, the UHF-style one. She rides a pink-and-blue scooter. She's the one who gets described as mischievous, clever, incredibly energetic, with a fiery spirit and a bit of a rebellious streak.



Corn

And her voice.



Herman

Her voice is the actual answer. Po was played by Pui Fan Lee. British-Hong Kong actress. And because English wasn't her mother tongue, she struggled to find her Teletubby voice. Wood's account is that they decided Po should use Mandarin.



Corn

There's a discrepancy there, isn't there.



Herman

There is, and it's worth flagging because Daniel would want us to. Wood told the Guardian in twenty thirteen that they decided Po should use Mandarin. But the specific phrases Po actually says are Cantonese. Pui Fan Lee gave Po a little Cantonese — Fi-dit, Fi-dit, which means faster, faster, and Yāt, yih, sàam, which is one, two, three.



Corn

So the creator's own quote doesn't match the audio.



Herman

It doesn't. The Cantonese attribution is more specific and better supported. The Mandarin line comes from Wood herself, in one interview, and it's possible she was using Mandarin loosely, or misremembering, or simplifying. But the phrases on tape are Cantonese. That's what a British-Hong Kong actress would bring.



Corn

So Po is the strangest because of a casting accident.



Herman

Po is the strangest because of an actor's linguistic background. Which is the same root cause as everything else in the show — a practical constraint that the production chose to incorporate instead of hide. They didn't replace Pui Fan Lee. They didn't coach the Cantonese out of her. They leaned into it.



Corn

And the result is that one of the four Tubbies is the only one whose language is foreign to the English-speaking viewer.



Herman

Foreign, and untranslated. The other three are speaking a dialect of almost-speaking that a child can parse by rhythm. Po is speaking actual words in a real language that almost nobody in the audience knows. Which means Po is the one where the show's central conceit — that the language is meaningful but not in English — is literally true rather than metaphorically true.



Corn

That's the answer.



Herman

She's the only Tubby who stops being a design choice and starts being a person.



Corn

And the reason she's remembered as the strangest isn't because she's stranger. It's because she's the only one where the mystery has a real, undocumented bottom.



Herman

Which is exactly what Daniel was circling.



Corn

Now — the decade. Wood said they were interested in how children were reacting to the increasingly technological environment of the late nineties, and that the Tubbies were technological babies on the cusp of technological change. Say what that means.



Herman

It means the show was positioned as an antidote. The specific thing it was written against was violent children's television — Mighty Morphin Power Rangers is the one that gets named. Ragdoll's pitch was that if you're making something for two-year-olds, you start by not giving them violence-and-catchphrases, you give them a landscape and a rhythm.



Corn

And yet the Tubbies are machines. Tummy screens, voice trumpets rising out of the ground, a vacuum cleaner with a personality.



Herman

That's the tension. The show is simultaneously anti-technology in its values and completely saturated with technology in its imagery. Wood's framing is that the Tubbies aren't there to be protected from the technological world, they're there to model living comfortably inside it. That's why the devices are friendly. Nothing in Teletubbyland malfunctions in a threatening way. Noo-Noo eats things and then gives them back.



Corn

Which is the opposite of almost every children's show that has technology in it. The machine is the ally, not the danger.



Herman

That's a unusual position for ninety-seven. Most television aimed at kids with gadgets in it was teaching them to be suspicious of the gadgets.



Corn

And then the adults got involved.



Herman

The adults got very involved. Wood's line about this is that the intention was to create an imaginative landscape for children to project their own ideas on to. And then she says: we found that everyone in the world projects their own ideas. It's astonishing what some people have read into it.



Corn

She built a blank wall and then was surprised when people saw things in it.



Herman

She built a blank wall on purpose and was surprised that it was blank enough for people to see things in it.



Corn

Give me the famous one.



Herman

Jerry Falwell's Parent Alert in ninety-nine. Falwell's newsletter claimed Tinky Winky was gay, on the grounds that he's purple — which is a gay pride colour — and his antenna is a triangle, which is a gay pride symbol. Also, he carries a handbag.



Corn

Wood laughed.



Herman

Wood laughed when she first heard. But in the United States certain communities took it seriously, to her horror, and she says it damaged the brand considerably. And then — and this is the line I'd frame — she also said it was the best publicity they ever had.



Corn

Both of those things at once.



Herman

Both of those things at once, and she meant both. It damaged the brand and it made the brand unavoidable.



Corn

Did Davenport engage with any of this?



Herman

He did, and his line is the most interesting one for this episode. He said the show was quite Brechtian. Because they are actors, but they are also part of the audience.



Corn

Unpack that.



Herman

Brecht's whole theatrical project was breaking the illusion on purpose. Reminding the audience that they're watching a performance so they stay awake and think rather than disappear into the story. Davenport is saying the Tubbies occupy that weird zone — they perform for the child, and they also sit and watch the tummy screens alongside the child. They're inside the show and outside it at once.



Corn

So the show isn't naive at all.



Herman

The show is extremely self-aware. Which is the opposite of the popular reading. The popular reading is that this was a bunch of people in suits doing something inexplicable. Davenport is saying they knew exactly what they were doing, including the theatricality.



Corn

And the critics were not having it.



Herman

Not remotely. Harvard psychologist Susan Linn said there's no documented evidence that Teletubbies has any educational value at all. Dorothy Singer at Yale said gearing a show for very young children goes against everything she believed in.



Corn

Which is a striking thing for a researcher to say about a show that was designed with developmental research.



Herman

It's a striking thing and it's revealing. Singer's objection isn't about quality, it's about the premise. She's saying the target age itself is the problem.



Corn

And then PBS.



Herman

Alice Cahn at PBS is the one who pushes back. Her line was: what's so sacrosanct about one-year-olds? Whether we as a society like it or not, kids watch TV.



Corn

Which is the most honest sentence in the whole debate.



Herman

It really is. Linn and Singer object to the audience existing. Cahn points out that it does.



Corn

So Ragdoll's position was that they were the only people in the room taking that audience seriously.



Herman

That's the argument. The critic says you shouldn't make this. The producer says somebody is already making it and it's worse than this. And Wood's line, at the time, was that there had never been a programme that speaks so distinctly to children the world over, and that they were the first to understand how children perceive the world around them.



Corn

Which is a big claim.



Herman

It's a big claim and I don't think it's literally true, but I think it points at something real, which is that almost nobody had built a show around perception rather than content.



Corn

So the argument between them is whether a blank landscape is respectful or negligent.



Herman

And they never resolved it, which is why we're still talking about it.



Corn

The puddle thing. You mentioned there's one more design story.



Herman

There is. Davenport watched children shouting ugh at a Tubbie stepping in a puddle. That's it. That's the input. He noticed kids found that funny and would shout at the screen. So he wrote a scene where all four Tubbies step in puddles and shout ugh at each other.



Corn

That's how the show was written.



Herman

He watched what the audience did and wrote it back into the show. Which is the same loop as the voice trumpets — the audience reacts, the production incorporates. That's what Brechtian means in practice. The show is watching itself watch.



Corn

And then the whole thing ends. Sixteenth of February, two thousand one. Last original episode. And then the reboots.



Herman

Two thousand fifteen, WildBrain takes it and swaps the tummy TVs for touch screens.



Corn

They replaced the design constraint with a design update.



Herman

Which in fairness was the correct thing to do if you're rebuilding it for a different decade. The tummy TVs existed to solve a scale problem with a CRT. In twenty fifteen the CRT is gone and everything is a touchscreen, so the screen becomes a touchscreen. It's internally consistent.



Corn

But the babies.



Herman

The babies got recast, multi-racial Sun Babies. Which again is a defensible choice and it changes the emotional register of the opening significantly, because the original sun baby was one specific baby.



Corn

Jess Smith.



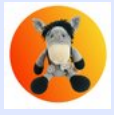
Herman

Filmed at nine months old. Paid two hundred and fifty pounds plus a box of toys.



Corn

That's the whole payment.



Herman

She revealed her identity in twenty fourteen at age nineteen.



Corn

Two hundred and fifty pounds and a box of toys, for the single most-viewed face in the show's history.



Herman

There's something very honest about that number.



Corn

And then Netflix.



Herman

Twenty twenty-two, a second reboot announced for Netflix, Tituss Burgess as narrator. And Anne Wood criticises it as a major devaluation of the brand.



Corn

The creator, watching her own show rebuilt by people who didn't make it, and calling it what it is.



Herman

Which is a very consistent position for her. She spent the whole original run arguing that the design was the point. A reboot that keeps the characters and drops the design is, from her perspective, the whole thing gone.



Corn

And last year, the two of them.



Herman

Twenty twenty-five, Andrew Davenport and Anne Wood jointly received the J.M. Barrie Award for Lifetime Achievement in children's arts and television. Which is a strange and lovely bookend — the woman who made the show about spacemen and the man who made the show about perception, getting a lifetime achievement award named after the man who wrote Peter Pan.



Corn

Both of them built around children's perceptions of the world.



Herman

Both of them built around children's perceptions of the world and got told at various points that the audience shouldn't exist.



Corn

So the show got a lifetime achievement award for doing the thing the critics said shouldn't be done.



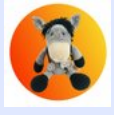
Herman

Yes.



Corn

That tracks.



Herman

It does.



Corn

There is one more thing. Daniel said "arguably the strangest of the lot," and I want to leave the audience with the answer rather than the question. So — Po.



Herman

Po is the strangest because Po is the only one who was literally, a specific person. The other three are designs. Po is Pui Fan Lee.



Corn

And the strangeness of Po isn't design strangeness.



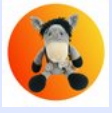
Herman

It's person strangeness. Which is a completely different flavour.



Corn

Anything else on the language point worth planting?



Herman

Only that Po's voice is described as more soft-spoken than the other Tubbies, almost like a whisper. Which I think is a feedback loop. The softer the delivery, the more the Cantonese words float out without explanation, and the more the audience has to lean in to hear it. And leaning in is what fixes attention.



Corn

So the quiet one is the one you remember.



Herman

The quiet one is the one you remember.



Corn

Yeah.



Herman

And the press did notice. There's a Design Week piece from ninety-nine called "The tao of Po" that treats her as a cultural icon in her own right. Po was the one that showed up in student rooms and became a cult figure. Wood noted that the Tubbies became gay icons and a cult among students specifically.



Corn

So the strangest one is the one that leaked out of the show and into the culture.



Hilbert

We had one that went out live with the rabbit still in the hutch, and the segment ran four minutes long, and nobody could get to the bar to open it because the door was on the wrong side of the set.



Corn

Four minutes of grass.



Hilbert

The floor manager kept signalling at us to do something and there was nothing to do. We weren't allowed to touch the hutch. That was the rule.



Herman

You worked on children's productions?



Hilbert

Set dressing, mostly. Children's was hard work because everything is oversized and you can't see where you're putting your feet. I remember the suits were nine feet and the performers inside were completely blind below the chest. You couldn't see the floor. So somebody had to walk in front of them, going backwards, holding their hand, telling them when to stop.



Corn

Every step, somebody walking backwards.



Hilbert

Every step for the entire shoot. And you can only do that for so long before it stops being funny. I saw one performer go down. Couldn't get out quickly enough. Panic, in the suit, in the heat.



Herman

That's nine feet of foam with no ventilation.



Hilbert

It was hot in there. Very hot. And the performers on Teletubbies had it in their contracts that they couldn't speak to the public. That was the rule. They put the suit on, they did the show, and they couldn't say a word about it. You'd get asked and you just had to stand there.



Corn

Same with the rabbit hutch, functionally. Somebody decided something and the person doing the work found out about it on the day.



Hilbert

That's how it goes. And the rabbits, the ones in the hutch, they were enormous. You could see it in the chest. Their hearts were too big. You'd look at one and know it wasn't going to make it.



Corn

Wood said almost weekly the trainer would tell her another one had died.



Hilbert

That tracks. Nobody was being cruel. It was just how those animals were bred. It's a different problem than a suit that doesn't let a man see the floor.



Corn

But both of them are that. Somebody designing at scale, and a body paying for it.



Hilbert

That's the job.



Herman

That's the correct way to think about the whole show. Every single strange element was a person solving a specific problem with the tools they had.



Corn

And some of the tools were alive.



Herman

Some of the tools were alive.



Corn

The thing I keep coming back to is the sun. Because the one image that everyone starts with — the baby inside the sun — is the one where the documentation runs out. We know why a baby was used. We don't know who looked at the sun and decided that was the container. Everything else in the show has a paper trail. That one has a function and no author.



Herman

Which, given what you said earlier about the blank wall, is almost too neat.



Corn

Almost too neat. Yeah.



Herman

Po's the same shape, actually. We have the reason her voice is Cantonese but not a creator statement about why Po specifically is the strangest. That reading is fan consensus.



Corn

The two most-asked questions about the show are both questions where the answer is "we know the mechanism and we don't know the mind."



Herman

And I think that's the show's shape. There's a lot of mechanism and not a lot of mind. That's what makes it settle so strangely on adult ears. It's an extremely carefully built thing with nobody visibly inside it.



Corn

And that's the forward-looking thought. The show was stranger because it was designed so carefully for a mind that can't yet ask questions about it. The weirdness is the craft. Which is why the reboots fail. You can rebuild the Tubbytronic Superdome. You can replace the tummy CRTs with touchscreens. You can't recreate the process of thinking about what a pre-verbal child can perceive. That part isn't in the assets.



Herman

Which is exactly why Wood called the Netflix version a devaluation. She's not objecting to a new show. She's saying you can't reboot a research process.



Corn

So a two-year-old will watch the new one and never know the difference. Everybody older does.



Herman

And that's the whole episode.



Corn

Good. Thanks as ever to Hilbert Flumingtop, our producer, who ran the desk through all of this.



Herman

Thanks to Daniel, obviously, for the prompt — and if the exact origin of the baby sun ever turns up in a Ragdoll archive somewhere, we want the email.



Corn

Send it — show at my weird prompts dot com. That's show at my weird prompts dot com. One more thing before we go: if you've enjoyed this and you haven't yet, a review helps other listeners find the show, and it's the cheapest thing you can do for us.



Corn

This has been My Weird Prompts.



Herman

The human-AI collaboration podcast. We'll be back soon.



Corn

See you tomorrow.