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By Michael Berick, Special to the Times

## 'Word World' spells it all out for kids

The PBS show melds letters into animals and objects to boost word recognition.

THE food-loving pink pig, brainy green frog and cute brown dog who populate the new PBS show "WordWorld" might look like normal kids' television characters at a glance, but on close inspection you'll notice



something unique. The letters "d-o-g" form the dog's body. Similarly, "p-i-g" makes up the pig and "f-r-o-g" the frog. A bridge is constructed out of the letters "b-r-i-d-g-e"; a box from "b-o-x." Embedding letters into creatures and objects to teach word recognition to children ages 3 to 5 is the show's simple but ingenious idea.

"WordWorld" mastermind Don Moody has spent a number of years devising a literacy-oriented program in which words rule. Not your typical TV show creator, Moody was running his own Manhattan ad agency when his wife became pregnant with their first child. Realizing that he didn't want to be one of those "Don't look at what I do" parents, he quit advertising to search for a way to use the arts to help children.

On the phone recently from his show's offices in New York City, Moody joked that he went through 125 concepts before hitting upon the "WordWorld" idea. During his extensive research he read "eyeball tracking" studies that concluded that children will focus on the image of an animal on screen more than on words, so he started exploring ways to merge images with letters.

To help him develop his family-oriented project, he turned to his cousin, children's book writer-editor (and onetime preschool teacher) Jacqueline Moody. This show, however, isn't their first collaboration. "We used to put on shows in our grandma's backyard," she said. When he showed her his early "WordWorld" script, she was excited to team up with him.

Because they are educated outsiders, not education experts, the Moodys don't feel beholden to any one methodology of teaching reading. Different episodes employ different skill sets. Phonics will be utilized in one show, but another will focus on print awareness.

Jacqueline Moody's time teaching taught her that each child learns differently, so by making their show less didactic and formulaic they hope to keep young viewers more involved. Her classroom experiences also showed her how vital humor can be. "When students are laughing," she said, "they are engaged and paying attention."

Humor is just part of their creative equation to teach reading. "We are very keen that this show tells stories; that it isn't just a show in which a problem is solved," Jacqueline Moody said. The cousins quibble over whether to describe "WordWorld" as retro, but they agree that they want good, old-fashioned storytelling, classic characters and classic jokes.

The Moodys also strove to create a compelling universe

for "WordWorld," much like Winnie the Pooh's Hundred Acre Wood. They chose doing the show in 3-D animation to make it more real to their young viewers, but it's a distinctive "real world" where kicked-up dust spells out "d-u-s-t." It'll all part of their idea for turning the abstractness of learning to read into something more concrete.

Their concept has won many believers. Children's television executive Tina Peel ("Ghostwriter") and Emmy-winning director Olexa Hewryk ("Little Bill") have been part of the show's core creative team for several years; the Department of Education awarded them a multimillion-dollar grant.



PBS holds a similar enthusiasm for being "WordWorld's" home. "The humorous way that the show presents new words and spells out character names and objects is certain to get kids laughing and learning at the same time," Linda Simensky, the network's senior director of children's programming, said via e-mail.

Don Moody is thrilled to be aligned with PBS, his top choice for "WordWorld." He grew up a latchkey child with PBS often serving as his baby-sitter. Having his first TV show on the network, he said gleefully, is like "getting to date your baby-sitter."



**A New World:** Cousins Don and Jacqueline Moody created "WordWorld."