

What Entering the Public Domain May Mean for Mickey Mouse's Legacy

Many of you have probably heard by now that Disney's first Mickey Mouse short, *Steamboat Willie*, had become public domain this year, and on the same day, the trailer for a comedy-horror slasher parody movie starring a murderous Mickey Mouse was released, titled *Mickey's Mouse Trap*. A lot of the top comments on the trailer joked about another iconic character being turned into a horror movie or about how quickly the trailer dropped, and some were excited about the ways *Steamboat* Mickey can be used. However, it's also feasible for some to be exasperated or even outraged that Disney's iconic and lovable mascot is being bastardized for a cheap horror movie cash-grab. The best example of this is none other than Disney itself, as it continues fighting for copyright ownership for *Steamboat* Mickey as of writing this article.

There is a common misconception about Mickey though: he wasn't always the loveable and morally-upstanding icon we all associate with the Disney mascot. If you look at the earliest Mickey Mouse cartoons in the late 1920s and early 1930s, you'd quickly notice that Mickey in his initial depictions exhibits a lot of behavior that is mischievous at best and downright antisocial at worst. Mickey partakes in a lot of reckless behavior, abuses animals, tricks others, and even kisses his love interest, Minnie Mouse, a couple times without her consent. A lot of these behaviors could be passed off as being a relic of its times or excused by the durability and flexibility of cartoon characters. However, Walt Disney himself later received letters from parents complaining about their children imitating Mickey's harmful behavior. This was an early lesson for the company about having their characters present a positive example for children, even before their primary demographic was children (the early Disney shorts were geared towards general audiences, including adults, instead of children only). The company took the parents' concerns seriously and cleaned up Mickey's image and rebranded him into the Mickey Mouse we all know and love.

The point of bringing this up is that it isn't as far-fetched to imagine Mickey as an evil and scary character as one would initially assume. In fact, as a concept, transforming a wholesome children's icon into something much darker is really fascinating, with a variety of avenues to explore. One example is a series of Creepypasta (a horror-related legend that has been shared around the internet) stories titled *Abandoned by Disney* by a creator named Slimebeast. The main antagonist of the story, Photo-Negative Mickey, represents the corruption and wrongdoings committed by the Disney company, and thus twists his wholesome and wonderful image into something disturbing and unrecognizable. Later, a fan game inspired by *Five Nights at Freddy's* and *Abandoned by Disney* called *Five Nights at Treasure Island* was created by Matthew Phoenix Rodriguez, meant to be a faithful recreation of Slimebeast's Creepypasta. If you're not satisfied with these examples, look no further than Disney's own Mickey Mouse cartoon titled *Runaway Brain*, when Mickey switches his and Pete's brains with each other, which results in Pete going on a rampage and causing chaos in Mickey's now nightmarish body while Mickey tries to stop him in Pete's body. This example, however, is only recently gaining popularity on the internet in the past few years, and has largely been forgotten to the public.

There have been multiple horror versions of Mickey long before *Mickey's Mouse Trap* was announced, and a lot of them have been entertaining and or interesting portrayals. The director of *Mickey's Mouse Trap*, Jamie Bailey, is expecting people to hate-watch the movie and welcomes negative feedback, which further emphasizes the parody aspect of the upcoming movie. More

importantly, it indicates that *Mickey's Mouse Trap* isn't meant to be remembered. At most, it would mock the iconic Disney mascot, but not in a way that would leave a lasting impact on the brand. So what does *Steamboat* Mickey falling into public domain mean for his legacy? Nothing different. He's not the Mickey that comes up in the public consciousness, and Disney almost certainly won't stop using the *Steamboat Willie* clip they open with for their animated movies, so what difference is there in being the main antagonist in a throw-away horror parody movie? At least *Steamboat* Mickey will finally be expressed in different ways outside of the grasp of the Disney conglomerate.