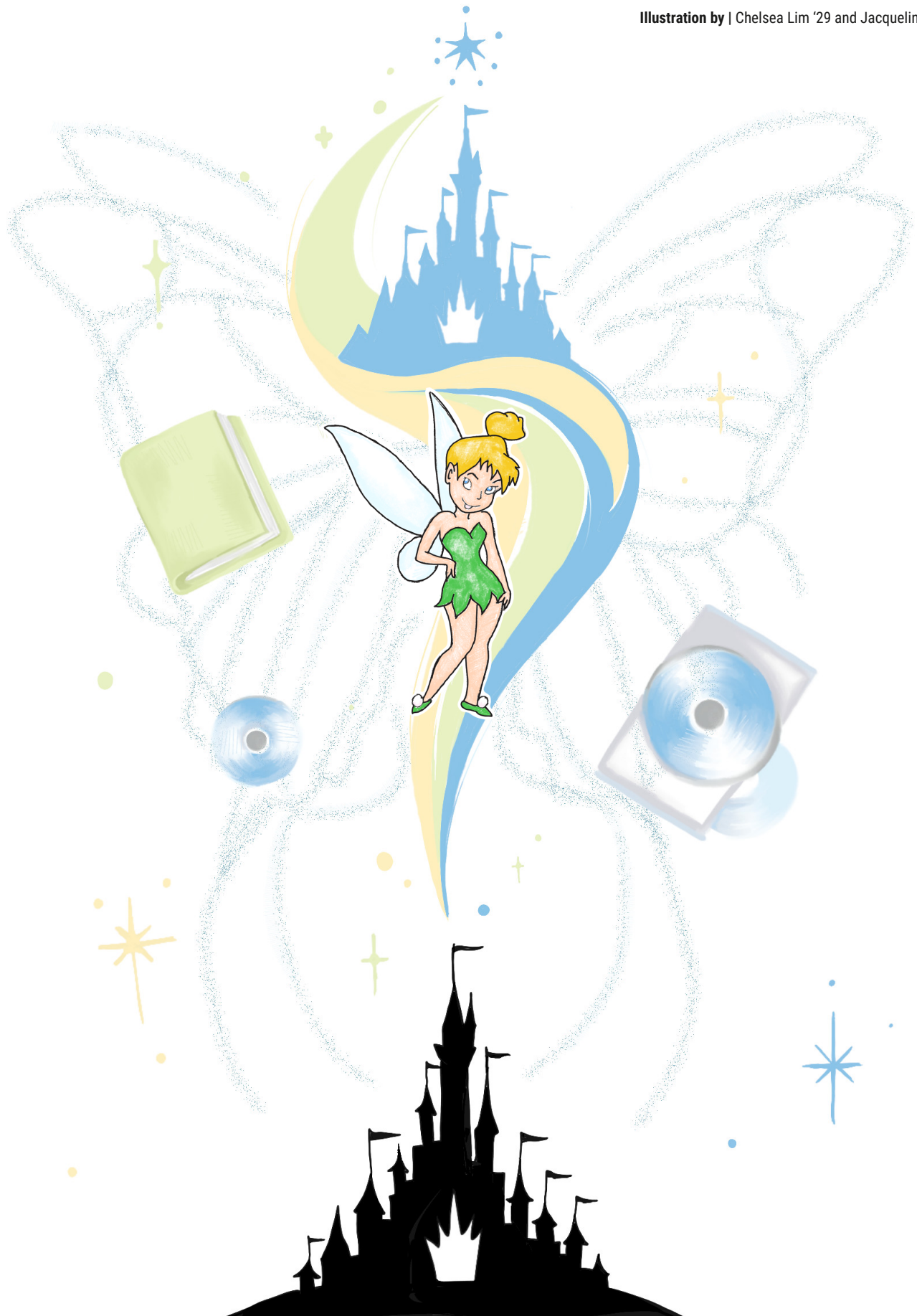


Illustration by | Chelsea Lim '29 and Jacqueline Lee '29



ORIGINAL RESEARCH

From Barrie to Branding: The Rewriting of Tinker Bell in the Disney Fairies Franchise

Sophia Garthe '27

Washington University in St. Louis

Few characters can be as synonymous with The Walt Disney Company as Mickey Mouse himself; however, Tinker Bell comes strategically close. Introduced in 1904 through J. M. Barrie's stage play, *Peter Pan*, and later recognized in his 1911 novel, *Peter and Wendy*, the character has since evolved into a Disney entity. Tinker Bell's debut in Disney's animated film *Peter Pan* (1953) launched her career as a marketing tool for the corporation, meant to associate the character's wonder and magic with Disney's core values. Eventually, Tinker Bell and a cohort of other Neverland fairies were given their own franchise, the *Disney Fairies*. This paper will analyze how Disney, as a conglomerate, has claimed ownership over the originally licensed character Tinker Bell through in-house literary publications, animated films, and the online video game *Pixie Hollow*. I argue that these media platforms helped develop a cultural rebranding of Tinker Bell and the Neverland Fairies, redefining their identities around the *Disney Fairies* installations rather than J.M. Barrie's 1904 play, *Peter Pan*.

Disney has never shied away from using licensed properties, notably drawing on fairy tales and existing literature to influence its projects. Yet, Tinker Bell offers a unique opportunity to understand how the Walt Disney Company integrates the public domain into its enterprise. In Barrie's stage play, Tinker Bell consists of a rapidly moving speck of light with no auditory role. Disney contrasts this version by characterizing the fairy as a "jealous pixie who glows brightest for *Peter Pan*" (Tinker Bell Character Archive). She is identified by her spiteful nature, tinkling sound, and curvaceous appearance. In the wake of the animated film's success, Tinker Bell was promoted to feature as a hostess for several of Disney's live-action television programs, where her character greets the viewer with a wave of her wand and a sprinkling of pixie dust. Additionally, Tinker Bell has been referenced in Disney's opening logo since the company's 50th anniversary in 1973 (Tinker Bell Character Archive) and is the fifth Disney character to have received a star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, alongside Mickey Mouse, Snow White, Donald Duck, and Winnie the Pooh (Walk of Fame). Her integration into Disney's iconic images over the decades has made Tinker Bell a representative character for the company, casting a cross-generational nostalgia for the fairy.

Nonetheless, even though she's been thoroughly merged into Disney's media network, the push for a Tinker Bell-inspired franchise only came on the heels of the *Disney Princesses* franchise establishment in the early 2000s. Lead heroines like Cinderella (*Cinderella*, 1950), Ariel (*The Little Mermaid*, 1989), and Mulan (*Mulan*, 1998), among several other characters, were recruited to form a marketing brand that unifies the Disney princesses into a cohesive merchandise line. Disney's Consumer Products Chairman, Andy Mooney, constructed the *Disney Princesses* using a ca-

sual storytelling strategy designed to engage with the franchise's young audience, along with a "highly selective and tightly managed" membership (Kunze 125). Tinker Bell didn't fit the ideal princess persona; she wasn't the main protagonist of her film, and she didn't possess the kindness, generosity, and wisdom that are typical of other princesses. Instead, her characteristic sass and attitude were maintained within the independent *Disney Fairies* franchise (Orenstein). The fairies franchise was built on Disney's release of *Return to Neverland* (2002) and theatrical re-release of *Peter Pan* in 2003, as well as the Universal Pictures-produced biopic *Finding Neverland* (Mark Forster 2004). These films reinvigorated the cultural appeal of Tinker Bell and Neverland's story world in the early 2000s, motivating Disney to create a series of best-selling chapter books, several direct-to-DVD animated films, and various media outlets centered on the *Disney Fairies*.

“

These media platforms helped develop a cultural rebranding of Tinker Bell and the Neverland Fairies, redefining their identities around the Disney Fairies installations.

At the same time, The Walt Disney Company was undergoing significant leadership changes. In "The Disney Empire" (2020), Janet Wasko describes the period as a state of unrest, where "The Disney brand was suffering, stock prices were down, and Disney's corporate structure was at a low point" (Wasko 38). A heavy mix of internal and external pressures, with Chief Executive Officer Michael Eisner at the root, led to a tumultuous power clash for the outwardly wholesome brand. The climax came in 2005, when Eisner stepped down as CEO and board member; Robert Iger immediately took his place and developed a technological expansion-focused branding strategy (Wasko 38-40). Disney shifted to computer animation and new forms of distribution and strengthened its online presence through franchise-based sites, social media, and mobile gaming (Wasko 39). Tinker Bell was given her own animated film series that Disney could easily market across and integrate with various media platforms, synthesizing her image into a merchandisable network. Consequently, the *Disney Fairies* emerged at the inception of Iger's takeover and demonstrates how Disney used Tinker Bell's celebrity to facilitate their new franchising approach.

The franchise was officially launched in 2005 with the illustrated novel *Fairy Dust and the Quest for the Egg*, published by Disney Publishing Worldwide and written by Newbery Honor-winning author Gail Carson Levine (Disney Wiki). Levine, who was already famed through her work *Ella Enchanted* (1997), would later continue the *Disney Fairies* novels with *Fairy Haven and the Quest for the Wand* (2007) and *Fairies and the Quest for Neverland* (2010). The stories follow the adventures of various Neverland fairies as they navigate themes of friendship, adventure, and finding one's true talent. On Levine's personal page, she states that "[her] job was to invent the island's fairies (other than Tinker Bell), to expand Tinker Bell's character, and to figure out where and how the fairies lived" (Levine). Within Levine's texts, the targeted audience of girls aged six to nine (Disney Wiki) can explore a world intended for them, contrasting with the typical male-driven franchises available in the early 2000s (Kunze 124-126). *Fairy Dust and the Quest for the Egg* spent eighteen weeks on the New York Times children's best-sellers list, showcased alongside works like *Harry Potter and The Half-Blood Prince* (J.K. Rowling, 2005) and *Eldest* (Christopher Paolini, 2005; Orenstein). Its success can be attributed to a one-million-dollar marketing and publicity campaign by Disney (Disney Wiki), which effectively directed young girls to the novels and the world of Tinker Bell through repetitive advertisements and product output. Additionally, Disney licensed the franchise to Random House and later Little, Brown Books for Young Readers to amass a collection of literary additions to the series that expand the fairies' story world (Raugust).



This strategy for the Disney Fairies is not an isolated case, but rather an example of a broader pattern in which Disney uses literature to expand and rebrand existing intellectual property under its corporate identity.

Levine's trilogy builds on Disney's reimagination of Tinker Bell, allowing the corporation to use its own publishing division to shape how Tinker Bell and her fairy friends are represented to a new generation of young readers. This strategy for the *Disney Fairies* is not an isolated case, but rather an example of a broader pattern in which Disney uses literature to expand and rebrand existing intellectual property under its corporate identity. A similar instance exists within the *Kingdom Keepers* (Ridley Pearson) franchise. Created in 2005, the same year as *Fairy Dust and the Quest for the Egg*, and published by Disney-Hyperion, the series follows several teen protagonists as they fight iconic Disney villains within the theme parks after dark (Disney Wiki). Pearson uses his stories to reimagine the Disney parks and characters within a new narrative, consequently sustaining the company's cultural ownership over the properties for younger audiences. Similarly, the *Disney Fairies* novels serve as foundational world-building texts for the franchise, creating new storylines and identities for pre-existing characters. By comparing the two series, it is evident that Disney's publishing efforts were a deliberate strategy to assert narrative

control over competing iterations of licensed properties.

The *Disney Fairies* franchise is unique as well because it includes several animated straight-to-DVD films that focus on Tinker Bell and her group of friends. The film series (2008-2015) consists of six movies and two television specials produced in-house by DisneyToon Studios, all of which feature popular actresses such as Mae Whitman, Raven-Symoné, Kristin Chenoweth, and America Ferrara as the fairies' voices (Disney Wiki). They offer new narratives within the setting established through Levine's novels, with Tinker Bell being "true to the likeness of the palm-sized fairy in the 1953 *Peter Pan*—blonde bun, green dress, slightly voluptuous. But her fellow fairies are ethnically diverse and have empowering skills" (McClintock). Tinker Bell is pictured similarly to her previous Disney appearances to inspire familiarity among viewers. Yet, the cast around her is developed to address the company's lack of diversity and agency in its other media. Disney uses the film series to curate what Rebecca Rowe calls a legacy retelling: a narrative that "draws on animated classics to tell a completely new story, often by focusing on a different perspective or continuing the story beyond the animated classic" (Rowe 99). By shifting from *Peter Pan*'s perspective to Tinker Bell's through the films' retelling strategy, Disney affirms that it has "grown as a company, both venerating the original texts and intentionally pointing to their flaws in order to make Disney seem even better today" (Rowe 99). The result was successful, considering how the first four films were each made for under \$35 million and together generated over \$335 million for DisneyToon Studios (McClintock). The film series has therefore largely influenced Tinker Bell's cultural status among newer generations, especially for young girls.

Disney's rebranding of Tinker Bell through the *Disney Fairies* franchise mirrors its approach to live-action remakes, such as *The Jungle Book* (Jon Favreau, 2016), where the corporation claims public domain property and revitalizes it through narrative and aesthetic modifications that reinforce Disney's version as the dominant one. In *The Jungle Book*, these changes include reintroducing musical numbers like "The Bare Necessities" and the use of realistic CGI to recall the 1967 animated version. Similarly, the *Disney Fairies* franchise expands Tink's story world to establish new social frameworks and relationships that are absent from Barrie's play. In a similar fashion to Tinker Bell, Disney used the public domain literary work *The Jungle Book* (Rudyard Kipling, 1894) to build its generational legacy. By first creating the 1967 animated *The Jungle Book* cartoon, then referencing it through sequels and adaptations, the corporation cements its place as a creative authority in public memory. Favreau's 2016 film "takes every opportunity to resurrect and canonize the animated version, assuring that it is read as the source text rather than the Kipling stories" (Benson 35). Narratively, the live-action film reworks Kipling's themes to fit Disney's family-friendly style by incorporating songs and characters that enhance and reference the brand (Benson 35). Likewise, the *Disney Fairies* franchise creates a new society for Tinker Bell and her friends that doesn't exist in Barrie's novel, leading fans to associate the characters with Disney's model. Aesthetically, Disney uses media saturation and style cohesion to overwrite the original texts of the two franchises; their distinct CGI and animated representations sustain Disney's cultural dominance. In this fashion, the Tinker Bell films and the live-action *The Jungle Book* help reposition the hierarchy of power between Disney and the properties' original sources.

The *Disney Fairies* franchise is also distinctive due to its online presence. In 2005, as part of the million-dollar campaign for

Pixie Dust and the Quest for the Egg, Disney launched the website disneyfairies.com, where fans can explore and learn about Tinker Bell and the other Neverland fairies (Disney Publishing Worldwide 2005). The site has also hosted the massively multiplayer online role-playing video game *Pixie Hollow* since its inception in 2008 until the game's closure in 2013. While playing, fans can customize their personal avatars, play mini games, collect points and artifacts, interact with other players, and create a digital fairy life (Maplesden). The effect of playing is that fans may experience the fairies' fantasy both physically and imaginatively; their bodies hear and see features on the site and respond by making decisions and clicking buttons on their screens. This call-to-action interactivity intensifies the audience's connection with the franchise and upholds consumerist ideals that promote fan participation in other media within the franchise, such as books, films, and toyetic products (Maplesden).

Today, the *Disney Fairies* franchise lies mostly dormant. To understand why, it's essential to consider the state of the *Disney Princesses* franchise as an explanation for the industrial and viewer biases that often prejudice female-dominated media. The princesses and the fairies are almost exclusively directed towards young female audiences: the main cast, if not the entire ensemble, is made up of women, and the properties defend traditional gendered ideologies, such as female characters being primarily nurturing and affectionate. While this does promote effective demographic appeal, "franchises designed for girls are especially devalued and neglected by mainstream society... because of their intended audience and profit centers" (Kunze 122). The princesses are a highly successful example of an overwhelmingly female franchise. However, even their popularity is not liberated from the restrictions of gender within the media. Many of the stories are labeled "regressive, in part because the fairy tale itself is fundamentally flawed" (Kunze 121). Disney has aimed to remedy this perception within the past two decades through live-action remakes and retellings of its iconic animated princess films. They concentrate on correcting the cultural representations in their classic stories as a strategy for bridging the gap between audiences who grew up with the cartoons and new generations (Rowe). Part of the strategy consists of moving away from gender-specific tropes and movie titles, as well as alluding to socially conscious themes. The extent to which these endeavors are successful is highly debated, but Disney clearly has been aware of the necessity for a diverse, cross-generational audience for some time.

The *Disney Fairies* franchise gained popularity between the mid-2000s and the mid-2010s and draws inspiration from the animated film *Peter Pan*, made over fifty years prior. In *Peter Pan*, Tinker Bell is characterized by her jealous attachment to Peter and her unrealistic body type. Disney attempted to develop the character more within the *Disney Fairies* franchise by fleshing out her backstory and fairy culture, in addition to providing an assembly of other fairies with individual ambitions and talents. However, the corporation was challenged with the task of translating its empowerment themes across media, especially while maintaining a profit-centered attitude. In the *Pixie Hollow* game, players are "'make-believing' the caring role of a Fairy who contributes to the orderly scheme of the Pixie Hollow world" (Maplesden). The effect of this gameplay is that "when playing the game, the subject position they are called into is that of a girl-consumer who is civilized, feminine, and domesticated" (Maplesden). Likewise, the Tinker Bell films depict the characters with highly feminine proportions and accessories and use their narratives to reinforce the orderly element of the brand. Furthermore, throughout all of its media, the *Disney*

Fairies franchise includes a minimal number of male representations. These components reflect the franchise's success in attracting its key demographic while at the same time failing to access a broader audience, particularly as society and media evolved to include more diverse portrayals in the 2010s.

The fairies, rather than evolving with new screen iterations and expansions, are now constrained to Disney parks and online fan labor. Tinker Bell is featured in several park events, most prominently in the nighttime fireworks show. The company also still sells various merchandise with the *Disney Fairies* image, including a Tinker Bell-inspired collection that launched in park stores in March 2025 (Disney Store). Furthermore, the franchise is invigorated through fan-created discourse on engagement platforms like Reddit or Twitch, as well as through references on contemporary sites such as *Roblox* (Carapelloti). While connecting to the property, audiences almost always assume Disney's version of Tinker Bell and the other Neverland fairies to frame their fan extensions. The legacy of the *Disney Fairies*, therefore, lies in Disney's consumer-based approach; new fans' primary entry points are either through physical merchandise or references to the Disney image within other media.

In 2025, twenty years after the initial launch of the franchise, it is essential to reflect on the *Disney Fairies*' rise and decline to understand how Disney has manipulated and implemented intertextual relationships in targeted ways to reaffirm its corporate authorship over public domain properties (Benson 26). The company first adapted J.M. Barrie's 1904 stage play *Peter Pan* into its 1953 animated film, adopting Tinker Bell in the process. Over time, Disney transformed her from a secondary, jealous character to a leading figure for the media empire through live-action programs, advertisements, novels, films, and an online game, reframing her as kind, ambitious, and independent. This rebranding paralleled the company's efforts to appeal to young girls and to modernize its representation of femininity. As a result, audiences today routinely associate Tinker Bell with Disney's glossy, marketable character rather than Barrie's cynical fairy. Tinker Bell's reimagined persona demonstrates how corporate storytelling can overwrite literary origins, thereby shaping cultural memory through specific brand identity. This procedure transcends creative redesigning; Tinker Bell's evolution is an example of Disney's broader capitalistic transformations of public domain works into symbols of the corporation's values and ambitions. When audiences are continually met with reinterpreted characters like Tinker Bell, they inherit a mediated account of cultural history that blurs nostalgia with corporate ownership. Disney's control over Tinker Bell and the *Disney Fairies* franchise demonstrates the cultural outcomes of media conglomerates steering how audiences consume, remember, and emotionally connect with iconic media properties.

Illustration by |
Margaret Susovica '28



References

- Benson, Nicholas. "All Hail Disney: Establishing Corporate Authorship Through Industrial Intertextuality." *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, 25-47, doi.org/10.1080/10509208.2019.1593032
- Carapelloti, Hannah. "'We the Pixies' is Bringing the World of Pixie Hollow Back to Life." *The Michigan Daily*, 2023, <https://www.michigandaily.com/arts/digital-culture/we-the-pixies-is-bringing-the-world-of-pixie-hollow-back-to-life/>
- "Disney Fairies." *Disney Wiki*, Fandom. disney.fandom.com/wiki/Disney_Fairies#Online_game
- Disney Publishing Worldwide. "Cornerstone of New Disney Fairies Franchise Which Builds Upon Tinker Bell's Enormous Popularity is Launched with a One Million Book Launch in 45 Countries." *Disney Publishing Worldwide*, 2005, web.archive.org/web/20061027020931/https://licensing.disney.com/Login/displayContent.do?layout=pressreleasedetail&contentId=281221&returnLayout=pressReleaseArchives&year=2005&articleSort=date
- Disney Store. "Tinker Bell." www.disneystore.com/characters/disney/tinker-bell/
- Hollywood Walk of Fame. "Tinker Bell." walkoffame.com/tinker-bell/
- Kelly, Heather. "Coping with the Loss of an Online World." *CNN Business*, 2013, www.cnn.com/2013/tech/gaming-gadgets/closing-toontown/index.html
- "Kingdom Keepers." *Disney Wiki*, Fandom. disney.fandom.com/wiki/Kingdom_Keeper
- Kunze, Peter C. "Revise and Resubmit: *Beauty and the Beast* (2017), Live-Action Remakes, and the Disney Princess Franchise." *Feminist Media Studies*, 23.1, 2023, 121-136
- Levine, Gail Carson. "Fairy Dust and the Quest for the Egg." gailcarsonlevine.com/egg.html
- Maplesden, Allison. "Pixie Dust: Gender, Embodiment and Consumer Identities in *disney.go.com/fairies* and *Pixie Hollow MMOG*." *Sense of Cinema*, Issue 57, 2010, www.sensesofcinema.com/2010/feature-articles/pixie-dust-gender-embodiment-and-consumer-identities-in-disney-go-comfairies-and-pixie-hollow-mmog
- McClintock, Pamela. "How Tinker Bell Became Disney's Stealthy \$300 Million Franchise." *The Hollywood Reporter*, 2014, www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/how-tinker-bell-became-disneys-692559/
- Orenstein, Peggy. "What's Wrong with Cinderella?" *The New York Times Magazine*, 2006, www.nytimes.com/2006/12/24/magazine/24princess.t.html
- Raagust, Karen. "Disney Fairies Fly to Little, Brown." *Publisher's Weekly*, 2014, www.publishersweekly.com/pw/by-topic/childrens/childrens-industry-news/article/60748-disney-fairies-fly-to-little-brown.html
- Reuters Fact Check. "Fact Check: Disney Has Not Removed Tinker Bell from Its Parks."
- Reuters, 2024, www.reuters.com/fact-check/disney-has-not-removed-tinker-bell-its-parks-2024-05-30/
- Rowe, Rebecca. "Disney Does Disney: Re-Releasing, Remaking, and Retelling Animated Films for a New Generation." *Journal of Popular Film and Television*, 50.3, 2022, 98-111
- "Tinker Bell Character Archive." *Disney Online*. web.archive.org/web/20070105003150/http://disney.go.com/vault/archives/characters/tinker/tinker.html
- Wasko, Janet. "The Disney Empire." *Understanding Disney*, 2nd ed. Polity Press, 2020, 31-70