

Plush pandemic

Colossal microbes taking over the world sounds like a B-movie plot, rather than the business plan of a stuffed toy manufacturer. We asked Drew Oliver, the creator and CEO of Giant Microbes, about how the company came about, how their products have been received and his plans for the future.

■ What inspired you to create Giant Microbes?

I have always liked making things, and partly Giant Microbes are an expression of that basic inclination. But why microbes instead of something else? I read a book once by the famed physicist Richard Feynman. In it he described his fascination as he watched a tiny microscopic organism trapped in a droplet of water that was evaporating because of the heat of the microscope. He said he had always imagined microbes as being simply uninteresting little blobs of organic material, and I think that's the way many people perceive them. But suddenly, the organism, in a desperate effort to save its life as its world collapsed, began extending various pseudopods to try to reach another droplet of water nearby. The vividness with which he described that experience, and his wonder at witnessing it, always stuck with me. It made the microscopic world, and the creatures in it, seem very individualistic, with characters and passions — and possibilities.

Years later, I read an article by P. J. O'Rourke in which he humorously described one of his children's regrettable experiences with a stomach ache. He lamented the fact that he had no way to explain to his daughter what was happening to her. I thought back to Feynman, and imagined not just undifferentiated, medically accurate microscopic props, but little personalities.

Finally, the tiny size of microbes appeals to me in many ways. My mother used to read *Stuart Little* to me as a child, and I have always found the imaginative possibilities of unseen worlds to be very attractive. But more than that, the impact that tiny creatures can have in the world is a theme that resonates strongly with me. You see it explored in stories like *The Hobbit*. But humility is a Christian virtue that is undervalued in an American popular culture that is primarily about celebrity and success. Of course, it goes without saying that some of the microbes are little devils as well. But the cocktail of humility and sinfulness — and humour, which is, I think, a form of absolution — is very potent with creative possibility.

All of that is the raw material of artistic creation. It is, of course, quite whimsical and disorderly. But probably if I had been a microbiologist I would have been too aware of scientific reality to have started playing with it.



■ Was it difficult to convince people there would be a market?

The Giant Microbes began as pure art, made to satisfy the artist. In fact, the Giant Microbes were displayed years ago as part of an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and they have appeared in many other museums as well. And as art, I had only to convince myself that they had value. But my hope was always that they would have a wide appeal to the general public, and once they were made, the company grew organically as more and more stores began carrying the product. Because they are inexpensive, it requires only a small leap of faith for people to try them. In most instances, that faith has been well-rewarded.

Giant Microbes were originally sold online, but as they proved popular we immediately developed a distribution network of stores. We now sell worldwide in thousands of outlets, including book stores, museum stores, educational catalogues, novelty shops, etc. The tags have been translated into a dozen languages and interest in the Giant Microbes has proven to be, well, highly contagious.

■ Were you surprised by this contagious popularity?

Well, I've certainly been pleased. I do think at a basic level, health and wellness are universal issues. And education is widely valued as well. But the humour in the Giant Microbes helps the medicine go down. And the sympathy and the silliness and the fun magnify the appeal. So I think they touch a lot of core emotions, and I think that is what people find interesting.

■ Are sales mostly to those working in the life sciences/education?

We do sell to science educators and medical professionals. But Giant Microbes appeal to a wide range of people, and the bulk of our sales are to the general public. Parents buy them for their children for educational purposes; children form their own collections as well. College students buy them as humorous novelty gifts. Working professionals buy them as sympathy gifts for their colleagues. Many people buy them simply because they are curious, or because they strike a particular nerve.

■ What sort of reactions you get from the general public (and children in particular)?

It is extremely gratifying to receive the very enthusiastic letters from children, chock full of creative ideas for new microbes, accessories, and story concepts. But the general comments (which you can see on our website www.giantmicrobes.com) from all our customers are equally positive. In fact, the genuine joy that people express when they first learn about our products is a constant source of inspiration for me.

■ Can Giant Microbes have a role in combatting germophobia?

There's no question that germs can be scary, and in many instances justifiably so. But I think by reifying the concept of disease, the Giant Microbes are very empowering. Getting sick is not just an abstract experience. It is caused by specific agents. And the more we understand about those agents, the more we can do to combat them — whether by simply washing our hands, or by conducting scientific research to develop more comprehensive solutions.



I am always pleased to get letters from children who say that the Giant Microbes have inspired them to become doctors or scientists. That is as positive and non-fearful a response to germophobia as I can imagine. And I feel very fortunate to have helped some young people find their passion.

■ **Who designs the products and do you consult microbiologists?**

I provide the broad concept, and then we proceed to fine-tune it by consulting with appropriate experts. The morphology of all our designs is as scientifically accurate as we can manage within the broad boundaries described by artistic license in plush

material, and so the first step is to find reference images for a particular creature. We then research specific characteristics of the creature, which can impact other design choices. The tags are written and reviewed by experts in their fields. And then final modifications are sometimes made as accommodations to the needs of mass productions.

■ **Which is the all-time best seller?**

The Common Cold was my first design. It has been for sale the longest, and it has probably sold the most. But as all the Giant Microbes are the children of my creativity, commercial success in no way

impacts the regard with which I hold each one of them. I resolutely decline to pick a favourite.

■ **How do you decide which new products to develop?**

We get a lot of feedback from our customers, and we try to respond to it. In addition, we try to anticipate microbe-related news events (for example, we did a polio microbe for the anniversary of the vaccine). Sometimes, I will have a personal interest that I wish to explore, a friend who is involved in research (or who has contracted something unusual...) I love the Giant Microbes, and it is always fun imagining new things we can do with them.

■ **Do you have any plans for an animated series?**

Yes indeed. We have many plans, and the difficulty is choosing between them. The Giant Microbes have great potential both to educate and to entertain. It is a large project and we've spent a lot of time with writers and creative professionals moving it forward.

■ **What did it feel like when you first heard that Giant Microbes had made it all the way to the White House and that President Obama has a collection?**

As I mentioned, Giant Microbes are partly a philosophical expression of my belief that tiny, insignificant creatures can have a huge impact on the world. With that in mind, I wouldn't want to express too much glee about the fact that the President finds them appealing. However, I am as delighted that he appreciates them as I am that anyone does. It is extremely rewarding to have one's work recognized.

INTERVIEW BY ANDREW JERMY