

December 17, 2020

The Greatest Toys Since 1900, Part I: 1900-1949

Looking back at the best toys since the turn of the 20th Century.

[Troy Brownfield](#)

Of the thousands of toys given to American girls and boys over time, what are the greatest? This writer, a lifelong toy collector and longtime toy columnist, decided to tackle that massive question. We'll start at the year 1900, we'll exclude board and card games (surely worthy of their own list), and we'll exclude athletic equipment. Not every selection may be your particular cup of pretend tea, but each one was chosen according to [The Tom Morello Scale](#) of "impact, influence, and awesomeness." Here are the Greatest Toys from 1900 to 1950.

Honorable Mentions: The Top and the Yo-Yo



Left: A toy top ([aastock](#) / Shutterstock); Right: Boy playing yo-yo. Tondo of an Attic red-figure kylix, ca. 440 B.C. (Photo by Bibi Saint-Pol; Public domain via [Wikimedia Commons](#))

The top is one of the oldest known toys, having existed for thousands of years. Variations of the top have been found in archaeological excavations. Different versions, like the dreidel, have significance to different cultures. It transcends the time period under examination, but it definitely bears mention.

Believe it or not, there's a Greek vase painting from 440 B.C. that shows a kid playing with a yo-yo. The modern version began manufacture in 1928 when Pedro Flores opened the Yo-yo Manufacturing Company in California.

1901: The Lionel Electric Train



Shutterstock)

(Dominick Corrado /

Wooden toy trains have been around almost as long as trains themselves, but Lionel opened up a new world of play with the first electric train set. The first set was intended to be a store-front display attention getter. The thought was that the moving cars would catch the eye and bring in shoppers. It did, but they wanted to buy the actual train. Though the company has changed hands many times over the decades, Lionel, LLC still sells trains, holding about 60 percent of the market on the popular O gauge (scale) trains and accessories.

1903: The Teddy Bear



Shutterstock)

([Kidsada Manchinda](#) /

Some historical figures could be called larger than life. Teddy Roosevelt was larger than several lives. Adventurer, soldier, lawman, cowboy, conservationist, writer, and, oh yeah, president among other things,

Roosevelt had legends spring up around him everywhere he went. One in particular came out in a story where Roosevelt refused to allow a tethered bear to be shot during a hunt. The story morphed through various iterations, including one where he protected a bear cub. Morris Michtom saw an editorial cartoon depicting that story and hit upon the idea of selling stuffed bears named after the president. After sending him one and asking for permission to use his name, Michtom dubbed the new toy "the Teddy Bear."



PRIZE CONTEST FOR BOYS AND GIRLS
 Lincoln Logs prizes will be paid for photographs of the best original structures created in 1923 and girls from LINCOLN LOGS sets. All entries must be mailed October 15, 1923. Send your name and address to the publisher.

They speak to the child's play instinct. They speak to the child's love of building. They speak to his love of making history. They speak to the spirit of Lincoln.

Make your child a builder—

With this new toy that is historical, educational, constructive, and fascinating!

NOW—during the impressionable period—your child's PLAY is influencing and shaping his CHARACTER in later years. Building Log cabins, school houses, stores, barns, chapels, with Lincoln Logs is the sort of wholesome fun that guides the young imagination along constructive lines.

With Lincoln Logs any child can build literal reproductions of the first American buildings. An exact duplicate in miniature of Abraham Lincoln's cabin for instance. And all sorts of interesting and unique log structures.

Here is a constructive toy that is truly practical for the younger child. The building designs are simple—easy to understand. The notched logs are easily put together and are practically unbreakable. The possible constructions are without end. And the cost is but \$1.00 complete.

WONDERFUL COMBINATION SET

Set 1-A, from which your child can build literal reproductions of pioneer cabins—and a number of other interesting combinations—may be obtained at most toy departments or from us for \$1.00. The Lincoln Logs Combination Set from which your child can build a complete pioneer settlement with a large amount of cost but \$4.00. This consists of four boxes of notched logs, substantial roofs, complete plans and material for a quaker (pioneer settlement). Here is a gift that your child will never tire of—a happy gift that will develop his imagination and ability along constructive lines. If your dealer hasn't it, simply fill out the coupon below and we will ship direct to you. If you and your child are not delighted, we will gladly refund your money. Go to your dealer—or mail the coupon today.

LINCOLN LOGS
 MANUFACTURED BY JOHN LLOYD WRIGHT IN CHICAGO



LINCOLN LOGS

Each set of Lincoln Logs consists of 24 logs, notched and stained in the true historical manner, a substantial roof and an interesting design that can be built and given as a gift to children for holidays. Write your name, your address and the name of your dealer to the publisher.



LINCOLN LOGS COMBINATION SET

With the boxes of notched logs attached to the two historical (pioneer) settlements, roofs, building material and plans for building a complete pioneer settlement with a large amount of cost but \$4.00. This set includes Lincoln Logs Combination Set from which you can build a complete pioneer settlement with a large amount of cost but \$4.00. Write your name, your address and the name of your dealer to the publisher.

John Lloyd Wright, Inc.
 122 W. Erie St. Chicago
 Please mail to: _____
 700 1/2 A Lincoln Logs for \$1.00
 Lincoln Logs Combination Set for \$4.00
 Enclosed is \$1.00 for \$1.00 for set enclosed above. If it is not enclosed, please send me the money for my set. I should wish to return this set after the 15th of Oct. 1923.

NAME _____
 CITY _____
 STREET _____
 STATE _____

Lincoln Logs ad from

Sticking with the idea of toys that share names with presidents (no, Trump: The Game won't be making the list), we come to the popular building toy. They were invented, appropriately enough, by John Lloyd Wright, son of legendary architect Frank Lloyd Wright. While some suggest that the name came from a clever play on "linkin' logs" and others note that elder Wright's original middle name was Lincoln, the toys may have been named Lincoln Logs to suggest patriotism during World War I. The original set did come with plans to build Lincoln's childhood home and Uncle Tom's Cabin. Today, Lincoln Logs and their distant cousin Tinker Toys are owned by K'Nex, whose eponymous line is the spiritual successor of the Erector Set.

1918: Raggedy Ann

YOURS — EITHER DOLL

HOWDY, folks! Get acquainted with Raggedy Ann and Andy!

Here they are . . . 22 inches tall, redheaded and a riot of fun! You'll love Ann's gay print dress and Andy's checked shirt and overalls.

Win either doll by sending 3 two-year subscriptions for *COUNTRY GENTLEMAN*, sold at \$1.00 each (U. S. A. only), to persons outside your home.

Or why not win both for 3 two-year *COUNTRY GENTLEMAN* subscriptions sold at \$1 each and 1 one-year subscription for *The Saturday Evening Post* (sold at \$2, U. S. A. only)?

Pin names and addresses of subscribers with your own name and address to this picture. Then send with either Check or Money Order to

CURTIS PUBLISHING COMPANY
328 INDEPENDENCE SQUARE
PHILADELPHIA, PENNSYLVANIA



Raggedy Ann & Andy Ad from the September 1, 1935 issue of *The Country Gentleman*.

Raggedy Ann was one of the first toy tie-ins; that is, the doll was conceived to go along with another product. In this case, a book. Johnny Gruelle created and patented the doll in 1915, but it went to market in 1918 with the publication of *Raggedy Ann Stories*. Two years later, Gruelle released *Raggedy Andy Stories* alongside a doll for Ann's brother, Andy. Between 1918 and his passing in 1938, Gruelle wrote and illustrated 21 Ann & Andy books; after he died, many other stories that he had already written continued to be illustrated by other artists. The books and the dolls sold millions of copies; today, Ann and Andy's master license is owned by Hasbro/Playskool, and the plush dolls are made by Aurora World, Inc.

1927: Radio Flyer



Cute kid in Radio Flyer wagon, 2006 (Photo by Troy Brownfield)

The toy wagon was nothing new in 1927; people had been hand-making wooden versions for years. One such builder was Antonio Pasing, who sold his wooden wagons to toy shops starting in 1917. By the late '20s, demand was too big for his company to keep up, and Pasing was struck by inspiration. Taking a cue from the auto industry, Pasing hit upon the idea of mass producing stamped-steel wagons. He dubbed the little red wagon the Radio Flyer in honor of two other innovators: inventor [Guglielmo Marconi](#) and pilot Charles Lindbergh. Pasing's company renamed itself Radio Flyer in 1987; Pasing's grandson, Robert, is the CEO today.

1938: Plastic Soldiers/"Army Men"



kai keisuke / Shutterstock

They're not poseable, but that hasn't stopped "Army Men" from engaging in countless battles since 1938. Molded in plastic and commonly sold in buckets and bags in a variety of colors (green being the most iconic), the toys were the brainchild of the Bergen Toy & Novelty Company (nicknamed Beton). While some sets had individual painted figures, they began to be entirely green after World War II. The popularity of the Army Men led to many other similar sets being introduced by a variety of companies, including cowboys, dinosaurs, knights, and more. Plastic soldier manufacturers announced in 2019 that they would begin adding Army Women to the mixed bags and buckets in 2020.

1939: View Master



[Alexey Broslavets](#) / Shutterstock

The first stereoscopes were made in 1832; the devices allowed the viewer to see two images unified into a single 3D image. View Master incorporated that technique along with the then-new Kodachrome color film to present vibrant, full-color images. The reels that one inserts in a View Master are made up of seven pairs of pictures; as you advance the reel, each eye sees one photo of the matched pair, which results in the combined 3D effect. Early on, the reels centered on famous locations, but the company later integrated stories featuring famous characters, TV shows, and films. Mattel, the present owner of View Master, has reported that more than 1.5 billion reels have been made.

1945: Slinky

Try watching this video on www.youtube.com, or enable JavaScript if it is disabled in your browser.

Classic 1970's Slinky® Commercial (Uploaded to YouTube by Slinky Toys)



It's already in your head, isn't it? That's the longest-running jingle in advertising history, composed in 1962 by Johnny McCullough, Homer Fesperman, and Charles Weagly. The toy itself was invented by Richard T. James, a Navy engineer. He and his wife Betty formed James Industries to make the toys. Upon their divorce in 1960, Richard left the country to be a missionary and Betty became CEO. She ran the company until it merged with Poof Products Inc. in 1998.

1947: Tonka Trucks



MYP Studio / Shutterstock

Some businesses change completely from their original plan. Consider Mound Metalcraft, founded to make gardening tools. Their new building's previous tenant had patented some toys and pitched Mound on the idea of making some of those, too. Mound went for it, creating a name and logo derived from tanka, a Dakota Sioux word for "big." That was prophetic, because the success of their metal trucks and construction vehicles was huge. By 1955, Mound would change their name to Tonka Toys. Tonka trucks continue to roll around the world; the company has been owned by Hasbro since 1991.

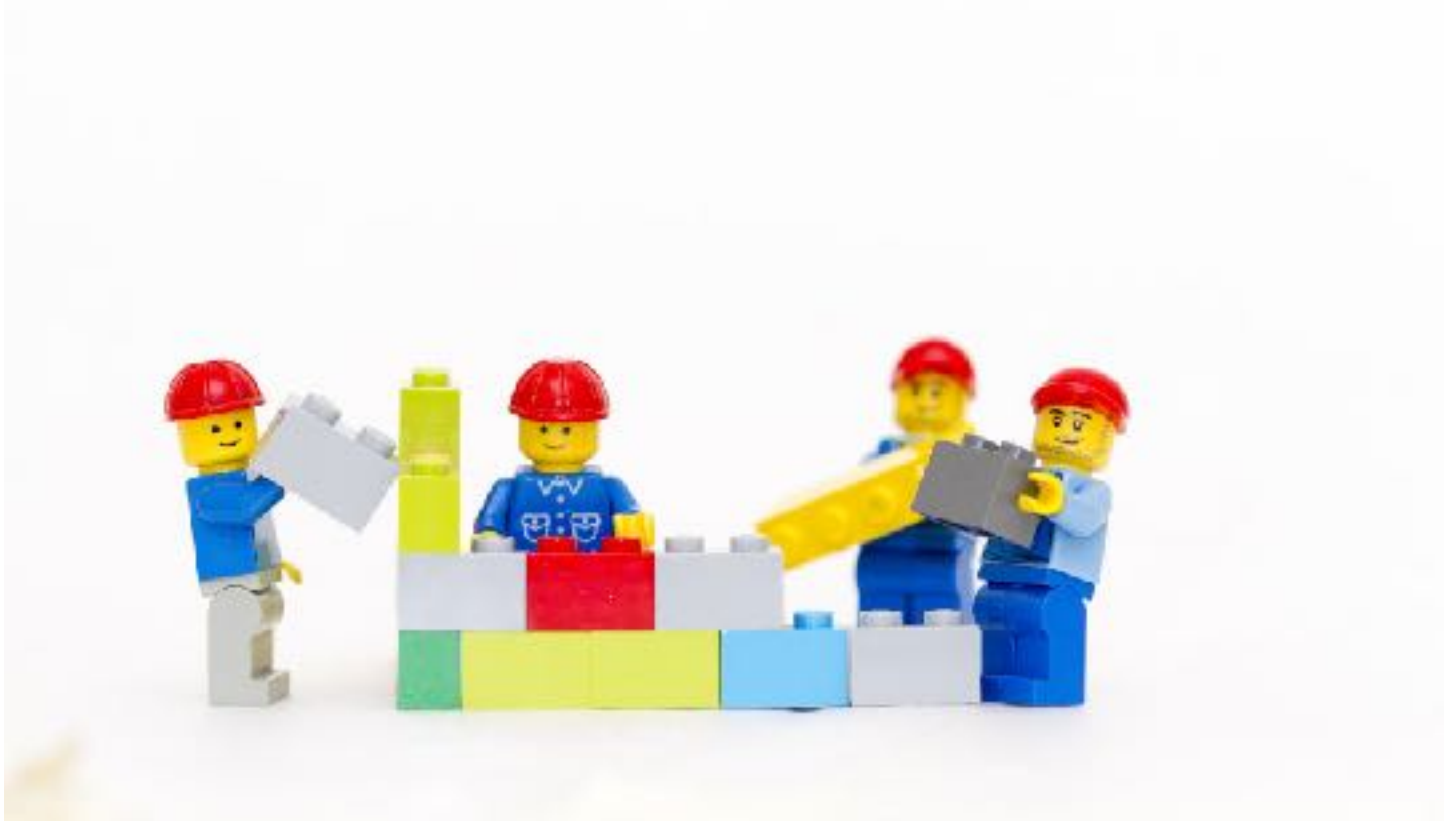
1949: Silly Putty



Keith Homan / Shutterstock

There's actually a lot of science behind Silly Putty. In simplest terms, it's an elastic solid that's adhesive, but can also bounce. The material contains ingredients that help it maintain its cohesion, rather than melting in fluid. And hey, it's fun! There's some dispute over who actually created Silly Putty, but it was first invented during World War II as the Allies looked for alternatives to rubber, which was in short supply due to the War. It wasn't used as a toy until Ruth Fallgatter found out about the material and began selling it in her toy store in 1949. Though a variety of knock-offs exist, official Silly Putty is sold in its egg-shaped container by Crayola LLC.

1949: Legos



MeskPhotography / Shutterstock

Created by carpenter **Ole Kirk Christiansen**, Denmark's The Lego Group began making their locking construction toys in 1949, and world conquest followed. Easily one of the most popular toys in human history, more than 600 billion Lego pieces had been produced by 2015. That same year, business valuation consultancy Brand Finance identified Lego as the **world's most powerful brand**. Lego has proven durable enough to result in an ongoing line of video games, board games, TV series, films, stores, and theme parks. And durable is certainly the right word; a **2012 experiment** determined that you could stack 375,000 Lego bricks atop one another before the bottom one succumbed to pressure and broke. The construction toys follow rigid quality standards.

The Greatest Toys Part II: 1950-1978

We continue our look at the Greatest Toys Since 1900 with toys 1950 to 1978.

Troy Brownfield

In [Part 1](#), we posed this question: Of the thousands of toys given to American girls and boys over time, what are the greatest? This writer, a lifelong toy collector and longtime toy columnist, decided to tackle that massive question. We started at the year 1900, we'll exclude board and card games (surely worthy of their own list), and we'll exclude athletic equipment. Not every selection may be your particular cup of pretend tea, but each one was chosen according to [The Tom Morello Scale](#) of "impact, influence, and awesomeness." Here are the Greatest Toys from 1950 to 1978.

1952: Mr. Potato Head



([cjmacer](#) / Shutterstock)

You would think that the memory of World War II would be a hurdle for, say, a soldier toy. But it represented a real obstacle for Mr. Potato Head. When George Lerner pitched his creation to toy companies, with the original premise of accessories that you stuck into actual potatoes, some companies passed because America still felt the shadow of war-time rationing and thought that such a use of food was wasteful. Lerner got a cereal company to bite, but the Hassenfeld Brothers caught wind of it and paid both Lerner and the cereal company to get ahold of the toy. By 1964, with stiffer regulations forbidding the pointy parts, the company, which would soon change its name to Hasbro, created plastic potato bodies for the newly blunt-ended parts.

1953: Matchbox



(Gabor Mika / Shutterstock)

Only a handful of items can be said to be named after the box they come in. While Matchbox cars didn't exactly come in a box of matches, the resemblance of said toy boxes in shape and size lent the toy line its name. The Matchbox line began with England's Lesney Products. Co-owner Jack Odell invented a tiny car for his daughter to take to school (the school had a rule that kids could only bring toys that would fit in, you guessed it, a matchbox). His first creation was a road roller, followed by a cement mixer and dump truck. The die-cast metal vehicles caught on quickly and still have an ardent collector base. However, as you'll see, 1968 made the toy car market into a real race.

1958: Hula Hoop



(Rawpixel.com / Shutterstock)

It's harder to get your toy concept down to something as simple and inspired as the Hula Hoop. To be fair, hoop dancing using wooden or metal hoops has long been a part of various cultures. The Native American Hoop Dance uses the hoops to tell stories. **Joan Anderson** brought a bamboo hoop back to the States from her native Australia that she described as an "exercise hoop" and gave it the new name of Hula Hoop. Unfortunately, Arthur "Spud" Melin made a handshake deal to take the Hoop to market, and left Anderson and her husband out, claiming that he invented it. Hula Hoops were a craze shortly after release, and are still made today, albeit out of plastic.

1959: Barbie

This list wouldn't be this list without the most popular fashion doll in the world. Still made by Mattel, Barbie remains a hit with kids and collectors alike. In 1964, William K. Zinsser looked into the phenomenon for the Post in the article "[Barbie is a million-dollar doll.](#)" You can read the original article below. As for Barbara Millicent Roberts (Barbie's full name), the idea came from Ruth Handler, whose husband, Elliot, was one of the co-founders of Mattel. After discovering a doll in Europe that was similar to her idea, Handler worked with engineer Jack Ryan (more on him later) to put together their concept. Handler named the doll after her and Elliot's daughter, Barbara. Interestingly, Barbie's eyes looked to the side until 1971, when they were repositioned to look straight ahead.

From the Post article "[Barbie is a Million-dollar Doll](#)" by William K. Zinsser ([Click to Enlarge](#))

By WILLIAM K. ZINSSE

Barbie is a million-dollar doll



She is everything that America's little girls want to be when they grow up: beautiful, fashionable, and full-bodied. She is beautiful in the button-nosed tradition that America reveres as beauty in its cruelest moments—and if her face is also rather dumb and poor slightly, that is part of the tradition and is not to be worried about. Her hair is a vision—and a vision that constantly changes, depending on her mood. In color it fluctuates between blond, ash blond, platinum, sunset and Titian, and in style it ranges from rags to and beyond to: ribbons, braids, curls, and side part ups.

Now is Barbie's well-trodden. More than 35 million dolls are produced—and 50 million are more measure-bound than she. Is she going to be there? Then she will wear her good sense skin and behave justly. Or should she wear her suggestive nose down with off-the-shoulder blouse and pink garter hose and chromosome-tinge? Or her white and gold braided strands with her cuffs and matching her hat with pearl trim? Decision, decision. Is she going a dinner party? Then she will wear her braided and gold metallic net luncheon dress and gold waltz shoes. Is she going to the beach? She has a gold-embroidered and sequined with matching sandals, sun legs and white high-heeled shoes. Is she by any chance going to sing to a single who'll be her best friend? She has a black evening dress, long black gloves, black shoes, pink and white and sequined. She even has a "natural silk" jacket. Yes, her wardrobe is as versatile as her hair and she spends a lot of time on both.

And then of course there is her house, which would not only that symbol of beige-brown-and-salmon color, especially now that it has a new grille! She herself does "all the changes activities" for the dolls, which consists of a white telephone, portable TV set, portable radio, two magazines devoted to "Fashion" and "Style," and a framed photograph of herself and her best friend. There are in a corner of sensitivity and taste, a 50-cent-for-American printed, which sets precedent in her—its her best clothes, soft-focus and acquires—in a dream of the ideal life.

Several thousand girls, in fact, write her every month for advice. Evidently they feel that, even though she is only 11½ inches tall and is made of plastic, she is wiser than their own parents. Her name of course, is Barbie, and she is the biggest item to come along in the toy business since the balloon.

Today she and the four other members of "Barbie's world"—her best friend Ken, her new sister Skipper, her pet friend Midge, and Skipper's best friend Alan—constitute the size of considerable aspect of 25 magazines, 40 advertising executives, 5,000 retailers in Japan who make the actual dolls and costumes, and 300 employees of Mattel, Inc., the California firm that runs her and is, in a respect, the biggest toy company in America.

Though unassuming herself, Barbie has among these employees at Mattel a "personal secretary" to answer her mail, and 15 other people who run the Barbie Fan Club, which has 1,500 chapters and half a million members, some in countries as far off as Afghanistan. These chapters meet regularly for fashion shows, styling sessions and good-grooming discussions, many in their time the monthly "Barbie" magazine, which has 100,000 subscribers. Every member—and several tens of grandmothers ago—brings her Barbie to the meetings and answers for her at the roll call.

Mattel has released only one set of Barbie dolls since for the last time ending February, 1963. During the period, the firm sold the million Barbie Ken and Midge dolls and 25 million costumes in which they could do most of the things that real American girls and boys like to do, such as cheer-lead and get married. Since then Alan and Skipper have been added, but so have many new accessories and accessories, such as the Barbie "Queen of the Press" board game. To win you must have a steady best friend, a prom dress and be elected president of a school club. 4,000 dolls are the other wacky figures.

The art of creating Barbie and her friends, in fact, has become a major part in the output of American factories, and that is no making how many well-dressed dolls are made, according to the Barbie a similar figure from two-hour and one quarter with only 200 dolls to get Ken properly groomed to meet her time (inside with artificial lips), white dress shirt, sequined bow tie and sweater, and braided hair.

1 doll for each letter, Barbie and Midge are the same size and girls wear each other's clothes. Ken and Alan are at 17½ inches they are taller by just the right margin. Even so, the firm wardrobe contains 54 different costumes for Barbie and Midge, 26 for Ken and Alan, and 80 for Skipper—which is 100 right there, or maybe 5,000 worth, and that's not all.

Mattel also makes special "fashion packs" and kits for special purposes. Ken, for instance, can get perfect looks for students seeking to make good looks for being "the King." Barbie can even a dog though it isn't necessarily look like a dog after she chooses it is in her outfit and wardrobe jacket, net tulle, hat, mask and sunshade. Should she want to go to college, she can buy a "university" which consists of a chemistry room, soft stop (with phone booth), dormitory stadium and drive-in movie. Should she think out,

If she wears a slightly smug look, it's probably because she ranks as the hottest toy to come along since the balloon.



which seems likely, she has her own fashion shop with modeling stage, display corner and model's dressing room.

Barbie was the first of the "fashion dolls," and in only six years her success has been so immense—she is sold in 23,000 stores—that other firms have copied the idea. Today at least 40 million fashion dolls and costumes are sold annually in America. Bearing names like Trexy ("her hair 'pows' so that you can fashion it in any style") and Tammy ("shampoo and set her spotted hair, 8 rollers"), they are indisputable proof of the revolution that Mattel has wrought.

For clearly Barbie is a very different proposition from the dolls of old and not-so-old. Until recently, most girls imagined themselves as the mothers of their dolls and wanted them to be soft, shapeless, helpless and simply dressed. But Barbie is not a kid to be mothered. Chic, sophisticated and sexy, she runs off straight to places that Raggedy Ann never dreamed of, and God only knows what goes on when she's out on a date with Ken—over, for that matter, what goes on when Midge's out on a date with Allan. Only Skipper is safely home in bed.

And how long is Skipper going to be content to stick around at night? After all, she's about 10 now. She has her own blue telephone and telephone directory (they come with her pajamas), so it's safe to assume that when she retires after supper she's not doing homework. Reared in a family that encourages her sister Barbie to go out rather than stay in, to have dates and do fun things—or, if she absolutely must stay in, to watch fun TV shows and read fun magazines and try on her fun outfits—Skipper knows which side life's bread is buttered on. Anyone looking for deeper values in the world of Barbie is looking in the wrong place. With its emphasis on pos-

sessions and its worship of appearances, it is modern America in miniature—a tiny parody of our pursuit of the beautiful, the material and the trivial.

The Barbie revolution was inspired ten years ago by a real Barbie, the then 13-year-old daughter of Elliot and Ruth Handler, owners of Mattel. At that time the Handlers were manufacturers of plastic doll furniture. "Whenever I took Barbie into a dime store," Mrs. Handler recalls, "she would buy paper dolls like 'Tillie the Tinker,' and then she'd go home and spend hours cutting out the costumes and dressing the dolls. She also tried to dress real dolls, but they were clumsy and weren't meant to wear clothes that had any real style. I thought, 'Wouldn't it be nice if there were a three-dimensional fashion doll?'"

This simple thought grew into a \$97,000,000-a-year industry. The materials of Barbie's world now have multiplied so greatly that it would be possible to keep Barbie and her friends going on a round of activities for several weeks without the risk of repetition. Married with special Barbie outfits for a lunch date, an after-five date, a Friday-night date, Saturday matinee, theater date, "golden evening," country fair, masquerade and wedding; for rainy weather, hot weather and cold weather; for skiing, skating, skin-diving, shopping, cheerleading and tennis; for being a drum majorette, ballerina, career girl, airline stewardess, nurse and hospital volunteer. She sleeps in her pink "nighty-night" of pleated tulle with matching tucked poignoir, boudoir cuffs and studded dog. If asked to a pajama party, however, she takes her tailored two-piece pajama set with clock.

Only when she goes baby-sitting does she look less than impeccable. (For this job she has a white phone and phone list, bottle of pop and box of pretzels;

she wouldn't dream of bringing a book.) It's also one of the few times when she looks like a teen-ager, though that is what she is supposed to be. Most girls think of Barbie as six or seven years older than themselves, which puts her anywhere from 12 to 18. But she dresses 21 and up—a symbol of the American urge to hurry our children into the trappings of adulthood, if possible eliminating their youth altogether.

Ken's wardrobe is almost as diverse, enabling him to dress specially for such adolescent events as a roller-skating date and a fraternity meeting or to be the suave blase who goes to Rally Day, in which case he wears his three-quarter-length nylon car coat. Ken, incidentally, was created, if not out of Barbie's rib, at least out of her need for a "study," as expressed by countless Barbie owners in letters to Mattel. It is significant that they thought she needed a boy friend more than a girl friend.

The Handlers were loath to get Barbie emotionally involved. They also knew that boy dolls had never sold well. But the pressure was on and in 1961 they yielded and introduced Ken, naming him for their own son. A year later Midge came along to keep Barbie company in her nondating hours, but after a while she inevitably began to feel left out. This problem was solved last year when Ken's old buddy Allan moved to town. He is named for Allan Segal, husband of the real Barbie, now 23. Midge is named for nobody. Luckily, Midge fell for Allan right away, judging by several mooneruck stories about the couple that ran in the official Barbie magazine soon after he arrived.

Of course, this isn't the only way that Midge could feel about Allan. Her emotions depend on every individual Midge-owner, as Barbie's feelings depend on

every Barbie-owner. "These dolls become an extension of the girls," says Mrs. Handler. "Through the doll each child dreams of what she would like to be."

Mr. and Mrs. Handler deny that the world of Barbie is a place devoted to the accretion of objects. "These things shouldn't be thought of as possessions," Mr. Handler says. "They are props that create a mood to get into play situations." He points out that Barbie has her own theater, with special costumes sets and scripts, where she and her friends can produce plays like *Four Girls*.

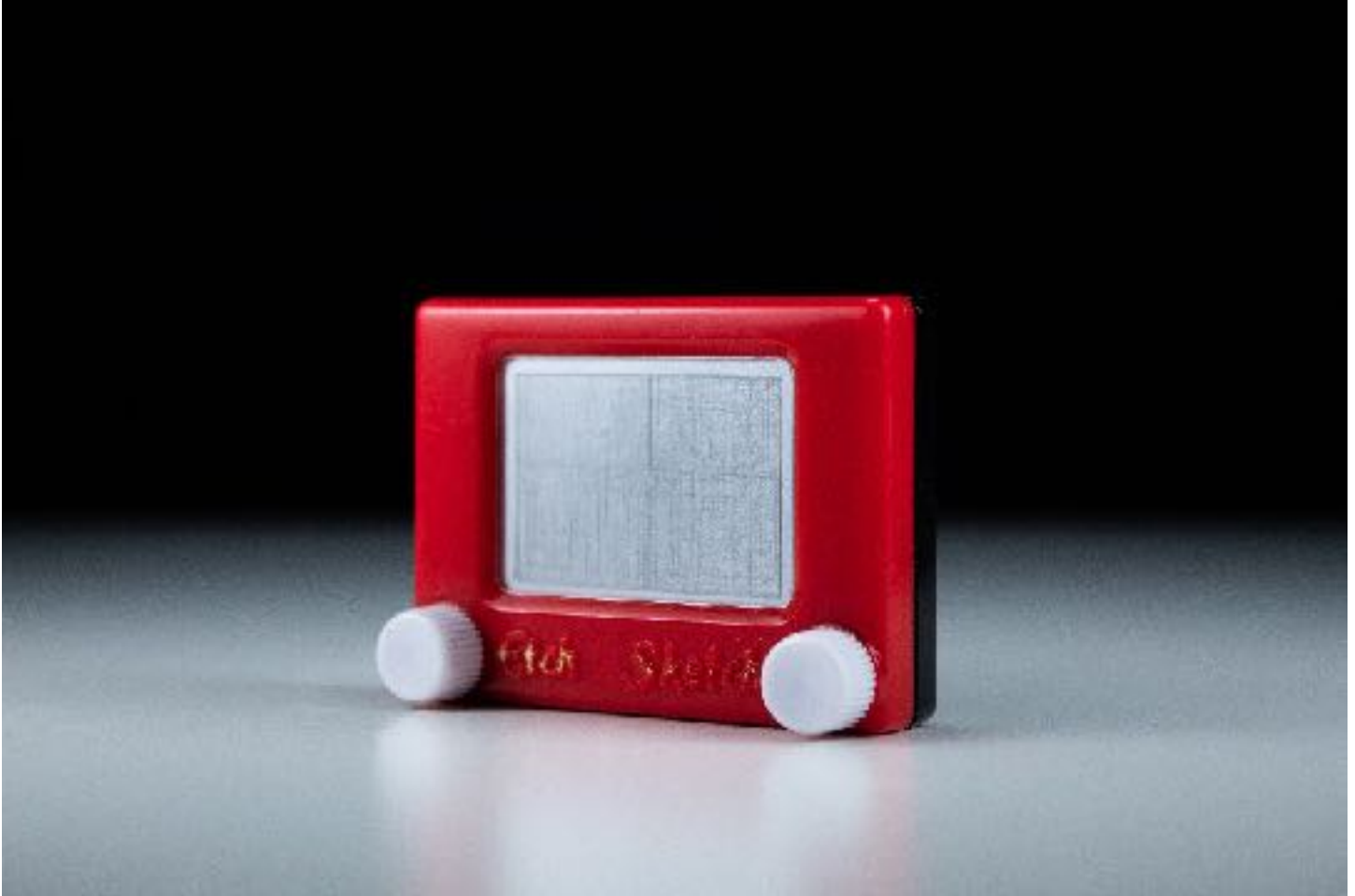
He also cites the new line of travel costumes that enable the little group to visit Japan, Switzerland, Mexico, Holland and Hawaii and to dress like natives when they get there. Pity the father who comes home to learn that Barbie and Ken have decided to take the Grand Tour. For Barbie wouldn't dream of going to Japan without her red-and-gold kimono, sandals, fan and three hair ornaments, or to Hawaii without her two-piece floral swimsuit, grass skirt, flower anklet, lei and pineapple.

If parents resent Barbie's consumption of their money or her influence on their daughters' upbringing—an influence that is sometimes greater than their own—they have never told Mattel. On the contrary, Mrs. Handler says, "parents thank us for the educational values in the world of Barbie."

"They say that they could never get their daughters well groomed before—get them out of slacks or blue jeans and into a dress, get them to scrub their necks and wash their hair. Well, that's where Barbie comes in. The doll has clean hair and a clean face, and she dresses fashionably, and she wears gloves and shoes that match."

And what could be more educational than that? THE END

1960: Etch A Sketch



(Film by Flynn / Shutterstock)

In case you've always wondered: aluminum powder is what makes the lines in an Etch A Sketch. The original concept was created as The Magic Screen by **André Cassagnes**; he took the idea to the 1959 occurrence of the International Toy Fair in Germany. The Ohio Art Company from the U.S. was there and took a look at Cassagnes's idea twice; upon their second viewing, they made a deal and had the re-named Etch A Sketch out in time for the 1960 holiday season. Etch A Sketch is still on toy shelves, and even found a new surge in popularity after its appearance in the Toy Story films. The rights to the toy was purchased by Spin Master in 2016.

1963: Easy-Bake Oven

Easy-Bake Ultimate Oven, Baking Star Edition (©Hasbro)

Light bulbs are commonly used to represent ideas. Here, the idea was the light bulb. The Easy-Bake Oven originally used a simple incandescent bulb (actually, two 100-watt bulbs) to bake, as the name suggests, easy recipes. The concept was apparently a welcome one, as Kenner sold 500,000 units in the first year. After Kenner was acquired by Hasbro in the '90s, the oven continued in production; however, a real heating element replaced the bulbs. In 2012, after young McKenna Pope started a Change.org petition, Hasbro switched the colors and packaging to gender-neutral designs.



1964/1982: G.I. Joe

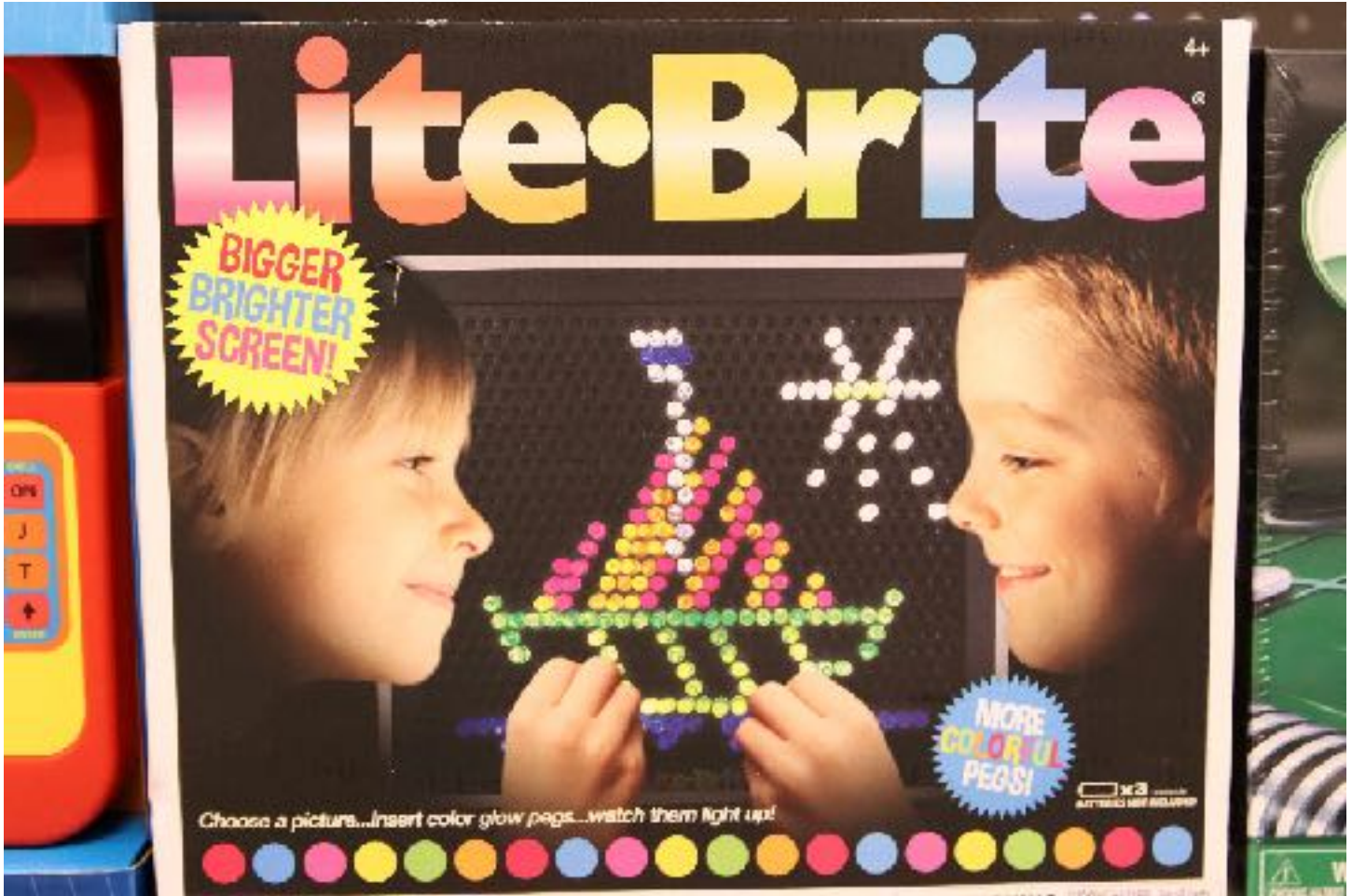


G. I. Joe: A Real American Hero figures and vehicles (Photo by Troy Brownfield)

That's not a typo; G.I. Joe really does get two different years. The 1964 creation was a poseable 12" character that was the first toy to use the term "action figure." The original Joes had accurate cloth military uniforms reflecting different branches of service; in 1965, Hasbro took the inclusive step of introducing a Black soldier as well. The figures were a major success. However, with the cultural hangover that followed the Vietnam War, Hasbro experimented with more of an "Adventure Team" rather than realistic military concept. Figures were given the famous "kung-fu grip." Despite these alterations, by the late '70s, the momentum for Joe ground to a halt.

The brand was resurrected in 1982 in a new scale. Made in 3.75" size like the Star Wars line, G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero introduced G.I. Joe as "the code-name for America's highly-special mission force; it's purpose, to defend human freedom against Cobra, a ruthless terrorist organization determined to rule the world." A unique cooperative deal between Hasbro and Marvel created Marvel Comics based on the new characters and promoted by animated commercials that sold both the comics and the toys. Most of the new characters' personalities and backgrounds were created by comic book writer Larry Hama. The figures were a major success of the '80s, leading to animated series and hundreds of figures and vehicles. Hasbro was able to bring back the 12" scale figures in various iterations as well. In 2020, Hasbro introduced a new 6" scale, G.I. Joe: Classified, featuring the RAH characters and targeted at the adult collector market.

1967: Lite-Brite



(Eric Glenn / Shutterstock)

Joseph M. Burck invented Lite-Brite, which is, admittedly, one of the coolest artistic toys ever made. Lite-Brite is a light box with a hole-punched face. Black paper is clipped over the face that is either blank or has pre-made patterns (like vehicles, characters, etc.). Kids then punch through the black paper with colored pegs that are then illuminated by the light box, bringing the images that the kids make to bright life. The regular set is still sold by Hasbro today, containing 12 black templates and 200 pegs.

1968: Hot Wheels



(SmLyubov / Shutterstock)

Elliot Handler appreciated Matchbox cars, but he had an idea to take them a step beyond the exacting production car style that line used. He liked the idea of custom cars like hot rods that had outside accessories and decos like flame patterns. With another engineer, Jack Ryan, and actual car designer Harry Bentley Bradley, Handler saw his idea come to life in Mattel's Hot Wheels. The original 16 cars and a race track became huge sellers, far exceeding expectations. Hot Wheels and Matchbox essentially went to tiny car war, battling for the attention of the market. That war ended in 1997 when Mattel purchased Matchbox; today Matchbox is a niche brand under Mattel, while Hot Wheels continues to enjoy major success.

1969: Big Wheel



(Robert Gubbins / Shutterstock)

The Big Wheel is, on one level, a plastic tricycle. But it's a low-rider with a huge front wheel and a handbrake that could allow spins if pulled at the right moment. So that made it infinitely cooler than a regular tricycle for kids that had aged out of the more traditional conveyance. The Big Wheel came from Louis Marx and Company, and they rode a wave of sales for most of the '70s. Empire Plastics bought out Marx in the '80s, and the various "big-wheeled" rides faded. However, The Original Big Wheel has returned under new ownership in a version extremely similar to the 1969 look.

1971: Mego 8" Figures



(Willrow Hood / Shutterstock)

Mego's action figures took the cue from G.I. Joe in that they had cloth uniforms. However, they began offering the Action Jackson line in an 8-inch, rather than 12-inch, scale. The military line did well in 1971, but faded.

Fortunately for Mego, they applied the same body-type and cloth outfit to a much more successful expression, 1972's World's Greatest Super-Heroes! line. Mego secured the licenses for both DC and Marvel comics and made many popular characters, including Superman, Batman, Spider-Man, Captain America, Hulk, Wonder Woman, Iron Man, the Fantastic Four, and the Teen Titans, as well as characters like Tarzan and Conan the Barbarian. The success of that line fueled other 8" licenses, including Star Trek, Planet of the Apes, and The Wizard of Oz. Mego's success was undercut in the late '70s by the cultural earthquake that was Star Wars toys. After years of bankruptcy and legal battles, Martin Abrams reclaimed the rights to his family's company name. In 2018, Mego began releasing 8" figures again, continuing classic lines like Star Trek and the super-heros with figures that they didn't get to make the first time around.

1977: Atari 2600



(JR Moreira / Shutterstock)

Yes, the rules said that we wouldn't do board games. But when you have a gaming system that totally changes everyone's expectations, you have to acknowledge it. The 2600 wasn't **the first home video game system**; it wasn't even Atari's first home video game (that was Pong). But the cartridge-based system that allowed you switch between a huge variety of games (and controllers) made the 2600 a legitimate event. The graphics seem quaint today, but they were mind-blowing upon introduction. Atari has had their ups and downs over the decades, but they're poised to return in 2021 with the **Atari VCS 800**.

1978: Star Wars



G. I. Joe: A Real American Hero figures and vehicles (Photo by Troy Brownfield)

The story of the Star Wars toy line is almost like a folk tale at this point. With the film poised for release, licensing ace Mark Pevers made the effort to stir up interest with the various toy companies. Everyone passed on the license but Kenner. Acknowledging that having 12 or 8" figures would make producing the very cool vehicles cost-prohibitive, Kenner exec Bernie Loomis told design V.P. Dave Okada to make Luke (the figure around whom all other sizes would be based) "this big," holding his thumb and forefinger apart. Okada measured the gap at 3.75" and the modern action figure scale was born. However, given the lateness of the license acquisition, there would be no way for Kenner to have toys ready for Christmas of 1977. Fortunately for them, the movie was box office dynamite, building major anticipation for the toys.

Taking an insane gamble, they put out the Early Bird Certificate box, allowing customers to buy what was essentially an empty box and mail in a certificate for the first four figures (Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia, Chewbacca, and R2-D2) that would ship to your house as soon as they were ready. When it hit stores, the Star Wars line exploded, dominating toy sales for years until the line cooled after 1983's Return of the Jedi. After Star Wars began its 1990s return with the novel Heir to the Empire, the figures made a comeback in the mid-'90s. With the advent of new films by the end of that decade, Star Wars toys have been here to stay in a variety of scales. And if that kid from The Mandalorian has anything to say about it, they won't be going anywhere for quite some time.

The Greatest Toys Since 1900, Part III: 1979-Now

The third and final part of our tour runs from the Reagan Era to today.

Troy Brownfield

In Parts [1](#) and [2](#), we posed this question: Of the thousands of toys given to American girls and boys over time, what are the greatest? This writer, a lifelong toy collector and longtime toy columnist, decided to tackle that massive question. We started at the year 1900, we excluded board and card games (surely worthy of their own list), and we excluded athletic equipment. Not every selection may be your particular cup of pretend tea, but each one was chosen according to [The Tom Morello Scale](#) of “impact, influence, and awesomeness.” Here are the Greatest Toys from 1979 to today.

1979/1981: Strawberry Shortcake and Care Bears



Strawberry Shortcake doll ([Erin Cadigan](#) / Shutterstock); A pile of Care Bears ([think4photop](#) / Shutterstock)

It might seem counterintuitive to include two vastly different ideas as one entry, but both Strawberry Shortcake and Care Bears came to life in the same way: they began as American Greetings cards. Artist Barbi Sargent drew the first version of Strawberry Shortcake, which appeared on a card in 1973. After the look was refined in subsequent cards, the character was adapted into ragdoll form in 1979. As the character and her friends hit animation, toy company Kenner turned the characters into a more figural line of dolls with pet pals, playsets, and an infused scent for each character associated with their name. That toy line was a major success in the 1980s and was later revived in a new form in the 2000s. Over the years, the brand has changed hands several times and may be rebooted again in the near future.

Care Bears began as greeting card characters in 1981, then transitioned to a line of plush toys in 1983. The Bears and their multi-animal cousins proved popular enough for animated feature films, TV cartoons, and a variety of toys, including figures. Some form of the Care Bears has existed in the every decade since, supported by animation, plush toys, and more. A new line by current license holder Basic Fun! debuted in 2020.

1980: Rubik's Cube



(gd_project/ Shutterstock)

The *Post* recounted the story of the Rubik's Cube earlier this year **on the occasion of its 40th anniversary**. Erno Rubik invented the puzzle cube, which launched worldwide after he made a deal with Ideal in 1979. By 1981, the Cube was a legit phenomenon, selling millions and prompting a cottage industry of best-selling books about how to solve it. Rubik also created the popular Rubik's Snake and has been active in STEM education; he's something of a cultural hero in his native Hungary, having received essentially every major civilian honor. His puzzles still sell regularly today.

1982: My Little Pony



([HOHLOVMIHAIL](#) / Shutterstock)

Take small toy horses. Combine with bright colors and catch names. Step back, and watch four decades of fandom grow. That's essentially the recipe that Hasbro has followed for almost 40 years. Buoyed by cycling generations of devotees and a long-running cluster of animated series that total in excess of 300 episodes, My Little Pony has been able to reach new fans in a variety of age groups.

1982 Cabbage Patch Kids



(catwalker / Shutterstock)

Cabbage Patch Kids were one of the biggest toy fads of the 1980s and have changed companies a remarkable seven times since their 1982 introduction. Xavier Roberts created the dolls, eventually assigning them an elaborate backstory about being born in a cabbage patch. Dolls came with adoption papers with unique naming and an official birthday. When the popularity of the dolls caught fire across holiday seasons in the early 1980s, **mob scenes**, occasionally accompanied by parent-on-parent violence, ensued when new shipments arrived. While that heat eventually cooled, some version of the Kids has remained in almost continuous production ever since. Along the way, everyone from toy giants Hasbro and Mattel to the current Wicked Cool Toys has held the license for some period of time.

1984: Super Powers Collection



Hall of Justice and figures from Kenner's Super Powers Collection (Photo by Troy Brownfield)

With Star Wars on its post-*Return-of-the-Jedi* wane, Kenner looked for a new action figure line in a familiar place: the pages of DC Comics. After acquiring the master toy license from DC, Kenner introduced Super Powers, a line that would include characters from the comics and the popular *Super Friends* animated series. The thing that separated Super Powers from previous super-hero lines was the incorporation of a "power action" into each figure that activated at the squeeze of arms or legs. Superman punched, Robin karate-chopped, Wonder Woman crossed her bracelets in her bullet-blocking pose, Flash ran, and so on. When the Martian Manhunter was introduced in the second series, it marked the first time that all seven original members of the Justice League were available in toy form (Manhunter and Green Lantern were absent from the earlier Mego line). The third series was marked by poor distribution, leading to certain characters like Cyborg and Mister Miracle to be extremely rare (and thus, extremely expensive on the after-market). The line went under after that, but is fondly remembered and actively sought by collectors. The 6-inch DC Universe Classics line of the 2000s would take pains to include every character from Super Powers, even characters specifically created for the line like Golden Pharaoh.

1984: Transformers



Optimus Prime, Ultra

Magnus, and Jetfire from Transformers (Photo by Troy Brownfield)

Robots in disguise! More than meets the eye! Transformers have almost as many catchphrases as they do variations. The original Transformers series came to the U.S. when Hasbro licensed a bunch of unconnected changing-robot toys from various companies. Working with Marvel in a deal reminiscent of their success with G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero, Hasbro worked out the launch of a comic book and animated commercials. Comic legends Jim Shooter and Dennis O'Neil put together a broader backstory, with O'Neil naming Optimus Prime. Bob Budiansky named Megatron, filled out the names and personalities of many other characters, and wrote dozens of the comics; he also wrote many of the character bios that came with the toys. Transformers have adapted with the times, finding ongoing success in the toy aisles as well on TV, in comic shops, and on the big screen with a hit film franchise.

1985: Nintendo NES



(Pit Stock / Shutterstock)

Console games were downswing in the States with the Nintendo NES arrived. The system ignited a boom that has basically never stopped. The NES established Mario and his collective universe as pop culture icons while introducing game after game that sold millions. This major launch has allowed Nintendo to put out innovative systems and games with regularity, from the GameBoy to Pokémon to the Wii to the Switch, Nintendo keeps finding new ways to appeal to a worldwide gaming audience.

1985: Teddy Ruxpin

Try watching this video on www.youtube.com

An original Teddy Ruxpin commercial (Uploaded to YouTube by Mark Precilla)

The animatronic storytelling teddy bear surprised everyone by becoming the best-selling toy of both 1985 and 1986. Combining the cuddliness of a plush bear with animatronic eyes and mouth and a library of books and tapes (later, books and cartridges, and later still, via app), Teddy Ruxpin combined play and learning experiences (as the kids could follow the story with the book) in a new way.

1990: Super Soaker



(Everything You Need / Shutterstock)

“A water gun?” you may ask. True, but the Super Soaker is a water gun in the same way that an Indy car is a covered wagon; they’re sort of the same idea, but one is on an entirely different level. Lonnie Johnson and William Raucci put the original concept together in 1989; when it came out from Larami in 1990, the pump/continual-spray blaster was called the Power Drencher. The following year, the concept was renamed the Super Soaker, and the sales dam burst. Two million units sold in 2001, beginning the path toward more a billion dollars in total sales since then. Sold today by Hasbro under the Nerf line, the various sizes and models of the Super Soaker continue to be perennially popular.

1990: WWF Hasbro Action Figures

WWF Hasbro action figures. (Photo by Topolgnussy; Wikimedia Commons via [Creative Commons Attribution-Share Alike 4.0 International](#))

Hasbro's WWF line wasn't the first wrestling line, but it put a premium on fun. Combining Super Powers-style power-action wrestling moves with colorful and vaguely cartoonish interpretations of the real-world grapplers they portrayed, the WWF line was an instant hit. Eleven series of figures, including tag team two-packs, wrestling rings, and other accessories were released in five years. When the popularity of wrestling hit a downturn prior to being reignited by the Monday Night Wars of the late '90s, the line went away. In 2017, Mattel, the current licensor of WWF (now the WWE) products, began to produce a Retro line of figures in a similar scale and style; that line includes stars of today and other wrestlers who were part of the late '90s resurgence, such as The Rock, Stone Cold Steve Austin, and Mankind.

1992: Nerf Blaster



(Veja / Shutterstock)

Nerf really began in 1970 with the Nerf ball from Parker Brothers. Marketed as the “world’s first indoor ball,” it traded on its softness and surprising durability (though not invulnerability) and became popular. Nerf products encompassed a variety of sports and game takes, from footballs to ping-pong. However, Nerf found a new life in 1992 when the first officially identified Nerf Blaster appeared. Pairing soft Nerf darts with increasingly more sophisticated dart guns, the Nerf Blaster line has grown exponentially in size and scope. Toy Nerf guns have been made based on weapons made famous in *Fortnite*, *HALO*, and other elements of pop culture; there have even been Nerf bows.

1996: Tickle Me Elmo

[Try watching this video on www.youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com)

Tickle Me Elmo commercial (Uploaded to YouTube by Hasbro)

We realize that Elmo is not the favorite of every mom and dad. The little red denizen of Sesame Street has been polarizing to parents, but the kids seem to love him. That's particularly true in his various Tickle Me Elmo incarnations, a series of electronic dolls that laugh, sing, dance, and more. Like the Cabbage Patch Kids before him, Elmo triggered some **actual inter-aisle combat** in 1996. Many more iterations have been released over time, such as Chicken Dance Elmo. Other characters, like Cookie Monster and Ernie, have also joined the line.

2001: Bratz

[Try watching this video on www.youtube.com](http://www.youtube.com)

A promotional video for Bratz Party Dolls (Uploaded to YouTube by Bratz)

The 10-inch fashion dolls created by Carter Bryant broke the Barbie mold by embracing a more stylized design, of-the-moment clothes, and an inherent brand of diversity. After a year of struggle, the dolls took off, eventually moving 125 million units in five years. The original four dolls kicked off separate, related lines and a whole raft of multimedia extensions and adaptations. Over the years, Bratz maker MGA Entertainment was entangled in a number of lawsuits, including one from Mattel alleging that Bryant creating Bratz while working for them. Although everything was resolved in MGA's favor after several years, those issues did slow the momentum of the brand. A new reboot of the line is imminent at this writing.

2002: Marvel Legends



Marvel Legends action figures (Photo by Troy Brownfield)

The most comprehensive action figure line based on the characters of the Marvel Universe, the 6-inch scale Marvel Legends line has been a fixture on the shelves for almost 20 years. Launched by Toy Biz in 2002, it was taken over by Hasbro in 2006 when they acquired the Marvel license. Distinguished by super-articulation (with many characters have more than 20 moveable joints), the highly-detailed and incredibly poseable line has been an ongoing hit with fans and collectors. Marvel Legends also pioneered the “Build-A-Figure” concept, in which each figure in an assortment comes with one piece of another character; for example, buying six figures with BAF pieces from the May 2020 “Avengers: Gamerverse” assortment would give you the pieces needed to build the villain Abomination. The Legends brand team at Hasbro has regular online chats with collectors, displaying new products and gathering fan input. With more than 100 figures released each year, and with ample support from Marvel films and comics, Marvel Legends shows no signs of getting snapped in non-existence anytime soon.

2011: Funko Pop! Vinyls



Game of Thrones Funko Pop! vinyls. (Photo by Troy Brownfield)

Bobblehead dolls and vinyl dolls or figures have been extremely popular around the world for decades. But something about the Funko Pop! line just clicked. The vinyl figures, encompassing just about every known pop culture license in history, from film to TV to comics to anime to music to sports, are a fixture in seemingly every store. And the Pops aren't just limited to fiction; real people like Albert Einstein, Stephen King, LeBron James, and Bill Nye the Science Guy can occupy shelf-space alongside the Fantastic Four, the cast of *The Office*, and the Universal Monsters. As a company, Funko holds more than 1100 licenses for different companies, characters, and properties. Which means that if there isn't a Pop for it, there probably will be.

Featured image: (*Pit Stock / Shutterstock*)