

You're listening to *Imaginary Worlds*, a show about how we create them and why we suspend our disbelief. I'm Eric Molinsky.

I have often talked about how much I love action figures. When I was a kid, they were my gateway to another world. After a while, I didn't even have to play with them. I'd just hold the Luke Skywalker action figure and go into a catatonic state. My parents used to say I was Luking Out.

As far as I knew, movies and TV shows aimed at kids always came with action figures. That's the way things were. But when George Lucas pitched the idea of Star Wars action figures to toy companies in 1976, a lot of companies turned him down -- except for one company in Cincinnati: Kenner.

Kenner ended up minting money with those Star Wars toys. The other companies must have been jealous. But Star Wars was a phenomenon. I mean, how do you reverse engineer that? They could wait until the next Star Wars fell into their laps, but there's only one George Lucas. And the toy companies were getting burned by filmmakers claiming to have the next Star Wars, but the movies were flops, and the toys sat on the shelves. If only the toy companies could make their own media -- you know, TV shows that star the toys that they want to sell.

Well, they were about to get a helping hand from Ronald Reagan. One of Reagan's main goals was deregulation. In 1983 and '84, government agencies that monitor advertising and content in children's television declared that the marketplace should decide what gets put on the air, not the government.

But even though Reagan was creating this very corporate friendly environment, the toy companies didn't know how to take advantage of it at first. They didn't have a master plan on how to conquer the minds of kids to get us to convince our parents that our entire happiness depended on getting that new toy. And I can say from personal experience it was dangerous to bring me to Toys R Us because I would beg my mom that I really, really, really need that new action figure. And she'd say, But don't you have a lot of those toys? No! Well, okay, I have that guy, that guy and that guy but I don't have this guy!

From an adult perspective, it's easy to get very cynical about this. But Isaac Elliot Fisher is a documentary filmmaker who's made films about toys. He's a toy designer, and he runs a toy store in Ontario. And he says there's a misconception that kids would want anything you put on TV.

ISAAC: You had to be really good to rise to the top. You had to be good designers, you had to be good writers. There had to be a certain level of disassociation between the writer and the cartoon company and the toys, not based on regulation but based on if you wanted this to be good, it had to be written well.

After turning down Star Wars, a lot of toy companies were now in the position of trying to compete with Star Wars.

Mattel was one of the first companies to figure it out. And they kind of fell into it. In the early '80s, people at Mattel were brainstorming ideas. And one of their concept guys, named Roger Sweet, pitched a bunch of characters which got rejected.

ISAAC: And then he made like a furry barbarian, and he called it He-Man. And apparently Roger Sweet coins it in that moment as He-Man. So he brings it to product demo, and everybody's like, whoa. Yeah, okay. We've tested all these different things with boys, barbarian theme seems to be the thing. So if we take barbarian Conan and mix it with Star Wars, that'll be the thing.

But Star Wars had a story. He-Man did not.

ISAAC: They don't know how to tell the story, so the guys, the marketing guys just come up with stupid names. Like, we're going to have like He-Man, and then D-Man instead of Skeletor. And then he's like, and uh, C-Man, uh, and then they, like somebody else in the office is like, no, you should try it. Merman. Yeah, Merman. That's better than C-Man. That's good. Uh, Wo Man was one of them. No, can't have Wo Man. We'll call her Teela.

There's actually a very complicated backstory as to which people deserve credit for coming up with He-Man and the other aspects of the Master of the Universe line. That's the nature of these corporate products. Everyone has a hand in it, but everything they do is for Mattel.

Mattel also commissioned mini comic books that came with the toys to explain who the characters were. And they made commercials with a company called Filmation.

CLIP: 1982 HE-MAN COMMERCIAL

ISAAC: And you were allowed to have X amount of animated fantasy content within a toy commercial, so he had to have certain percentage of his, of it be real world. So it's like a dad and his kids going, I let my kids play with Castle Grayskull from Mattel. And then it's like they have this little animated bit in the middle, and it's somewhere in there. Lou Scheimer at Filmation said, well, hey, this could be a show.

CLIP: HE-MAN OPENING CREDITS

It's amazing to me how little coordination there was. The people who designed the toys had no idea what was in the cartoon show until it was done.

ISAAC: So these guys were like all over the map, whether it was a cartoon or a, or a, or a media product or, or anything. They were just, things were happening so quickly, even though Mattel owned the block of time that was then syndicated for that cartoon so they could sell the commercial spots even to themselves and make more money off those commercial spots than the show, even though they were paying essentially for the cartoon to happen, the writers worked for Filmation. So you had these layers of separation.

The comics that Mattel commissioned were more serious and action packed. The cartoon had goofy humor and life lessons at the end of each episode.

HE-MAN MONTAGE: When we got to the beach, there are lifeguards there to watch out for our safety. (FADE OUT) A sword or any other symbol doesn't make a person a good leader. What does is intelligence... (FADE OUT) Drugs don't make your problems go away. They just create more.

The He-man cartoon launched in the Fall of 1983. It was a huge hit. The toys had been around for a year, but suddenly their sales skyrocketed.

There's actually a word for this phenomenon: toyetic. Toyetic refers to a media property where there is so much overlap between the toys, the content and the advertising that you don't know where one begins and the other ends.

In 1984, I was just aging out the demographic of children they were trying to reach. But I was aware of the new toys and cartoons. And I remember reading opinion pieces from concerned parents saying this is awful, we're opening the floodgates of visual junk food for kids. And I remember thinking, what's wrong with that?

In part three of our mini-series on iconic works that came out in 1984, we're looking at two toyetic franchises that launched 40 years ago: Transformers and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. They both dominated TV and toy stores for years. But each property struggled with the same question. What happens when the merchandise you sell to promote a story starts driving the story? Or to put it another way, when the cart comes before the horse, are you still going anywhere?

AD BREAK

Let's stay in 1983 for a little bit longer. The industry now had a clear business plan. And Mattel wasn't the only company to figure it out. Hasbro took a similar approach with GI Joe. They combined a new toy line with comics and a cartoon show and they gave Star Wars a run for its money.

But Hasbro wasn't satisfied. They wanted to find another franchise for 1984. And there was one way to do it very quickly – look to Japan which had its own booming toy market. So Hasbro made a deal with a Japanese company called Takara Tomy. They made these robots that could turn into vehicles and other objects. The execs at Hasbro thought we could rebrand those and sell them in the U.S. They hired an ad agency to come up with a new name for the toys: Transformers. The agency also came up with the names of the good guys and bad guys -- Autobots and Decepticons.

And of course, Hasbro wanted to have a comic book and a TV show to go with their new property. So they hired Marvel to create a series of comics which would explain who the characters were. Hasbro didn't even know who the characters were.

So what was going on at Marvel at the time? Remember there's no MCU. It's mainly comic books. They were going to launch a huge crossover event in 1984 called Secret Wars. The character Venom was first introduced in those comics. Who would rather write comics for a toy company instead? There were not many takers at Marvel. But Bob Budiansky was interested.

BOB: You know, any opportunity at Marvel to my mind, was a good opportunity. One thing would always lead to the next thing. So getting a gig, writing a toy book is the same to me as anything else. It's a, it's a stepping stone to the next, to the next place.

The treatment had already gone through another writer. Everything that writer had come up with had been rejected, except for one thing. Bob's editor liked one of the names the other writer had come up with: Optimus Prime. So in November of 1983, Bob was sitting at his office. His editor came in and dumped a box of toys on his desk.

BOB: It was a weekend right before Thanksgiving, and he said, uh, these are the bad guys. These are the good guys. Can you develop 26 characters over this weekend? Meaning coming up with their names, and their character profiles. So I said, yeah, sure, I can do that.

All right. So let's go through the names. How did you come, uh, tell me about the names. Megatron, of course, you got to start with him.

BOB: Okay. Well, Megatron, actually, Megatron is a good name to start with because probably of all the names I came up with, and I came up with about 250 names over the years, that's probably my favorite. And I came up with that, you know, right, right from the get-go. At the time, back in the 19, mid, mid 1980s, the term mega, the connotation for that was kind of negative because it was associated with megatons and megaton was the word that to describe the destructive power of nuclear bombs. And tron was just, uh, your, your standard, um, suffix having to do with electronics or technology. So I just put the two words together, Megatron, and I thought, that sounds really good, as a nice melodic sound to it. And it has this feeling of danger and some kind of threatening character. And so that was a name where, uh, all like, like all the names, I had to run it by Hasbro. They had to make the final decision. They had to make sure the legal department approved it, so and so on. And that was a name that, uh, to my surprise, Hasbro rejected, but not for any legal reasons. So, I actually spoke to my liaison over at Hasbro, and I said, uh, Megatron, why did you guys, uh, decide to reject it? And the answer was, well, we thought about it, and we found, we, we thought it sounded too scary. And I was kind of surprised at that because as I kind of gently pointed out to them, he's the leader of the bad guys. He should sound like a very scary character. They thought about it, and he said, yeah, you're right. We'll go with Megatron. So I saved Megatron.

MEGATRON: Now we can accomplish the purpose of our little visit, the total destruction of our helpless foes! (Evil laugh)

Another breakout character Bob came up with was Bumblebee.

BOB: So Bumblebee started out as a VW bug. The toy was painted yellow and black, and he was small. So I was looking for a name that had the connections to yellow and black, small, a bug <laugh>. But I didn't want him to look to sound like a complete, uh,

weaking because even though he was small, he needed to, uh, he was part of the Autobots. He was a fighter. So, uh, I thought, well, Bumblebee's a good, a good name to associate. All those different qualities.

DANIEL: You sure we did the right thing in coming here, Bumblebee?

BUMBLEBEE: No, but we can hardly stay behind either. Come on!

They launched the franchise in 1984. Would they get their He-Man moment? Did they put all the pieces in place? Of course they did.

Now everything that Bob established in the comics was canon. And then those comics were sent to the animation company so they knew who the characters were - but they could come up with their own stories for the cartoon show.

BOB: And after that, I had no connection to the animated series. In my entire life, I've never sat down and watched one single episode of what was going on.

CLIP: TRANSFORMERS SONG

Which is amazing to me because I remember this show being all over TV. Although I actually haven't listened to this song in almost 40 years, and I cannot believe how good it is. I love the minor chords and the harmonizing. It actually makes me feel like the stakes are high in this battle of good versus evil. Of course, they used the song in the commercials along with animation from the show until live action kids suddenly appeared playing with the toys.

CLIP: TRANSFORMERS COMMERCIAL

BOB: I remember I was talking to Hasbro executive at the time I was working in Transformers. And she said that, um, if a toy comes out and lasts two holiday seasons, in other words, it's introduced in the Fall of a year, you know, right before Christmas holidays and so on. And if it lasts two holiday seasons, that's considered a success in the toy industry.

Two holiday seasons later, Transformers was not slowing down. But Hasbro was not going to feel content. They say if your business isn't growing, it's dying. And they felt an imperative to keep adding new characters and new toys. And all of these new characters had to be introduced in the comics.

BOB: I had to come up with all different ways of finding access for the, into the storyline for all these new characters. Like, they're on Earth, but they're on Cybertron. How do these guys on Cybertron, this distant planet, all of a sudden show up in my storyline on Earth? I came up with something called the Creation Matrix. Like, how do these mechanical life forms come up with new mechanical life forms? They don't, they, they, they're asexual. They don't reproduce like we do. So the, the Creation Matrix was, was basically a, a very sophisticated program that the leader of the Autobots had access to. And through that Creation Matrix, he can create new mechanical life. Another way was I created a space bridge. So, this was a, a bridge that went from Cybertron through some kind of a wormhole or something and landed on Earth.

Was that a challenge in terms of, you know, you're, you're writing your stories, you're planning things out, and they're like, here's a bunch of new characters. We're selling these toys. You need to incorporate this into your scripts.

BOB: Well, that, first of all, that describes almost to a T exactly what, you know, where, where Hasbro was coming from. Yes, <laugh>. They looked at the comic book as a vehicle to market their toys, sell more toys. It became more and more of a burden to come up with new ways to introduce all these new toys. Also, simultaneously, I was writing stories that featured certain characters, and then I'd have to kind of gently push them aside because I needed to make space for all these other characters that I wanted to introduce into the story.

When it came to the animation, Hasbro did not gently push the characters aside. They made the decision to kill off many of the characters introduced in the 1984 toy line so they could clear the shelves for the next line of toys. And they killed them off in the first half hour of the animated Transformers movie.

DANIEL: Prime, you can't die!

PRIME: Do not grieve. Soon I shall be one with the matrix.

HOT ROD: Prime.

But kids didn't think of these characters as just toys. They were sobbing in the theaters. All this product churn took a toll on Bob as well.

BOB: I was burnt out. I was trying to get off the book for probably up to a year before that. My editor, my editor kept begging me, please stay on the book because I don't know who else I can get to write this thing.

He finally found a replacement in 1989. But at that point, the franchise was losing steam. He thought he put Transformers behind him. Then in 2004:

BOB: The first Transformers convention I went to, uh, I like to describe it as my Elvis moment. A young man was walking by, and he says, it's you <laugh>, you're him, you're him <laugh>. And I realized then, I did something really special. But I take a sense of pride in the fact that, um, these stories and these characters that I wrote now almost 40 years ago, uh, are still around and that people still really care about it.

Although he doesn't feel a sense of ownership over the characters he came up with. He literally doesn't own it.

BOB: I was a cog in the machine. I was, if they didn't choose me to develop those characters, and ultimately write the comic book, Marvel would've found somebody else. It just happened to be me. And in fact, I wasn't even the first choice or the second choice, I was like about the fourth or fifth choice.

But that's the way it goes with toyetic franchises. How could it be any different?

Let me tell you another story -- a story that ends up in the same place, but it begins with very humble origins. And this story doesn't start with a top down corporate strategy and everybody working their separate silos. It doesn't start with ideas being focus grouped and market tested. It doesn't involve corporate employees who share a tiny bit of the credit and even less of the profits.

Let's rewind our VHS cassette of time back to 1983. We're no longer in a corporate headquarters in a major city. We're now in a small town in New Hampshire, at the headquarters of Mirage Studios, which is actually in somebody's house.

ANDREW: The name Mirage was itself kind of a, you know, a joke and a commentary in the studio because they didn't actually have a professional studio space. They didn't have anybody working for them other than those two guys, Kevin and Peter.

That is Andrew Farrago. He is the curator of the Cartoon Art Museum in San Francisco, and he's written several books about cartoons and comics. The Kevin and Peter that he's referring to are Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird. Andrew says one night in 1983, Kevin and Peter were working at their desks. It was late. They were getting antsy. They needed a break.

ANDREW: So they decided, let's do one of our usual things and just try to crack each other up. So one of them hit upon the idea of, you know, I'm going to draw a goofy turtle character. Let's, let's take a turtle, outfit him as a ninja, give him some weapons. They

kept adding to it. So, they drew extra Turtles, and by the end of the night, they had actually hit upon the name Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

And they thought, this is actually kind of cool. We could make a comic book about this. In 1984, they were ready to bring their comic to a local comic convention in Portsmouth, New Hampshire. To get some attention, they put out a press release.

ANDREW: Touting the fact that this was the, as far as they knew, the first professional comic book created and printed in New Hampshire. The, the combination of that, that really unforgettable title, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. And fortunately for them, a slow news day, the Associated Press picked up on it, and just like that, uh, coast to coast, their pictures were in the newspaper. Before the convention, uh, even happened, they'd heard from comic book stores nationwide who wanted to order copies of this for their shops.

Earlier we heard from Isaac Elliot Fisher. He's currently working on his second documentary about Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.

ISAAC: They only printed 3,000 copies of the first issue. And they sell out very, very quickly. And they thought they were like they always say they thought they were going to be burning them to keep warm that winter. And so, I mean, they killed their main bad guy in the first book. I mean, Shredder is killed in the first issue. They never intended on doing another one. But at some point, when they had sold out very quickly and, and they were doing another printing and they went, wait a minute, they did the math, they wrote it down. They said if we did a, a book every two months or whatever, we could make like \$2,000 each per book. And that was huge. You know, for them they were making like \$4,000 a year if they were lucky.

They hired a few more artists and Mirage Studios was no longer a mirage. It was a fully fledged studio.

A few years later, a business entrepreneur named Mark Freedman arranged a meeting with Kevin and Peter. Andrew says Mark was a lot like them -- an up-in-comer who punched above his weight. And he thought Turtles could be the next Transformers.

ANDREW: Mark approached them and said, I think, I think we've got something here. Let me have Turtles for a month. Let me take it out to the West Coast shop at around, see what I can do. You know, if you're happy with what I'm doing, we'll, we'll keep it

going. If not, you know, we'll part ways. No, no hard feelings. And they said, sure, you've got the enthusiasm, you're excited about us. We we're not really thinking about anything beyond the comic book at this point. Anyway, so, so go for it.

And they said one more thing. They said, if you sell this to a toy company or whatever, we still retain full ownership. He said okay. That will be part of the deal.

Mark Freedman goes out to pitch what was going to become the next toyetic phenomenon. It did not go well. Although I can imagine the perspective of these toy companies. The comic book was gritty. It was not aimed at young kids. The word teenage was right in the title. Speaking of the title, mutants come from nuclear waste. Ninjas are violent. Turtles are slow and boring. Whoever thought you could actually sell this to kids?

He finally found a company that was interested. Playmates had success making dolls, and they wanted to break into the action figure market.

ANDREW: He had a convincing pitch. He explained, this is the potential I see in Turtles. It could be the next He-Man, it could be the next Masters Of The Universe, GI Joe Transformers.

Playmates bought the pitch. Now they need a cartoon show because that's how you launch a toyetic franchise.

Remember how the toy designers at Mattel had no connection with the He-Man cartoon show? Bob Budiansky never saw the Transformers cartoon show. When Playmates developed the cartoon show for Turtles, Peter Laird and Kevin Eastman were in all of those meetings. They still owned the whole thing.

When Isaac was working on his first documentary about the Turtles, Peter Laird gave him access to footage from this time.

ISAAC: Kevin and Peter get brought into these boardroom meetings and Peter records the whole darn thing on camera every time.

And they let him?!

ISAAC: Yeah. And it was, it's so fascinating because all of this is creative process. So it's iterative. What if we did this? What if we did that? What if, because the Turtles in the comic books were black and white. They all looked exactly the same. And if they were in color, they all had red bandanas. So how are you, how are kids going to tell them apart? Well let's make them all different colors. Oh, great idea! Let's put different, you

know, initials on the belt buckles. And, and at the time they were like convinced that the Playmates was designing ideas of like, all the bad guys should be these like humanesque bad guys, and shredders a good bad guy, so we'll bring back Shredder. But all of his henchmen should be like angry mutated dudes from New York, like a taxi driver or a mechanic with a wrench for an arm. And Peter kept saying on, on camera in these, these meetings, he kept saying, what if they were like mutants in human clothing? Like what if they were wearing like khaki pants or camo or something? And he was drawing a mutant rhino and a mutant, um, warthog. And so he was drawing Bebop and Rock Steady in those meetings.

Bebop and Rocksteady are henchmen of the main villain Shredder.

BEBOP: Well, well, well! Look-ee what we found!

ROCKSTEADY: We got a score to settle with you little twerps!

The amazing thing to me is that Peter and Kevin were not precious about this world they created. You need us to age it down for younger kids? No problem, just let us in the meetings.

But Andrew says, they didn't foresee how huge this was going to be. They thought it would bring in some extra work, some extra cash.

ANDREW: This was great because they could, they could make comic books, they could draw all day. They could employ even more artists, even more friends of theirs

But when that cartoon and that toy line launched, Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles went from niche to ubiquitous almost overnight.

DONATELLO: Turtles fight with honor!

LEONARDO: Taste cold steel!

Move over He-Man and Transformers. Those shelves are going to be dominated by Turtles for years to come.

COMMERCIAL: Take Cover! The Foot are attacking with their sewer balls! Watch out, Turtles, or you'll end up in the recovery room! Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles! From Playmates!

Peter and Kevin wanted to make money creating something they love. Be careful what you wish for.

AD BREAK

The Turtles product line launched in the late 1980s. Isaac says everything changed for Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird.

ISAAC: Million dollar multimillion dollar checks are rolling in every single day. Like Kevin would often say, people would think that they must be cashing checks and sitting on a beach somewhere and not doing anything. It's like, no, they were working 90 hour weeks every week.

Isaac says before that, they spent most of their time drawing comics. They handled the business maybe 10% of the time. Now:

ISAAC: They're doing business 99% of the time and don't have any time to draw anymore because all of a sudden, you're handling massive, massive amounts of business because it's like you're a, you're a cereal company and you want to put turtles and cereal and sell more cereal. Well you got to do all these contracts for that, and you have to approve all the art and now you've got to take your internal art guys and make them into marketing art creators, because if the cereal company, which would often happen, they would kind of do their art. They would send it to them and go, whoa, whoa, no, the turtles aren't purple. What is this? You know, when we were kids consuming every turtle thing, which there were ungodly amount of, every single one of those things had to go through Kevin and Peter's hands. And nobody, none of us knew that. None of us thought, oh, there's these two independent comic book guys we're just like, oh, it's a corporate machine.

They were handling the kind of toyetic empire that Hasbro and Mattel had handed but without the benefit of a corporate structure. And Turtles was arguably bigger at the time because they had a live action film franchise running alongside the cartoon. The first live action Turtles movie broke the record for the highest grossing independent film.

According to Isaac, Peter was the more cautious one. He was a little older. He had already settled down. Kevin was more adventurous. He tried different business ventures that sometimes flopped. He also bought a tank and a Batmobile. And they approached the Turtles differently when people came to them with new ideas.

ISAAC: Peter would be notorious for the rest of the ownership of the Turtles for being very specific, very much hands-on this is this needs to be like this. And Kevin was much more open

All of that came to a head in the mid '90s. The Turtles craze was starting to wind down. The hot new thing was Power Rangers. The company Saban, which made the Power Rangers show, approached Kevin and Peter about doing a live action Turtles TV show. But Saban wanted to add a fifth turtle character — a girl turtle. This wasn't a surprise. Andrew says the toy company and the animation studio had been asking for more Turtle characters, especially a girl turtle. But Peter and Kevin didn't really want to deviate from the formula which had worked so well.

ANDREW: So this, this time around the studio came to them and they said, we want a girl turtle on this show, and if we don't get it, we're going to walk away. We're not going to do the show. Kevin took them at their word and said, we can keep everybody at Mirage Studios employed. We can keep, keep this going for a while. Maybe this is the, the little jolt that we need to get the Turtles through this kind of market correction or, or whatever you want to call that. Peter felt that, you know, they were still at that point, both the owners of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, and he thought the brand was valuable enough that they didn't have to do that. You know, we can, we can walk away. We can wait for the right opportunity. I don't think this is it.

Kevin convinced Peter to change his mind. Saban went ahead with the show featuring a girl turtle.

You aint' a ninja?

No, I am Shinobi.

You're a full-fledged mutant hottie!

Do not call me mutant or hottie.

No, he means you're like us, a mutant.

The show failed on every level.

ANDREW: There was backlash. Kids didn't go for it. It affected the toy sales. The comic books were kind of at a low point. Everybody was kind of collectively burnt out. Peter Laird, I'm sure, was looking at the situation thinking like, you know, we sold out for no reason at all.

Eventually Kevin decided to sell his half of the shares to Peter so he could get out of the business entirely. Peter sold the franchise to Viacom. Peter and Kevin drifted apart and didn't reconcile for years.

Meanwhile, the industry was changing. The parents' groups who fought against toyetics found a sympathetic ear with the Clinton administration. Limits were set on how much advertising was allowed on children's programming, and they added educational mandates.

But Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles did not become a nostalgia brand for adults – at least not entirely. Nickelodeon revived the franchise with a series of new shows and movies. The last animated film was produced by Seth Rogan.

CLIP: MUTANT MAYHEM TRAILER

ANDREW: You know, the fact that they have mutant right in their name, I think tells you about their ability to adapt and change. And I think, no pun intended, it's such an evergreen property that, uh, you're able to take these characters and they never age past their teenage years. So you've got, you always got a new crop of teenagers coming up. You've always got kids who admire and aspire to be teenagers. You know, they'll reboot and they'll kind of take a new fresh approach roughly every five years, whether they need it or not. Even if they've got a series that's going well, they will kind of put that aside. Say, let's, let's bring in some new creators. Let's bring in some new perspectives on this. What can we do that's going to be fun and interesting?

In 2023, the franchise made a billion dollars in retail sales. But all that energy wasn't directed towards toys. There were ad campaigns with fast food chains, snack foods, video games, and clothing lines. Andrew loved having toys as a kid, but he has a different perspective now.

ANDREW: As the person with the wallet, I'm really happy that, uh, my kid and his friends can just enjoy entertainment and not feel, not feel this obligation to, you know, buy things. Because I know, I know kids who felt left out in the '80s because, you know, their parents weren't buying them every single toy that they, they saw on TV. They didn't have, you know, a hundred transformers or gobos or He-Man characters, you know, cluttering up their living rooms.

Isaac sees things a little differently. I mean, his kids are not begging him for action figures either – but he actually wants to buy them action figures. And Isaac runs a toy store.

ISAAC: Children these days have no access to commercials that give them permission or suggestion to play. And if nothing is on there saying, here's what everybody's into and we're, and here's a commercial showing another kid my age playing with this product, now I'm looking at it going, oh, I can do that. So, so often in my store I'll have adults come in and say, man, I buy action figures from a kid, but they don't know how to play with them. They actually have lost the language of how to do it collectively.

Now they are still making action figures of He-Man, Transformers and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. And there are action figures of just about every character in Star Wars, DC, and Marvel. But the biggest driver of toy sales today are adults. It's actually called the kidult market. Some of those high end collectable action figures go for hundreds of dollars.

Isaac thinks the culture lost something when that controversial relationship between toy companies, commercial production studios and animation studios was broken apart. And he has a bone to pick with those parents' groups who fought to put those regulations in place.

ISAAC: Because I mean, we can talk about content. Sure. And, and we want to protect kids from stuff that is, you know, actually violent or actually too, too intense for them, too mature. That's fine. We can all say that. But at the end of the day, if they were really just against them buying things, because they're always, their argument was free play, free associative play, which is of course is incredibly important to do, was more like, I'm going to make up my whole world. I'm going to make up, doesn't matter if it's a stick or a rock or this or a bug, I'm not going to have anything dictated to me. So a lot of critics would say, yeah, well now you're saying that He-Man is good and Skeletor is bad. It's binary and somebody told me that, and now I'm just playing the scripted show. My argument was like, no, I don't know how many kids really went in there and went, here's the exact script from the episode, and I'm going to repeat it. Sure, there might have been tie-ins, but at the end of the day, it was this doorway for an avatar play, an allegorical play where they could conquer their own monsters, they could be the hero, they could deal with their anxieties, they could generate story. Then you take that all away and then what is the kid going to pick up? They're going to pick up a cell phone because that's, that's the vacuum. My own little anecdotal moment is that my kids stumbled upon Godzilla as an IP, so I have to hunt high and low to find them the kid-ified pop vinyl toys that they can play with because most of the access is like, oh, I can buy \$200 Godzilla sculptures all day long, but I can't find the damn \$30 toy for them because of the access isn't there at that level. So we live in a world where it's scary and it has big things, and it has big things that kids are scared about. And, and my kid had a

lot of anxiety and when he discovered Godzilla, all of a sudden, his anxiety went out the window because you know what? He could conquer this monster. He could take a monster and put all of his focused energy and fear into something that he could control. And that's the, that's the beautiful thing that toys gave us.

I began this mini-series by talking about things that scared us in 1984. I was a kid with a lot of anxiety. Maybe that's why I loved action figures so much. The toyetic craze of the 1980s was like a social experiment on a generation of kids. No wonder some of us grew up to become kidults. I think our imaginations are richer because of it. But I also can't imagine it having been any other way.

That is it for this week. Thank you for listening. Special thanks to Isaac Elliot Fisher, Andrew Farago, and Bob Budiansky. If you want to hear more about the creation of high end collectable action figures, check out my 2014 episode Actionfigureland.

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