

Hey everyone. Welcome to another bonus episode of Imaginary Worlds.

In the last episode, I talked with documentary filmmaker Isaac Elliot-Fisher about He-Man and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. Isaac had so many great anecdotes about the history of those franchises that I couldn't fit into the previous episode. So I'm going to play those outtakes for you.

I started the interview by asking Isaac to explain where the word toyetic comes from. Toyetic is now known as a term for toys that are so wrapped up in marketing, you don't know if the show is a commercial for the toys or vice versa. But he says that wasn't the original meaning.

ISAAC: It is a funny term. And if, and I love the term and I think that if this story is true, it would make it so much better. because there's a story that the, the term toyetic is coined by the famous Bernie Loomis, who was the, the kind of the head guy at Kenner Toys and, and, you know, famous for literally inventing the modern or, or what would become the modern kind of action figure toy realm. And apparently the story goes that Bernie coined the term while trying to explain to Steven Spielberg why Close Encounters Of The Third Kind would not make a good toy line. <laugh> You know, sorry, Steven, that's not very toyetic. You know, can you imagine a Richard Dreyfus action figure having a breakdown with a pile of mashed potatoes, accessory <laugh>, you know, like it would be just, yeah, you know, this is not a good idea, <laugh>. ***But it really took off though there was like this, you know, famously the Reagan Administration was really into deregulation. That was this whole thing where children's television in the US had to have some educational content. You couldn't, you couldn't just create a, a cartoon show to sell toys. And they were like, why not?***

ISAAC: Well, the '70s really belonged to the groups of people that were against marketing to children, specifically helmed by a woman named Peggy Charren and Peggy Charren, um, who founded a, a, a group called Action for Children's Television was they, they, they were, I guess, I guess during the '70s, their big thing was protecting kids' health from a food and teeth and body perspective because they were really worried about sugary cereals, essentially. So the story goes that there was a, uh, Post Heart of Oats cereal that was being marketed by a cartoon character by named Lioness the Lion Hearted who nobody remembers. And apparently there was a, a line drawn at some point in the late '60s, early '70s, where that was like, Nope, you can't use an onscreen cartoon character to market to children. If you think about it, you have that decade of the seventies or so where, you know, prior to the '70s and the '60s and, and the '50s, you've got sort of the invention of marketing directly to children through things like the Mickey Mouse Club, uh, Mr. Machine, uh, that toy was, was popular on

television, that those type of things. And then after that, you have these, this period of time where shows like Scooby-Doo and the Flintstones and stuff like that, which were hugely popular shows, didn't have really a consumer product tie in the way that we remember them in the '80s. So the '80s is a really specific decade for this, for a lot of reasons and yes, He-Man kicks it off. Uh, and, and, and arguably GI Joe was happening at the same time, the, the, the, the Hasbro reboot of GI I, Joe. But they, they kind of kick it off and accidentally fall into this. And then the explosion that happens after there is a inherent very capitalistic response or, or a conclusion out of this, where basically the free market had to regulate itself to create good content. And I think out of it, we got some pretty creative and pretty inspired stuff.

So you said that He-Man fell into this by accident. I thought that it was like Mattel was upset that they had missed out on Star Wars, and they were desperate to come up with something and they were thinking of toys to begin with, right? I mean, wasn't it like toy first, cartoon story after?

ISAAC: Yeah, exactly. I mean, like, they were still, everybody was still, because again, the, the lead up time to creating something takes so long that like to, to get a product from concept to shelf. So the big problem with Star Wars for everybody was that George basically came to the toy companies too late. At whatever time of the year that he approached all these toy companies, they're sitting there going, well, it's going to take us six or eight months or more to get product on shelves. So I'm sorry, but we can't, and, and at the time, using a movie or television franchise as a, a basis to make product was incredibly risky. And they usually didn't do it the first one to successfully do it was Six Million Dollar Man in the, in the late '70s. And, and that was a huge risk, and it was a huge, and it was like obviously, uh, a huge success for Kenner. And so Star Wars had sat down with Mattel. They said, sorry, we can't have product until March. It's not going to, we're not going to hit Christmas. We're not going to have it until March. And so forget it. And so they pass, and they go to, they end up landing on Kenner through this, this strange confluence of events. But Bernie Loomis takes the risk and sends out those, those empty boxes with those, with the, the slip that says, we owe you a figure in three months. And that was the empty box Christmas. But that idea that, that they took the risk. because Mattel, if you remember also had just done Clash of the Titans, the Harryhausen film and it bombs. So they put like a half million dollars into buying the license, half million dollars into tooling, half million dollars into inventory. All of these toys go out on the shelves. And the movie just, it doesn't do well.

No, my, my 10th birthday party was a Clash of The Titans themed birthday party <laugh

ISAAC: You got the toys, you were the one,

I bought all the toys. I never, I had all of them. They're me. I bought them all. <laugh>.

ISAAC: I love the look in your face. because you're like, wait a minute, he's wrong. This was a huge deal!

<laugh>

ISAAC: They were stuck with so many, you should have bought the rest of the inventory.

I should have, I didn't know!

ISAAC: So Mattel was sitting there panicking as they're going, we can't, we can't move this stock. What we're going to, what are we going to do? So they, they said no. And so the weird thing is the, everybody wants to think that in retrospect. They want to think that, oh, Mattel must have seen it coming. They must have known the deregulation was going to come and they could go in and, you know, do commercial cartoons that would sell product. This not at all would happen because what ended up happening is they had also at the time, because of the desperation, star Wars comes and goes, uh, or doesn't come and go, it comes and stays I should say. And, and they go, shoot, we missed this. So they make a deal with Dino DeLaurentis to do toys for Conan. So they're like sitting there going, okay, we're designing these, these toys for Conan, one of their, their main designers, a guy named Mark Taylor's drawing all these designs. And then they realize the movie rated R and they go, uh oh, we, I don't think we could do this. We're backing out. And at the same time, Mattel had this, this interesting structure as a company at the time, which is unfortunately no longer the case in almost any toy company as far as I understand it, which was there was a, a, a division within Mattel called preliminary design. And preliminary design could come up. Blue Sky, just ideas. They're all partying, they're all crazy hippies and they're doing all sorts of crazy stuff. And they could just come up with wacky ideas that were like not influenced by the marketing division. So marketing couldn't go in and say, make us this, we're just going to make this. So you've got Mark Taylor in marketing, product design, designing Conan, and they're like, well, we missed Star Wars, and we can't do Conan. And then you've got this guy named Roger Sweet who's inside the, the other division, the, uh, the, the, uh, blue sky part he was trying to come up with redesigning their big success, well, success, their big major male action product was a product called Big Jim, which was a tall figure, like a 12 inch figure that was similar to Hasbro's big GI Joe, uh, the original GI Joe. And it, and there's this guy named Derek Gable who does, who in the documentary we filmed has this great British accent. He goes, Roger said that he looked too wimpy, and everything was too wimpy. So he like bulked it up and made it massive with clay. And he said, here's like three themes. And he did like a guy with a tank for a, a tank turret for a head, a guy with a very dis like very specifically Boba Fett helmet with a point on it. So it was a missile head bullet, Boba Fett. And then he made like a furry Frank Frazetta-esque barbarian, and he called it He-Man. And so we got this guy Mark Taylor over here. He's already just sculpting and designing Conan. Let's just tell him to burn all the things that say Conan use the same sculpt and, and bulk them up and

change them. And so that's why when you look at those really, really early photos of like product tests before He-Man's toy looks like He-Man. He's wearing like the, the Frank Frazetta horned helmet. So he looks like Conan still. And still not a lot of people I think realize that that is the proto thing. And he'd al he, and you know, Mark Taylor claimed, well claimed as sort of an unfair thing to say in in his, in his story, he had been drawing this barbarian character since he was a kid and had a skull face bad guy and had a castle and he had his whole idea. So if you take all these three or four different people's ideas that were floating around, they match them up, they create a product line, they basically fall backwards into this success. But then in, in hiring this company Filmation to do an advertised commercial for the Castle Grayskullll playset, and this, the, one of the first female animation directors in the business for television of a woman named Gwen Wetzler head up, headed up a team within Filmation and they, they did full animation for this thing. And it somewhere in there, Lou Shimer at Filmation said, well hey, this could be a show. And then, you know, the rest is history.

AD BREAK

Isaac produced a documentary about Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, where he got to know the creators of it pretty well. So, I asked him to tell me about how Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird originally met.

ISAAC: Turtles is the most amazing -- which is why we've done 15 years of documentary films on it. It's the most amazing happy accident, rags to riches, just two guys holding on for dear life story. So I'll try to unpack it in such a way, like if you go to '83, '84, you've got a guy in, you know, middle Massachusetts who is a nerd and, and wants to get into Jack Kirby-esque comics and him and some other guys are doing this little paper xerox thing that people would do back then and go, okay, we've written our own little stories and our little sci-fi mag and we're going to do xerox, you know, staple together comics and hand them out free handout. That guy was named Peter Laird, but another guy named Kevin Eastman is taking a bus one day and finds this magazine on the floor. And he is like, well cool, this guy draws really cool stuff. Who is this? Goes to the office. They're like, he's like, I want to draw, you know, some stuff with you guys. And they're like, oh yeah, we're pretty much not doing this anymore, but you might like this guy Peter Laird, here's his, here's his contact information. You know, here's his mailing address. And so, you know, Kevin finds this, this comic on the bus goes to the office and asks if he can work with them. They send him the mailing address for another guy named Peter Laird. He mails him a letter, says, Hey, I really want to get into comics. I think you're into the same thing. And Peter's like, yeah, come on over, let's hang out. Kevin walks into his apartment and there's a Jack Kirby pencil page from the comic book, The Losers on the wall. And this like blows Kevin's mind because it's his favorite

comic in the world. So they immediately hit it off and they're like, Hey, let's be buds and let's draw stuff together. And to make an incredibly long, complicated story short, Kevin moves in with Peter and his and his soon to be and, and would be at that house wife who, who was going to, she was going to, um, university to become a teacher. And you know, Peter's a fledgling, you know, illustrator for, for newspapers and Kevin just moves in and they're like staying this uh, house in, in Dover, New Hampshire. And one night they're joking with each other and they're drawing stuff back and forth. And they come up with this concept of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles. These two men sit side by side, write everything together, pace everything together, pencil everything together, ink everything together, they pass the pages back and forth. So every single page of the comic book is a pure amalgamation of those two talents and those two ideas that is I think a very, very unique story within comic book history because you've got this zero ego scenario where the two of them literally were doing everything. So you didn't know where one guy's pencil or one guy's ink started or stopped. And so they go, and they do this 40 page comic book. They've got the story of the Turtles, and the Turtles is a pure melting pot of pop culture, reference influence. You've got the Turtles is, origin is basically the continuation origin of Daredevil where the same canister hits Daredevil, it falls down the sewer and it makes the Turtles. Instead of Stick, you've got Splinter instead of The Hand bad guys, you have The Foot. So you have all these things and, and of course it's very much Teen Titans and New Mutants and the cover is Ronan, like, it's the Ronan cover. You know, it's, it's all of this mashed up amalgamation of pop culture into one idea that is homage attributing everything that they love about comic books. And in a way it's actually amazing to think that the Turtles as teenagers, as characters then become not only synonymous with pop culture, but they are of pop culture. They are born of pop culture and they consume pop culture because they're teenagers in a sewer consuming things that come down the pipes and go, wow, look at this comic book. Wow, look at this VHS tape. So they're even character consumption of pop culture is within them. So it's, it's a really amazing thing that they kind of just accidentally kind of came up with and created and all of those ingredients. And then calling them Renaissance artist names and everything like that, lands this thing that then becomes infinitely malleable, and you can do anything with those characters for all of eternity.

In the episode, we covered the creation of the toys and the cartoon show. But I wasn't able to include this story about how the 1990 live action film came out. It was at the time the most successful independent film ever made. But it was not based on the cartoon.

ISAAC: It is very much based on that 1984 comic book. A lot of kids were confused because they, we were used to the cartoon, right? We, we, Splinter was a man who

mutated into a rat. Well actually no, in the comic book, he was a rat who was, uh, learned jujitsu from watching his sensei in his cage, which is confusing. And then he's like getting revenge for his sensei's murder <laugh>. So when you watch the live action film and you go, wait, that was a bit different. And, and, and a lot of the people, if it makes sense when you look back at it, because Steve Baron, the director and Jim Henson Creature Shop were all in the UK. And, and the Turtles hadn't hit there yet.

Ah.

ISAAC: They were only handed the comic books.

Ah, interesting.

ISAAC: This is what you've got. Interesting. Right? And, and there was a Hollywood guy that even the, the birth of that movie is bizarre because there was the road manager for the comedian Gallagher ended up with the rights to do this as a co, uh, as a comedy and it was going to be brutal. And it had been written by this crazy kind of Hollywood guy that has never written a thing since. And so <laugh>, so they took it to Golden Harvest, which was famous for Jackie Chan, Bruce Lee kung Fu movies, right? This is obviously where we're taking so it's independent. So they're like, okay. But they brought in Steve Baron who had directed a bunch of episodes of The Storyteller with Jim Henson, and they got Steve Baron because he had done Money for Nothing Dire Straits, Ah Ha Take On Me, Don't You Want Me Baby, Billie Jean, he had done the biggest music videos, period. <laugh>

That's my childhood, man.

ISAAC: And they're like, he's so good, he's different. We're going to bring him in his director. And he's like, this script is garbage. So he took the comic book, ripped it up into pages with this guy that wrote The Wonder Years, a guy named Todd Langdon, and they were in a hotel in LA, and they just went, okay, here's the story. It's, it's the comic book, first 10 issues of the comic book plus the one shots. This is the story. And the only thing that they really added to the story was a motivation for Shredder that he says that Steve Baron says, comes from a story he read out of the state somewhere where there was a guy that was manipulating young children in a very Fagin, and as he says, you know, very Dickens, Fagin-esque way. And it's like, oh, that's, that's interesting. So they, they gave the shredder a motivation to take and manipulate these young kids in the, in the streets to, to do what he wanted them to do. So it made this very dark, very gritty, very adult Jim Henson creature shop, independently financed out of like, uh, shall we say backdoor financing out of Hong Kong that was like not above board whatsoever to get it done because they actually lost their distribution deal in production and they had a \$4 million pay play deal with, with Henson, and they had to find money. So they made it for like \$10 million total when New Line came in at the very end, after they had to find, quote unquote find \$6 million to make the movie.

<laugh>

ISAAC: Um, and it was, yeah, there's some stories in there. So, so they then they put it out in the first weekend, it makes 20 million, boom, huge. And, and then they're like, yeah, but there's a problem here. We need to change everything and make it really colorful and kidified in the second movie <laugh>.

So how, how did all this affect Kevin and Peter's relationship?

ISAAC: That's, and that's the thing is that at the end of the day, there are these two super caring, super kind, nice people and, and it didn't make them bad people. It was, it was absolutely fascinating. But at the end of the day, when you look at managing that much business, how could it not affect two creative people and their relationship? Because again, the insanity of that fragile relationship in '84 to say these two creatives are going to write and draw and create this one piece of art as a singular piece of art. And there's these hilarious, we would pick up on these little interviews on TV where Peter would be like, they'd be asked by reporters, what's it like when two guys from Hollywood, or two guys from North Hampton get millions of dollars? And he's like, well, you know, it's the simple things in life, but we drive nice cars now. And he goes, we haven't gone Hollywood. And you can literally see Kevin on the other side of the frame going, uh, well <laugh>, because he's about to go Hollywood, right? Like Peter stayed, he's 10 years older, he's very, he's very much like a Spock kind of guy. And he stays in one place in Northampton. He builds one house, he has one kid, he stays married to one woman. He just, this is what he does. He doesn't fly anywhere. He didn't go anywhere. And Kevin's running off going, don't you want to go to the premiere in Paris? Don't you want to go here? Don't you want to go there? And he's like, no, I'm, I'm good. And Kevin's running around buying the Batmobile from the '89 movie and buying a tank for his girlfriend and buying this building and that building and this and that. Then he starts Tundra Publishing, which, which flames out and burns down horribly and costs him ungodly amounts of money. But all the while being such a generous person and so generous to artists and really wanted to like, yeah, we're going to do a publish, publishing company. I'm going to prepay you for art and you're going to do it. So he is like, you know, living the high life and going Hollywood and trying a lot of crazy and, and creative things. He buys Heavy Metal Magazine, right? And saves Heavy Metal.

Oh, I didn't know that.

ISAAC: Yeah. And so he, Heavy Metal magazine from the '90s on is Kevin Eastman

Oh wow.

ISAAC: Kevin's wife, Julie Strain is on every cover. And then they did the fact two movie, the second Heavy Metal movie, and Kevin, like single handedly takes the original Heavy Metal movie and pulls all those music rights and makes it work for home video because it was a mess, right? because you couldn't have home video with all those amazing songs. So he gets that out to the world. He keeps that thing alive all the way into the, well into the 2000s and eventually sells it. And now it's unfortunately Demising, but that's, you know, not his fault. And so, so he did all that, that stuff. And at

some point along the line, if you look at the progression of the Turtles, they stopped doing comics together. They, they, like, after about issue 10 or 12, they, they really couldn't, they had to focus on business. And, and then that drives them apart.

We heard in the episode that the tension between them came to a breaking point with the live action TV show made by Saban, the company that did Power Rangers. Eventually Kevin sold his half of the shares to Peter, who sold the whole franchise to Viacom.

ISAAC: So, for 20 plus years they really didn't see each other. They spoke a little bit off and on. And then in, uh, 2015, we brought them both, they had, they had done a signing together the day before at the, at the anniversary celebration at Rochester, at the, the Comic-Con where they, or the little convention where they had launched the Turtle book. And they'd done a signing together for the first time in like 20 years. And it was five years into us working with them. And we said, hey, you know, we're really close to Dover, New Hampshire <laugh>, why don't we go, why don't we go head over to, to where you guys invented the Turtles in '84. And Peter was the one who kind of said that day, you know what, we could, we could probably go do that. And, and the next day, Kevin and Peter and me and Randall and Mark, my business partners and, and Kevin's wife and Peter's daughter all, um, went over to this empty lot where this house was in Dover, New Hampshire. And I said, listen, we had already delivered our first documentary to Paramount, it was going through QC, and we couldn't really change anything. But I said, here, I'm going to put a mic on you. Just go and walk on the, the lawn and say whatever you want. And they walked around for like an hour and a half and it was amazing. It was like they reminisced about everything and they, everything that was this and that, we created this, and this is what we did together. And they, they had this really kind of coming together moment. So that's why we had to do a second documentary, which is eventually coming out.

That's it for this bonus episode of Imaginary Worlds. We'll be back with regular episodes next week.