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MOVE OVER COWBOYS, IT'S "ACTION FIGURES"

Thirty years ago the neighborhoods of America were seemingly being overrun by marauding bands of youths armed with shiny pistols. Sometimes masked, and always decked out in distinctive headgear, these gangs would scamper from yard to yard or street to street, pistols issuing exploding noise and puffs of acrid smoke. Their collective battle cry was often "I got you!" echoed by an equally loud "You did not!" followed by another snapping round of gunplay.

Who were these gangs? Where did they go? They were children of the 50's who, inspired by the old western heroes of the films of the 30's and 40's (early television's mainstay), were playing

that time-honored pastime, "Cowboys & Indians" with their cap guns and cowboy hats.

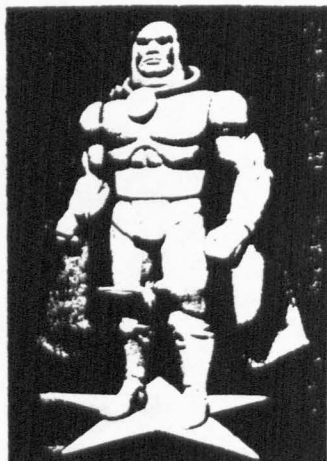
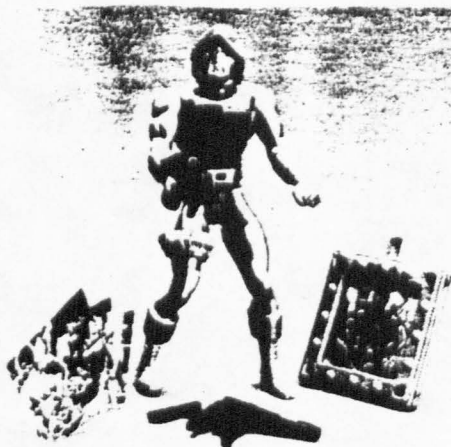
This fantasy play seemed to be an all but forgotten game of American youth, being replaced by new interests and new heroes in the high-tech, rock 'n roll, fantasy & science fiction world of the 80's. However, social scientists have often stated that such fantasy play-acting during youth is a normal and necessary part of growing up and development. The game of dress-up "Cowboys & Indians" must have been replaced by a different sort of activity which supplies the same kind of fulfillment.

With a little bit of observation on the playtime activities of a number of 8-year-olds (just the sort

who would have been out playing "Cowboys & Indians" thirty years ago) we here at *Licensing International* took note of their main fantasy interest: heroic action figures.

Three decades past, the thought of boys playing with "dolls," even a "G.I. Joe" doll, was often looked upon as being out of the norm, to say the least. With the coining of the "action figure" term, the "problem" of boys playing with miniature play figures was seemingly solved and the action figure segment of the toy industry came into its own. It took off here in the 80's "faster than a speeding bullet!" And those figures depicting a well-known super-hero (i.e., a "licensed property") are at forefront!

Mary Moebus, licensing director for DC Comics Inc., a division of Warner Publishing of Warner Communications, said, "I would totally agree with the fact that children may very well be projecting their play fantasy into the action figures. They become aware of fashion now at an earlier age and give up playing dress-up earlier."



Mattel's "Dr. Doom" from Marvel's "Secret Wars" collection and "Darkseid", Kenner's DC Comics' "Super Powers" personification of evil.

About three years ago DC Comics decided that there was an opportunity to do something with their toy license and consolidated a number of toy categories together. As a result, they talked to a trio of toy companies who each spent a day at the company's New York offices learning the heroic characters' histories. After the three companies "pitched" to DC, they established the "Super Powers" line of action figures licensed out to the Kenner Toy Company featuring such DC super-heroes as "Superman", "Batman", "Robin", "Wonder Woman" and others.

The concept of the "hero" is the anchor of the action figure toy category just as a solid toy line is the anchor of a licensing program, said Moebus, and built into that "hero" concept is the "good versus evil" idea.

"The old trademark, 'Super Heroes,' which we share with the Marvel Comics Group," Moebus pointed out, "really only emphasizes one element of the license. 'Super Powers,' our umbrella title we've adopted for the entire licensing program, broadens so that both the good and the evil are incorporated in the trademark. Initially we introduced eight heroes and only four villains with the emphasis being 'here are the heroes to save the day.' We lacked a single evil force that was so large, so threatening that it required the combined resources of our heroes to combat it. So in '85 we've refreshed a line of characters created by Jack Kirby, 'Darkseid' and his world. 'Darkseid' is truly the largest, most threatening, most evil villain in the universe and has the power to soli-

cit all the other super villains to do his bidding. It makes it a very simple conflict. It's 'Darkseid' and his minions versus 'Superman' and the heroes. That makes it easy for the young child, our most ardent fans, to understand."

"The 'Darkseid' storyline," explained Moebus further, "will appear in the 'Super Powers' comic book which we publish to support the license, and on Saturday morning TV's 'Super Friends. The Legendary Super Powers' and in advertising and wherever possible in media we control."

The "good versus evil" concept was most clearly illustrated on the big screen in the epic "Star Wars" trilogy as "Luke Skywalker" and the "Rebel Alliance" defeated "Darth Vader" and the "Empire." Maggie Young, vice president, merchandise/licensing, of Lucasfilm spoke of the "Star Wars" action figure line also licensed by Kenner Toys. "The action figure line of toys," she recalled, "was there from the very first of the 'Star Wars' movies. All the initial licensing was handled by 20th Century Fox. They handled everything through the first year. Lucasfilm took over in June of 1978.

"There are over 80 different figures in the line," she commented, "and it's almost impossible to get the exact numbers on which is the most popular individual figure. But I think kids buy both the good guys and the bad guys since they want to either re-enact scenes from the movies or make up their own fantasy adventures."

In September, ABC-TV will be launching two Lucasfilm car-

toon shows on Saturday mornings. "'Droids' and 'Ewoks' will both be premiering then," said Young, "but ABC has yet to announce the exact times the shows will be running. However, we introduced a new selection of action figures of 'Star Wars' robots and 'Ewoks' to coincide with the debut of these two programs."

Speaking on the continuing popularity of action figures in general and "Star Wars" action figures in particular, Young said, "The demand for 'Star Wars' action figures has been pretty spectacular from the very beginning. However, we're seeing some stiff competition since there are no new 'Star Wars' movies anticipated for the near future."

Kids Demand Action Figures

"We had a triple-feature release 'Star Wars', 'The Empire Strikes Back' and 'Return of the Jedi' for one day back on March 28th and the enthusiasm and interest is still very, very strong for the entire series, and we still want to maintain a high visibility. The cartoon shows will aid us in that area. I can't say which new 'Droid' or 'Ewok' characters are going to have the highest visibility on the upcoming shows without spilling the beans.

"In conclusion," Young speculated by saying, "I think that action figures are great for kids, and I see no diminished market for such toys now or in the foreseeable future."

The other large "comic book super hero factory" in New York City is Marvel Comics, a division of Cadence Industries, home of such notable super-doers as "Spider-Man," "Captain America," "Daredevil" and the "Hulk." Steve Herman is Marvel's director of licensing and he expressed his views on Mattel's action figure line featuring the Marvel heroes involved in the "Secret Wars."

"'Secret Wars'," stated Herman, "came about through demand of the Marvel Comics Group's readership. It came about from the editorial side to link the major characters, the super-her-

oes and the super-villains in a major confrontation in the comic books. Mattel expressed interest in becoming involved in this major comic publishing effort through their 'Secret Wars' line of action figures."

"In Marvel's case specifically and in most cases generally there is a built-in play value in having built-in antagonism, the built-in conflict. I don't think the villains are as popular as the heroes, although they certainly have a following of their own. In kid's actual play, there is the necessity of the villain as the counterpoint of the hero. In the play value of the line there has to be a substantial 'bad guy' grouping."

"I think that's at least partially true," says Herman when asked about action figures as a substitute for "dress-up" play. "When we were kids there were more 'real life' action-oriented television, movies, etcetera. There were cowboy movies, cowboy TV shows and it was fairly easy to dress up as a cowboy. Just strap on your six guns. Now, most of the media exposure for kids is more fantasy oriented than reality-based. It's a lot harder to be 'Darth Vader' than a 'bad guy' in a Western. Fantasy, to be realized for a kid now, is more difficult to achieve on a personal level, and easier to achieve on a fantasy level through an action figure."

"It's a category that's become crowded to say the least," Herman says, "but it's strong, and an excellent outlet for kids."

"Mattel's 1986 additions to the action figure line are still under wraps," Herman admitted, "but we're working with them on the development of molds and prototypes of the characters they'll be introducing."

Marvel operates as both licensee and licensor. They are licensors in the case of the "Secret Wars" action figures, but are licensees in the case of "G.I. Joe," "Sectaurs" and the "Transformers."

"Marvel was involved," Herman pointed out, "right from the very beginning, in those three cases, in the creation of the fantasy environments in which those toy lines participate. We recog-

nized that these storylines were also viable in a comic book line with the action, adventure and fantasy components."

"G.I. Joe" and "Transformers" are both licensed from the toy lines of Hasbro/Bradley, while "Sectaurs" is licensed from Coleco.

In the case of both "Sectaurs" and "Transformers", the manufactureres have gone one step (or more) beyond "just" the action figure. In an effort to be more competitive, "Sectaurs", humanoid insect warrior action figures, each figure, have a symbiotic relationship with a giant insect

Play Value Is Enhanced With "Good vs. Evil" Action Theme.

mount. These "mounts" are actually gloves the child slips on to his or her hand to make the "insect" move.

"Transformers" are robot action figures that "transform" into different vehicles.

Marvel's Herman describes robot toys as "second generation action figures," but they are "action figures," he says. Marvel is the licensee for comic books of the "Transformers" robot line. "There are two kinds of play that can take place," he said, "with each form the toy can take, figure and vehicle."

While no one sees any end to the popularity of action figures featuring heroes, there are some who view heroic figures as a supplement and enhancement to other action toys. Kenner and M.A.D. (Marketing and Design Service of General Mills Toy Group) have joined forces for the "M.A.S.K. (Mobile Armored Strike Kommand)" toy line.

"M.A.S.K. began," explained M.A.D.'s Director of Licensing, Alan Gordon, "as an internal concept within Kenner. The concept involves the story of men and machines working together and how ordinary men and machines



"Sectaurs' Zak & Bitaur."

become extraordinary men and machines with tremendous fighting powers. For example, the 'ordinary' Thunderhawk Camero becomes the 'Go-Wing Fighter,' the ordinary "Matt Trakker," who is the leader of 'M.A.S.K.', puts on his mask and then becomes the leader of the 'M.A.S.K.' and has special fighting powers.

"Of course there always has to be a bad side, so there is 'Miles Mayhem' who is the leader of 'V.E.N.O.M., the Vicious Evil Network of Mayhem.' 'Mayhem' was a traitor who was once the leader of 'M.A.S.K.' Both sides have special fighting machines and special masks; good versus evil.

"Throughout history there has always been good and evil," Gordon continued, "but it's not necessarily our goal to establish conflict for play value."

"'M.A.S.K.' didn't start out as just action figures. Every package Kenner sells," Gordon pointed out, "contains a vehicle, action figure and then a mask which goes over the action figure, which gives the child nearly a total play scenario there.

"We view 'M.A.S.K.' as fitting into the strong, 'boy's action' category which it can be licensed into; other toy categories which Kenner is not active in such as Halloween costumes and bicycles. Number two is your apparel area such as boys wear, your tops and bottoms, pajamas, sneakers, socks, what have you. Then domestics is always a strong market, sheets and then your stationery line, school supplies, posters . . ."

In almost every case, exposure in other media has been a major concern for action figure toy lines not inspired by television or movies. One of the most popular of these other-media representations of the action figure characters has been the television cartoon. And in more and more instances, licensees and licensors are moving away from the traditional Saturday morning time slots.

"This Spring," said Gordon, "we have five one-half hour episodes, syndicated nationally, which will run Monday through Friday in the same time slot every day as miniseries. And in the Fall we will go on the air with 65 episodes, Monday through Friday in an after-school time slot running for the entire season, being repeated two times during the year. These will be produced by DIC, the same people who do "Inspector Gadget".

Carl Macek, producer of the "Robotech" cartoons licensed by Harmony Gold here in the United States spoke on the differences between selling a licensed line of heroic robots in the U.S. and Japan.

"In Japan," he explained, no cartoon gets on the air unless the toy companies support it beforehand. Here, we many times produce television and film properties and the licensees come afterwards."

"Robotech" originated in Japan as a cartoon series, but the

U.S. version did not debut until this last April, to rave reviews around the country.

"What I tried to do," Macek explained, "is change the 'film syntax' of the original cartoons, changing the order and the timing sequence of scenes. Along the same lines, we've licensed it out to a comic book company out of Philadelphia called Comico. Their unique approach has three 'Robotech' titles coming out with intertwined storylines so that a new one

Robots Demand Equal Time.

appears every week. They parallel episodes of the the show so that if someone misses it, they won't get lost."

The "Robotech" concept is a huge undertaking. "As it is now," said Macek, "it's a 42 1/2-hour miniseries." Again, keeping away from tradition, the cartoon show is syndicated during an after-school time slot, five days a week rather than on Saturday morning."

"Besides Comico," Macek pointed out, "we're also in negotiation with a major toy manufacturer. They're aiming at a 'very complete' toy line, one with longevity. An apparel line from Pilgram Sportswear is also in the works."

"Robotech" will soon begin to have original U.S. stories produced, retaining the work from the Japanese animation studio. "We're looking for a time when there will be an episode of 'Robotech' on every weekday, 260 different episodes telling one long story crossing 60 years of events."

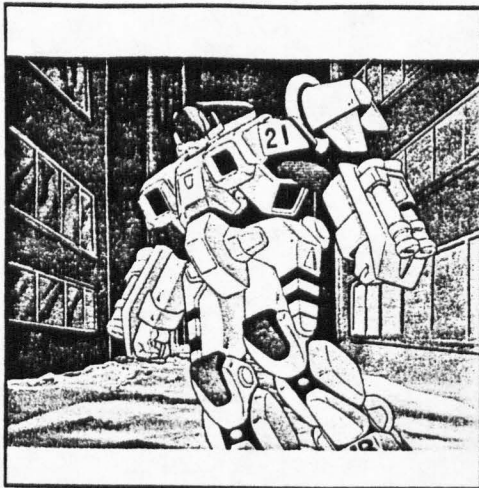
Such long range planning seems to be the norm in licensing characters.

MCA/Universal's "Voltron" has a similar Japanese history, existing originally as a Japanese cartoon supported by a toy line. In the U.S., "Voltron" has also enjoyed a certain amount of a "cult" following from the comic book and science fiction fans.

Tonka's "GoBots" utilize the vehicular concept and have also established a background history that is being carried over in their licensing efforts such as a line of successful storybooks from Western Publishing.

"Robo Force" was a line of robot toys created internally at CBS/Ideal. Ronni Pollack, director, character licensing, at CBS/Ideal said, " 'Robo Force' was based on a gut feeling when we wanted something as an alternative toy back in 1982. Of course since that time robots have become a phenomenon. The fact is, all robot toys help all other robot toys.

"One of the things that helps the sales of these lines is their collectibility. Kids want to have a complete set, even if they



New cartoon series hail "Robotech" as well as "Hulk Hogan."

have a particular favorite or favorites. There is a pre-conceived idea of conflict, of 'beat-em-up' that goes back to the 'good guys' wearing the white hats.

"Color consideration is important to us in that respect," Pollock pointed out, "our 'good' robots have light colored bases while the 'bad' robots have dark bases.

"'Robo Force' is licensed out for such things as sleepers, flat art pieces, watches and clocks . . . we are serious in our roles as licensors. It's a new opportunity in the non-toy end of the spectrum."

With the robot toys and action figures' huge success in the young boys' market, it was only a matter of time before the gender line would be crossed. Some of the figure lines *do* have super-hero-

ines, most notably Kenner's "Wonder Woman," part of the DC Comic's "Super Powers" line. However, in most cases, these superwomen are part of a collectible line that is aimed at and which includes, mostly males.

Beverly Cannady, director of licensing at Mattel was very enthusiastic about "She-Ra, Princess of Power," recently introduced at New York's Toy Fair.

"'She-Ra,'" she explained, "is a spin-off from our 'He-Man and the Masters of the Universe' line. We knew that approximately 30% of the viewers of the 'Masters' television show were girls, so we thought it would be wise to introduce a whole new line directed to them. But we also are aware that girls' play patterns' are different.

"We examined other toy

lines at first, taking note especially of the niche that our 'Barbie' doll occupies. We realized that a female action figure couldn't just be a copy of 'He-Man'. We had to be aware of such things as glamor, hairplay and fashionable looks.

"That's why we're calling the 'She-Ra, Princess of Power' line 'action fashion figures'. It's a new establishment of a new direction and it has already been licensed for lunch kits and other items."

"Golden Girl" has also entered the female action figure market with figures by Lewis Galoob. Leisure Concepts has already licensed the character for such things as Halloween costumes, stickers, juvenile books, girls sleepwear, puzzles, etc.

The female action figures are, simply by being directed to the female market, a step away from the original action figure concept. However, they still are solidly based in their fantasy origins. Action figures based on real life characters seem to present wholly different problems. Recent attempts to market figures based on highly popular rock stars seem to have met with a certain amount of failure. But now there appears on the horizon a new series of characters (and "characters" seems a particularly appropriate description) which are, among other things, being introduced as action figures.

DIC Enterprises is the exclusive licensing agent for the World Wrestling Federation and LFN introduced, at Toy Fair, action figures of such wrestling stars as "Hulk Hogan," "Rowdy Roddy Piper", "Captain Lou Albano" and other wrestling "heroes". This September, CBS will be featuring "Hulk Hogan's Rock 'n' Wrestling," a combination live-action and cartoon program. With this kind of support (both this show and the "real" wrestling matches that have made these "characters" fall into the "heroic" category), this line of figures based on real life personalities might fare better than the rock stars who were only viewed sporadically on videos.

To admit that the World Wrestling Federation personalities might still fall well within the realm of fantasy, however, would open debate that we really don't wish to dwell upon at this point in time!



Straight from the sky, it's "Super Ted!"

People's definition of "hero" differs for every type of hero there is; from the "real life" characters such as the World Wrestling Federation members to the "super-heroes" of the DC Comics and Marvel Comics Group. There is still another "hero" type who should be counted among these stalwarts. He is the heroic teddy bear, "Super Ted" from Pedalcraft Demonstrations Ltd., licensed through IMG.

IMG's Jeff Brown spoke on the origin of "Super Ted" and the character's unique appeal. "The original story began," Brown said, "with Mike Young, who was a producer of television shows in Great Britain. One night while trying to finish a script for a detective series he had to tell a story to his son to get him to sleep without being afraid of the dark.

"Tying a handkerchief around the neck of his son's teddy bear, he told the boy that 'Super Ted' would protect him from anything that was there after the lights were out. After that, his son would not go to sleep at night without a story of 'Super Ted'.

"Unknown to Mike," Brown revealed, "Richard, his son, had been going to school every day and telling the stories of 'Super Ted' to his class. The teacher told Mike how much they all enjoyed the 'Super Ted' stories and, being a producer, Mike thought that since the kids liked 'Super Ted' so much, maybe there's something here. He went to a publisher and the first stories were printed. His wife made the first 'Super Ted' teddy bears.

"Over the last four years, 'Super Ted' has gone on to become a hit on Disney Home Video, the Disney Channel, books by Random House, etc.

"It's been sold in 40 countries around the world and there's a theme park in the works in Wales and a major motion picture in offing."

A New Fantasy Outlet For Kids.

Although not in the least bit traditional, Brown stresses that "Super Ted" is considered a "hero", "as is his sidekick 'Spotty Man,'" Brown said. "But one of the things you'll find in the show and in the books is that it's a non-violent property, which is unusual for a 'hero'. 'Super Ted' never hits anybody, he never shoots anybody. When he captures the 'baddies,' they know they're in an awesome presence and surrender. And 'Super Ted' always turns them over to the proper authorities. But the stories are action-packed and full of adventure."

Keeping more with tradition, "Super Ted" does have his collection of "baddies" such as "Texas Pete" who is the head villain, and his two cronies, "Bulk", a bumbling idiot and "Skeleton". These are the three 'baddies', but Brown does admit they are going to be introducing more in the near future.

Although existing as three different sized plush toys, the "Super Ted" line will be invading the action figure category with toys by R. Dakin. "We've already approved many of the molds," Brown

told us, "and they will, I believe, be shown at Toy Fair next year."

Speaking with the various licensees and licensors involved with the marketing of today's action figures clearly illustrates that they recognize the new fantasy outlet for today's youth. And though some of them enhance the basic figure with vehicles or other play pieces, the basic figure has a solid hold on the very center of the toy market. Further, the action figure has an even stronger hold and dependence on licensing — both as licensee and licensor.

There appears to be no end in sight for the action figures as they are already a firmly established staple in licensing and the toy market. Even if Hollywood brings back the Western as a popular entertainment focus, it's more likely that the neighborhood kids of the 80's will buy the action figure of a new cowboy star than to strap on a pair of six gun cap pistols.

Instead of "I got you" being the battle cry, we might be hearing, "I got your action figure" — in more ways than one. ■

—Jack C. Harris