

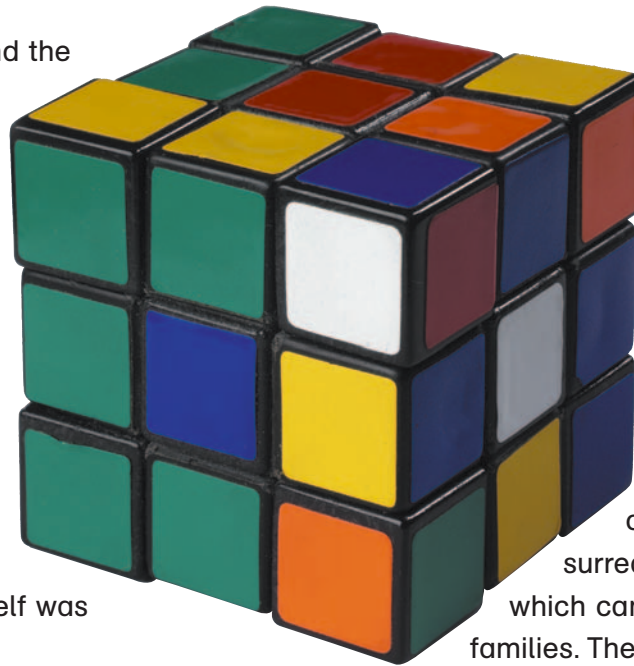
1980s



Consumer research was very much part of the production process in the US since the 1960s. In Britain, little consumer research had been done before the 1980s and little design input went into good advertising. In fact pre-war advertising as evidenced by the catalogues of Lines Bros. and Kiddicraft was far more eye catching. Combined with the difficulties thrown up by the current economic climate; increased imports, the rising cost of raw materials, increased labour costs and removal of fixed prices, it was inevitable that even large businesses could not guarantee long term security and survival. Desperate measures were tried by some, but by the beginning of the 1980s over sixteen British companies had collapsed including some of the major players; Lesney, Mettoy, Berwick Timpo and Airfix. Eventually these were to be absorbed by other companies in the US and the Far East, as well as in Britain. However, many major British companies managed to survive including some venerable examples, such as Britains, Spears, Hornby, Waddingtons, Galt and Cassidy Brothers.

Torquil Norman started Bluebird Toys in 1983, his first product being the now famous Big Yellow Teapot House. This was one of the first 'container' houses which broke away from the traditional architectural style of dolls' houses in favour of this light and colourful family home. He is also famous for his Big Red Fun Bus and Big Jumbo Fun

Plane, Polly Pocket and the Mighty Max range, as well as the invention of the plastic lunch box. Other companies such as the Cassidy Bros. built up a remarkable range of child sized domestic appliances, modelled on real brand products, authentic to the point that the name of the brand itself was on the toy.



Then there were fantasy toys which took off in the 1980s with cute, 'caring' toys such as Sylvanian Families, My Little Pony, Care Bears, Wuzzles, and the Smurfs. There was no doubt that children loved these surreal fantasy figures which came in groups, or families. There was a choice of

characters within each group and the choosing of a particular one allowed children to feel important. Gary Cross in his book *Kids' Stuff* expresses the view that unlike traditional toys these were so far removed from reality that they encouraged play that did not involve preparing girls for future roles as mothers. Care Bears were large, cuddly and unthreatening, offering comfort at times when parents or carers could not and they all had different identities. The hybrid Wuzzles, which were mixtures of animals, birds and insects were fun and quite different from each other. Although they ostensibly looked alike, children perceived them as different from each other and

It was, however, video and computer technology that proved to be completely addictive by the end of the 1980s, occupying a substantial part of almost every child's leisure time. The importance of computer technology went from strength to strength in the 1980s and 1990s. Games, such as Atari's Space Invaders, could now be played on hand-held consoles. Video and computerised games were the fastest growing part of the toy industry in the 1980s.

The technology was now available to manufacture the first interactive 'speak and spell' toys which even looked like robots and computers, bringing fun to learning by 'talking' to children. These included Alphie, the Electronic Robot and the Vtech revolution with its 'first' computers for pre-school children. These new educational toys happily co-existed with the more traditional learning toys manufactured by Galt and Living and Learning amongst others. The market for these pre-school toys was growing rapidly, particularly in the US.

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Pictures opposite page top to bottom

Sylvanian Families, 1985-1998
 Courtesy of Tomy UK and Simon Harwood of The Sylvanian Shop, 68 Mountgrave Road, London, N5 2LT

Masters of the Universe, 1983-1987
 Courtesy of Mattel

Cabbage Patch Kids, 1985
 Courtesy of 4Kids Entertainment International

Star Wars toys made by MPC, Kenner and Palitoy, 1977-1980

Above

Rubik's cube originally made by Ideal toys, 1979



accordingly related to each one in a different way. Fantasy toys were appealing and funny and grown-ups did not understand them. When a child was allowed to choose, the fun part lay in choosing one which you knew that no one else had chosen and was yours alone.

An interesting development during this decade was that toys started to become collectables for adults. This was partly for investment reasons as toys were now becoming collectors' items, increasingly bought and sold at auctions including Sotheby's and Christie's, and partly because adults bought things that they could not have been able to afford as

children, often to share with their own children. Gary Cross, in his book, discusses how Cabbage Patch Kids, attracted not only children but also adults, particularly women. Cabbage Patch Kids were offered for adoption, each with their own birth certificates in 1983 and 1984. The fact that 20 million were sold by the end of 1984 speaks eloquently for the brilliance of the marketing campaign which had turned a basically ugly doll into a potentially loveable 'orphan' found in a cabbage patch waiting to be 'adopted' by some caring person. Some women for whom the dolls were 'babies' took their dolls out with them, strapping them safely into their car seats. Cross also points out that women liked them because they reminded them of their doll play in childhood and also because they wanted their children to share in the experience. Appearing in 1983 the doll created stampedes of people trying to buy them.

Other crazes included the Rubik's Cube, invented by Erno Rubik, a lecturer of Interior Design in Budapest. The first cubes were sold in local toyshops in 1977 before Ideal Toys brought the cube to the West in 1979. It won prizes for outstanding inventions in Hungary and in 1981 it became an exhibit at the New York Museum of Modern Art. For about two years (in 1980 and 1981 it won the Toy of the Year award) everybody with a cube was seen frenziedly, trying to solve the puzzle usually without success. Eventually demand dried up as almost everyone had one.

Transformer toys were robots which could be changed into weapons or vehicles and vice versa. The idea had originated in a Japanese inspired series of Micronauts which had been released under licence in the US in the late 1970s. The early transformers did not capture children's imagination until Hasbro came up with the idea of creating stories woven around them and this proved successful. The film Transformers: The Movie set in the year 2005 was released in 1986 and the craze for transformers began to grow. The idea that a toy could be transformed from a robot to a vehicle proved irresistibly fascinating.

The popularity of sci-fi toys linked to films and cartoons like Star Wars and Masters of the Universe was demonstrated by the huge amount of merchandising at this time. Masters of the Universe first appeared in the early 1980s as a toy line developed by Mattel. The initial idea was to create an action figure range from the Conan the Barbarian film. The marketing department deemed it an unsuitable role model for small children. So the Masters of the Universe action figures were born with hero He-Man and villain Skeletor.

The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles were another popular toy. They were ordinary turtles which grew to human size after coming into contact with a mutagen. They were hugely successful, probably because they were so different from the action heroes that children were used to. The turtles lived in sewers, ate pizza and



were taught the martial art of ninja from a rat and parents did not like them.

The new toys horrified those that felt that the new war toys were a threat to childhood, using replicas of sophisticated modern weapons as the main subject for play. Movements such as Peace through Play were founded to campaign against war toys.

Top left

Love-a-Lot Care Bear made by Kenner, 1983
Courtesy of Care Bears from Vivid Imaginations

Above

Big Yellow Teapot made for Bluebird Toys, 1981
Courtesy of Mattel