

1990s



The last decade of the 20th century was characterised by two principal concerns and, in many ways, achievements; the first was the growing awareness of environmental issues and the second being the huge growth in popularity of video games and its implications.

One of the great advances of the 1990s was that the British Toy and Hobby Association launched the Approved Lion Mark Scheme as a symbol of toy safety. The European toy safety directive was adopted by the British government in July 1989 and the Toys Regulations came into effect in January 1990. As in most responsible industries, the toy industry was becoming increasingly aware of the need for ethical, environmental and ecological concerns to be taken into account. Awareness of the effects of globalisation on developing economies was elevating the profile of ethical toy production. Concern over child labour abuses prompted the International Council of Toy Industries (formed in 1974) to address the issue of lawful, safe and healthy work and environments and practices within the toy industry. Toy safety continued to be a major concern with questions raised over the suitability of materials previously considered safe, like PVC. Several companies started manufacturing toys which taught children about environmental matters; some kits were recreational whilst others were also of scientific merit.

The sale of compact discs, computers and computer games expanded dramatically in the 1980s and 1990s. Children were hypnotically drawn to these, happily spending many hours in their own company. By the end of the century over half the toys sold were video games, outselling traditional games and toys. The market for video games in Britain was by now the largest in Europe and the third largest in the world after the US and Japan. One major player was Nintendo's Game Boy, introduced in the US in 1991, it won many awards.

Children, irresistibly drawn to video games, were becoming extremely sophisticated in their requirements. They became acquainted with technology at a very early stage and the impact of global markets began to give them a much wider choice of products to spend their pocket money on than ever before, including mobile telephones, sportswear preferably with designer labels and music compact discs. Toys and games were just part of a long list. The global shift towards video games was no doubt also strengthened by an upsurge of interest from adults, particularly young men. Whilst this was great news for the video games market and no doubt such technological advances could be seen as a positive development on the one hand, on the other hand there was and continues to be much debate within the media about the effect this may have on children's leisure time.

There were strong warnings from the medical profession that children were spending far too much time in front of the



computer, playing with hand held consoles or looking after Cyberpets like Tamagotchi. Parents were warned that children were running the risk of becoming

Pictures opposite page top to bottom

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, made by Playmates, 1980s

Courtesy of 4Kids Entertainment International

Gameboy made in Japan by Nintendo, early 1990s

Courtesy of 4Kids Entertainment International

Tracy Island, 1992

Courtesy of Vivid Imaginations Ltd.

Britannia Beanie Baby, made in China, 1997

Courtesy of Ty.Inc

Above

Tamagotchi, made in Thailand, 1997

Courtesy of Bandai UK Ltd.

reclusive, of not being able to bond with other children, of becoming unhealthy and obese. Warnings such as these continued right through to the 2000s, remaining largely unresolved. This did not deter children and the popularity of computer games has continued to grow.

One of the reasons for their popularity lies in the fact that there was little innovation in the toy industry at the time computer games became prominent. Market conditions tend to fluctuate according to demand for crazes and few new toys became crazes at this time. The situation changed when the film *Toy Story* was screened. First shown in 1996 this was the first film to be released for both conventional and e-projection use. The film triggered a huge demand for the Buzz Lightyear figure and, ironically reawakened a nostalgic interest in toys that were no longer trendy such as Mr Potato Head, Etch-a-Sketch, Slinky dog and the Cowboy. It was also no doubt one of the reasons why some old toys started to become collectable. The market was no longer perceived to be entirely child based; adults who had not been able to afford coveted toys in their childhood could now buy them and did. Other old favourites that had comforted the parents of the new generation also made a comeback, somewhat updated, including the Thunderbirds' Tracy Island and Twister. Many manufacturers have reintroduced brands and lines based on popular 1980s cartoons. By the end of the decade, toys that were popular in the 1980s, such as Mattel's He-Man and Play Along's Care Bears and My Little Pony had been reintroduced.

Amongst the new toys, 'caring' toys

became popular, small and portable; the Tamagotchi cyberpets, cute Beanie Babies and Polly Pocket's little worlds in miniature in particular. Tamagotchi are small plastic eggs with a screen and control buttons, a pet for children to look after and keep well for as long as possible. Children's need to imagine themselves in caring roles had not changed; what had changed was the shape and form of the object of affection, which no longer had to be doll or teddy bear shaped. The four technological Teletubbies caused a sensation when they appeared, winning the Toy of the Year award in 1996 and triggering fights in toy shops amongst well intentioned parents desperate to buy them for their children. Created by Anne Wood and Andrew Davenport for Ragdoll Ltd. the Teletubbies live happily together in Teletubbyland in an underground dome shaped home where the Noo-Noo vacuum cleaner tidies up after them. This programme, which has won over 13 awards, appeals to babies and young children because it is based on strong images and repetition activities. In stark



contrast, the computer game Tomb Raider, featuring Lara Croft in hotpants and a tank top, became a cultural icon discussed by academics, newspapers, radio and adolescent boys.

Old style favourites such as building kits and rocking horses were still in evidence such as K'nex, a new construction kit for children; it gave them a choice of options and a flexibility that allowed them to build things that other kits could not do thereby offering a challenge to Meccano and Lego and other long established makes.

New crazes were Pokémon and Pogs. Pokémon was the creation of a Japanese games inventor, Satoshi Tajiri, who had a love of insects and films about monsters. He devised the original games for Nintendo's Game Boy in the early 1990s. The purpose of the games was to train, fight and collect monsters. Pokémon then moved to television and then to trading cards. There are 155 different monsters. However, this seemingly harmless pastime caused many a riot amongst children building up their card collections and had to be banned from several school playgrounds. Last but not least is the Harry Potter merchandise, which was produced after the phenomenal success of the books by J.K. Rowling and the films based on them.

In the US toys targeted at pre-school aged children have been enormously popular over the last few years despite their high cost. This success is mainly due to highly developed educational electronic systems like LeapPad, teaching pre-school children about subjects such as reading and mathematics. The system has generated



interest in toys for pre-school children, who are able to enjoy items with a greater level of sophistication than ever before. These educational toys are the springboard toys for future learning, which will become ever more sophisticated.

Left

Mighty Morphin Power Rangers made in China by Bandai, 1995

Above

Ultra Hair Barbie made in the US by Mattel, 1991