

# Designer Toys: Redesigning Childhood

CHELSIE CHAN



*WRITER'S COMMENT: When I took UWP 101, Melissa told us to write an essay analyzing the social implications of an everyday object of our choosing. I decided to write my essay on designer toys, simply because they fascinate me and because I have been collecting them myself for several years. My essay evaluates the rise of designer toys against the rise of the Millennial/Peter Pan Generation and analyzes the psychology of these objects in this particular group. As a card-holding member of the Millennials (and one who collects designer toys at that), I was particularly interested in finding out what these 3-inch pieces of vinyl could possibly have to say about an entire demographic — especially one that older generations criticize because we just can't seem to "grow up already!" In my research, I read Hara Estroff Marano's A Nation of Wimps, in which she argued that the recent economic downturn and overprotective helicopter parents created this generation of fragile, infantilized individuals. Designer toys thus became the physical manifestation of the "Peter Pan syndrome" in Millennials, who view designer toys as a preserver of childhood.*

*INSTRUCTOR'S COMMENT: I have to admit that when Chelsie Chan first proposed to focus on collectible designer toys for her quarter-long research project in my UWP 101 class, I did not know what a designer toy was. An image of a Star Wars figurine, pristine and still in its original packaging, popped into my mind, not the made-for-adults, street-wise vinyl characters Chelsie presents in this essay. My lack of familiarity with this object, however, reinforces one of Chelsie's presuppositions in "Designer Toys: Redesigning Childhood": these toys hold special appeal for members of her generation, not mine. To explain this appeal, Chelsie draws upon recent research on the social and economic factors that have influenced the childhood and adolescence of the Millennial generation and that distinguish this generation as adults from the preceding ones. While the toys themselves may be aimed at a particular generation, Chelsie's essay appeals to all of us. She not only calls our attention to a trend, but also helps us to make sense of how it has developed and why*

*it deserves our attention. In other words, she has succeeded in doing what we expect of our contemporary cultural critics.*

—Melissa Bender, University Writing Program

In its eleven-year history, Kidrobot has become America's most recognizable producer and retailer of designer toys. Founded in 2002 by Paul Budnitz, the company has grown from a two-man garage operation into a global tastemaker in the world of designer toys, raking in over \$15 million in annual sales (Dean). What started as a creative outlet for dissatisfied toy collectors from the hipster backstreets of Hong Kong and Tokyo, the designer toy scene has developed into an international subculture of vinyl toy enthusiasts. Although they have established a thriving web presence in the form of online magazines, blogs and annual awards ceremonies, designer toys are still relatively unknown in the grander scheme of things. In the same way, the world of designer toys is kind of like Burning Man<sup>1</sup>— you don't realize how large the community is until you become a part of it. This albeit under-the-radar rise in popularity of designer toys coincides with the members of Generation Y, or the Millennials, transitioning to adulthood. Millennials are often labeled the "Peter Pan Generation" because they are in a seemingly prolonged state of childhood. However, these phenomena are not a coincidence. Rather, the designer toy functions as a preserver of childhood, and the creation and consumption of designer toys is a manifestation of the Peter Pan syndrome within the Millennial population.

A designer toy is a small "three-dimensional figure based on the design and pattern of a particular artist or graphic designer collective, usually made from rotocast vinyl, but includes resin, plush and wood objects as well" (Steinberg 210). They are not meant to be played with like traditional toys, but instead are marketed towards adults to be collected and displayed. While many designer toys may look cartoonish, they cannot be considered completely child-friendly. A prominent example is American artist Frank Kozik's Labbit, an otherwise cute and innocent-looking rabbit if not for his permanent 5 o'clock shadow and addiction to cigarettes (Kozik). What distinguishes a designer toy from a

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<sup>1</sup> A week-long annual event dedicated "to the spirit of community, art, self-expression, and self-reliance" ("Burning Man").

traditional toy is its core aesthetic and the larger community into which it is introduced and, ultimately, embraced. They are typically made in small production numbers, partly because the artists don't have the financial backing of large toy manufacturing companies and also because limiting the quantity "keeps them special, keeps collectors interested, and makes the release of a new toy into an event" (Phoenix 106).

(The demand for collectible vinyl toys is credited to Hikaru Iwanaga, who sold vintage *kaiju* (Japanese monster) toys in his street-fashion shop Bounty Hunter in the Harajuku district of Tokyo during the mid-1990s. However, the designer toys as we know them today claim their point of origin in the works of two young Hong Kong artists, Michael Lau and Eric So, shown at ToyCon<sup>2</sup> in 1998. Lau's "Gardeners" collection featured standard 12-inch G.I. Joe figures that he had customized. Dressed in contemporary clothes with tattoos, piercings and skateboards, the "Gardeners" embodied the local hip-hop and skate-flavored street culture. So's G.I. Joes were customized to resemble the actor Bruce Lee. By putting their own spin on these toys, Lau and So gave designer toys their defining aspect, in that they are singular objects that come from a personal design sensibility, "rather than the result of merchandising from television or film spin-offs, comics, or video games" (Phoenix 106). Iwanaga took the same approach in Bounty Hunter, whose "50% toy, 50% punk" motto reflected their attitude that the advertising of larger franchises was what made "All Other Toys Suck."

Creating these G.I. Joe toys in the image of the local street culture and famous icons made them easily recognizable by and relatable to the convention's visitors. By making his figures look like Bruce Lee, So was trying to appeal directly to the local youth by using Lee's philosophy to "inspire young people to be harder working and [to] put more effort into doing something useful. [He felt] that young people nowadays are very lazy; they do things without continuity and they only concentrate on playtime" (qtd. in Phoenix 77).

So's observation on his generation, the Millennials, has been more seriously considered in the work of contemporary psychologists and sociologists. The Millennial Generation is a demographic group referring to individuals who were born from the early 1980s to the early 2000s; they are the children and grandchildren of the Baby Boomers. They are

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<sup>2</sup> A quarterly convention of Hong Kong toy collectors.

also referred to as the “Peter Pan Generation” because they seem to never grow up, often delaying the traditional rites of adulthood — leaving home, completing their education, entering the workforce, getting married and having children — for much longer periods of time than the generations before them. Sociology professor Frank Furstenberg, Jr., observed that “after the disappearance of America’s well-paying unskilled and semi-skilled manufacturing jobs during the 1960s,” Millennials often elect to stay in school longer, live with their parents longer and take more time before starting their careers and families (67).

This delay happens for two reasons. The first is economic. Millennials grew up during the Great Recession; the increasing cost of living and the decreasing chance of finding a job have forced many Millennials to continue living with their parents after finishing their education. As this period of parental dependence gets longer, the financial and emotional burden of parenthood also gets heavier (Furstenberg 67). This creates a feedback loop: because of the economic turndown, Baby Boomers are reluctant to give up their jobs. In an effort to continue providing support for their children — who won’t leave! — Baby Boomers are delaying their own retirement (Brown). However, this delayed retirement makes it all the more difficult for Millennials to find jobs and leave home in the first place; the job market is already full. As a result, they have to live with their parents for a longer period of time before they are able to financially support themselves.

The second reason has to do with the way that Millennials were raised. *Psychology Today* Editor-at-Large of Hara Estroff Marano declares that many Millennials were brought up by “hothouse” or helicopter parents, who go to great lengths to give their children the perfect childhood. These helicopter parents are not only over-involved in their children’s lives, they also force their children to adhere planned, rigid and unforgiving structure, and “demand perfection from them ... because parents now gain their status from the performance of their children” (Marano 47).

Marano explains that hothouse parenting starts “in the womb” (25). Affluent parents vie for their child’s entrance into top-tier nursery schools. Edward Zigler, professor emeritus of psychology at Yale, says “the movement toward early academic training is not about children. It’s about parents and their anxiety to give their children an advantage in the global economy” (Marano 101). Furthermore, parents and schools are no longer geared toward child development, but instead toward

academic achievement. Driven by the desire to create an “atmosphere of achievement, schools are doing away with recess in the belief that less time for play leaves more time for study” (Marano 88). Play, the opposite of work, is viewed as a waste of time because it isn’t goal directed. Psychology professor Kathy Hirsch-Pasek explains that parents are “anxious that [their] children will fall behind, and there is no time for play among such fear” (qtd. in Marano 100). However, taking play out of the educational structure is actually shown to be detrimental to a child’s development. Child psychologist David Elkind explains that play is essential in “teaching children how to control themselves and how to interact with others” because it “fosters decision making, memory, thinking, and speed of mental processing” (Marano 90). Depriving children of play not only produces long-term consequences in a child’s emotional and psychological development, but it also hinders their ability to eventually adopt adult roles. The studies of Jaak Panskepp, a neuroscientist at Washington State University, “show that if you deprive animals of play in early life, they spend their time playing in extended adolescence” (Marano 91). Because engaging in social play provides practice for the future, if children do not go through a stage in which they engage in play, they then become stuck in a state of perpetual adolescence.

The general response of Millennials to cheating childhood is to extend it as long as possible to avoid the realities of adulthood. Because of the lack of free play and their regimented, monitored childhood, young adults “often need a period in college or afterward to legitimately experiment — to be children,” says social historian Peter Stearns (qtd. in Marano 177). Psychology professor Bernardo Carducci also argues that taking out childhood play creates a developmental lag in adolescence and young adulthood. He says that since “the precursor to marriage is dating, and the precursor to dating is playing” (qtd. in Marano 178), the less time children have to spend in free play, the less socially competent they’ll be as adults.

Finally, the “atmosphere of achievement” Marano discusses, which pegs self-worth to one’s accomplishments, makes children psychologically fragile (88). In doing this, parents are teaching their children an intolerance towards failure. Furthermore, Marano says that Millennials do not even know what failure is; their childhood has been completely sanitized by overprotective parents who want to save them the risk of feeling disappointment and discomfort (2). Raised in an environment

where everyone is “awarded clip-art Certificates of Participation just for showing up” so that no one felt left behind, Millennials grew up “self-centered and convinced of [their] specialness and unaccustomed to being denied,” says self-proclaimed Millennial writer Noreen Malone.

So what do designer toys have to do with helicopter parenting? Robert Bradley, a professor of early education, asserts that there is a correlation between the availability of toys and a child’s development. He says that toys “serve as catalysts for imaginary play. They can serve to carry the meaning of the play situation to full realization” (25). Just like social play provides practice for future adult roles, toys and playsets do the same through more tangible means (Almqvist 47). Figural toys act as models through which adult behaviors can be acted out while playsets act as props that allow for imitating adults more directly.

Toys are markers of childhood. Designer toys then, which are marketed towards adults, are toys for adults. More specifically, they are toys for the adults of the Millennial generation, who never truly grew up. Millennials are the ones who are producing and purchasing these toys, and, by doing so, they are extending Panskepp’s theory of social play to the idea of literal play. They are acting as both the creator and consumer. They create designer toys out of an urge to extend their childhood by making something tangible, something that reminds them of the childhood that they never got to fully experience. Because they get to decide and control every aspect of the toy, they are not only dictating the conditions of this “second childhood” to their own liking but they are also gaining the decision-making skills from creative play of which they were deprived in childhood. Likewise, Millennials buy designer toys to fulfill the same need. Christian “Bigboy” Cheng, a DJ, has been collecting designer vinyl toys for ten years and has built a collection of over 800 pieces arranged throughout his home (Han). His self-chosen moniker, Bigboy, brings to mind the image of a big kid — or in his case, an adult who still sees himself as a kid. Artist and writer Woodrow Phoenix explains that “the real truth at the core of our fascination with toys [is that] it’s about dreams and the desire to catch them in a piece of plastic. And how it feels when you see the perfect piece that seems as if it were made for you, and you recognize that someone has done just that” (105). To clarify, however, Millennials are not necessarily making and buying designer toys in a self-realized effort to mature by playing with them, but rather to preserve childhood by preserving the idea of

play. Significantly, this shows that both the designer and the customer are unified by their desire to rectify their robbed childhood.

Still, why do Millennials collect designer toys and not some other object reminiscent of their childhood? Why do people collect at all? Psychoanalyst Werner Muensterberger sees childhood traumas as the origin of collecting: when children are deprived of the protection and support of those close to them, they seek comfort in, and become attached to, inanimate objects in their immediate environment (cited in Tanselle 4). As a result of collecting these objects, “the act of demonstrating that one possesses and controls them[] is a pleasurable experience ... because it creates the illusion of being able to cope” (Tanselle 4). In reality, the psychological reason why Millennials collect designer toys is much simpler than Muensterberger’s theory. They specifically collect designer toys — not video games, comic books, or other common forms of childhood entertainment — because they’re different. Because designer toys aren’t commonplace, collecting them makes the collector feel special since collections “serve as an extension of the self ... demonstrating [their] judgments and taste” (Belk 323). Ronnie Pirovino, owner of what is considered the most complete KAWS<sup>3</sup> collection in the world, explains that “main toy collectors, like for Star Wars ... relish the fact that everyone knows about Star Wars, but urban vinyl people like that nobody knows about it — we enjoy the fact that it’s sub-cultural” (qtd. in Foo). This need to feel special is important: while the Millennials have been told throughout their childhood that they are special (Malone), once they reach adulthood, they are now being told (and maybe slowly realizing for themselves) that they are “*not* special, *not* exceptional” at all (McCullough). Furthermore, the need to collect designer toys also stems from the format of the object itself. Since the majority of designer toys are released in limited edition series, they are “fundamentally based around the practice of collection, inciting a desire to complete the collection” (Steinberg). Phoenix also explains that “the impulse to collect toys makes sense when you see many examples of the same character together... Multiples reinforce each other and create a contextual universe. One

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<sup>3</sup> KAWS (b. Brian Donnelly) is a Brooklyn-based artist and major figure in the vinyl toy world. His most recognized work is his first vinyl toy character created in collaboration with Bounty Hunter, Companion, a humanoid figure with a skull-and-cross-bones for a head.

action figure is just a toy; ten figures are a collection. A hundred can be another world” (Phoenix 9).

It is the individual creation of this world — this second chance childhood — that makes collecting designer toys so attractive to Millennials. Because Millennials never got to experience a satisfying childhood, they are recreating it for themselves in their adult years by collecting designer toys, which echoes the childhood act of playing with toys. Therefore, it is important to recognize that designer toys aren’t just a fad. There is a solid psychological ground to account for their creation and longevity. Finally, if the Millennials themselves recognize the failures of their childhood, then the outlook of their future may not be so cynical. By collecting designer toys, they are subverting the power of toys as objects of regression. Thus, collecting designer toys isn’t about extending childhood but reclaiming it.

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