

Toys & Games of the Past

Select Toy Histories



Dolls

Dolls were a toy many parents used to help teach young girls to be good mothers someday. Girls were also able to test their sewing skills by making their dolls' clothes. In the ancient world, dolls were just as important in the afterlife as they were to the living. Dolls have been found by archeologists in the grave goods of children, both boys and girls. Very few ancient dolls have survived but scientists, anthropologists, and sociologists believe that dolls existed in virtually every culture from the beginning of civilization. Every country and community had culturally distinct dolls. As technology has grown, dolls have taken on more and more human traits. In 1840, American doll makers were granted patents allowing them to manufacture and sell dolls on a wider scale. It is at this point that dolls began to look more homogenous rather than distinct to their community and culture. As the mass marketing of toys grew over the course of the late-19th and into the 20th century, dolls were marketed for both boys and girls. In those early days of childhood toy marketing dolls were not a toy for girls only. However, mass-produced dolls are closely tied to the ever-evolving social changes of the world including fashion, popular culture, gender roles, and contemporary moral attitudes which dictate how children should live their lives. By the Great Depression and into World War II, dolls were marketed as a girls-only toy leading to an ongoing conversation over whether toys should be gendered and whether boys should be "allowed" to play with dolls. The 21st century has reopened this conversation. In 2017 American Girl announced its first male doll, Logan.

Barbie Dolls

One example of a contemporary toy manufacturer is Mattel. Toy manufacturers like Mattel produce and distribute most of their own toys. They also research and develop new toys and buy or license toy inventions from inventors. Mattel began in 1945 as a garage workshop belonging to Harold Matson and Elliot Handler. Their business name, Mattel, is a combination of their last and first names, respectively. Mattel's first products were picture frames, however, Handler started making dollhouse furniture from picture frame scraps. That proved to be such a success that Mattel switched to making nothing but toys. In 1959, Mattel, with direct influence of his wife Ruth, released the Barbie doll. Even before her debut, Barbie's designer spent over a year researching whether parents would buy a child's doll that emphasized womanhood as Barbie's design did. She was anything but anatomically correct. It was predicted that she would never sell. Today, she (along with her many friends) have been sold in over 150 countries. There have been more than a billion Barbies sold with one being sold in the world nearly every three seconds. Despite the brand's popularity, questions remain over the message she sends to young girls about appearance. Over time, Mattel has worked to change some of these opinions by updating the Barbie brand to ever-evolving social changes. By 2016, Mattel introduced the Fashionistas collection which offers Barbie dolls with tall, curvy, and petite body types in a variety of skin tones and hairstyles.

Toy Guns

One of the earliest American success stories was the toy gun. When the American Civil War ended, the market for real guns slowed down causing munitions factories to retool or close. Many chose to manufacture toy guns using a paper primer in a similar style of the caplock mechanism. These guns, although not real, were handled like the genuine article. With authenticity came concern for safety. Parents were immediately worried for their child's safety, especially after the BB gun entered the market in 1886. Although BB guns were not really toys, they were designed, manufactured, made, and marketed for children—a dangerous toy. In 1888, the first model Daisy BB gun was first offered as a promotional giveaway if one bought a toy windmill.

Teddy Bears

Animals have long been an inspiration for toy makers and in the first decade of the 20th century a new toy bear was produced by the German maker Steiff. It had jointed arms and legs. In honor of the American President Theodore “Teddy” Roosevelt, the toy was given the name “Teddy.” This was thanks to a cartoon published by an American newspaper which told the story of how the President had refused to shoot a baby bear while on a hunting expedition. Teddy Bears were soon produced as toys in the United States and the name became synonymous with toy bears worldwide.

Monopoly

When Monopoly was first offered in 1933, toy and game companies rejected it and it was both a patent failure and disappointment among board game critics. One company stated there were 52 fundamental errors in the game and listed why the public would never buy it. Monopoly was seen as too complicated, there were too many rules, and it would take too long to finish. The game's inventor Charles Darrow, at the time unemployed, chose to market it on his own without a toy company's help. But Monopoly beat the odds and became one of the world's most popular board games. It has been translated in 26 languages and Braille, and includes special edition versions such as Batman Monopoly, Las Vegas Monopoly, and Harley Davidson Monopoly. Darrow sold his game to Parker Brothers in 1935. The amount of the sale has never been disclosed.

Pop-Up Books

Initially called “moveables,” the first pop-up books actually predate most print texts. They first appeared in the 14th century, when a Catalan mystic began using revolving disks to illustrate his philosophical theories. Pop-up books were not created for young audiences until the early 19th century, when lift-the-flap techniques were introduced in children’s books. It wasn’t until 1929 that readers were introduced to pop-ups as we know them today. Published by Louis Giraud and Theodore Brown, the *Daily Express Children’s Annual No. 1* was the first in a series of pop-up books that featured illustrations that leaped off the page, starting one of the longest lasting literary gimmicks in history.

Bubble Blowing

Though children had blown soap bubbles over pans of soapy water for many years, it wasn’t until a Chicago cleaning-supplies company named Chemtoy began bottling its own bubble solution in 1940 that a true enthusiasm for the activity erupted. Now with millions of bottles sold each year, bubble solutions, paired with wands of various sizes, have worked their way into our culture even outside their role as a children’s toy. In the 1960s they became a universal symbol of peace as the hippie movement blew bubbles into the air en masse. More recently they’ve become a regular feature at weddings.

Cards

Card games were co-created with playing cards themselves and may have been invented by the Chinese when they began shuffling paper money into various combinations. Though where and when cards originated is uncertain, China does seem the most likely place to have invented cards, probably around the 7th to the 10th centuries. These earliest card decks did not contain numbers as they do today. Instead, these decks contained instructions for what to do next in the game as many card decks in today’s board games might have. Playing cards made their way to Europe by the 1300s using the four-suit system we can recognize today. However they were created by hand and as a result were only affordable to the wealthiest people. It would take another century for playing cards to be printed in a more affordable manner to a wider population. Many of the games we play today are descendants of these Medieval European games. In the early 1800s, most children’s card games were designed to be educational. Card games helped children learn about math, geography, history, and science. Some card games even taught girls about cooking. In the same century, card decks were very colorful but despite the child-friendly colors of the decks, many parents didn’t want their children to learn card games because they didn’t want to encourage gambling.

Crayola Crayons

Although Europe was the birthplace of the original wax crayon used by adults, Crayola brand crayons were the first kids' crayons ever made, invented by cousins, Edwin Binney and C. Harold Smith.

In 1864, Joseph W. Binney founded the Peekskill Chemical Company in Peekskill, New York. This company was responsible for creating pigments used in industrial industries such as lampblack, charcoal, and red iron oxide. Peekskill was also instrumental in creating an improved and black-colored automobile tire by adding carbon black that was found to increase the tread life by four or five times.

Around 1885, Joseph's son, Edwin Binney, and his nephew C. Harold Smith, formed the partnership of Binney & Smith. The cousins expanded the company's product line to include shoe polish and printing ink. In 1900, the company purchased a stone mill in Easton, Pennsylvania, and began producing slate pencils for schools. This started Binney's and Smith's research into nontoxic and colorful drawing mediums for kids. They had already invented a new wax crayon used to mark crates and barrels however it was loaded with carbon black and too toxic for children. They were confident that the pigment and wax mixing techniques they had developed could be adapted for a variety of safe colors. The brand's first box of eight Crayola crayons made its debut in 1903. The crayons were sold for a nickel and the colors were black, brown, blue, red, purple, orange, yellow, and green.

The word Crayola was created by Alice Stead Binney (wife of Edward Binney) who took the French word for chalk (*craie*) and oily (*oleaginous*) and combined them. Today, there are over 100 different types of crayons made by Crayola.

Dominoes

The word "Domino" comes from the French word for the black and white hood worn by Catholic priests in winter. The oldest domino sets date from around 1120 A.D. and appear to have been a Chinese invention. The game first appeared in Europe, in Italy, around the 18th century, in the courts of Venice and Naples.

Dominoes is played with a set of small rectangular blocks, each divided on one side into two equal areas, each of which is either blank or marked with between one and six dots. Players place their pieces according to matching numbers and colors. The first person to get rid of all their pieces wins.

Hacky Sack

Hacky Sack, also known as Footbag, is a modern, non-competitive American sport that involves kicking a bean bag and keeping it off the ground for as long as possible. Created as a challenging way to exercise, the story of the hacky sack begins in Oregon in the summer of 1972. Mike Marshall introduced visiting Texan John Stalberger to a game that involved kicking a bean bag repeatedly to keep it off the ground for as long as possible—using all of your body, except your hands and arms—and then eventually passing it to another player.

The game was not unlike passing and dribbling drills frequently played by soccer players who “juggle” or “freestyle” with a ball before kicking it in the air to a teammate. Historians have identified similar games played throughout ancient Asia, dating back as far as 2597 B.C.

Stalberger, who was recovering from a knee injury, began playing the game—which they described as going to “hack a sack”—as a way to rehabilitate his leg. Six months later, with Stalberger’s knee healed and with a newly acquired mastery of their game, they decided to go into manufacturing. They experimented with different versions of the sack. Their 1972 initial sack was square shaped. By 1973, they had made a disc-shaped sack out of cowhide leather.

The first bags using the Hacky Sack name appeared in 1974. When Marshall died of a heart attack in 1975, Stalberger decided to soldier on, developing a more durable bag and working to promote the game he and his late friend had created.

Hacky Sack became extremely popular with high school and college students, especially with counterculture groups who would stand in circles, taking turns working to keep the footbags aloft. Groups of “Deadheads” playing the game became a familiar sight outside concert venues whenever the Grateful Dead performed.

In 1979 the U.S. Patent office granted a license to the Hacky Sack brand Footbag. By then Hacky Sack Company was a solid business, and Wham-O, the company that manufactures the Frisbee, acquired it from Stalberger.

Checkers

Checkers, or as the British call it, Draughts, is a game played by two persons, each with 12 playing pieces, on a checkerboard. The object of the game is to capture all of your opponent’s pieces.

A board game that appeared very similar to checkers was discovered in the ruins of the ancient city of Ur in modern day Iraq. This board game dates to about 3000 B.C. Checkers as we know it today has been around since 1400 B.C. In Egypt, a similar game was called Alquerque.

Jigsaw Puzzles

The jigsaw puzzle—that delightful and perplexing challenge wherein a picture made of cardboard or wood has been cut into differently shaped pieces that must fit together—is widely thought of as an entertaining pastime. But it didn’t start out that way. The birth of the jigsaw puzzle was rooted in education.

Englishman John Spilsburg, a London engraver and mapmaker, invented the jigsaw puzzle in 1767. The first jigsaw puzzle was a map of the world. Spilsburg attached a map to a piece of wood and then cut out each country. Teachers used Spilbury’s puzzles to teach geography. Students learned their geography lessons by putting the world maps back together.

With the invention of the first fret treadle saw in 1865, the ability to create machine-aided curved lines began. This tool, which operated with foot pedals like a sewing machine, was perfect for the creation of puzzles. Eventually, the fret or scroll saw came to also be known as the jigsaw. By 1880, jigsaw puzzles were being machine crafted, and although cardboard puzzles entered the market, wood jigsaw puzzles remained the bigger seller.

Mass production of jigsaw puzzles began in the 20th century with the advent of die-cut machines. In this process, sharp metal dies for each puzzle were created, and operating like print-making stencils, were pressed down on sheets of cardboard or soft woods to cut the sheet into pieces. This invention coincided with the golden age of jigsaws in the 1930s. Companies on both sides of the Atlantic churned out a variety of puzzles with pictures depicting everything from domestic scenes to railroad trains.

In the 1930s, puzzles were distributed as low-cost marketing tools in the United States. Companies offered the puzzles for special low prices with the purchase of other items. For example, a newspaper ad from the period trumpets the offer of a \$.25 jigsaw of the Maple Leaf hockey team and a \$.10 theater ticket with the purchase of a Dr. Gardner’s Toothpaste (normally \$.39) all for just \$.49. The industry also created excitement by issuing “The Jig of the Week” for puzzle fans.

The jigsaw puzzle remained a steady pastime—reusable, a great activity for groups or for an individual—for decades. With the invention of digital applications, the virtual jigsaw puzzle arrived in the 21st century, as a number of apps were created allowing users to solve puzzles on their smartphones and tablets.

Chess

Chess is an intense strategy game played by two persons, on a chessboard. Each player has 16 pieces that can make different types of moves depending on the piece. The object of the game is to capture your opponent's "king" piece.

Chess originated in Persia and India about 4,000 years ago. A very early form of Chess was called Chaturanga, a four-handed game played with dice. Chess pieces were carved miniature elephants, horses, chariots, and foot soldiers.

Modern Chess, as we know it today, is about 2,000 years old. The Persians and Arabians called the game Shatranj. Chess and cards were introduced to North America by Christopher Columbus. Howard Staunton, the world's leading chess player of the 1840s, organized the first international chess tournament and designed the classic chess pieces used in modern matches and tournaments today.

Other toy makers/distributors in history—

- Charles Crandall, a famous American toymaker, produced all sorts of wooden blocks and puzzles.
- In 1903, American Albert Schoenhut introduced the Humpty Dumpty Circus, which became an instant success. He also made dolls, wooden figures, and tiny toy pianos that worked just like real pianos.
- George Brown was an inventor who loved making mechanical toys. In 1856 he started the George Brown Company in Forestville, Connecticut. Brown led the way in making wind-up toys, including the first wind-up trains.
- The first board game produced by Milton Bradley was called *The Checkered Game of Life*. To meet the demand for this popular game, Bradley and an assistant worked long hours cutting, pasting, and folding the games. Milton Bradley became a successful producer of many colorful, popular games for children.
- One of the first professional dollmakers in the United States was a woman named Izannah Walker. Her "unbreakable" dolls were first made of stuffed fabric. They had painted features and hair.
- A German puppeteer named Lothar Meggendorfer created some of the most famous pop-up books. His book *International Circus* has six very detailed scenes in it. This scene contains an audience of 450 separate pop-up figures! Many of Meggendorfer's books were sold in North America.
- It takes nearly three weeks to assemble and produce a single Madame Alexander doll.
- Joseph McVicker became a millionaire before his 27th birthday after his wallpaper cleaner was discovered to be a pliable children's play toy: Play-Doh.