

Barbie doll revolutionized toy industry essay

[History](#), [Revolution](#)



From left, Cherity and Amanda Pierce display their Barbie collection.

Photo by Sandra Pierce. Flashy clothes, the perfect boyfriend, a Corvette, Ferrari, full size apartment with beautiful furniture and a boat. She's the woman who has everything and every year receives more. Since her introduction in 1959, the Barbie doll may be the most influential icon of American culture in the late twentieth century. Barbie's success may be attributed to the focus on children as consumers for the first time. She attracted little girls because of her adult-like features. Before this, children looked at toys like Yogi Bear, Howdy Doody, and baby dolls for inspiration. With the creation of Barbie, girls now had a new toy to stimulate their imaginations.

In the 1950s most women stayed at home, cooking, cleaning and caring for their children; they didn't parade around in tight little skirts and high heels. The Barbie doll represented independence and glamour: she could sing solos in the spotlight one minute and pilot an airplane the next. She was exciting and completely different from the clinging Betsy Westsys and Chatty Cathys that little girls were used to. In *Forever Barbie: The Unauthorized Biography of a Real Doll*, M. G.

Lord tells the story of Barbie's creators. Ruth Handler, the youngest of ten siblings, worked as a stenographer for Paramount Pictures as a young woman. Her husband Elliott designed light fixtures and studied art. In 1937, they had moved from Colorado to California where they gambled their life savings on a plan to build Plexiglas furniture. The Handlers began the factory in their garage but quickly expanded until they had hired a hundred workers

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who made jewelry and decorative items. World War II shortages of labor soon put them out of business.

Despite their first failure, the Handlers didn't give up and, in 1945, they joined with Harold Matson, a former worker, and together the three started "Mattel Creations". Matson's last name along with Elliot's was fused together to form the name Mattel. In 1946, Matson sold out his share. The Handlers were not discouraged, though, because of their strong belief in futuristic materials such as Plexiglas, Lucite and plastic. They continued looking for the perfect item to make their company a success. Little did they know that their persistence would lead them to establish a multi-million company initiated by the revolutionary Barbie doll. Ruth Handler first encountered the model for Barbie in 1955 while vacationing in Switzerland with her family.

The Lilli doll, a comic character from Germany, was usually found in tobacco stores as a three dimensional pinup. Lord quotes Ruth Handler as saying, "We were walking down the street in Lucerne and there was a doll ... and adult doll with a woman's body ... sitting on a rope swing. The doll had an adult shaped body, the thing that I had been trying to describe for years, and our guys said it couldn't be done." Ruth brought back two dolls, one for her daughter Barbara, and one for herself. A second contributing factor to the realization of this doll evolved from Ruth watching her daughter and friends play with paper dolls. Handler recalls: "Through their play Barbara imagined their lives as adults. They used the dolls to reflect the adult world around them. They would sit and carry on conversations, making the dolls real people.

I thought if only we could take this play pattern and three dimensionalize it, we would have something very special. " The actual making of dolls was very complex. They were made in a Japanese company called Kokusai Boiki Kaisha (KBK). KBK bid for and received the opportunity to manufacture the doll out of injected-molding vinyl. And so Barbie - the All-American doll- was born in Tokyo because it would cost a fortune to manufacture a doll with such detail anywhere else. Charlotte Johnson, a fashion designer who had been working in the garment industry for many years, was Barbie's first dress designer. Johnson met with a Japanese designer and the two developed designs that minimized the sewing process.

Housewives all over Japan made the ideas real, even hand stitching the buttons. Every person involved the creation waited anxiously for her introduction to the public. Barbie debuted at the American Toy Fair in New York City in the winter of 1959. But in her unseasonable black-and -white striped swimsuit, the doll did not impress toy buyers. Even Sears, Mattel's biggest customer, refused to put the sexy doll on their shelves. Lord says it was Mattel's advertising strategy aimed at the children that finally paved the way for Barbie's success.

s. Television advertisements with the child-as-a-consumer revolutionized the toy industry in the twentieth century. Letty Nunez, a teacher and native El Pasoan, remembers first seeing Barbie on television. " I couldn't believe my eyes. She was so beautiful. I ran to my mother and dragged her to the television set. " She recalls begging her mother for the doll.

“ I just had to have this sexy fashion dream doll in the black and white swimsuit. ” Barbie was a fantasy. In a border city it was rare to encounter a white, blue-eyed person. Maybe that’s why I was so attracted to her. ” Most little girls couldn’t wait to get their hands on Barbie because they had never encountered a doll with such an enormous wardrobe.

Nunez would not have been obsessed with the doll if she hadn’t seen it on television. Lord says the Handlers sank huge amounts of money into their advertising budget in the early 1960’s. Angela Loya, an engineer and Barbie collector from Houston, idolized Barbie because of her independence. She said in an interview, “ Barbie was designed for women by women. It taught us what was expected from us by society. She had it all... the clothes, the boyfriend and whatever career she wanted. She was the symbol of post-war female independence. ” Barbie’s biographer reminds us that she was not defined through relationships of responsibility to men or family.

Lord quotes Ruth Handler as saying, “ Pregnancy would never be part of Barbie’s physique, because Barbie would not compromise her freedom. Just as she did not depend on parents, she would not have offspring dependent on her. ” Handler even rejected a vacuum cleaner company’s idea to make Barbie-size vacuums, because Barbie, in Handler’s words, “ didn’t do rough housework. ” Barbie’s sexy image also raised questions among both children and parents. Many parents still did not talk about sex to their children and naked baby dolls usually did not spark great interest. Barbie dolls changed this.

Nunez recalls in her interview, “ I remember the first time I asked my mother ‘ Why is it that Barbie has no nipples like yours? ‘ I got slapped across the face, sent to my room, and was grounded from playing with the doll for a month. ” Some 700 million Barbie dolls have been sold since 1959 in over 140 countries. Yearly sales exceeded the \$1 billion mark in 1993. Retail experts estimate that the typical American girl owns an average of eight Barbie dolls. And the doll has her own Hall of Fame in Palo Alto, California, where a collection of over 20, 000 Barbies awaits visitors.

Barbie, named after the Handlers’ daughter, has become the quintessential American doll. A child’s imagination can take Barbie anywhere. She easily can be a doctor by simply converting her hot pink kitchen into an operating room. Tissue boxes and packing cartons make great furniture and apartment complexes. A child really doesn’t need the fancy cars or doll houses to make her dreams come alive: all that is really needed is an imagination.