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FLOOR WARS

By CATHLEEN SCHINE AUG. 13, 1989

When I was a child, I used to dig for worms in the garden.

Once I found an old horseshoe too, but usually just worms and the occasional bowlegged plastic cavalry-man. Children digging for worms in that suburban garden today, 30 years later, would probably find no horseshoes. They wouldn't find a toy soldier either, and if they did they would be smart to have it appraised. For, after centuries of active duty, the rows of Scots Guards and cuirassiers, of hussars, dragoons and lancers, Tommies, Yanks and Rebs have retreated from toy-store shelves to collectors' cabinets. Gone, too, is the entire culture of childhood in which the toy soldier played such a glorious role.

Their replacements are perhaps best described by the adjective that all branches of the childhood industry - toy, soft-drink, candy, television - seem to favor right now: wacky. Wacky warriors are a peculiarly American invention, the equivalent of sugar-free soda, an expression of simultaneous indulgence and restraint. Violence has survived, flourished actually, as a theme in children's playthings. Even frilly creatures like My Little Pony, aimed at girls, live brutal cartoon lives. But toy soldiers are no longer acceptable in any historically realistic form. The new warriors fight, but only on a fantasy field of battle.

Toys tell us what we want our children to know, which is what we think is good in the world, and worth doing: We no longer think becoming cannon fodder is worthwhile, it is clear. It is no accident that toy Vietnam-era soldiers are rare. After the carnage of World War I and before the patriotic fervor of World War II, many companies cut back on toy soldiers. Britains Ltd., perhaps the most important manufacturer in the world of lead soldiers, literally beat its swords into plowshares - it began making farm sets.

America's post-Vietnam dismay certainly has not led to plastic farms. On the contrary, toy weapons are more sophisticated than ever. Ominous Uzi water guns, laser pistols, shrill and blinking, miniature missile launchers and amphibious nuclear subs - this souped-up machinery of violence dominates play battles.

Children used to lie on their stomachs intently setting up dignified, nameless toy soldiers in careful formations. The solemn intensity with which a child once contemplated strategy and tactics is now often aimed at something quite different - at weapons and vehicles for jolly creatures with goofy names, at fitting the pieces together, making jokey toy technology work. "Get the Good, the Bad and the Accessories!" is the motto of one line of the new warriors.

These two styles of play, and the contrast between the toys we trip over and the ones our parents tripped over, suggest that childhood in America has changed, has been wrested from the general culture and delivered to an exclusively pop kiddie culture. Children still play on the floor, but they have entered a new phase in the moral and psychological history of childhood.

In the 17th century, a court physician chronicled little Louis XIII playing with toy soldiers. Uncle Toby made them in Laurence Sterne's "Tristram Shandy"; Robert Louis Stevenson arranged them on the coverlet in "A Child's Garden of Verses"; Hans Christian Andersen's steadfast tin soldier landed in the fire; Mark Twain gave one to Tom Sawyer. They have posed for Andrew Wyeth and for countless sentimental Victorian painters, and danced in "The Nutcracker." H.G. Wells wrote a pacifist celebration of them called "Little Wars." Toy soldiers were lined up and knocked down by Abraham Lincoln and the Nicaraguan hero Augusto Sandino.

BUT IN THE LAST TWENTY YEARS, THE NEW WARRIORS have moved in. They have not marched in, for most of them cannot even stand up. They have whooshed and swooshed and vroomed in, carried by an alarming variety of supertechno-magic vehicles.

Food Fighters, the latest arrivals, are plastic junk food dressed in helmets and combat boots. Glaring, bug-eyed, dripping condiments, they are cartoon grotesques, in the tradition of the good-humored, ill-mannered parody that brought us toys like Rat-finks (hideous plastic figures of the 1960's) and Mad Balls, a rubber ball sporting maimed facial features.

But unlike toys of the old gross-out genre, which played off a fascination with ghoulish monsters, Food Fighters are soldiers. They include a ketchup-gurgling hamburger called "Burgerdier General" and a slab of pizza pocked with cheese bubbles and pepperoni, named "Private Pizza."

The toy industry's allegiance to these "action figures" is self-conscious and complete. "Fun and fantasy" has become an industry formula, and a clever one, too: a salve to parental anxiety, a come-on to kids. G.I. Joe is a "fun, fantasy-filled adventure," says Wayne Charness, a spokesman for Hasbro Inc. Adrienne T. White, marketing manager of boy's toys for Mattel Toys, calls Food Fighters "a zany, humorous fantasy line. They're just a lot of fun." Fantasy is one area on which toy stores as different as New York's exclusive Penny Whistle Toys and Toys 'R' Us, the nation's largest retail toy chain, can agree. "It's realism we try to stay away from," explained an assistant manager at Penny Whistle. Toys 'R' Us doesn't stock realistic soldiers at all, although less for any moral reasons than because "they're not 'in.' "

Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, popular toys-cum-cartoon-show, are in. They are named Leonardo, Donatello, Michaelangelo and Raphael, and they are indeed teen-age mutant Ninja turtles - pet turtles mutated into bipedal adolescents, still green and still shelled, who speak in Valley slang and practice the martial arts. The toy industry has also given us armies of superpowered robots, apocalyptic armored attack dinosaurs and battle figures hiding inside pieces of jewelry. What these giddy, weird warriors all have in common - what makes them "fun" rather than simply fun - is their complete embrace of fantasy, a fantasy of the industry's own manufacture.

"The annual 'Fridge Fest' vegetable party was held last night, only to be invaded by a rebel band of Refrigerator Rejects!" reads the copy on the Food Fighters package containing the pimply drumstick named Lieutenant Legg. "They were rowdier than ever, teasing vegetables, dancing with the condiments. . . ."

The most popular of all the fantasy warriors at first glance does not seem fantastic at all. He is human, for one thing. But G.I. Joe is just as alien to the real world as a combat hamburger. The toy first appeared 25 years ago, one foot tall, a

private dressed in World War II fatigues. Hasbro stopped making him in 1978, but four years later, after the success of "Star Wars" and its licensed toys, Hasbro brought G.I. Joe back. He returned as a small figure with flexible arms and legs - a whole line of figures, in fact - the familiar, homely battle fatigues now supplemented by colorful nondenominational adventure jump suits. For G.I. Joe, named after the typical American infantryman, was no longer really a soldier at all.

The G.I. Joe "modern army action figures" (as the industry calls them; the U.S. Customs Service declares them "dolls" for the purpose of establishing import duties) have no common uniform, no regiment. Men, not units, have "rousing" nicknames - names like Hot-Shot and Recoil. This bunch has no obvious geographical headquarters. It says "a real American hero" on the box, otherwise we would have no idea what country these fighting men represent. Their enemy is not a recognizable national entity, either, but a group of thugs who speak in various all-purpose Eastern European accents and belong to an organization of no clear political affiliation (except to evil itself) called Cobra. The Joes' weapons and vehicles are elaborate techno-fantasies, their battle gear snazzy rather than practical.

I know the names of the Joes and their backgrounds and the sound of their enemies' accents because I have watched the G.I. Joe cartoon on TV and read the copy on their packaging. Many of the modern fun warriors come with dossiers printed on the packages, often on mock file cards with dotted lines to show the child where to cut them out. These are whole worlds the toy companies have created, ahistorical perhaps, but complete with their own bureaucracies.

THE TRADITIONAL TOY SOLDIERS ARE, IN CONTRAST, SU-premely historical beings - for they were created as tiny monuments to important events. Frederick the Great's sweeping victories inspired the first mass production of toy soldiers - flat tin troops, magnificent from the side, almost invisible when viewed head-on. In the late 18th century, French manufacturers introduced exquisitely detailed, fully rounded soldiers, of the Revolutionary and Napoleonic armies. (The French were typically chauvinistic, making foreign troops only after French boys demanded enemies for their toy troops to fight.) In the 1870's, the German toy-soldier industry's self-confident expansion reflected Bismarck's great victory in the Franco-Prussian War. By the end of Victorian era, an Englishman lucky enough to be named William Britain had developed a new, cheaper method of casting lead soldiers and achieved toy-soldier hegemony around the world. A poster has been made of

regiments of Britains's soldiers in formation on their crimson cardboard boxes, and it is a startling sight. West Indian regiments, Madras Cavalry, Bengal Lancers, Egyptian Camel Corps, Zulus and Boers stand as bright as jewels, row after row, a miniature record of imperialism.

Malcolm S. Forbes, famous for his publishing millions, his motorcycles and his hot-air balloons, is also the world's foremost collector of toy soldiers. He has built two shrines to house his collection, one in a glistening white palace in Tangiers, the other in New York City. The Forbes Magazine Galleries on lower Fifth Avenue, surely the perfect realization of modern noblesse oblige, are free and open to the public, a series of cool, dark rooms filled with toy boats, Faberge eggs and Presidential papers - and 12,000 toy soldiers. The experience of walking through these quiet caves of toys at rest is an extraordinary mixture of reverence for the past and pure, ecstatic, greedy child joy.

It's almost as if these toys were designed to become collectibles. Some of them are breathtakingly beautiful. They stand as nostalgic artifacts of childhood. But toy soldiers also serve as mementos, indeed they were created as mementos - of national(Continued on Page 60) hopes, brave deeds, of the boundaries of human strength and frailty and folly.

Their popularity, their commercial viability, were directly affected by what schoolteachers call "current events." "In the game of little wars, topicality was all," writes Peter Johnson, a curator of Forbes's Tangiers museum, in his book "Toy Armies." Britains rushed out a line of toy Rough Riders after the outbreak of the Spanish-American War, so quickly that they were first issued wearing white helmets, as shown in military handbooks. After pictures of the war appeared in the British press, however, Britains switched to the now famous slouch hats.

During World War II, one American company, Comet Metal Products, made recognition models for the armed services. In Germany, Wehrmacht security people sometimes stopped toy makers from including certain details. "And when a name fell into disrepute," Johnson writes, the figure "was either beheaded and given another identity or simply recatalogued as an anonymous senior officer."

The bond between toy soldiers and historical warfare was intimate, unquestioned. Toy soldiers were idealized models of reality, fragments of cultural aspirations brightly painted and gracefully posed. And it was the relationship of the toy warrior to the real warrior that made the toy soldier infinitely interesting, for

there were always questions to be asked about what really happened - how many, where, when, why? And there were always more places to search for the answers. For many children in the past, their interest in toy soldiers merged seamlessly with serious intellectual pursuits, with what was still, even in America in the 1950's, a classical education. Battles were embedded in literature; warriors were heroes of poems and novels. Toy soldiers were part of toy armies, armies part of history.

In "The Face of Battle," the eloquent and insistently humanitarian military historian John Keegan writes: "Battles belong to finite moments in history, to the societies which raise the armies which fight them, to the economies and technologies which those societies sustain. Battle is a historical subject, whose nature and trend of development can only be understood down a long historical perspective." This is true also for toy battles. Authenticity, strategy, reconstruction of battles, an understanding of the social and political forces that create wars and shape their participants - all of this was once part of a child's play.

Several people I know turn out, to my surprise, to be former toy generals. One, a former film critic named James Delson, has started a mail-order business called the Toy Soldier Company, a remarkable enterprise (its catalogues read like historical atlases) that supplies collectors not only with lead soldiers but also with plastic figures, for which the collector's market has virtually exploded.

"When you play with toy soldiers," Delson says, "you want to have some basis in fact. You don't want to say, 'Oh, there's a bunch of Greeks!' It's Agamemnon, Achilles, Hector. Each year at Christmas, my Aunt Dora would take me to F.A.O. Schwartz and ask me what I wanted and I would point to a box of soldiers. She would always say the same thing: 'Is it educational?' Everyone in my family is seriously socialist, pacifist, including me. I would have to convince her that it was educational. And it was. One thing fed off another. I saw 'Ivanhoe,' I read 'Ivanhoe,' I played Ivanhoe. By the time I got to my freshman college classics course, my interest in toy soldiers had already taken me through the syllabus: Julius Caesar's war commentaries, Thucydides on the Peloponnesian Wars, Xenophon, Plutarch's Lives, Plato's Republic, the Iliad, the Odyssey. . . ."

S INCE THE 18TH CEN-tury, European culture, like Aunt Dora, has wanted to know, "Is it educational?" Toy soldiers once beautifully fit the moral and pedagogical bill: they taught the virtues of leadership, discipline, strategy, bravery and

patriotism. They prepared a man for war. They were also a part of his larger education, little landmarks in the world and the culture he had inherited.

But the pedagogical demands on toys have changed. Instead of nudging children toward the realities and responsibilities of civic life as their predecessors tried to do, today's fantasy warriors have moved on to a more modern preoccupation: personal growth. "The Food Fighters encourage a child to use his imagination in ways far beyond what he can experience in real life," says Adrienne White of Mattel. "Mattel fosters the idea that toys should encourage the ability to use the imagination. The Food Fighters line allows kids to act out a conflict fantasy, which is something boys always seem to want to do. It's important for character development."

Certainly the designers of Food Fighters used their own imaginations, more perhaps than the kid who is handed this prefabricated piece of whimsy does. As for character development, it seems likely that a child in need of acting out a conflict could just as easily square off a piece of French toast against a hard-boiled egg. As one child psychiatrist I spoke to, Dr. Leon Tec, put it, "The child will use the toy in the way the child's temperament dictates, regardless of the construction of the toy or the parent's wishes."

Still, the construction of these warriors is often wonderful. The G.I. Joe figures with their articulated limbs fit perfectly in the hand. They are made for twisting and adjusting and just holding - for fidgeting. And the jazzy vehicles, with their hatches and trap doors, must be fitted together with great care. They require clever concentration, which is rewarded with a gratifying click! of success.

In the 18th century, when toy soldiers were first mass-produced, the physical reality of linear tactics, as well as the social and political realities of nationalism, revolution and growing militarism in Europe, made the soldiers an almost inevitable toy. So it's not surprising that modern toy warriors belong to small specialized forces equipped with the latest space-age supertechnology, counter-terrorists who strongly resemble the terrorists they fight.

"Look," says Malcolm SET FOR ART Forbes, sitting in his cavernous office one flight above his museum of toy history, "one always tends to reminisce about one's own childhood, one's own memories. And you tend to treasure what yours were. But I don't think it's bad that these new toys are set in space and the galaxies. It's a new age; the space age. And the world of fantasy for children today provides exploration into so many more directions - space and high-tech. It stretches children's minds."

But at some level, these modern figures, robed in their technological finery, seem terribly limited. Hasbro changes 50 percent of its G.I. Joe line each year in its pursuit of novelty. Topicality, the old toy-soldier marketing strategy, is novelty grounded in something real, and the real is unpredictable and diverse. The fantasy worlds invented by the toy companies must be constantly redesigned if they are to compete with the real world. "Once a child gets bored with a certain toy, that's it," says Hasbro's Wayne Charness. That's true, and these fantasy soldiers have obsolescence, or boredom, built in. Because finally, they, like their aerial assault craft and their rotating laser cannons, are nothing more than gadgets. They don't stretch the mind as much as occupy it.

These modern "action figures" are individuals with their own names and personalities spelled out on their packages. They come with vehicles of staggering technological confidence. But once the accessories are all in place, once the vehicles are rolling, children can do very little with the warriors themselves. They hold the figures and run around with them. Three- and four-year-olds contentedly skip and holler and smash rubber heads together. Older children put them in the pilot seat; they take them out. But they quickly tire of the toys, because this kind of play is so restricted intellectually. There are no questions: magic provides all the answers. In the "fun" soldiers fantasy world, there's no place else to go.

The stiff, uniform figure of the traditional toy soldier was limited in its poses, but a child's play could blossom and expand. Toy soldiers, like blocks, are interchangeable, faceless parts used to build a whole. And the world of a toy knight, for example, is crisscrossed with paths leading to those places conscientious parents usually have to drag their children to - operas and ballets and paintings and poetry. Knights are actually the only traditional toy soldiers left for kids, though they stand on the shelves of a few toy stores not because of historical longing but because they seem remote - in a word, fantastic.

B EYOND TEACHING KIDS TO hate war, there ought to be some way of teaching them who are the good guys - and how to make that judgment," says Paul Berman, a political writer and critic who is a veteran of toy soldiering and the author of "Make Believe Empire - A How-To Book," a quiet and subversively funny guide for children. "Napoleon or Napoleon's enemies? For me, toy soldiers always constituted a study in who were the good guys." But children playing with the new toy warriors are no longer called upon to make that judgment.

Far more individual than the traditional toy soldiers, the fantasy warriors are also dehumanized, and quite explicitly: They are Things, concrete jokes; the enemy just Other Things. In their universe the moral force of battle and its place in history has become irrelevant. When Hasbro's spokesman says, "The play pattern is the triumph of good over evil. With the older type of toy soldier or with G.I. Joe, it all comes down to the same thing, and the child controls the scenario," he's right. But when a battle is between two nations, the specifics of the conflict become essential. When the battle is generic, stripped down to "good against evil," then that's really all there is, isn't it? A battle, a violent conflict, pure, simple and meaningless.

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