

A BRIEF HISTORY OF TOYS

By Tim Lambert

Early Toys

Before the 20th century children had few toys and those they did have were precious. Furthermore children did not have much time to play. Only a minority went to school but most children were expected to help their parents doing simple jobs around the house or in the fields. Egyptian children played similar games to the ones children play today. They also played with toys like dolls, toy soldiers, wooden animals, ball, marbles, spinning tops and knucklebones (which were thrown like dice).

In Ancient Greece when boys were not at school and girls were not working they played ball games with inflated pig's bladders. They also played with knucklebones. Children also played with toys like spinning tops, dolls, model horses with wheels, hoops and rocking horses.

Roman children played with wooden or clay dolls and hoops. They also played ball games and board games. They also played with animal knucklebones.

Toys changed little through the centuries. In the 16th century children still played with wooden dolls. (They were called Bartholomew babies because they were sold at St Bartholomew's fair in London). They also played cup and ball (a wooden ball attached by string to the end of a handle with a wooden cup on the other end. You had to swing the handle and try and catch the ball in the cup).

Modern Toys

The industrial revolution allowed toys to be mass produced and they gradually became cheaper.

John Spilsbury made the first jigsaw puzzle in 1767. He intended to teach geography by cutting maps into pieces but soon people began making jigsaws for entertainment. The Kaleidoscope was invented in 1817.

In the 19th century middle class girls played with wood or porcelain dolls. They also had dolls houses, model shops and skipping ropes. Boys played with toys like marbles and toy soldiers as well as toy trains. (Some toy trains had working engines fuelled by methylated spirits). They also played with toy boats. However poor children had few toys and often had to make their own.

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In a well off Victorian family children played with rocking horses and clockwork toys like moving animals. Clockwork trains were also popular. So was the jack-in-the-box.

Simple toys like spinning tops were also popular. So were hoops and games like knucklebones and pick up sticks in which you had to pick up coloured sticks from a pile without disturbing the others.

On Sundays children often played with toys with a religious theme like a Noah's ark with wooden animals.

Children also loved magic lantern (slide) shows and puppet shows.

In the late 19th century town councils laid out public parks for recreation. The first children's playground was built in a park in Manchester in 1859.

Many new toys were invented in the 20th century. Plasticine was invented in 1897 by William Harbutt. It was first made commercially in 1900. Also in 1900 Frank Hornby invented a toy called Meccano. Other popular toys in the early 20th century were tin cars. In the 1920s train sets became very popular. Soft toys also became common in the early 20th century including teddy bears.

During World War II most toy factories were turned over to war production. However in the late 20th century with the arrival of an affluent society plastic and metal toys became much cheaper and much more common. In the 1950s Lego became a popular toy. Mr Potato Head was invented in 1952. The skateboard was invented in 1958. Barbie dolls were invented in 1959 and Action Man went on sale in Britain in 1966. In the early 1970s space hoppers and clackers were popular toys. At the end of the 20th century computer games became very popular.

(1) HISTORY OF TOYS: Timeline 4000 B.C - 1993

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- 4000 B.C. A Babylonian board game is played that was probably an **ancestor of chess and checkers**.
- 3000 B.C. First game resembling **backgammon** is played in Ancient Sumeria. Games similar to backgammon had probably been played by Egyptians, Greeks and Romans for thousands of years. **Stone marbles** are first used in Egypt. Later, glass marbles were popularised in the US in the 1800s.
- 1000 B.C. **Kites** appear in China. They have probably been flown since before recorded history.
Stone **yo-yos** begin to be used in Greece.
- 200 The first iron **skates** are used in Scandinavia.
- 600 An ancestor of **chess** begins to be played. It evolves from an Indian game called Chaturanga.
- 969 **Playing cards** begin to be used in Asia.
- 1400s Modern chess pieces were finally standardised.
- 1759 **Roller skates**
- 1824 First rubber balloons (ancient people made balloons from animal intestines, and other parts)
- 1840 **Dolls** begin to be mass-produced in the US.
- 1800s **Playgrounds** begin to appear in US cities.
- 1843 The Mansion of Happiness becomes the **first board game** sold in the US.
- 1860s First **bicycle**
- 1886 **BB gun**. The BB gun is a descendant of the cap gun, which was invented soon after the Civil War, when some shotgun manufacturers converted their factories to make toys.
- 1887 The **speaking doll**, which had first been invented by Johann Maelzel in 1820, is improved when Thomas Edison combines his phonograph technology with a doll, allowing it to speak.
- 1901 **Battery-powered train**
- 1902 Toy bear craze begins. **Teddy Bears** named after President Theodore Roosevelt.
- 1903 **Crayola crayons**
- 1913 **Erector Set**

- 1914 **Tinker Toys**
- 1915 **Raggedy Ann dolls**
- 1916 **Lincoln Logs**
- 1928 **Mickey Mouse**
- 1929 The **yo-yo** is popularized in the US.
- 1936 **Monopoly.**
- 1940s Affordable, plastic **model airplanes**
- 1943 **Slinky.** If stretched end to end, the Slinky toys sold since 1945 would wrap around the world 126 times.
- 1949 **Lego, Candy Land, Silly Putty**
- 1952 **Mr. Potato Head**
Pez mint dispenser comes to the US.
Matchbox car.
- 1956 At a 4th of July BBQ, Milton Levine dreams up the idea for the first **Ant Farm**, complete with live ants.
Play-doh enters the market as a wallpaper cleaner. Over 700 million pounds of Play-doh have been sold.
- 1957 **Tonka trucks**
- 1958 **Skateboards** were marketed, but kids had been building them for years on their own.
- 1959 **Barbie doll. Hula Hoops** (A similar toy was used as long ago as 1000 B.C. in Egypt and later, Greece and Rome)
- 1960 **Etch-a-Sketch, Game of Life**
- 1965 **G.I. Joe** – doll for boys
- 1966 **Hot Wheels**
- 1969 **Nerf ball**
- 1972 **Odyssey**, the first video game machine
- 1973 **Dungeons & Dragons**
- 1977 **Star Wars action figures**
- 1983 **Nintendo Entertainment System**
- 1986 **Cabbage Patch Kids** – become the most successful new dolls in the history of the toy industry
Pictionary
- 1987 **Koosh Ball**
- 1993 **Beanie Babies** – started with a dog, a platypus, a moose, a bear, a dolphin, a frog, a lobster, a whale, and a pig. Not a big success until 1996 when they became a collector's item.