

19th Century Toys & Games

A History of Play



Toys and games have been a part of every civilization. Throughout history, they have provided historians, anthropologists, and sociologists with insight into ancient civilizations. They can also document important moments throughout history.

Many of the toys and games still played today date back to our earliest ancestors. Babylonian board games have been found to be nearly 6,000 years old and are the predecessors of chess and checkers. Ancient Romans played board games like chess and backgammon. Gamblers sometimes call rolling dice “rolling the bones,” a reference to ancient Egypt where dice were made of bone. A toy factory existed in India around 5,000 years ago. Among the earliest known toys are small stone and clay balls or marbles. Marbles were found in a child’s grave in Nagada, Egypt and date from 4,000 B.C. Marbles have also been discovered in China and date to more than 5,000 years ago. Stone yo-yos were crafted in Greece more than 3,000 years ago. Paintings show that they were used in essentially the same ways as they are today. The earliest rolling toys have been discovered to be about 2,000 years old.

The word ‘toy’ dates from the 16th century. At that time it was applied to tawdry objects such as buttons and buckles—tools—as well as playthings. Many toys as we know them today were more likely to have originated as playthings and amusements for adults.

While different games, including rolling toys and forerunners of checkers or chess, have been around for a long time, until recently toys and games were reserved for the wealthy because they had the time and money to play. The notion of childhood play is a relatively new concept, one not made common until the late 18th and early 19th centuries. Children worked the fields and factories and did not have the time for play. It was only at the start of the 19th century that childhood became recognized as a separate period of a person’s life and American values began celebrating and protecting childhood.

Children of the American frontier lived differently from those of boys and girls today. Difficult work was a part of every day. In order to have enough food and clothing, the entire family had to work. Boys and girls began to do chores as soon as they were able to walk and talk.

Even though boys and girls worked hard, they did find time for fun. Many children today have a variety of toys, games, and activities from which to choose. Frontier children had to amuse themselves with simple games and a few homemade toys. With what little time children had to play, they often played with pieces of string, bits of wood, corncobs, and old wagon wheels. Most of these games were played outside, using objects found around the farm or in the community. An old barrel hoop provided hours of fun when it was rolled with a stick. A fence rail and blanket could be an imaginary horse or saddle. A fence could be a bucking horse to ride. A sturdy board laid over a tree stump became a simple seesaw. Rocks, leaves, and branches created imaginary houses and forts. A child’s only limit was his or her imagination. Fathers and grandfathers carved dolls, model boats, and whistles from wood. Mothers and grandmothers made dolls and dolls’ clothes from rags and scraps of cloth. The local carpenter sometimes made toys and sold them in the community.

As more people moved into communities, children's lives changed. Parents started buying toys for their children. The shops in the cities and towns sold a variety of playthings. Even in small towns, people could buy toys at the general store or order them from a catalog. Parents sometimes bought expensive toys to show off how wealthy they were.

Some children from well-to-do families owned toy collections, but many toys were not necessarily meant for playing. Fancy dollhouses and dolls with china heads were often for display only. Some mechanical toys were for adults with an interest in machines, not for children. Parents often found optical toys more interesting than children did. Most children preferred to play with simple toys such as blocks or pull toys.

Dominoes, playing cards, counters, and teetotums were all used to play games in the 19th century but were more popular with adults than with children. These were often ornate and made of bone and ivory. Teetotums and spinning tops with numbers on each side were used instead of dice and were thought to encourage gambling.

Most children's play toys and games have their origins in the late 18th century. These include dolls, hobbyhorses, stick horses, kites, and puzzles. Toys as a formal business did not begin until after the 1830s when steamboats and steam trains improved the transportation and distribution of manufactured goods. Forty-seven American toy makers were registered with the Census Bureau by 1850. In a relatively short time, the United States was rivaling Germany as the leader of the international toy market. Early toy makers used wood, tin, or cast iron to fashion horses, soldiers, wagons, and other simple toys. Charles Goodyear's method for vulcanizing rubber created another medium for manufacturing balls, dolls, and squeeze toys.

Over the last 150 years, the importance of play in childhood has grown exponentially. Toys serve to contribute toward the development of skills and independence in childhood and help children think, figure out strategy, and learn important skills. Through toys, children are taught the things they need to know to be an adult.

Fancy toys were brought to North America from Europe. By the 1850s, however, there were several toymakers in the United States who were also selling exciting new toys. Soon, American toys were popular around the world.

One of the earliest popular toys for children to play in the 19th century was the Noah's Ark toy. Since the Noah's Ark toy was based on a Bible story, it was one of the few toys with which children were allowed to play on Sundays. The toy ark looked like a house on a raft. Its roof opened so that the brightly painted wooden figures of Noah, his family, and the animals could be stored inside.

A popular board game of the 19th century that reflected the time was called "Mansion of Happiness." The object was to move your piece through the course to reach the Mansion of Happiness. If you were a robber, you went to prison; if you lied, you would be punished in the pillory; but if you did something good, you would advance a certain number of spaces until reaching the Mansion of Happiness.

Jigsaw puzzles were originally made from printed paper which was glued onto wood and cut into shapes. Puzzles were first seen as an educational pastime, often featuring historic figures such as kings and queens of England.

Very young children played with toys such as blocks and puzzles. Blocks were educational as well as fun. Young children practiced working with their hands when they played blocks. The sides of some of the blocks were decorated with letters of the alphabet, numbers, or pictures of animals. Sometimes blocks had part of a picture on one side, forming a simple puzzle. When the blocks were arranged properly, they were transformed into a colorful image. Using blocks and some imagination, children could also create houses, castles, and towers.

With the rapid growth of the rail networks in the 1840s, toy trains soon appeared. The first toy trains were made in the 1850s. Most had to be pushed across the floor by hand. Some trains, however, had hand wind up mechanisms or real steam engines that made them move! As the Industrial Revolution developed, so did mass-produced toys.

In the 20th century more elaborate toys were produced and, as the motorcar was seen on the roads for the first time, the toy car was also created.

During World War I, the toy industry was quick to produce an array of toys reflecting the conflict. They included a range of toy soldiers which were then incorporated into board games creating tabletop war games.

In the 1920s and 1930s cartoon characters such as Felix the Cat and Mickey Mouse gained worldwide appeal. These toy figures were produced as merchandising.

The Great Depression nearly eliminated the toy industry. But it did not stop toy makers from developing. During the Great Depression, people still dreamed of finding fame and fortune. An out-of-work heating engineer drew up a board game on an oil cloth and called it Monopoly. It was originally played on a circular board. (See Resource File 2-Selected Toy Histories for a more information on the creation of Monopoly.)

During World War II toy making came to a near standstill. Factories and materials were used to make weapons instead. Cheaper toys were made from card or paper such as cut out paper dolls. However, one of the most popular toys was discovered as a result of a failed experiment by military engineers tinkering with a suspension device to ease rough sailing on battleships: the slinky. As the story goes, one of the various springs that inventor Richard James had rejected was knocked over and when it fell to the floor it didn't just land there, it walked and moved coil over coil. He took it home and marketed it. He eventually turned to television in 1962 to promote his slinky. The jingle used in that marketing campaign has become the longest running advertising jingle in American television history.

In the 1950s television became a focus of family entertainment. In England, the Coronation of Queen Elizabeth II in 1953 saw the purchase of 100,000 extra television sets, so that people could watch the televised event at home. Leading up to the event Britains Ltd produced a Coronation coach as a souvenir toy.

In 1969 another televised event took place as Neil Armstrong became the first man to walk on the moon. A variety of space age toys were soon available and when the Star Wars film *The Empire Strikes Back* was released in 1980, the AT-AT (All Terrain Armored Transport) toy, marketed for this film, was the most expensive toy sold at the time.

In the early 1970s, Pong, the first patented video game, was a hit. Nolan Bushnell created Pong along with a company named Atari. Pong debuted in arcades and was soon transported to home units. The games Space Invaders, Pac-Man, and Tron followed. As technology advanced,

the dedicated single game machine was replaced by programmable machines that allowed different games to be played simply by exchanging a cartridge.

In 1973, Dungeons and Dragons was introduced to the public creating a new category for the gaming industry—fantasy role play—leading to sales that generate \$250 million per year. Inventions in circuitry and miniaturization in the early 1980s produced handheld games, as Nintendo, a Japanese electronics company, along with many others, moved into the video game market. Home computers created a market for games that were versatile, action packed, challenging, and diverse.

By the end of the 20th century, the toy industry in the United States was generated nearly 21 billion dollars in sales every year.

As our technology progresses, so does the complexity and diversity of our amusements. Once, toys simply reflected everyday life and activities. Today, toys create new ways of living and teach us to adapt to changing technologies and inspire us to follow our dreams. Toys and games are necessary. They spark basic instincts, foster dreams, and encourage us to seek adventure. From what researchers can tell, humans are the only species capable of imagination and fantasy play. When these fantasies are nurtured they turn into dreams which in some cases turn into reality. Although toys and games have existed for thousands of years, only since the 19th century has their importance in teaching and developing imagination been recognized.