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## Bored With Her Toys

Makers See Girls Growing Up Faster, and Wonder How to Entertain Them

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It's hard to walk into a toy store and not be struck by the utter excitement of children facing such a vast array of games, building sets, race cars, dolls, action figures, arts and crafts, infant toys and stuffed animals.

But the giggles these products create hide the underlying problems facing the toy industry: declining sales, competition from electronics and, in a word, girls.

The business is tough, and even tougher when it comes to making toys for girls. Some of the industry's most creative companies have had high-profile girl-toy disappointments recently, such as last year's "Girlfitti" line of playful desk and stationery items from Crayola. At the International Toy Fair in New York in February, it was hard not to notice the clear dominance of boy toys throughout the massive Javits Convention Center.

It's always been a bit trickier to make successful girl toys than it has been to make knockout boy toys, in part because the industry is still largely run by male executives, which makes it harder for companies to get inside the head of 10-year-old Tiffany.

"When I tour different company showrooms and look at what they're doing, many times it's a bunch of guys making decisions about what girls would like, and they miss the mark," said Nancy Zwiers, president of industry consulting firm Funosophy and former head of worldwide marketing for the Barbie doll line at Mattel Inc.

But this inherent difficulty has been exacerbated by the "age compression" that has been affecting all kids and putting huge pressure on the toy industry. Children are moving through play stages faster now, always wanting to go quickly to the next level of toys and encouraged by their parents to do so.

This change is especially pronounced in girls. The result is that Barbie, which used to be a doll that 7- and 8-year-olds would play with for hours, is now the domain of 3-year-olds. Never mind that 3-year-olds don't have the fine motor skills needed to dress the 10-inch bombshell in her tiny outfits and teensy accessories. Playrooms across the country are littered with naked Barbies with missing arms and matted hair.

By age 8, girls are gravitating away from Toys R Us to fast-growing chains like Club Libby Lu, which lets them dress up like rock stars, get glitter on their faces, put on fake ponytails and buy itty-bitty accessories to put in teeny-weeny purses.

But boys, bless their little hearts, stick with toys longer, thanks to their unwavering interest in building things and wrecking things, in things that move fast and things that fight. That simply makes them a bigger, easier target for toymakers.

"Boys stay with toys till they're 12," said Daniel Grossman, chief executive of Wild Planet Toys Inc. "But girls, on the other hand, by that time, they're starting to buy things that are not traditional toys. That means

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we have boys for 12 years and girls for eight. So that's 50 percent more time."

Toy executives say they want more girl toys and are trying to get them in several ways: hiring more female toy designers, doing more kid-focused market research, breaking down traditional barriers between a company's "boy toy" executives and "girl toy" executives and, perhaps most of all, embracing technology.

Toy companies are banking on tech for a lot of things, most of all a better competitive advantage against the consumer electronics that have become a new form of entertainment for kids. But the toy industry also loves that technology seems to more easily produce gender-neutral toys. Products such as LeapFrog's Fly Pentop Computer *and* Zizzle's iZ (pronounced "is") speaker system for iPods were huge, much-needed successes last holiday season -- for boys and girls. The industry is looking for more.

"You've got a lot more opportunity with a unisex product because you've got twice the marketplace to go after, twice the number of licenses," said Reyne Rice, toy trend specialist with the Toy Industry Association. "It opens up a lot of different doors."

### **Girls Get Scrapbooks**

The \$21 billion toy industry was shaken by a 4 percent drop in sales last year, and many executives are trying to think about the business in new ways. But it's tough to break out of old habits.

In recent years, kids have been spending less time with toys because of the Internet, electronics, television and even homework. In response, toymakers have delved deeper and gotten more creative to energize their base. In the process, they have created some of the best boy toys ever.

Spin Master Ltd. has produced dramatic remote-control vehicles -- a central business for boy toys -- including trucks that climb walls, little helicopters that hover perfectly and vehicles that can go from land to water to air with astonishing speed.

Meanwhile, K'Nex Industries Inc. and the Lego group have taken building systems to new heights, giving boys nifty new interlocking technologies to build not just planes and bridges but also characters and games they can then play with. Cool spy gear has unleashed the inner 007 in legions of boys. And the once-lowly water gun has become the must-have new accessory each summer, with ever more ways to splash, surprise, soak and scare your opponents.

But besides the wonderfully creative arts-and-crafts books from Klutz and perhaps the success of MGA Entertainment Inc.'s edgy Bratz fashion dolls, not much has ignited the toy business for girls. The most innovative products for girls have tended to come outside the realm of traditional toys: in accessories, room decor and scrapbooking.

Which raises a question: Are girls moving out of toys earlier because the toys aren't good enough? Or are the toys for girls less interesting because the girls have left the market?

"I personally think there could be a lot more innovation than there is," said consultant Zwiers. "A lot of what's happening is old hat."

### **Hitting 'Nurturing' Buttons**

Even when a company tries to tackle girl products, it's hard to always get it right. Wild Planet unveiled a new line of room decor accessories called GLS, for "Girls Living in Style," two years ago, but the line has not done as well as the company hoped.

The subtlety of the business is almost maddening: In one case, Wild Planet packaged three GLS accessories

-- a mini radio, mini lamp and mini fan -- and expected it to be wildly successful. It wasn't. Turns out girls don't want their accessories in a bundle; they want to buy them individually.

"It's always confounding when you think you have it," said Grossman of Wild Planet. But he cuts his team some slack by recognizing that Wild Planet began as a boy-toy company and is still trying to understand girls by spending more time on market research. Among his revelations: Even though girls may be moving up the toy spectrum at younger ages, they are not advancing emotionally at the same pace. So a girl toy that feels advanced still has to hit the emotional buttons appropriate to the age group, such as nurturing or making things pretty.

"With girls, you have to design in layers," Grossman said. This year, Wild Planet is tackling the somewhat easier preschool-girl market with a line of tiny dolls called Sugar Snaps, which have clothes that snap on and off in a jiffy, solving the vexing problem of the 3-year-old constantly going to her mother to ask for help getting Barbie dressed.

### **Toys . . . or Shoes?**

But Sugar Snaps are not going to get 10-year-old Tiffany into the toy store. In a recent survey by Funosophy, 92 percent of boys 9 to 11 said they'd probably or definitely go to the toy aisle in a mass market store such as Target. Only 76 percent of girls said the same thing. Their first choice? Clothes, fashion accessories and shoes.

Unwilling to cede that market to the fashion industry, some toy companies are trying innovative approaches to toy design and development in the hope of creating more hits for girls over age 8. At Mattel, for example, the traditional barriers between the boy and girl sides of the business are coming down as the company seeks more opportunities for crossover toys.

"My colleagues and I talk about these things more regularly and more easily than we may have in the past," said Tim Kilpin, a senior executive in Mattel's boys division.

And at Seattle-based Cranium Inc., there simply is no girl or boy side of the business; it's all one unit. Of course, the eight-year-old gamemaker has the built-in advantage that games, like outdoor play and to some degree arts and crafts, is an area where there is already more overlap in the play patterns of boys and girls.

"We went *in* thinking we were going to make gender-neutral products," said Cranium co-founder Richard Tait, whose business card gives his title as Grand Poo-Bah.

But it can be hard to keep that philosophy going. When Cranium introduced a line of toys for younger kids at Toy Fair, its role-play masks for preschoolers came in four varieties: robots, aliens and bugs for boys and fun fairies for girls.

### **High-Tech Razzle-Dazzle**

Perhaps nothing is generating ideas in the toy business like technology, which is allowing companies to abandon some of the old notions of what makes a boy toy or a girl toy in the first place. Zizzle, a new industry darling formed by two veteran toy executives, is following its alien-shape iZ speaker-system for iPods -- which was a hit last Christmas -- with a desktop music and light console called Zounds. Company executives were pushing it hard at Toy Fair as a product that will appeal to boys and girls equally.

"I think the line has blurred in a very significant way" between boy toys and girl toys, said Marc Rosenberg, chief marketing officer. "You know what this industry needs? It needs hit products."

One of the surest routes to a hit right now is through youth electronics, he said, which have "changed what

people think of as toys."

Traditional toy retailers are eager for technological advances, too, because they broaden their audience. Gregory R. Staley, president and chief executive of KB Toys Inc., said the more technology morphs into toys, the more kids will turn into toy consumers.

"The real sweet spot for the industry is 2- to 7-year-olds. Anything that can extend that age is good for us," he said. Better yet if toymakers come up with a product, like iZ, that appeals to kids of all ages and of both sexes.

"You get a product like that, it's a home run," Staley said.

It has become so inexpensive to add interactivity, sound and liquid-crystal display screens that toymakers are adding these features to toys in droves. Anything with technology is "cooler" in the minds of kids, they say. The Amazing Amanda doll by Playmates Toys Inc. uses technology to make a doll so realistic that some toy bloggers have deemed it "creepy." But it's a talker in the toy industry and has raised the bar for other interactive products.

Mattel has added technology to traditional girl toys with products such as Pixel Chix, which uses the traditional nurturing play pattern in a purely technological environment. Little girls must take care of their Pixel Chix, who live as moving, responsive characters in little stackable cubes. And then there's the electronic Barbie diary, a clear effort to keep Barbie relevant to 9-year-olds.

For parents and toy experts who bemoan the advance of technology in toys, there is a counterbalancing trend in the industry that emphasizes free play, open-ended toys and old-fashioned fun. No batteries needed.

But for all the press these old-fashioned toys have gotten recently -- Radio Flyer wagons, old card games, Lincoln Logs, board games -- they remain a small slice of the ever-advancing industry. One can argue -- and people do -- whether all this technology is good for kids or is ruining their ability to think for themselves and use their imaginations. But toy executives deal with that criticism this way: If they don't chase the promise of technology, they risk another year with a 4 percent loss in sales, or worse.

In the process, it just may bring boys and girls together in the toy aisle.

"There's always been gender-neutral products in the areas of games and entertainment," said toy consultant Zwiers. "Now technology is bringing all of that to life."

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