On my desk are several action figures, ranging from the heroic (Superman) to the historic (Alexander the Great) to even the academic (Freud). But as long as I’ve owned them, these action figures have remained actionless: I do not make Superman fly, or Alexander conquer, or Freud psychoanalyze. Rather, I leave them standing, in the same pose, in the same place, in the same spatial relationship to all of the other items left static on my desk.
And yet, in their own way, they’re still acting. Any toy can be played with, just as any rarity can be collected, but what makes action figures special is their ability to shape, and reveal, the nature of their owners.

The origin story of the action figure goes like this: One day in the early 1960s, Don Levine, then the vice president and director of marketing at Hasbro, walked by an art store and saw a wooden artist’s mannequin in the window display—and had an epiphany that would dramatically alter the landscape of toys in the U.S. In 1964, Hasbro shipped the first action figure, G.I. Joe.

At the time, Hasbro rival Mattel had already succeeded in marketing the massively popular Barbie dolls to girls; a doll geared towards boys seemed like a niche waiting to be filled. Instead of a doll, however, Hasbro developed what it called a “movable fighting man,” a figurine built on the cultural understanding of war as an experience that turned boys into men.

G.I. Joe—which debuted early in the Vietnam War, when popular support for the war was still high—was an immediate success, making Hasbro nearly $17 million in its first year. But as that support waned over the next several years, so too did G.I. Joe sales. In the 1970s, he was relaunched with a beard, a “Kung-Fu grip,” and a backstory that recast his symbolism. Once representative of the geopolitical quagmire of war, G.I. Joe was now all about fantastical “adventure” removed from reality.
But the true revival of G.I. Joe didn’t happen until the early 1980s, when the right ingredients for an allegorical war figure emerged: jihad and state-sponsored terrorism, the “Evil Empire” rhetoric of Ronald Reagan, and the rise of Star Wars and fantasy war. The “movable fighting man” was no longer a generic representation of the armed services, nor was he a macho representation of an abstract militaristic fantasy. Instead, G.I. Joe synthesized both of these incarnations into something new—an increasingly detailed representation of a fantasy war between good (G.I. Joe, the Real American Hero) and evil (Cobra, his fictional nemesis).

The tension between fantasy and reality, in turn, led to the trait that would come to define the action figure’s enduring appeal: its ability to take on new meanings at the hands of its owners.

Children create new personalities for their action figures, turning warriors, wizards, and Wolverines into whatever their stories require.

It’s a characteristic that owes as much to capitalism as it does to warfare. To keep production costs down, action figures were often produced in a modular fashion, allowing action figures to share accessories across different companies. And different collections, for that matter—intellectual-property law forbids the copyrighting of the human form, which meant Hasbro could not protect the basic form of its action figure, enabling competitors to model their own action figures after G.I. Joe in shape, size, and style.
One such competitor was the toy company Leisure Concepts, founded by the former Hasbro executive Stan Weston, who had worked on the development of G.I. Joe. In 1996, Leisure Concepts created Captain Action—a generic action figure who could be transformed with accessories into anyone from Batman to the Lone Ranger, thanks to Weston’s licensing agreements with DC and Marvel Comics. The shape-shifting nature of Captain Action and similar action figures meant that weapons, uniforms, even heads could be taken off and moved from one body to another, as children re-created and re-defined their toys.

Even without the removal and replacement of parts, action figures can still be repurposed by the imagination. In play, children create new personalities and backstories for their action figures, turning warriors, wizards, and Wolverines into whatever characters their stories require. The ability to move and pose the limbs—the “action” in “action figure”—also gives children the ability to move those stories forward. By developing their own imaginary worlds within the context of the real one, children use the fluid identity of action figures as a tool to help them discover their own identities.

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But today, the toy industry often resists those imaginative possibilities. G.I. Joe was once a generic, militaristic everyman, ready to take on whatever task his child operator might invent. But ever since the monumental success of *Star Wars* action figures in the late 1970s, action figures have increasingly become specific characters from movies, TV shows, and comic books. Contemporary action figures...
come with pre-packaged media-franchise identities: Toy companies help sell entertainment, and entertainment companies help sell toys.

As a result, action figures are now largely sold as cross-promotional efforts for movie releases. They become interactive advertisements, but also handheld spoiler alerts. Recently, an Iowa Walmart accidentally started selling *Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens* action figures too early, leading two fans to receive lawsuit threats from Lucasfilm and Disney for posting pictures of their purchase online. Movie fans can try to avoid watching trailers and reading about movies online, but action-figure fans also have to wade carefully through toy stores to avoid seeing characters, costumes, and locations that give away major plot points. (Just imagine if *The Empire Strikes Back* were coming out today, and toy companies released Luke Skywalker action figures with removable hands months before the movie hit theaters.)

Another side effect of the rise of the pop-culture-character-as-toy: Action figures have evolved from mass-produced, generic play companions to artfully crafted items made to be collected and displayed. In the movie *The 40-Year-Old Virgin*, Steve Carell’s character Andy Stitzer is ridiculed for owning an action figure of the Six Million Dollar Man’s boss, Oscar Goldman. Andy has to explain to his incredulous co-worker Cal that it’s worth far more than the Six Million Dollar Man. To Cal, action figures are just children’s toys. But to Andy, action figures are collectibles for adults to display like works of art or bottles of wine. To own and exhibit such a rare item makes perfect sense.

Turning action figures into collectibles, as Andy does, both embraces and undermines the imaginative possibilities of play. Any collector knows that if you want to maximize your investment, your action figure can’t be taken out of its original packaging—to retain value, an action figure and its box must both be kept in mint condition. The action
figure owner is forced to determine if the benefits of play are worth the costs of lost appreciation: Since play cannot be quantified as easily as can market prices, the transformative value of play and imagination is swapped for the (hypothetical) investment value of collection and conservation.

If owners aren’t using action figures to expand their imaginations, perhaps it’s no surprise that some choose instead to use them as a mirror. Sites like myfaceonafigure.com and thatsmyface.com offer shoppers the chance to buy action figures of themselves—for around $30, instead of creating a personality of your own invention, you can project your face onto Batman’s body and adopting his persona for your own. By extension, you can now buy, sell, and trade action figures of yourself to celebrate your own identity—or alienation. Who do I want to be? Superman? Freud? Alexander the Great?

It’s easy to sneer at Andy Stitzer—or at me—for displaying children’s toys rather than using them. But the Oscar Goldman on his shelf and the Superman on my desk are still tools of discovery. Despite its changes over the last 50-something years, the action figure still stares back at whoever holds it, daring children to see who they could become and adults to see who they think they are.

This article appears courtesy of Object Lessons.

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