



# The Transmedia Franchise of Star Wars TV

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## CHAPTER 2

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# The Enduring Force of Kenner Star Wars Toy Commercials

*Jonathon Lundy*

On December 12, 2015, NBC's infamous late-night comedy show *Saturday Night Live* (SNL) debuted a humorous commercial parody for the film release of *The Force Awakens*.<sup>1</sup> The fictional advertisement, fashioned in the style of a retro toy commercial, featured SNL cast members Bobby Moynihan, Taran Killam, and Kyle Mooney as overly enthusiastic adult toy collectors continuously disrupting the fun of three young boys. As the kids try to just play with their toys as intended, the stereotypical obsessive grown-ups encourage them to “leave them in the box” or “just look at it!” While the children seem perfectly happy with their unboxed figures, the adults are more concerned with keeping the toys in pristine condition and maintaining cinematic fidelity. At one point, Moynihan's character even correctively demonstrates a more “movie accurate” recreation of the Millennium Falcon's landing sequence.

<sup>1</sup> *Saturday Night Live*, “Star Wars Toy Commercial—SNL.”

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The Farce was strong with this creative spoof that was both a nostalgic nod to classic toy commercials and a satirical jab at the adult toy collection phenomenon. The skit continues to be immensely popular with SNL's official YouTube channel, amassing over 5.4 million views and 2800 comments. For some viewers, the sketch's deeper resonance came from its critique of Star Wars fan culture, particularly adult toy collectors. Moynihan, Killam, and Mooney masterfully play the lonely, geeky, white-male fan archetypes, best illustrated when one boy asks Killam's character, "Does your wife like toys too?" With John Williams's somber music coming to the aural foreground, the camera zooms in to reveal the man's dejected realization.

As is the case with all effective parody however, its popularity also lies in the masterfully exaggerated imitation of an original work. For individuals of a certain age, the sketch was instantly recognizable as a Star Wars toy commercial through its successful appropriation of all the classic Kenner toy advertisement aesthetics from a pre-Internet youth. Originally, mass-produced to further the films' financial success, Star Wars toys have, over four decades, become a cultural force of their own and a central component of the franchise. The "vintage" Kenner toylines (1977–1985) simultaneously revolutionized the toy industry and gave the first generation of Star Wars fans a material connection to their beloved fictional storyworld. Some popular attention has been paid to the significance of Kenner toys within the Star Wars franchise and among adult fans. Less explored, however, is the role Kenner toy commercials played in making Star Wars the most successful and beloved transmedia property of all time.

Using data obtained from an in-depth content analysis and a previously unpublished survey of fans, this chapter will (1) recount the history of Kenner Star Wars; (2) explain how the original Kenner advertisements and their aesthetic template refined the action-figure commercial genre in American TV; (3) address Kenner's influence on the transmediality of Star Wars and the toy industry; and (4) demonstrate how Kenner toys and their commercials cultivated an enduring legacy of fandom for the first generation of Star Wars collectors.

### THE TRUE GALACTIC EMPIRE

In 1977, George Lucas's *Star Wars* (later renamed *A New Hope*) captivated audiences worldwide and transformed the film industry by setting new standards for special effects and visual storytelling. Lucas's true

genius, however, was the strategic integration of filmmaking and merchandising that extended the Star Wars experience beyond the movie theater through an endless array of products. For children, this meant that all aspects of their lives were voluntarily colonized by Star Wars. Kids could play with Star Wars toys, eat Star Wars cereal, wear Star Wars clothes, cover injuries with Star Wars band-aids, and sleep in Star Wars sheets. While many of the “vintage” commodities became collectible, the Kenner toys became especially important material reminders of the film experience. The story of Star Wars quickly became intertwined with the history of its toys to the extent that some argue, “Star Wars is a toy franchise, not a movie franchise.”<sup>2</sup> The action figure line in particular has, since its inception, been an economic and fictive cornerstone, while Kenner became a well-known character in the Star Wars saga to many original fans.<sup>3</sup>

Kenner, named after the street where the original corporate offices were located, was founded in 1946 in Cincinnati, Ohio, by brothers Albert, Phillip, and Joseph Steiner. Kenner gained some notoriety with its Bubble-Matic (1946), a toy gun that blew bubbles; Easy-Bake-Oven (1963), a light bulb powered toy cooker; and the Kenner Gooney Bird, the 1960s era corporate mascot logo with signature catch phrase: “It’s Kenner! It’s fun!” Kenner, however, became a true household name after securing the lucrative merchandising license for Star Wars. Today, Kenner’s story has become its own legend, a metanarrative inexorably tied to the franchise, retold in books,<sup>4</sup> YouTube series,<sup>5</sup> documentaries like Netflix produced *The Toys That Made Us* (2017),<sup>6</sup> and the fan-made *Plastic Galaxy: The Story of Star Wars Toys* (2014).<sup>7</sup>

Bernie Loomis, a toy development executive for Kenner, famously passed on the merchandising rights for Steven Spielberg’s *Close Encounters of the Third Kind* (1977)—because the film wasn’t “toyetic” enough—in favor of George Lucas’s *Star Wars*.<sup>8</sup> By toyetic, Loomis meant the

<sup>2</sup> Meslow, “Star Wars isn’t a movie franchise. It’s a toy franchise,” 1.

<sup>3</sup> Scott, “#Wheresrey?: Toys, Spoilers, and the Gender Politics of Franchise Paratexts,” 138–147.

<sup>4</sup> Fleming, *Powerplay: Toys as popular culture*, 94; Geraghty, *Cult Collectors*.

<sup>5</sup> *Analog Toys*, “History of Star Wars Toys: Vintage Kenner Action Figure Review / Collection”; or an abridged version *Toy Galaxy*, “The History of Vintage Star Wars Figures—Need to Know #1.”

<sup>6</sup> “Star Wars,” *The Toys That Made Us*, season 1, episode 1.

<sup>7</sup> Stillman, *Plastic Galaxy: The Story of Star Wars Toys*.

<sup>8</sup> Fleming, *Powerplay: Toys as Popular Culture*, 94.

suitability of the film for merchandising, particularly in modes amenable to children, through play or collectability. If merchandising is “the materiality of licensing, an extension of virtual screen texts into physical paratexts,” then toyetics is the “interactive ‘make-and-do’ aspect of merchandising, encouraging audiences to engage and play with aspects of the screen text.”<sup>9</sup> Toyetic properties must possess creative characters, technology, or storyboard enough to produce merchandise with play value.<sup>10</sup> As a high-concept space opera, visually striking and stylistically innovative, *Star Wars* had the look (imagery), the hook (market appeal), and the book (accessible narrative) to be perfectly toyetic.<sup>11</sup>

Kenner, wanting to capitalize on the diverse characters and technology present in *Star Wars*, soon realized that standard action figure sizes (8”–12”) were too large for a scalable universe of toy vehicles, creatures, and playsets.<sup>12</sup> It was thus decided that the main line of action figures would be 3.75” tall, meaning that, in light of the 1970s oil crisis, a greater variety of figures could be produced, sold for an affordable price, and work interchangeably with vehicles and creatures.<sup>13</sup> Kenner also deviated from industry norms by producing figures, primarily with molded clothing, specific to each character, instead of a single figure, like G.I. Joe, with multiple outfits suitable for different applications. The smaller size and diverse assortment of toys was also more conducive to collection, a goal that was explicitly and repeatedly encouraged in their TV commercials through direct addresses like “collect them all” and the sale of seven distinct “collector” cases.

*Star Wars* debuted in May 1977, but Kenner was unable to produce enough toys in time for Christmas. Instead, it bravely sold the “Early Bird Certificate Package,” an empty box containing a diorama display stand, some stickers, a fan club membership card, and mail-away certificate redeemable for four action figures.<sup>14</sup> To spread the word about this promise of toys to come, Kenner aired its first television advertisement in the months leading up to the holidays. The commercial featured a boy and

<sup>9</sup>Bainbridge, “Fully Articulated: The Rise of the action figure and the changing face of children’s entertainment,” 25.

<sup>10</sup>Toyetic merchandise could also mean clothing, lunchboxes, or food.

<sup>11</sup>Justin Wyatt, *High Concept: Movies and Marketing in Hollywood*, 22.

<sup>12</sup>“Star Wars,” *The Toys That Made Us*, season 1, episode 1.

<sup>13</sup>Alexandratos, *Articulating the Action Figure: Essays on Toys and Their Messages*, 7.

<sup>14</sup>xboxphanatic, “Kenner Star Wars Early Bird Commercial 1977,” June 3, 2012, video, 00:30, <https://youtu.be/0CmGs9ixpNU>.



girl enthusiastically playing with the Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia, Chewbacca, and R2-D2 in front of the diorama display. One of the children even demonstrated how to fill out the certificate, which Kenner hoped would mitigate the disappointment of receiving an empty box for Christmas. The four figures shipped in February 1978, and soon eight more figures were available in stores. By 1979, 21 individual figures were available, along with a handful of vehicles and playsets. Retailers had trouble keeping product on shelves and the toyline generated an estimated \$100 million in revenue during that first year.

Kenner went on to produce an estimated 300 Star Wars-themed products between 1977 and 1985 with the action figure line as the hallmark of a vast toy galaxy encompassing plush toys, inflatable lightsabers, blasters, and games. Profits eclipsed \$2.5 billion by the end of the first three films;<sup>15</sup> in 1985 there were more Star Wars action figures on the planet than US citizens.<sup>16</sup>

The seemingly ubiquitous popularity of *Star Wars* at the time might suggest that the toys sold themselves; however, an important, often underrated component in Kenner's triumph was its strategic use of television advertising. The content of toy advertising has been explored previously, mostly regarding gender and racial representation, but there is a lack of research on the formal features of children's commercials and their impact on viewers.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, it is even rarer for television commercials to be explicitly analyzed as televisual genre.<sup>18</sup> However, if the commercial was treated as genre, "it would be among the most ubiquitous and the most influential of its forms and hence deserve[s] the attention of the serious critics and theoreticians of that art."<sup>19</sup> Due to their limited timeframe and explicitly persuasive intent, the form and style of TV advertisements are more important than other televisual genres.<sup>20</sup> Kenner did not invent the action figure commercial genre, but its advertisements firmly established its presence within American children's culture.

<sup>15</sup> Engelhardt, *The End of Victory Culture: Cold War America and the Disillusioning of a Generation*, 269.

<sup>16</sup> Taylor, "How Star Wars Conquered the Galaxy."

<sup>17</sup> Chandler and Griffiths, "Gender-Differentiated Production Features in Toy Commercials," 503.

<sup>18</sup> Hernandez, "Blurring the Line: Television Advertainment in the 1950s and Present," 13.

<sup>19</sup> Esslin, "Aristotle and the Advertisers: The Television Commercial Considered as a Form of Drama," 96.

<sup>20</sup> Messaris, "Visual Persuasion. The Role of Images in Advertising," 86–87.

## KENNER COMMERCIALIZES STAR WARS

The first toy advertised on national television was “Mr. Potato Head” (1952), a kit of plastic facial features, backed with push pins, to be stuck in your tuber of choice (“potato not included”).<sup>21</sup> More toy commercials would follow, including Mattel’s 1959 advert for the iconic fashion doll *Barbie*.<sup>22</sup> However, the first action figure commercial didn’t air until 1964, when Hasbro debuted its poseable 12” scaled “G.I. Joe” doll. Conventional wisdom held that boys would not play with dolls, so Hasbro marketed “Joe” as the world’s first “action figure.” The one-minute advertisement featured an original patriotic theme song, quick jump-cuts highlighting the variety of authentic equipment that would, according to the authoritative male narrator, enable a child to “have the greatest realism, the greatest fun you ever had in playing soldier.”<sup>23</sup> Several boys enthusiastically shouted commands and demonstrated how to equip their clearly-not-dolls with uniforms, tools, and weapons on an elaborate playset. Thematic music, rapid cutting, masculine voice-over, and demonstrative play would remain staples of the “boy toy” commercial genre. By the 1970s, the toy commercial genre was well established, but it would jump into hyperspace with the Kenner’s Star Wars toyline.

Roughly 100 toy commercials aired on US television sets for the original Kenner Star Wars toys,<sup>24</sup> with an additional 10 TV advertisements

<sup>21</sup> VintageTVCommercials, “Vintage Original Mr and Mrs Potato Head commercial 1960’s.”

<sup>22</sup> BarbieCollectors, “1959 First EVER Barbie Commercial High Quality HQ!”

<sup>23</sup> Tommy Retro’s Blast From The Past! “G.I. JOE (1964) Debut TV Commercial!”

<sup>24</sup> The data regarding Kenner commercials discussed within this chapter is the product of a systematic content analysis made possible only by the thorough cataloging and curation of several passionate fans. Particularly essential, were SKot Kirkwood’s “The Star Wars TV Commercials Project” and Geoff1975’s “Chronological Order—Kenner Toy Commercials” discussion board posts located at [TheOriginalTrilogy.com](http://TheOriginalTrilogy.com).

These comprehensive lists were cross-referenced with the work of other dedicated fans including the “Vintage Star Wars Kenner Toy Commercials 1977 to 1985 Compilation,” <https://youtu.be/IJY709chKLw>, found at the *All Things 80s* YouTube channel, and the “Vintage Star Wars Kenner Toy Commercials 1977 to 1985 Compilation,” <https://youtu.be/IJY709chKLw>; the Star Wars—All 1977–1978 Kenner Toy Commercials—Compilation,” <https://youtu.be/AhNus5ulzCs>; “The Return of the Jedi—All 1982–1984 Kenner and Palitoy Toy Commercials—Star Wars—Compilation,” <https://youtu.be/tuAifo9VdM>; and the “The Empire Strikes Back—All 1978–1982 Kenner Palitoy Toy Commercials—Star Wars—Compilation,” <https://youtu.be/mQcMW-gLXiQ> all available at *Eric Stran’s* YouTube channel. [https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCUNUHkV6k-Oq\\_jDRiri6XQw](https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCUNUHkV6k-Oq_jDRiri6XQw).

made exclusively for Palitoy,<sup>25</sup> the company that produced Kenner toys in the United Kingdom.<sup>26</sup> Commercials were 30 seconds in length, typically airing in between weekday children's programming, before and after school hours, or during Saturday morning cartoons, prime viewing times for American kids. The bulk of commercials promoted the 3.75" action figures and their vehicles, creatures, and playsets. The latter were an intentional focal point of the advertisements, with child actors demonstrating how the figures fit, literally and figuratively, into the strategically miniaturized universe. Commercials emphasized special features, weaponry, and the ability of figures to fit inside an ever-increasing network of easy-to-handle spaceships and playsets.<sup>27</sup> There were also spots for other Kenner Star Wars products like games, puppets, inflatable lightsabers, plush Ewoks, and the diecast metal "Micro Collection," which had 1.25" tall figurines and scaled down connectable playsets that would have been too expensive to replicate in the 3.75" scale. Kenner's toy galaxy expanded to the public in five distinctive waves: *Star Wars* (1977–1979), *The Empire Strikes Back* (1979–1982), *Return of the Jedi* (1982–1984), *The Power of the Force* (1984–1985), and *Droids* and *Ewoks* (1985).<sup>28</sup> Commercials airing between 1977–1979 were produced by 20th Century Fox and included toys for *A New Hope* (ANH) and *The Empire Strikes Back* (ESB). In 1980, licensing changed to Lucasfilm LTD, which was responsible for the remainder of ESB, *Return of the Jedi* (ROTJ), and *The Power of the Force* (POTF) lines, and toys made for the *Droids* and *Ewoks* animated series, respectively.

<sup>25</sup> The Palitoy commercials, produced in the United Kingdom for *Empire* and *ROTJ* toys, were of much higher quality with more special effects than their US counterparts. The film looked cleaner, with a more advanced graphics and creative transitions including wipes and dissolves. Adverts in the United Kingdom generally displayed a greater quantity of figures, like entire units of Stormtroopers, that would make any kid envious. Furthermore, Palitoy seemed to think that children were best seen and not heard, with young actors merely playing with the toys as notable actor of stage and screen Tony Jay dramatically voiced-over the entire commercial to the *Star Wars* theme song.

<sup>26</sup> Information regarding toy commercials produced for other international audiences is harder to come by, but fans that research this believe advertisements were produced for other global markets as well.

<sup>27</sup> Keidl, "Between Textuality and Materiality: Fandom and the Mediation of Action Figures," 3.

<sup>28</sup> *The Power of the Force* (1984) and *Droids* toy lines each only had one known commercial produced. No known commercials were made for toys from the *Ewoks* (1985) animated series. Multiple copies are available on YouTube.

In 2020, streaming services and YouTube unboxing videos have changed the meaning of “television” and the impact of traditional toy commercials. However, in the 1970s and 1980s, Kenner progressively refined a particular aesthetic that emerged as a unique televisual genre, capturing the attention of consumers during an era of true national audiences.

### THE KENNER AESTHETIC

Most Kenner Star Wars adverts opened with a closeup or zoom-out of the featured toy, by itself or being moved into frame by a child, granting it the appearance of autonomy. Child actors were prominently featured in the early spots but, as time went by, Kenner appeared to embrace the product-as-star approach. The toys themselves dominated screen time with only the children’s arms or hands visible manipulating the toys, or a few shots of their facial reactions as they delivered key lines such as “Wampa!” or “Now I know The Force is with us.” Closeup shots of toys were strategically used, as is common in toy advertising, to make the toys seem larger than life, build intensity, and potentially increase their importance in young viewers’ minds.

The commercials for the *Star Wars* collection commenced with an adult narrator directly addressing the kids at home and introducing toys, typically with a slogan like “New from Kenner Star Wars.” During *ESB* commercials, kid actors spoke first,<sup>29</sup> setting the scene through dialog and moving the toy into frame, before narration introduced the toys and gave obligatory disclaimers. As one might expect given the type of toy being sold, the commercials were strategically crafted to feel like action-packed narratives.

The rapid cutting, jump-cuts, close-up shots, and cinematic music all cultivated excitement in prospective young consumers and, for some fans, made them feel “like Hollywood movie premieres each time they aired.”<sup>30</sup>

<sup>29</sup> While the specific reason for this is unknown, it does feel consistent with an industry shift that began in the 1960s with advertisers directly addressing kids as consumers, opposed to their parents, and other attempts to sell products to children using peer power to define what is cool versus adults telling kids what to buy.

<sup>30</sup> Lundy, Star Wars Fan Survey. In 2019, I conducted an original survey of 68 self-identified Star Wars fans, recruited from a variety of Facebook groups and YouTube channels related to Kenner Star Wars toys. Specific references to fans, like this one here, come from this survey unless otherwise cited.

Kenner effectively smuggled the aesthetics of the big screen onto the small one. Film-editing theorists contend that rapid cutting is used to build dynamic moods such as excitement, intensity, and tension in contrast to more static shots and dissolve transitions, which tend to develop more reflective moods like tranquility, calm, and relaxation.<sup>31</sup> Such aesthetic differentiation has been linked with gendered stereotypes in marketing. Some 1980s studies showed that advertisements targeting boys or a mixed audience exhibited higher cutting rates and shorter shots, a marketing practice consistent with a perceived masculine preference for action-orientation than commercials directed at girls, which employed more passivity through long shots and dissolves.<sup>32</sup> Given Kenner's target demographic, the prominence of the former aesthetic choices seems consistent with industry assumptions of the day.<sup>33</sup>

Both indoor and outdoor play environments were used in the Kenner commercials, with the latter being more common. The creative DIY playsets, made with average household items or backyard scenery, both mirrored those built by many viewers and inspired new ones, whether that be knocking your Boba Fett figure into a green bucket buried in the dirt (Great Sarlacc Pit) or racing your temperamentally explosive Speeder Bikes through the legs of your kitchen table chairs (Forest Moon of Endor). My favorite playset was the Endor "security shield," an upside-down Styrofoam cup with window cutout for a guard look-out, in front of a cellophane strip, stretched between two upright sticks. This "sandpit aesthetic" would be used in future action figure commercials for toy lines like Hasbro's Transformers.<sup>34</sup> Indoor scenes were generally brightly lit to emphasize the fun nature of play and of course to highlight product. Several commercials featured darker lighting to convey more dire tones, like the *ROTJ* collection advert in which, on a stormy night, a young boy challenges his Darth Vader poster to a lightsaber duel.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>31</sup> Zettl, *Sight, Sound, Motion: Applied Media Aesthetics*, 250 & 256.

<sup>32</sup> Chandler and Griffiths, "Gender-Differentiated Production," 503.

<sup>33</sup> Huston, Greer, Wright, Welch, and Ross, "Children's Comprehension of Televised Formal Features with Masculine and Feminine Connotations," 707–716. Children as young as 6 years old can use formatting and visual style of a medium, in conjunction with content cues, to determine if the product is designed for their gender or not.

<sup>34</sup> Geraghty, "Back to That Special Time: Nostalgia and the Remediation of Children's Media in the Adult World," 203–220.

<sup>35</sup> All Things 80s, "Vintage STAR WARS Kenner Toy Commercials 1977 to 1985 Compilation," 38.02–38.32.

Production quality noticeably improved after 1979. At first, special effects (SFX) were limited to simple text that stated toy names, copyright information, and disclaimers. Commercials for the *ESB* collection introduced more SFX like advanced backgrounds, the Kenner logo, animated *Star Wars* and *ESB* title graphics (also synergistically featured on the respective toy packaging), and integration of actual film footage. Two advertisements even included exclusive footage of C-3PO (Anthony Daniels) as spokes-droid, alongside Chewbacca, on the deck of a spacecraft addressing the “parents of Earth” to promote Kenner’s “toy universe of heroes, villains, fantastic space vehicles, and far away galaxies.”<sup>36</sup> Lucasfilm stepped its game up with the *ROTJ* series. Each commercial opened with advanced computer-generated graphics, including either a fly-in, electrified, or a red-laser blasted logo over an animated space background. Most commercials also used John Williams’s authentic *Star Wars* theme as the audio backdrop where previous commercials used a generic, *Star Wars*-esque sounding tune.

One of the more elaborate commercials recalled by fans was for a trio of toys from the *ROTJ* collection: Speeder Bike, Ewok Combat Glider, and Ewok Assault Catapult.<sup>37</sup> Three boys play on a bedroom floor when suddenly one digitizes, *Tron*-style, into an “Imperial Biker Scout” action figure riding a “Speeder Bike” through an elaborate and impossibly replicable model forest, eventually crashing into a tree. The boys enthusiastically voice-over the commercial, reinterpreting the major Endor conflict with all the appropriate figures and an enviable army of Imperial troops. After the cardboard shield bunker takes a hit from Wicket’s catapult, the camouflaged “trench coat Han Solo” figure rematerializes back into a boy, and the kids celebrate a hard-fought ludic victory. Another high-quality commercial of note is the one-off, rarely seen, 1984 *POTF* advertisement with giant CGI collector coins floating through the sky above a typical suburban neighborhood.

Many of these production features had been used previously in toy commercials, but Kenner perfected the template for effectively advertising action figures on television. Today, action figure commercials still look,

<sup>36</sup>This is one of the rare instances when parents were directly addressed. Starting in the 1960s, advertisers shifted their messages for children’s products from parents, directly to the kids themselves, during kids programming on the radio or television, and in comic books and magazines.

<sup>37</sup>Lundy, *Star Wars Fan Survey*.

sound, and feel quite similar to the classic Kenner advertisements. While innovative in form, the commercials' content often followed representational tropes of action figure marketing.

### SEX, RACE, AND AGE IN A PLASTIC GALAXY, FAR, FAR AWAY

Unsurprisingly, considering the target market for “action figures,” 93% of the advertisements featured boys. To Kenner's credit, when girls were present, they had relatively equivalent screen time and number of speaking lines compared to their male counterparts. In fact, Kenner's first TV commercial featured a female actor. The mere presence of females in Kenner ads might suggest some progress in the highly gendered toy marketing of that era. However, the performative roles for girls in the commercials largely conformed to cultural stereotypes. Not entirely unlike some real-life play patterns I remember, the girls were relegated to playing R2-D2, a popular yet obviously less actionable character, or Princess Leia, seemingly the only female character of importance in the entire galaxy (other than Mon Mothma). Boys frequently engaged in battle play, whereas girls and their plastic avatars were often reduced to the damsel-in-distress trope, either being chased, captured, or rescued by the boys and their heroic male figurines. The largely mimetic play of the child actors surprisingly did not reflect the strong heroism present in the Original Trilogy and celebrated by many.

Girls were featured more significantly in ads for toys intended for younger fans like the “cuddly” plush Ewoks from the *ROTJ* and the “Ewok Family Hut” from the Kenner Preschool line. Perhaps more telling of Kenner's assumptions about market demographics than girls' roles in ads is that, although Princess Leia was a major protagonist in the films and immortalized in five distinct figures, the character only appeared in 5% of commercials. Furthermore, the singular instance of a boy playing with a Leia figure was in a commercial featuring her Boushh Disguise variant, with her identity only revealed at the end. Kenner produced three other female characters: Sy Snootles (1982) from *ROTJ*; Kea Moll (1985) from the *Droids* cartoon; and Urgah Lady Gorneesh (1985) from the *Ewoks* cartoon. Only one, Snootles, was featured in a commercial.<sup>38</sup>

<sup>38</sup> Kea Moll's figure can be briefly seen in one shot of the 1985 *Droids* toy advert. Kenner also developed two unproduced prototypes for female characters, Jessica Meade (1986) from *Droids* and Morag (1986) from *Ewoks*.

Some minority groups were also noticeably absent in those cherished Kenner commercials of yesteryear. Nearly 90% of primary presenters in the adverts were White/Caucasian. The presence of African American/black children accounted for 10% of the total kids on screen. Given the estimated percentage of African American/black citizens in the United States in the early 1980s was around 12%, they were at least close to proportionately represented. However, another 1% of actors race was indeterminate, suggesting Hispanics and Asians were underrepresented. No girls of color were present. It's difficult to say why more minority children were not in the adverts, but considering the time period, relative to the slow progress of societal inclusivity, and that minorities are still underrepresented in commercials today, this is not shocking. The Star Wars saga and Kenner's plastic approximation of it featured a great variety of characters, but there was a lack of human racial diversity. In the Original Trilogy, the only major character of color was the smooth-talking, retired smuggler, and administrator of Cloud City, Lando Calrissian. Lando was a primary protagonist in *ESB* and *ROTJ*, widely popular with fans, and Kenner produced three separate figures of him.<sup>39</sup> Only one other human-minority figure was produced, a black-skinned Bespian Security Guard.<sup>40</sup> Although Kenner couldn't control the lack of humanoid diversity in the filmic universe, it perhaps missed an opportunity to create unique figures that would represent and appeal to a greater number of children.<sup>41</sup>

Only 16 adults appeared in the commercials, accounting for about 8% of the total on screen talent.<sup>42</sup> Adults usually appeared in the background, silently watching the action or reading the newspaper. There were a few exceptions in which Kenner let the family—or at least fathers—play with

<sup>39</sup> Kenner first produced "Bespian" Lando figure captured his likeness as seen in *ESB*, both with toothy grin and without variants. The most valuable version of Lando is the cloth-caped version honoring his promotion to General in the Alliance fleet, from *ROTJ*, one of the "Last 17" figures produced by Kenner. The "Surprise, surprise, I'm Lando in disguise" Lando figure was perhaps the most memorable. This quote is from the 1982–1983 commercial for *ROTJ*, featuring Lando in his "Skiff Guard Disguise." It is also one of the ear-worms noted by survey respondents that has stuck with them into adulthood.

<sup>40</sup> Another figure was produced, also a Bespian Security Guard prominently rocks a Fu Manchu mustache, which some fans argue, represents an onscreen character that could be Chinese or Hispanic. However, the photo of the character featured on the action figure's card-back is of a bearded Caucasian man.

<sup>41</sup> For instance, perhaps Kenner could have created a more racially diverse cast of generic "Hoth Rebel Trooper" or "Endor Rebel Soldier."

<sup>42</sup> Lundy, Star Wars Fan Survey.



the products. For example, in the “Radio Controlled R2-D2” commercial, a boy excitedly displays its functions to his father until dad decides to hog the remote.<sup>43</sup> Similarly, in the 1979 advertisement for the “Electronic Battle Command” micro-computer game, a father gets too involved and in Kenner’s first use of advanced SFX, transforms into a Stormtrooper as footage of a space battle from *A New Hope* fills the room’s windows.<sup>44</sup> As would become common in toy advertising through the 1990s, fathers, if present, were portrayed as uncool, inept toy users who just didn’t “get it.” In children’s commercials, adults often “enforce a repressive and joyless world” where products or brands come to the rescue of oppressed kids by supplying kid-centric fun.<sup>45</sup> The “kids rule” promotional ethos of cable networks like Nickelodeon frequently frame adults as too serious and authoritarian.<sup>46</sup> Mothers were even less involved in Kenner promos, with only three women present in commercials, most prominently in the advert for the “Kenner Preschool Ewok Family Hut” playset.

Kids were understandably the focal point of the Kenner’s campaign, yet there was a consistent adult presence. Over 90% of commercials featured dramatic, authoritative, masculine narration that introduced product, highlighted new features, and reiterated obligatory information like “New from Kenner Star Wars” or disclaimers like “batteries not included.” Later commercials even featured notable vocal artists like Victor Caroli, the iconic narrator from the original *Transformers* cartoon series (1984–1987), and Tony Jay, known for his villainous role as Frollo in Disney’s *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996).<sup>47</sup> Several commercials were narrated by the kids themselves and the rest utilized young men. The predominant use of masculine voice-over was—and remains—common in the toy advertising world for toys marketed to boys and girls. Even *Barbie*’s first commercial in 1959 featured a male narrator, talking over a Disneyesque female vocalist. It was believed by some marketing experts that kids would perhaps feel more compelled to buy and play with certain toys if they were told to or encouraged by an authoritative male voice.

<sup>43</sup> *All Things 80s*, “Vintage STAR WARS Kenner Toy Commercials 1977 to 1985 Compilation,” 1:33–2:03.

<sup>44</sup> *All Things 80s*, 11:58–12:28.

<sup>45</sup> Schor, *Born to buy*, 53.

<sup>46</sup> Banet-Weiser, *Kids Rule!: Nickelodeon and consumer citizenship*.

<sup>47</sup> Tony Jay even lent his distinctive baritone to voice over to a series of promotional marketing videos for prospective Kenner investors. See 12BACK, “Star Wars Vintage KENNER Marketing Video—Toy Collection 1983 v2 [Remastered].”

Another—now common—strategy Kenner utilized was the use of children slightly older than its target market. A handful of older boys (12+), all fashionably dressed in either sport coats or sweaters over collared shirts, were used as spokespeople to highlight entire figure collections, or special mail-away offers like the “Action Figure Survival Kit.” One such commercial promoting the new “Darth Vader Collector’s Case” even featured two soon-to-be stars, Christian Slater and Peter Billingsley.<sup>48</sup> Furthermore, while the recommended age for the topline was four and up, most actors were much older. The “cool kids” strategy became standard in toy advertising as marketing experts thought children would want toys if they were promoted by older kids, whom they naturally saw as determiners of what was “cool.”<sup>49</sup>

Without insight from the creative minds behind Kenner’s campaign, we can only speculate as to the noticeable absence of female and minority children. Surely Kenner wanted all boys and girls to purchase their toys. The reason for female underrepresentation seems more understandable. Conventional industry wisdom held that girls were not interested in action figures for any number of reasons, including gendered play patterns, either inherent or socially constructed; a lack of female characters in the Star Wars media, and thus fewer female figures produced; or the absence of targeted marketing. Despite fewer gender-specific signs in toy aisles today, this wisdom prevails, outside of rare instances like the *Forces of Destiny* line (2017–2018), which is described in advertisements as a set of “adventure figures,” and marketed as both action figures and fashion dolls. This long-standing debate about girls’ interest in action figures quickly turns into a chicken-or-the-egg causality loop. Industry insiders claim toy companies and retailers do not market action figures to girls because they do not buy them, and consumer advocates counter that girls do not buy action figures because they are not marketed to young girls. What isn’t debated is that representation issues persist in children’s advertising. Such issues notwithstanding, Star Wars has become the most successful transmedia franchise of all time and the toys and their commercials have synergistically contributed to its ever-expanding narrative in meaningful ways.

<sup>48</sup> Slater starred in movies such as *Heathers* (1989), *Gleaming the Cube* (1989), *True Romance* (1993), *Very Bad Things*, (1998). Billingsley is best known for playing Ralphie Parker in *A Christmas Story* (1983).

<sup>49</sup> BanetWeiser, *Kids Rule!* This seemed to be the prevailing wisdom through the 1980s, 1990s, and early 2000s, however it is unknown by this scholar whether this is still the case.

## TOYETIC TRANSMEDIA INTERTEXTUALITY

Transmedia storytelling is the unfolding of a narrative “across multiple media platforms, with each text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole.”<sup>50</sup> For example, Star Wars, initially introduced in the film *Star Wars*, has expanded through tie-in novels, comic books, animated series, video games, toys, and immersive experiences like the Disney theme park Galaxy’s Edge. Materials that surround an original narrative, or paratexts, extend its reach, allowing audiences to inhabit and explore the officially licensed story-world.<sup>51</sup> Toyetic transmedia texts, including the Kenner toys and their commercials, have played a variety of roles in the Star Wars transmedia saga.

Practically, before Google or IMBD, toyetic paratexts revealed information about tertiary characters not revealed in the films.<sup>52</sup> Many background characters, such as Hammerhead, had very little screen time and were of relatively minor importance to the story. Other canonical material would eventually expand their biographies, but fans initially learned basic information like their names through toys. More significantly, toyetic paratexts enabled a unique, more tactile, form of audience engagement through their material affordances during the formative ages at which most individuals engaged them. Many fans were introduced to Star Wars through Kenner toys and this embryonic fandom fostered a tangibly affective relationship that informed and framed future memory and interpretation.<sup>53</sup> The first generation of fans grew up “imagining themselves as part of the Star Wars universe, [and] the toys [were] integral props in the make-believe relationship they have with that fictional world.”<sup>54</sup> As familiar media derivations, Kenner toys facilitated group play and cooperative storytelling through shared codes and narratives.<sup>55</sup> As plastic avatars of onscreen characters—as well as creatures and vehicles—with identifiable visual traits, certain possibilities for play were manifest. Players more familiar with the Star Wars narratives often transformed onscreen dialogue, personality, action, and theme into “play scripts,” leading to more symbolic

<sup>50</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, 95–96.

<sup>51</sup> Genette, *Paratexts: Thresholds of Interpretation*.

<sup>52</sup> Lundy, Star Wars Fan Survey.

<sup>53</sup> Harvey, *Fantastic Transmedia: Narrative, Play, and Memory across Science Fiction and Fantasy Storyworlds*, 147.

<sup>54</sup> Geraghty, *Cult Collectors: Nostalgia, Fandom and Collecting Popular Culture*, 127.

<sup>55</sup> Seiter, *Sold Separately: Children and Parents in Consumer Culture*, 168.

or mimetic play,<sup>56</sup> although as toys the potential for unscripted play also existed. References to onscreen content and themes in the Kenner commercials functioned more as triggers for possible action than as authoritative guidelines for screen accurate reenactment.<sup>57</sup> Thus, Kenner encouraged both narrative-based play consistent with the story-world in question and more free-range enjoyment.<sup>58</sup>

This dialectic is illustrated in the many Kenner commercials in which kids reenact key scenes from films, reinterpret major plot points, and create entirely new stories. Kenner's "Creature Cantina Action Playset" (1979) was a plastic base with stairs, a bar, table, revolving discs, action levers, and a cardboard background featuring an artistic rendering of the bar's interior. In the playset's advertisement, several boys use the toy's special features to reimagine the blaster showdown between Han Solo and Greedo. This time, however, instead of a smoldering hole in his chest, Greedo humorously receives a stern warning before being knocked down. In this example, we see more scripted play, albeit a child's reinterpretation of movie action, influenced by the specific characters, the playset, and their associated filmic histories. The scene is also an exemplar of how the television medium requires the reduction of complex narrative into succinct, easily understood and memorable, 30-second vignettes. A model of off-script play occurs in an *Empire* commercial, in which a "Hoth Rebel Trooper" altruistically brings an injured Imperial Snowtrooper to the "FX-7" medical droid for treatment.<sup>59</sup> After the eight-appendaged droid heals the enemy combatant, the puzzled Imperial asks the Rebel why he saved him, to which the hero responds, "When the Force is with you, your duty is to do good." This drama has no cinematic referent but is illustrative of the many pro-social messages related to using "The Force" that are present in these toyetic transmedia texts. Thematically most of the commercials strongly reinforced good guys (and gals) versus bad guys war play, with a few exceptions like the one just mentioned. During the three-year gaps between films, Kenner toys also helped sustain Star Wars fever and build anticipation between sequels.

<sup>56</sup> Kline, *Out of the Garden: Toys and Children's Culture in the Age of TV Marketing*.

<sup>57</sup> Keidl, "Between Textuality and Materiality," 3.

<sup>58</sup> Gibson, "The Theory of Affordances," 67–82.

<sup>59</sup> 12BACK, "Star Wars Vintage KENNER Commercial—FX-7, Rebel Soldier, Chewbacca, Snowtrooper [Remastered]."

Although Kenner's first toy series succeeded the release of *A New Hope*, some toys and advertisements preceded the releases of *ESB* and *ROTJ*. Promotions for *ESB* toys first appeared in 1978, including significant new figures and playsets depicting major plot points. One commercial even revealed Lando's betrayal on Bespin and Han's carbonite freezing.<sup>60</sup> Thus, toy commercials acted as spoilers and "prophetic objects that ... paratextually [revealed] the relative significance of characters, settings, and scenarios of the forthcoming film."<sup>61</sup> Furthermore, the very development of certain figures or vehicles suggested their importance to the storyline, reinforced by their appearance in commercials. Fans today still use paratexts like toys, trailers, cast interviews, and leaked set photography for this type of speculative play,<sup>62</sup> a key component of modern media fandom.<sup>63</sup>

Toyetic transmedia can even generate anticipation and fandom around individual characters of seemingly minor significance. When Boba Fett officially debuted in *ESB* (1980), the notorious bounty hunter was an instant fan-favorite despite having only 6.5 min of screen time and 27 words of dialogue. While undeniably badass, his popularity was a result of his paratextual presence, two years in the making. Fett first appeared as an animated character in the CBS *Holiday Special* (1978),<sup>64</sup> but was introduced to most fans through an action figure mail-away offer. Kenner decided to release Fett's action figure in advance of *ESB* through a proof-of-purchase campaign, advertised in Kenner catalogs, on the back of figure packaging, and in a well-remembered television commercial.<sup>65</sup> Initially advertised with a spring-loaded "rocket firing back pack," this design was abandoned after the choking death of a three-year-old boy caused by a similar Mattel Battlestar Galactica toy missile.<sup>66</sup> Only a secondary

<sup>60</sup> Another memorable commercial moment reported by fans, Han's carbon freezing involved him being lowered into an empty drinking glass by string.

<sup>61</sup> Scott, "#Wheresrey?: Toys, Spoilers, and the Gender Politics of Franchise Paratexts," 138.

<sup>62</sup> Brooker, *Using the Force: Creativity, Community, and Star Wars Fans*, 115–128.

<sup>63</sup> I can recall a particularly frustrating moment in 1999 at a local Fred Meyer after I read "Qui-Gon's Noble End" as a song title on the soundtrack for *The Phantom Menace* (1999).

<sup>64</sup> DJameyson, "Star Wars Holiday Special, The (1978) [Nice Copy]."

<sup>65</sup> Lundy, Star Wars Fan Survey.

<sup>66</sup> Kenner removed the spring, molded the rocket permanently to his back, and covered the rocket-action information on cardbacks with a black, sticker, that many fans removed. Despite what some fervent fans claim, no rocket-firing figures were ever shipped to consumers or sold in stores. However, Kenner did produce several prototypes that have become "Holy Grails" for collectors, selling for over \$20,000. Only one carded figure is known to exist and is currently listed on eBay for \$150,000.

character in *ESB*, Fett's paratextuality propelled him to legendary status among fans, leading to more screen time in *ROTJ*, a retconned appearance in the 1997 Special Edition of *A New Hope*, major story arcs in the prequel trilogy and *The Clone Wars* (TCW) animated series (2008–2014), and numerous other transmedia incarnations.<sup>67</sup> The Boba Fett toy saga is one of several examples of the non-linear intertextuality of toyetic transmedia, where a toy, created to represent a narrative, can reflexively influence the story.

### A TALE OF TWO SNAGGLETEETHS

Kenner's "Cantina Adventure Set" (1978) captured the highly toyetic scene from *A New Hope* when Ben Kenobi and Luke Skywalker visited that wretched hive of scum and villainy known as the Mos Eisley Space Port. The playset was a cardboard base and backdrop depicting the outside of the dimly lit, yet lively, droid-unfriendly cantina, where most of the best freighter pilots socialize. Sold exclusively through Sears, the set included four figures, along with their respective blasters and handful of plastic foot pegs: Greedo, the unfortunate recipient of Han's *preemptive* laser blast; Walrus Man,<sup>68</sup> the ill-tempered alien whose arm met the unfortunate edge of Kenobi's lightsaber; Hammerhead,<sup>69</sup> a bar patron on screen for six seconds; and the most storied figure, Snaggletooth, an incorrectly sized and colored version a character, appearing briefly in *A New Hope*, but more prominently in the much maligned *Holiday Special*.

Based on limited information, Kenner produced Snaggletooth, 3.75" tall, with gloves, silver boots, and a blue flight suit.<sup>70</sup> However, his on-screen persona was half-sized, had exposed, hairy hands and feet, and wore a red flight suit. The figurine was redesigned before hitting store shelves as a carded figure and thus today "Blue Snaggletooth" is one of the rarest and most collectible Kenner action figures. Blue Snaggletooth's unique origin story became folkloric among fans, some of whom apparently became creative contributors to the franchise. Blue Snaggletooth would reflexively make an on-screen appearance in the aptly named TCW episode

<sup>67</sup> For a comprehensive list of Boba Fett's presence in the Star Wars universe, both Canon and Legends, check out this link: [https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/Boba\\_Fett](https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/Boba_Fett).

<sup>68</sup> In later canonical works, we would come to find out that his name is Ponda Baba.

<sup>69</sup> In later canonical works, we would come to find out that his name is Momaw Nadon.

<sup>70</sup> Sansweet, *Star Wars: From Concept to Screen to Collectible*, 68.

“Revival” as a Snivvian Space station Superintendent named Morlimur Snugg.<sup>71</sup> In this reverse toyetics, or *toyesis*, Snaggletooth’s paratextuality, like Boba Fett, has obscured his textual origins to the point that he becomes multi-platformed and multi-origined, enabling his text to easily “flow from screen to material media and back again.”<sup>72</sup> Original fans would likely recognize Snugg as a nostalgic nod to the fabled toy of their youth, while younger fans might only view him as a new character, unaware of his toyetic origins.

There are other examples of Kenner cameos reemerging in various transmedia incarnations. An animated version of Walrus Man, clearly based on his action figure design—and not his filmic counterpart—can be seen in *TCW* episode “Missing in Action.”<sup>73</sup> A recurring Kenner cameo in Star Wars transmedia is the Imperial Troop Transport (ITT), a vehicle with authentic film sounds, exclusively seen in a 1977 television commercial. The ITT was one of Kenner’s first “just off-screen” concept toys;<sup>74</sup> something unseen on film, but that was designed to fit right into the Star Wars universe.<sup>75</sup> After its toy commercial debut, the ITT first reappeared in a Marvel 1979 *Star Wars* comic,<sup>76</sup> and was later included into several *Rebels* episodes.<sup>77</sup> The ITT most recently appeared in *The Mandalorian* episode “Redemption”<sup>78</sup> and Hasbro released a new version of the toy for its 3.75-inch scale “Star Wars: The Vintage Collection” in March 2020. For fans, Kenner’s “off-screen” contributions aided in world-building, a key trait of transmedia storytelling, where each textual extension helps construct and enrich a broader fictional “world” to create a more cohesive entertainment experience for audiences.<sup>79</sup> These appearances in *TCW*, *Rebels*, and *The Mandalorian* are also significant because they “officially” establish Blue Snaggletooth and the ITT as canon after Disney’s April

<sup>71</sup> “Revival,” *The Clone Wars*, season 5, ep. 1.

<sup>72</sup> Jason, “From Toyetic to Toyesis: The Cultural Value of Merchandising,” 33.

<sup>73</sup> “Missing in Action,” *The Clone Wars*, season 5, ep. 12.

<sup>74</sup> Errico, “Star Wars Toy Pro Spills 40 Years of Secrets: Everything You Wanted to Know About the Kenner Classics.”

<sup>75</sup> Kenner would similarly produce “Mini-Rigs” (1981–1984) and “Body Rigs” (1985), smaller, more affordable just off-screen vehicles. Several of these would appear onscreen in other media.

<sup>76</sup> Goodwin and Infantino, “Return to Tatooine.”

<sup>77</sup> Including “Fighter Flight,” *Rebels*, season 1, ep. 4 and “Breaking Ranks,” *Rebels*, season 1, ep. 6.

<sup>78</sup> “Redemption,” *The Mandalorian*, season 1, ep. 8.

<sup>79</sup> Jenkins, *Convergence Culture*, 95–96.

2014 announcement that all future tie-in materials would be considered part of the canon. Additionally, these examples demonstrate the continued influence of Kenner toys and commercials on Star Wars' transmedia narrative, which ultimately created an ongoing desire to collect.<sup>80</sup>

### KENNER WILL BE WITH YOU, ALWAYS

In order to explore the long-term impact of Kenner Star Wars, I surveyed 68 self-identified Star Wars fans, ages 18–55, using an online questionnaire. Participants were recruited from Facebook groups, discussion boards, and YouTube channels related to the original trilogy and vintage memorabilia collection.<sup>81</sup> Unsurprisingly, 76% of respondents were born in the 1970s, with the largest concentration being ages four to seven when *A New Hope* was released, making them a prime age demographic for Kenner. Nearly 94% of participants currently collect toys and 90% of those participants indicated that toys they owned as children were important to the development of their lifelong Star Wars fandom. Fans surveyed collected many different types of Star Wars toys. While 80% reported interest in vintage Kenner action figures, vehicles, and playsets, most collected other Star Wars toy lines as well, such as Kenner/Hasbro's *The Power of The Force 2* (1995–2000)<sup>82</sup> and Hasbro's *Black Series* (2013–). Many respondents recalled seeing Kenner commercials when they originally aired. A significant portion reported that the advertisements were successful in making them want to buy the toys and prompting them to employ “pester power” or “the ability of a child to influence a purchase decision of a parent through the use of nagging, pestering, or aggressive behaviors.”<sup>83</sup> These individuals were not alone. An estimated 300-plus million Star Wars toys were purchased between 1977 and 1985. The

<sup>80</sup> If interested in other Kenner toy inspired transmedia incarnations, check the “The Kenner Cameo Chronology” on: <http://4lomkuss.com/the-kenner-cameo-chronology/>.

<sup>81</sup> This survey population is not broadly representative of all Star Wars fans. Participants were recruited specifically because of their interest in or knowledge of vintage Star Wars memorabilia and the Original Trilogy. The goal of the survey was to specifically explore their knowledge of and feelings about Kenner commercials. The skewed percentage of vintage collectors was expected.

<sup>82</sup> Some now consider this to be “vintage” as well. The majority of longtime collectors, however, strongly disagree.

<sup>83</sup> Prible, “Product Packaging, Pester Power, & Preschoolers,” 462.



commercials' greater accomplishment however might have been in cultivating and sustaining an interest in collecting.

As kids, fans used the toys to remember, reenact, and revise the on-screen stories. As adults with discretionary income, those vintage toys became valuable commodities, bought and sold in-person, at toy shows, through magazines, amateur-produced catalogs, and eventually online. During what is commonly referred to by fans as, "the Dark Times," the period between 1986 and 1995,<sup>84</sup> when no new Star Wars films or Kenner toys were produced, "fandom continued to thrive and toy collection became an integral part of the belonging to and participating in adult fan groups."<sup>85</sup> Fans also kept The Force alive by recording, re-watching, and sharing the original Kenner toy commercials that fostered their desire to collect. In the 1990s, "a VHS compilation of Star Wars toy ads became a particularly hot commodity, a boon to any grown fans trying to relive their childhood days in front of the TV after school."<sup>86</sup> Those same commercials, now digitized, curated, and cataloged online, still play a role in fandom.

Almost all original Kenner commercials are currently viewable, either individually or in curated compilations, via YouTube and other dedicated online platforms. Fans have carefully compiled separate videos for each series (*Star Wars*, *Empire*, *ROTJ*, etc.), with the most comprehensive compilation running over one-hour in length, with over 500,000 views, and an active comment section. One dedicated YouTube member "12Back"<sup>87</sup> even digitally remastered over 100 of the old adverts. Palitoy's *ROTJ* commercial for the AT-ST Scout "Chicken" Walker is the most popular individual commercial on YouTube, garnering over 839,000 views. These digital time capsules are continually being uploaded and watched. Among the fans I surveyed, 57% still watch the original commercials with some regularity, with nearly 60% having viewed at least one within a month of study participation.<sup>88</sup> Among the numerous elements of the aged adverts fans enjoy today, they overwhelmingly love seeing kids play with the vintage toys, perhaps vicariously and retroactively seeing themselves in those children, playing with friends, and reliving scenes and

<sup>84</sup> Yes, I'm counting *Caravan of Courage* (1984) and *Battle for Endor* (1985).

<sup>85</sup> Geraghty, *Cult Collectors*, 120.

<sup>86</sup> Blevins, "Star Wars Relives Its Own History through Vintage Kenner Toy Ads."

<sup>87</sup> 12back is a reference to blister card-backs that the original 12 action figures were packaged on.

<sup>88</sup> Lundy, Star Wars Fan Survey.

themes from the films. Respondents also fondly recalled the outdoor play environments featured in the commercials, particularly the creativity and elaborate backyard-playsets, that were seemingly impromptu, although frustratingly difficult for the average kid to replicate. YouTube has enabled fans to immortalize the retro commercial aesthetic of grainy film, dated sound, and classic tropes like demonstrative play, dramatic voice-over, homemade playsets, and obligatory disclaimers like “figures each sold separately.” Clearly Kenner’s success played an important role in the lives of fans, but this merchandising miracle also revolutionized the toy industry.

### THAT’S NO TOY... IT’S AN ADVERTISEMENT

The success of Kenner’s 3.75” action figures encouraged other companies to similarly pursue the profitability of character marketing and smaller, more scalable, and more collectible toys. Most notably, Hasbro relaunched its classic 12” G.I. Joe action doll in 1982 as *G.I. Joe: A Real American Hero*, a 3.75” figure line with an ever-increasing array of characters with multiple points of articulation, vehicles, command centers, and a back-story chronicling the heroic Joes’ conflict with the evil terrorist organization, Cobra. These narratives played out first in Marvel Comics, marketed with TV commercials featuring animation that laid the groundwork for a syndicated series. This relates to the second, even more significant Kenner-inspired industry change.

Instead of waiting to acquire the licensing rights for a potentially toy-etic property like Star Wars, toy makers and product licensors started working synergistically to develop their own properties, primarily in the form of animated television. Prior to Star Wars, the primary narrative preceded the toy tie-in; however, post-Star Wars, toys were developed before, or concurrently, with a story to promote them. Both elements became integral to the 1980s marketing supersystems in which toys performed across a multitude of media platforms.<sup>89</sup> This approach was incredibly successful at introducing new characters into children’s culture, orienting kids to new products, fostering excitement, and generating an overwhelming desire to buy, play-with, and collect all characters in a line.

Star Wars’s impact was aided by good timing. Before the 1980s, the Federal Communication Commission (FCC) strictly regulated children’s

<sup>89</sup> Kinder, *Playing with Power in Movies, Television and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, 123.

advertising because of concerns over media's negative effects on children and pressure from advocacy groups. However, in 1983, the FCC lifted its unofficial prohibition against "program-length commercials," opening the proverbially floodgates for content producers, marketers, and toy manufacturers to develop a transmedia approach that intentionally blurred the lines between product and advertisement. *He-Man and the Masters of the Universe* (1983–1985), *Transformers* (1984–1987), and *Thundercats* (1985–1988) were all animated series created explicitly to market toy lines created by Mattel, Hasbro, and LJN, respectively. The "Shortcake Strategy," named after American Greeting Cards's *Strawberry Shortcake* character,<sup>90</sup> worked and by 1989 certain blocks of TV guide resembled a Toys "R" Us catalog. Over the past 40 years, the kid's consumer market has become highly lucrative and transmedia marketing is the new normal, thanks, in large part, to *Star Wars*.

Kenner commercials made a galaxy far, far away feel much closer to home, allowing children to imagine themselves recreating, extending, or creating entirely new adventures with officially licensed props. These advertisements established a *Star Wars* presence on television, even before the *Holiday Special* (1978), *A New Hope*'s home video release (1982), or the film's network TV premiere on CBS (1984). The sheer number of adverts produced, coupled with the frequency and longevity of exposure (1977–1985), firmly ingrained Kenner in the minds of the first generation of *Star Wars* fans inspiring them to connect and collect. The current memorialization and curation of the advertisements should not be dismissed as mere nostalgia, nor should their role in *Star Wars*'s transmedia success overlooked. Today, both the toys and commercials that advertised them are collectible connections to the past and generational identity markers that highlight the central role of both in the transmedial experience of *Star Wars*.

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