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# The Jewish Play Project

## Documenting 200 Years of the Contributions of Jewish Designers, Entrepreneurs, and Inventors to Toys, Games, Pinball, and Video Games

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### Abstract

For over two hundred years, first in Germany and then in the United States, Jewish “Game Changers” shaped the Western industrialized toy, game, pinball, and video game businesses. This paper will introduce this little-known history as a broad survey. It will examine the changes in the industrialized toy and game businesses since the 1800s by looking at a handful of key players out of close to one hundred key companies to inspire future, deeper research in the field.

Keywords : German Toy Industry, American Toy Industry, Jewish. Pinball, Video Games, World Wars

The history and impact of Jewish creatives and businesspeople in media and the arts, particularly film and television, is well known. The part that they played in the comic book industry became more visible beginning in the 2000s with the release of several fictional and historical books such as *The Amazing Adventures of Kavalier and Clay* (Chabon, 2000) and *From Krakow to Krypton: Jews and Comic Books* (Kaplan, 2008). However, it is not common knowledge that thousands of popular toys, games, pinball machines and video games were either conceived, designed, marketed, or sold by Jewish designers, entrepreneurs, and inventors.

For much of modern history, until after World War II, most Jews were often barred from corporate leadership, suburban housing, country clubs, fraternities, and other social organizations (where much business was done in the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries) and a wide number of corporate workplaces.

To make a living, some Jews took positions in less “respectable” markets like the garment business, scrap metal, or retail stores. Others became entrepreneurs in

emerging fields like arcade businesses, film, radio, television, and comics, which were viewed with suspicion by society and more established businesses (Goldberg, Ury & Weiser, 2021).

Gary Stern, retired president and CEO and current Chairman of the Board of Stern Pinball, once asked his father, Sam, why he went into the pinball industry. Sam replied: “What was I gonna do, go work for IBM?” (Sharpe, 2020a)

This paper will look at two hundred years of the once “less respectable” toy and game industry across six different phases through a Jewish lens. It will briefly highlight the stories of a subset of significant Jewish designers, entrepreneurs, and inventors within those phases in two categories.

These people were “Game Changers” who significantly impacted the industry.

### **Who’s Jewish?**

For this paper, Jewish identity can be religious and/or cultural. Generally, the people listed in this paper meet one or more of the following criteria

- Were born into families that identified as Jewish
- Publicly identified themselves as Jewish
- Changed their names so they wouldn’t be discriminated in business based on their names (like Lionel Cohen changing his name to Cowen)
- Had their companies Aryanized (seized by the Nazi Government)
- Fled Germany or other European countries during the rise of the Nazi party and the beginning of World War II
- Created or donated to Jewish charitable organizations
- They were listed in their obituaries as Jewish or were buried in Jewish cemeteries.

### **When Germany Led the World in Toys and Games**

Before the 1800s, several German towns and states were well-known for creating handcrafted wooden toys. In the early days of the Industrial Revolution, Nuremberg became a manufacturing hub, with modern (for the time) factories of all types, and the percentage of toys that were used to produce products significantly increased for the region (Hamlin, 2007).

Toward the end of the 1800’s factory-produced sheet-metal “tin toys” had become the leading products in the German toy industry, with the German Statistics

of Trade records listing 154 metal toy manufacturers in business (Schwarz & Faber, 2003).

The modern conception of childhood emerged in Europe during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Childhood evolved to be seen as a time for both formal education and learning through play. Friedrich Froebel of Germany would create the first *Kindergarten* program in 1840 emphasizing the role of play in learning (Lauwaert, 2009). Perhaps most indicative of this trend was the increasingly popular German tradition of Santa Claus. It transformed Christmas from a strictly religious holiday into the celebration of consumer-driven gift-giving it is today (Hamlin, 2007).

The changing conceptions of childhood and gift giving arose with European industrial toy and game production capacity. This led to drops in prices and increases in the number of quality toys produced, all giving rise to the modern Western toy industry (Hamlin, 2007). Jewish businesses helped transform the industrial powerhouse of Nuremberg into the global epicenter of the toy and game industry between 1850-1910 (Schwarz & Faber, 1998). Since Medieval times, Jewish citizens of Germany and Europe, as a whole, had been through waves of tolerance, acceptance, and persecution (Goldberg, Ury & Weiser, 2021). That said, from roughly 1852-1933, the Jewish community of Nuremberg grew in an atmosphere of tolerance and acceptance as citizens of the city and Germany (RIJO Research, 2015). This state of affairs would only last until the rise of the Nazi party.

### **Gebrüder Bing**

The largest toy and game company in the world in the late 1800s to the 1920s was Gebrüder Bing. It was founded by brothers Ignaz and Adolf Bing (Bing, 2013 [1915]). Established in 1863, the company started as a trading house for tableware and other household items, primarily from pewter and copper. Throughout the company's history, they would manufacture a wide range of household items, including gramophones called *Bingophones* (Bingola Records, 2021). Still, the company's most significant impact would be as a toy and games producer (Groll, 2014).

Gebrüder Bing began producing toy trains, steam engines, and other mechanical toys in the 1880s. They added a stuffed toy line, beginning with a bear, in 1907. By 1914, Bing's toy factory employed thousands of workers, which reflected the peak of the company's success (Sources vary on the number, 4,000-6,000, with 5,000 being the most consistently cited).

World War I, the embargo against German goods, and tariffs imposed on toy imports at the behest of the newly formed Toy Manufacturers of America (TMA) post-war would heavily impact Bing's success. Ignaz passed away just before the war's end in March 1918.

Although the company enjoyed a resurgence between the wars, changes in the German economy, and competition in the toy train market from American makers Lionel and Ives, Inc. all prevented the company's return to its former status. By 1933, the company was out of business, and its equipment was sold to a competitor (Groll, 2014).

### ***J.W. Spear and Söhne (Sons)***

Not much is known about the childhood and early adult years of founder Jacob Wolf Spier, born in 1832, the son of a soap maker and dealer in a small town. He was one of over a million Germans who left Germany in the 1850s due to the poor economic conditions and the failed revolution of 1848/1849. He would spend ten years in the U.S., gaining citizenship, a wife and children, and the Americanized spelling of his last name. Spear returned to Germany with his German-born wife and two children in 1861 (Schwarz & Faber, 1998).

In 1883, after joining or founding several different trading and manufacturing firms, Spear established the company that would become J.W. Spear and Sons. It began by making a wide range of products, including games, and then, like Bing, focused entirely on games.

Unfortunately, tragedy would dog the company. Factory fires broke out in 1892 and 1893. The financial losses from the fires themselves, related lawsuits from those who owned neighboring buildings around fire damage, and a nuisance lawsuit from a business rival proved too much for Spear, who suffered from depression, hanged himself in his factory (Schwarz & Faber, 1998).

Spear's sons continued the company's operations, moving from Furth to Nuremberg in 1898. For 40 years, two generations of Spear grew the business, even weathering the World War I period, expanding into picture books and arts and crafts. They successfully opened a British subsidiary, initially to avoid Britain's high import duties on foreign goods and providentially keeping that part of the business and many family members alive as the Nazis rose to power.

In 1938 the company was "Aryanized," a process in which the Nazi government seized Jewish businesses of all kinds. The Nuremberg Toy Museum has identified 29 toy and game companies (including Bing and Spear) owned wholly or in part by

Jewish designers, entrepreneurs, and inventors who were Aryanized (Schwarz & Faber, 1998).

While a number of the Spear extended family were able to get out of the country to Britain, at least six died in different camps during the war.

The Spear family was one of the few to regain its German company after the war. Spear rebooted, rebuilt, and transformed itself into an active player for decades. At one point, the firm held the rights to Scrabble distribution outside of the U.S. and became largely responsible for the *Scrabble* tournaments that still run today (Schwarz & Faber, 1998).

## Early US Companies and Creators

Before the early 1800s, children of wealthy parents had toys purchased from overseas or in one of the new-fangled “department stores” in a major city. The few toys and games that other children had were generally “folk toys.” These include peg-based solitaire and other puzzles; checkers sets, tops, guns, corn husk or hand-sewn dolls, and hobby horses. These might have been made by family members or others in the local community or made by children themselves (Byrne, 2016).

The first U.S. toy manufacturing company in the industrial era was Francis, Field & Francis, also known as the Philadelphia Tin Toy Manufactory, founded in 1838 (Sherry, n.d.). Like many other early toy companies, they imported, created, and sold various household goods until toys became their main product. Their first manufactured toy was a horse-drawn fire engine.

By 1916, eighty US-based manufacturers banded together to form a trade association, one of the first of its kind in the U.S. The newly minted Toy Manufacturers of America (TMA) protected the growing US-made toys and games market (Byrne, 2016). The Toy Association, the current incarnation of that earlier trade group, represents over 1,100 members, toy companies of all sizes and types, retailers, designers, and inventors. Its annual American International Toy Fair hosts over 26,000 professionals (Toy Industry Association, n.d.).

### **Lewis I. Cohen**

Lewis I. Cohen (1800-1868) was born in Philadelphia. He is the earliest American Jewish entrepreneur and inventor in this study, likely the first recorded one. Born into a family of stationers across two continents, Cohen was sent to England at 14 to apprentice with his British family. Upon his return to the States, and through his

new company, Cohen quickly made his mark in the stationery industry by being the first American to make and sell lead pencils and steel pens, moving his customers away from feathered quills.

He began making playing cards in 1832. In 1835, he designed and developed a press that could print four colors simultaneously. The playing card side of the business soon eclipsed the rest of his sales, and by 1848, Cohen sold off the stationary side of the business and devoted himself fully to playing cards. Cohen's son and nephews also formed card companies and eventually merged them into the New York Consolidated Card Company after Cohen's death. Cohen's inventions and business practices blazed the trail still used by such companies today (McKinstry, 2022).

### **Joshua Lionel (Cohen) Cowen**

Cowen (1877-1865) first apprenticed at a dry cell battery company after he graduated from high school and exited college. He then worked assembling electrical lamps at the Acme Electric Lamp Company. He would file his first patent in 1899, a battery accessory for photographic flashes. On the strength of that work, the US Navy gave him a contract to create detonators for underwater mines, allowing him to set up business as the Lionel Manufacturing Company (National Railroad Hall of Fame, 2023). Cowen would create several electrical products independently or under contract for others.

Attracted by stationary department store Christmas window displays, he created a battery-powered train car for one store that would be especially eye-catching. He used the battery he had developed for an electric fan to drive the motor in his *Electric Express* in 1901 (Lionel, n.d.b).

Consumer interest in buying the product for their homes led Cowen to shift direction and, in 1902, began manufacturing and marketing realistic-looking metal toy trains, cars, tracks, and accessories.

By the time the TMA was formed, Cohen had changed his name to Cowen, and his Lionel Corporation was one of the largest toy companies in America. At its peak in the 1950s, Lionel would be the largest toy train company in the world, have its TV show, acquire the *Kiddie City* franchise of toy stores, renaming them *Lionel Kiddie City*. Cowen and his son would sell the company to their relative and infamous political figure, Roy Cohn, in 1959. Since then, the brand and company have had several owners and are currently based in Concord, North Carolina, far from its original Manhattan roots (Lionel, n.d.a).

## **The World Wars and the Years Between**

Trade embargoes against Germany during and after World War I dramatically reduced the availability of all German goods, including toy imports. Wartime production needs shifted most manufacturing businesses, including those in the toy and game industry, to supporting the war effort and ceasing or radically reducing products or shifting materials. Lionel made a toy train set out of cardboard (Byrne, 2016), and as noted below, other manufacturers shifted to wooden versions of their toys. These proved to be lean years for the global toy and game industry.

The onset of the Global Depression negatively impacted all imports. While the world economy began rebounding in the 1930s, the rise of Nazi German aggression in Europe would see another round of embargos against German goods. This development proved positive for the US industry. Still, the outbreak of another World War harmed everyone, and once again, factories and personnel from almost every manufacturing business were shifted to creating war material (Byrne, 2016).

Despite the turmoil, a new wave of US toy and game makers' products became popular as international embargoes drastically reduced German imports.

### ***Louis Marx, Marx Toys***

Louis Marx (1896-1982) broke into the toy industry as a sixteen-year-old, working as an office boy for the toymaker Ferdinand Strauss, known for the first mass-manufactured mechanical toys in the US. Marx would rise to the position of director by the age of 20. Soon afterwards, a disagreement with the owners on business strategy resulted in Marx's firing. He and his brother Dave worked for another toy company until a disagreement there ended those positions as well.

Marx would join the Army in World War I. After the war, the brothers would buy the toy dies from the then-bankrupt Strauss factory and form Louis Marx and Company, Inc. Marx's practice of "skinning" the same tin toy in different ways began with the climbing monkey and the dancing minstrel toys originally sold by Strauss. When these newly colored toys hit the market, the business took off. In 1926, Marx made his first million (the equivalent of almost \$17 million today) just three years after starting his company.

In 1928, after a trip to LA, he reworked a traditional Filipino folk toy he saw a street vendor whittle there and started selling his version of the Yo-Yo, selling over 100 million by 1955 (Retail Trade, 1955). Another popular Marx innovation was sheet-metal play sets, with slot and tab assembly, that would never pass today's



consumer safety regulations. The original *Big Wheel* tricycle is one of the last toys that would come from Marx, and likely the best known to more recent generations. Marx was the world's largest toy and game company in the 50s and 60s, and Marx shared a *Time Magazine* cover with Santa Claus in 1955 (Retail Trade, 1955).

### **Bertha “Beatrice” Alexander Behrman**

Bertha “Beatrice” Alexander Behrman (1895-1990), known professionally as “Madame Alexander,” founded Madame Alexander Dolls, Inc and was a rare female corporate executive of the time and the only Jewish one in the 1920s.

In the early 1900s, when dolls were made of delicate and expensive porcelain, it was more cost-effective to rehabilitate them in a “doll hospital” than to purchase new ones. Her stepfather operated one of the first US doll hospitals before World War I, and when war broke out, he couldn't get the needed replacement parts from Germany, risking the family business and income.

Beatrice sewed a Red Cross Nurse doll prototype and convinced the family to produce it commercially. That doll's popularity saved the family firm from bankruptcy (Buchholz, 1996).

She founded Madame Alexander Dolls with her husband in the 1920s, specializing in collectible dolls of characters from literature, film, and politics. In the 1950s and 1960s, Madame Alexander was the world's leading doll company. Throughout its history, the company created several innovations, including creating the first plastic face mold for a doll in 1947 and debuting *Cissy*, the first girl's fashion doll, four years before the arrival of Mattel's *Barbie* (Madame Alexander Doll Company, n.d.). A favorite brand of doll collectors, the independent *Madame Alexander Doll Club* had its charter sanctioned by the company in 1961 and has held annual conventions across the US since 1983.

Several companies have owned the Madame Alexander brand since Beatrice first sold it in 1988, two years before her death. The current owner is apparel and doll manufacturer Kahn Lucas, Inc., a company with an origin that predates Madame Alexander's by over 30 years (Kahn Lucas, n.d.).

### **Marvin Glass, Marvin Glass, and Associates**

Marvin Glass (1914-1974) was a prolific toy and game designer. Glass started his Chicago-based firm, Marvin Glass and Associates, Inc (MGA), in 1941, and it was the world's leading toy and game design firm from the 50s-80s. Among the

hundreds of toy and game designs he and his team would produce are perennial favorites like *Rock 'em Sock 'em Robots*, *Lite Brite*, and *Simon* (in partnership with Ralph Baer, below)

MGA would come up with designs, develop prototypes, produce production instructions and requirements, and license them to toy manufacturers for a 5% royalty. That model of being an “idea factory” included “CIA-level” security, which was rare in business then. The office building had its windows blacked out, surveillance cameras were used throughout the building, and employees who took meetings offsite had their briefcases handcuffed to them. Glass’ royalty-driven, secretive business model, rock-solid non-disclosure agreements, and contracts would establish business practices used by independent designers, large and small, going forward. Even today, at the annual Toy Fair Trade Show, many booths on the show floor can only be visited by appointment and have high walls to prevent unauthorized viewing of products.

Glass’s childhood was troubled. His abusive mother was committed to an asylum when he was seven, and his father abandoned him. He was very public about the therapy he sought throughout much of his adulthood. He had a work-hard, play-hard lifestyle, was married five times (twice to the same person), and had his lavish home profiled in his friend Hugh Hefner’s *Playboy* magazine. Glass was said to live primarily off cigarettes, coffee, and alcohol. He frequently appeared in news and television interview shows and could be a defensive interview. (The Museum of Classic Chicago Television/WBBM, 1972).

MGA was so successful that part of his deal required that his logo be part of the packaging of the toys licensed from the company, no matter who manufactured and sold it. Ideal Toys, Inc, producer of the MGA-designed *Mr. Machine* toy robot, was so pleased with the product’s success that they used it as their logo for years.

MGA was so successful that it survived Glass’s death by cancer in 1974 and an on-site murder-suicide perpetrated by an employee with a history of mental health issues that resulted in the deaths of two of the company’s partners and a designer at the company’s office in 1976. It finally closed in 1988. (Paxton, 2019)

### **Pinball: The Arcade Game with a Massive Impact**

Although it has its roots in the European Renaissance game *Bagatelle* (Bagatelle, 2023) pinball is still a uniquely American innovation. After it arrived in the Great Depression, pinball kept people entertained, both in bars and in arcades.

Pinball resides primarily within the coin-op industry, but it has influenced toys and games in several ways. Toy pinball machines have a long history, including *Julie's Pinball Machine* from American Girl (*Julie's Pinball Machine*, n.d.), and software versions for computers abound. *Pinball Construction Set*, initially published by Bill Budge in 1982, and then picked up by pioneering video game distributor Electronic Arts, Inc, has won multiple awards as the original "Player-Created Content" game (*Pinball Construction Set*, 2024).

The *Space Cadet* virtual pinball game was bundled in versions of the *Windows* operating systems beginning with the release of *Microsoft Plus! – Windows XP*.

### **David Gottlieb, Gottlieb Pinball**

Innovative and ahead of his time, David Gottlieb (1900-1974) company led the pinball pack for forty-five years. A WWI veteran, he spent seven years working in the Midwest and then Texas. in a mix of early film sales, coin-op sales, and distribution. He also sold punchboards, the "scratch-off lottery tickets" of their day, countertop games, and slot machines (Sharpe, 1977).

He moved to Chicago, the center of the arcade machine manufacturing industry at the time, and established D. Gottlieb & Company Inc. There, he created Baffle Ball, released in 1931, which is generally recognized as the first widely successful pinball game. In the first six months of its manufacture, Gottlieb had orders for 75,000 units of Baffle Ball, ringing up \$800,000 in the middle of the Depression, equivalent to a little over \$14,000,000 today (Colmer, 1976).

That said, it didn't resemble a modern pinball machine. At the time, these were small, unpowered countertop devices without bumpers or flippers. It would take 16 years of innovation across several companies for pinball to evolve to its modern form. Gottlieb's company released Humpty Dumpty, the first game with flippers, featuring six instead of two and facing in the opposite direction from the current orientation.

Colleagues and competitors held D. Gottlieb & Company with the highest regard. Back in the mid-70s, competitor and owner of the pinball company Williams Manufacturing, Harry Williams, once said, "Gottlieb has always been consistent... I would say their golden years are every year. For my money, every year" (Sharpe, 2019).

David Gottlieb would retire to Florida, where he would often spend the day on his boat, Flipper, while other family members took over the business. In 1977, just a few years after his death, Columbia Pictures Inc acquired the company.

### ***Sam and Gary Stern, Father and Son Serial Pinball Tycoons***

Sam, the son of Orthodox Jewish parents, was a born salesman who worked in several markets before joining the coin-op industry. His son Gary, a lawyer who grew up in the pinball industry, went to law school and practiced for several years before the siren call of the silver ball brought him back to pinball. Father and son would see the pinball industry through highs and lows for over seventy-five years across numerous companies.

Sam was the most successful of the salesmen for the pinball company Williams Electronics Inc. In 1947, he walked into President Harry Williams' office and convinced Harry to sell him 49% of the company. In 1959, he would arrange a buyout of the company by a third party and three years later would repurchase it, becoming sole owner and President.

Sam's son Gary, born in 1945, joined his father as vice president of Williams in 1973. In 1977, they left Williams to buy coin-op and pinball company Chicago Coin, Inc to form Stern Electronics, Inc. Two years later, they also acquired jukebox company Seeberg, Inc, which had acquired Williams in the 1960s, bringing Sam's original company back under his control. Stern Electronics closed in 1985, and Sam passed away in 1986.

From 1986 to 1999, Gary ran the pinball divisions of video game companies Data East, Inc and Sega, Inc. In 1999, he bought Sega's pinball wing and created Stern Pinball, Inc. Stern Pinball is now the only major pinball company in the world and has survived highs and lows via several business innovations pioneered by Gary.

Throughout most of the industry's history, manufacturers created their games and their IP. Stern Pinball's releases, three machines per year, are built entirely around licensed properties from film, television, music, and games. Stern pinball machines released in the last few years have centered around rock groups the *Foo Fighters* and *Rush*, fictional secret agent *007*, Japanese movie monster *Godzilla*, Marvel Comics, Inc' supergroup *The Avengers*, and Netflix, Inc's *Stranger Things* television series.

Recognizing the power of the collectors' market, Stern's releases come in multiple versions, generally a "Pro," "Premium," and "Limited" edition. These editions come with an increasing number of features and a higher price. The 007 line even adds a fourth "60<sup>th</sup> anniversary" edition. Stern also runs a fan group, "Stern Army," that holds authorized tournaments worldwide.

Gary Stern stepped down from the company's day-to-day operations as CEO in 2022 but retained his position as Chairman of the Board.

## The Post-World War II Boom in Plastic Toys and Television

Following the conclusion of World War II, US toy industry leaders' success and innovations in design, entrepreneurship, and invention would position the US as the global leader, a position it still holds today. *Mr. Potato Head*, *Barbie*, the *Easy Bake Oven*—these evergreen playthings and many others all hit the market in the 1950s and 60s, when the US toy and games industry began to lead the world.

Injection-moldable plastics emerged before the war but, in part due to the need for heightened war material manufacturing, didn't strongly affect the toy industry until after WWII. The widespread availability of commercial-grade plastic that could be used in toys proved a game changer. More durable than paper and cheaper and more malleable than wood or metal, it would decrease the manufacturing barrier to entry for new toy and game companies and provide the opportunity to create a broader range of designs and forms (Byrne, 2016).

Though certain innovations occurred before the war, broadcast television didn't become a mass medium until the 1950s. Hasbro and Mattel would become the first to take advantage of the new mass medium to substantially advance their roles in the industry, laying the foundation for the relationship between TV and toys.

Many of the new toy and game makers would be soldiers who returned from the war looking to do something fresh, some of them with newly acquired technical skills from their time in the service degrees they earned thanks to the GI Bill.

The status of Jews in America began to improve during the post-war period. Antisemitism began to shrink, and barriers to entry into mainstream social and business life began to erode. Knowledge of the Holocaust became widespread, with American cultural artifacts like the 1947 novel and Academy Award Winning picture *Gentlemen's Agreement* exposing people to the impact of anti-Jewish prejudice (Gentlemen's Agreement, 2023). New opportunities abounded.

### **The Hassenfelds**

The Hassenfeld Brothers, Herman, Hillel, and Henry Hassenfeld left Poland for Providence, Rhode Island, and would form a literal "rag trade" business, Hassenfeld Brothers, Inc in 1923. The company bought and sold remnants from textile companies and later branched into school supplies boxes lined with the remnants. Initially, they included pencils, sharpeners, and the like in the boxes. After Henry's son Merrill (1918-1979) joined the company in 1938, they included modeling clay and paint. The line expanded in 1942 to include toy doctor and nurse kits, and under

the leadership of Merrill, the company created air-raid warden kits during the war. However, the company's toy business took off with a toy designed to make children play with their food.

Jewish designer George Lerner worked for the toy car, truck, and train company Buddy L, Inc. during the war, redesigning their toys in wood since sheet metal was earmarked for the production of war materiel (Ickes, 2014). On the side, Lerner had designed a collection of toy facial and body parts to be inserted into vegetables for child's play and licensed it to a food company that would include it inside cereal boxes. Unhappy with the deal, Lerner approached Harry and Merrill Hassenfeld with the toy. The Hassenfelds bought the product from the cereal company and released it in 1952 (Couzin, 2020).

*Mr. Potato Head* was the first toy in a TV commercial, and it was the first aimed directly at children. Mr. Potato Head later acquired additional family members and, in 1964, a plastic potato body. The plastic potato body was added because the original version of the toy often resulted in rotting vegetables being left around the house, and the pointed ends of the parts ran afoul of new safety regulations.

In 1964, following the lead of Mattel's *Barbie* and in the early days of the Vietnam War, when military toys were popular, the company, now known as Hasbro, gave the world a new term, "action figure," and a new toy franchise, *G.I. Joe*, spearheaded by Jewish VP Donald Levine. The toy would bring in \$30-40 million in 1964 and 1965 alone. After Merrill passed away, his son Stephen (born 1952) replaced him as president and CEO of the company. He led a decade of acquisitions until his untimely death in 1989, and his brother Alan (born 1948) would serve in his place until 2008.

Hasbro developed and acquired numerous popular toy and game lines and became a producer of media properties around its own IP and others. For decades, it alternated with Mattel and Lego, Inc. as the largest toy and game company in the world. It recently announced plans to divest its media production division by the end of 2023.

### ***Ruth and Elliot Handler***

Ruth Marriana Mosko (1916-2002) and Elliot Handler (1916-2011) met at a B'nai B'rith dance for Jewish teenagers 1929. The Handlers partnered with Elliot's friend Harold "Matt" Mattson to form Mattel in 1945, creating the name of the company, the men's names. The company first created a miniature piano that they lost money on, and Mattson soon became too ill to continue with the company, selling his shares

to the Handlers. Ruth was the company's first president, becoming the third female Jewish company leader in the industry.

Mattel's first successful toy was a plastic toy Ukulele called the *Uke-A-Doodle* with a windup music box inside. The Handlers bet the future of their company, as well as their own, on the decision to become the first sponsor of the Mickey Mouse Club television show at the cost of \$500,000 for a year; Mattel's entire net worth and roughly equivalent to \$5,000,000 in today's dollars. At the time, television was still a new medium, and buying a full year's worth of advertising was a real gamble. Product placement and television ads for a Mattel *Mousegetar* (a toy Ukulele replica of the similar tenor guitar played by "Uncle Jimmy," the first adult MC of the show) and a *Uke-A-Doodle* style *Mousegetar Junior* put the company on a solid footing with sales at ten times their initial investment.

Mattel next made industry history by introducing the ground-breaking fashion doll *Barbie*. Until the introduction of *Barbie*, fashion dolls were paper dolls. Though Madame Alexander had introduced the first fashion doll, *Cissy*, it somehow still resembled the other toy dolls. Ruth and Elliot ran across a *Bild Lili* doll, a German product modeled on a cartoon character from a men's magazine and sold primarily in bars and cigar shops as a novelty or "gag gift." The Handlers saw the opportunity to merge the *Bild Lilli* design with the paper doll model of multiple outfits, and a star was born. The company would also develop a new line of model cars that improved on the miniature Matchbox toy cars, *Hot Wheels*. Along with many other toys, both lines made the company a leading one (Assouline, 2015).

The Handlers left the company in 1975 under a cloud. Several suits by shareholders and investigations by the SEC centered around the filing of fraudulent financial reports (Dean, n.d.).

Mattel continued to grow and, like Hasbro, acquired numerous other toy and game companies. It also has a media division, Mattel Films.

## **The Arrival of the Video Game Era**

"What if you could play a game on your TV?" was the question engineer Ralph Baer asked himself during a commute to a business meeting one morning. Baer's resulting invention of the "brown box" home video game console (licensed by Magnavox, Inc as the *Odyssey*) transformed America's living room. Atari's initially unlicensed remix of the *Odyssey's* tennis game for the arcade, *Pong*, led to the boom of the video game arcades. Both would start video games down the road to

becoming a cultural behemoth, driving cross-pollinations with toys, games, pinball, and mass media of all types.

It's easy to imagine digital gaming as the latest and perhaps final chapter in play, growing ever more sophisticated and lifelike with innovations in AI, machine learning, and related technologies. Yet traditional "tabletop" and role-playing games have come roaring back into popularity in the last several decades in the United States and Canada. A major driver of this boom was the first and biggest crowd-funding platform on the Internet; Kickstarter helped drive new opportunities for independent creators of tabletop games in general and, in one particular case, the career shift of game designer Elan Lee from digital to analog.

Digital media are powerful, but they haven't changed everything. Like so many Jewish entrepreneurs before them, Baer and Lee worked in the margins, innovating around prevailing trends in play before subverting them entirely. Their innovations went mainstream, forming part of the explosion in the video gaming and tabletop categories of the game industry.

### ***Ralph Baer, Father of the Video Game Console***

Baer (1922-2014) was expelled from public school in Germany at 14 due to the "Law Against the Over-Crowding of Schools" that limited the number of Jewish students in any given school to 1.5% of the total enrollment. Baer's education would continue in a private, all-Jewish student's school, but not for long. The continuing rise in antisemitism in the country saw his family, father Leo, mother Charlotte, and sister Ilse, leaving the country for the Bronx in New York City in 1938. Though at the time it was already difficult for Jews to emigrate, the family's English language skills and the fact that Ilse had relatives in the US who would sign the required letters of support made it possible for them to leave just two months before Kristallnacht. Once in the States, Baer took correspondence courses from the National Radio Institute in Washington, D.C., and began working as a radio technician. Drafted in 1943 to work as a combat engineer at Fort Dix, he would be transferred to Camp Ritchie, the Army's first military intelligence training center, due to his native fluency in German. He would soon be sent overseas to become a weapons expert.

After the war, he worked at several engineering firms, eventually joining Sanders Associates in Nashua, New Hampshire, in 1956. There, he supervised almost 500 other engineers doing work for the military. He stayed at Sanders for 31 years until he retired in 1987. The process of innovation and invention that would



spawn an industry worth billions of dollars began as Baer waited for a bus. He came up with the concept of playing games on television (Baer, n.d.).

Back in his office in New Hampshire on September 1, 1966, he created a 4-page disclosure document describing the idea of playing video games on a home TV set. Baer and a small team of engineers would run through several prototypes over the next few years, ending up with the 9<sup>th</sup>, the “Brown Box” and a “Light Gun” for “Shooting Gallery” games.

US television manufacturer Magnavox, Inc. would license the technology from Sanders and release the Magnavox Odyssey in 1972, the first home video game console. Nolan Bushnell saw a table tennis game played on Baer’s technology at a Magnavox Dealer exhibition. It inspired him to form his own company, Atari, and create the Pong arcade machine. Magnavox would sue Atari because it infringed on the Sanders patent, and Bushnell would eventually settle outside of court (The History of How We Play, 2022).

Baer began a second career as an independent toy and game designer during the latter portion of his time at Sanders, often working with MGA. He continued it after he retired from Sanders. His best-known is the pattern-matching game, *Simon*. Game company Milton Bradley, the original licensee of the game, held a release party for it at the internationally renowned disco Studio 54 on May 15<sup>th</sup>, 1978.

Baer’s honors are legion. In addition to the National Medal of Technology, he was named, among other things, a Life Fellow of the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, their highest honor. He was inducted into the National Inventors of Fame. A statue was placed in his honor in Arms Park in Manchester, and the area around it was renamed “Baer Square.”

### **Elan Lee**

Lee’s (Born 1980) first name derives from the Hebrew word for Oak tree, and his career as a play innovator crosses both video games and traditional ones. He worked as a game designer for Microsoft Game Studios. In 2001, he was the lead designer for *The Beast*, generally credited as the first alternate reality game to promote Stephen Spielberg’s film *AI*. This game created a new genre of collaborative play and storytelling, using online platforms filled with clues and mysteries distributed across virtual worlds and the real one that distributed networks of players could work on together. Such is the impact of the game and the genre that it won a “Legacy Peabody Award” for excellence in storytelling (Weisman et al., 2021).

Lee formed several companies that used similar cross-media entertainment

efforts until he “grew tired” of creating work for screens and digital engagement (Langsworthy, 2023). Lee created a new company that focused entirely on physical party games played by groups in the same physical space. In collaboration with cartoonist Matthew Inman, he launched a Kickstarter, Inc. campaign for the card game *Exploding Kittens* to raise \$10,000. They raised \$8,782,571 (Kickstarter, n.d.). The company now lists over twenty games and has a wide range of expansions, bundles, and ephemera inspired by the games. These games now include a line of four *Kitten Games* aimed at young children and co-designed by Lee’s daughter, who was four when she started creating them with him.

In addition to creating a thriving company, the *Exploding Kittens* Kickstarter campaign would inspire legions of tabletop game designers to follow their dreams and leverage Internet-based crowdfunding to achieve commercial success.

## Future Work

This paper merely touches on a wealth of history that is currently unexamined. The author is working on a book that will extend this paper and examine the history of significant “Memory Makers,” who may not have changed the industry but created iconic companies, toys, or games that have lasted generations.

There are many more stories of Jewish designers, engineers, and inventors across all facets of the industry, including wholesaling, sales, the computerization of the business, and more.

There are deeper stories of the social and business interactions among these professionals, many of whom shared memberships in secular and religious organizations, interacted as strong friends and vicious rivals, supported immigrants from their home countries in times of international strife, and more. The author hopes that this initial effort in telling this history inspires more work by other historians and sociologists to tell those stories.

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