
A Lifetime of Making Toys, Games, and Play

An Interview with Jacob R. Miles III

A veteran media, entertainment, and toy industry executive, Jacob R. Miles III has held executive positions at Kenner toys, General Mills Entertainment Group, Tonka toys, Hasbro, Cultural Toys, Urban America Television, and Urban Cool Networks and, over the last forty years, has worked with fourteen Toy Industry Hall of Fame inductees. An original member of Kenner's Star Wars toy team and an avid Star Wars toy collector, he has been involved in developing and manufacturing such American toy and children's entertainment brands and figures as Six Million Dollar Man, Stretch Armstrong, Play-Doh, Sega Game Systems, the Baby Alive doll, Tonka, Pound Puppies, Hollywood Hounds, Ghostbusters, Alien, Strawberry Shortcake, Care Bears, Batman, and Superman. Miles has also helped develop television and film products based on content from Lucasfilm, The Jim Henson Company, DIC Entertainment, Disney, Warner Bros., Film Roman, NBA, MLB, NFL, American Greetings, Motown, and Hallmark Entertainment among others. As an award-winning entrepreneur and now analyst of global media and entertainment trends, strategies, and diversity, Miles has been featured in the *Wall Street Journal*, *USA Today*, *Business Week*, *Black Enterprise*, PBS, and numerous books, magazines, and newspapers. He currently serves as CEO and chairman of MAP Esports Network Inc., a multimedia platform and network that provides esports and robotics-based media and play learning centers and services for disadvantaged and at-risk youth as well as mainstream communities. **Key words:** culturally diverse toys; toy design and development; toy industry; toy manufacturing

American Journal of Play: Tell us about your childhood and your own early play experiences.

Jacob R. Miles: I grew up in the Millvale housing projects of Cincinnati in the 1950s and 1960s. I come from a big family with parents that took great care of my siblings and me. Due to the civil rights movement and gang violence happening at the time, I became aware of racism and violence at

a young age. However, my family stayed positive through these struggles. My family was like a tightly fitted knot: no matter the difficulties we faced, nothing ever tore us apart. What truly united us was our dream for a more peaceful life. I didn't have many toys except for marbles, baseball cards, and pick-up sticks. Oftentimes it was unsafe for me to play outside, so I spent most of my time indoors reading and dreaming. If I was able to be outdoors, I played football.

AJP: How did these experiences inform your own work in the toy and games industries?

Miles: The challenges I faced during my childhood equipped me with the strength I needed to excel later in life. To distract myself from the violence outside, I started drawing, which led to more mechanical drawing and drafting, which eventually led to my career as an engineer. It's odd to say, but experiencing turmoil in my community taught me perseverance and coping skills that I would later use in my career.

AJP: How did you get started into the toy industry?

Miles: Before my time in the toy industry, I was working as an assistant liaison engineer at a machine tool company called Gray Company. After several years, I decided that I wanted more out of my career. I didn't want to be just an engineer behind the scenes. I wanted to be an executive. I asked the vice president of engineering at the company how I could get his job one day, and he explained that because of racial prejudice and the lack of growth in the industry, I wouldn't be able to move up much further at the company. I asked him what he would tell his son to do in these circumstances. This led to his connecting me with the Steiner Brothers, the founders of Kenner Products. They introduced me to the limitless possibilities in the toy industry. After that, I joined Kenner Products as a manufacturing liaison engineer in 1975.

AJP: What was it like working at Kenner? What projects were you involved in and what were your roles?

Miles: Kenner was located at 912 Sycamore Street in Cincinnati when I first started working there. It was an old building with several Steiner family businesses located there. Toys, novelty items, soap, and beverages. There was a mural on the building of a kid playing marbles, one of my favorite games as a kid. I thought then—and still feel today—that the toy business is one of the most entrepreneurial jobs in the world. You are always working on new ideas, new materials, new processes. No matter what, you just had

to figure it out and do it relatively quickly. As we say in the toy industry, they are not going to move Christmas, so we had to turn that idea into a product in time for Christmas.

I arrived at Kenner in 1975. At that time, we manufactured most things ourselves. As a product liaison engineer, I worked with the product development engineering team in the office and then spearheaded the hand-off to the manufacturing engineering and production team. I was responsible for making or approving any engineering changes that had to occur in production and for keeping the product on schedule. We were working on Tree Tots Family Tree House, Six Million Dollar Man, Snoopy Electric Toothbrush, Dusty and Baby Alive dolls, Play-Doh, Spirograph, and Girders and Panels building sets (one of my favorites). Then came Bionic Woman and Stretch Armstrong. One of my most memorable experiences was the engineering problems we encountered trying to make Stretch Armstrong. We had to design the equipment for the process while developing the product. We had to cook the syrup and control its viscosity while putting it into a latex body and vacuum sealing it, something none of us had ever done before—and what a mess! Then *Star Wars* came along and changed everything.

Over the next ten years at Kenner, I worked on Sit 'n Spin, Miss America dolls; *Star Wars*, DC Comics, Marvel, NBA, NFL, WWF, action figures; M.A.S.K., Aerial Aces, in-home shooting arcade, Redline Drag Racing, and NFL hand-held electronic games; products in the Rose Petal Place, Strawberry Shortcake, Care Bears, Hugga Bunch, Raiders of the Lost Ark, Centurions, Fast 111s, Ghostbusters, Alien, Super Powers, Sea Wees lines and so many more. My role changed with the evolution of manufacturing in America. When I started, everything was manufactured in the United States, and I traveled to the East Coast to work with injection and roto cast molding companies. I went to Pennsylvania for tooling companies. As manufacturing moved over seas—first to Japan, then to Hong Kong, then to New Territories, then to interior China as well as to Taiwan, Korea, Thailand, Mexico, and Haiti—my job title changed from liaison engineer to product engineer to international liaison engineer or advance manufacturing engineer. My responsibilities remained the same—working with product from concept or idea alongside the designers and development engineers and taking the hand-off from them (so they could move on to new products), then sourcing and manufacturing the product and deliv-

ering the quantities promised, all while solving any problems that developed along the way. Kenner Products was the start of my career in the toy industry. Kenner and the Steiner Brothers were instrumental in my success. I spent a lot of time traveling as part of the product engineering department, which ensured manufacturing and distribution at the highest quality product possible—from concept creation to product retirement. I was fortunate enough to visit various manufacturing vendors in Hong Kong, Macao, Taiwan, Thailand, China, Japan, Korea, Portugal, Mexico, and Haiti.

AJP: Tell us more about how Kenner's Star Wars toys came about and the role you played.

Miles: Star Wars, I remember being called down to PD&E for a meeting. George Lucas, his attorney (I think), Bernie Loomis, Karl Wojahn, and several other engineers were there, and we reviewed the script and discussed our ideas for toys based on the movie. We had no idea how big Star Wars would become. My initial involvement focused on the TIE Fighter and X-Wing Fighters from an engineering and manufacturing standpoint and how we could add play value, make them toyetic. We did not want just a vehicle with no action or sound features, so we focused on adding action, on push-button wing expansion forming the X, and on a sound and light feature to the Tie Fighter. I also had the responsibility of going to Hong Kong and introducing the Star Wars line to our Hong Kong and New Territories manufacturers. I had to find the right manufacturer that could meet our quality and quantity standards and convince them to invest significant capital and resources for large production capacities without any history of success for this new property that no one had ever heard of. It was quite the challenge.

During the initial development of the Star Wars action figure toys, our department wasn't sure it would be successful. Unfortunately, we didn't have enough time to design and build injection molds before the premiere date of the movie in 1977. Instead, we produced a diorama set that promised the purchaser they would receive Star Wars figures when they came out in 1978. We sold over five hundred thousand pieces!

To reduce the cost of manufacturing these toys, I traveled to Hong Kong to lay the groundwork for the new Star Wars figures production, engineering, and support capabilities. My focus was to assess our vendor in Hong Kong's capabilities for mold building and tooling. This included

examining tooling shops, steel quality, and injection molding and decorating machines.

AJP: How did you end up at Tonka? How was Tonka's approach to toy making different from Kenner?

Miles: By 1985 many of my colleagues had left Kenner to work elsewhere. One of them was Armando Garcia who resigned at Kenner to be the executive vice president at Tonka. He reached out and asked me to come to visit Tonka's operation in Minneapolis and discuss a job opportunity. I had no plans of leaving Kenner, but I eventually was offered the position of director of liaison engineering with key executive status, which I happily accepted. I was thrilled to help lead the company to the next level of becoming a full-line toy and entertainment company.

Tonka's approach to toy making was much more conservative and was primarily focused on metal versus plastic and soft goods. The entire industry was marveling at what we were accomplishing at Kenner with our licensing and highly engineered, high-feature action figures. We were the best. Tonka wanted us to replicate that success for them. Pat Feely was our leader, and he was a risk taker. Steve Shank, our CEO, a lawyer, was not. We started doing licensing deals with Bandai, Sanrio, World Wrestling Federation, and Sega among others, and we rapidly grew Tonka's business.

AJP: While at Tonka you helped introduce Sega video games to American audiences. Tell us how that happened.

Miles: Tonka had a long history of working with Japan. Bandai represented and sold Tonka trucks in Japan and made the famous commercial of an elephant standing on a Tonka truck. The new Tonka team from Kenner, led by Pat Feely, decided to license and sell Japanese toys, and we would create our own cartoons and launch them to support the toy sales. We needed to do this with Bandai, Takara, Sanrio, and Sega. We had tremendous success with Pound Puppies and used some of those funds to acquire the Sega license. We had to learn fast, we had some experience with hand-held electronic games from our time at Kenner. I went to Japan and spent several weeks there with Bandai and with SEGA teams working with the engineers. I returned to the U.S.A., and, after two weeks sharing info and putting systems for communicating in place, I left for San Francisco to spend a week to ten days with the Sega U.S. team. I was sitting in the conference room on Forbes Avenue when the 1989 San Francisco–Oakland earthquake (also known as the Loma Prieta earthquake) hit. The quake

struck with a moment magnitude of 6.9 on October 17, just before the start of the third game of the World Series, which was being held at San Francisco's Candlestick Park. Sixty-three people died, and nearly thirty-eight hundred were injured.

Since Tonka had relationships with many different manufacturers and companies in Japan, we received an opportunity to team up with Sega Games Company, a multinational video game developer and publisher headquartered in Tokyo. We worked closely with the American division to introduce the Sega Master System, a cartridge-based video game system, which launched us into the video game business and grew rapidly to over a hundred million in sales on its own in its first year. We focused on creating nonviolent video games, such as racing, arcade, and adventure games.

AJP: In your experiences at Kenner, Tonka, and eventually Hasbro in the 1970s and 1980s, how did toy and game makers engage people of color?

Miles: The toy industry was—and still is—a very closed industry. Historically, it is a family business, Steiner brothers (Kenner), Hassenfeld brothers (Hasbro), Parker brothers. Through the 1970s, I was the only one except for Armando Garcia Jr., my boss who was from Argentina. He mentored me and looked out for me. His secretary was African American, and she would also tell me who to look out for or avoid from a racism standpoint. For the most part, I felt like family and still do. Early in my career, there were guys in tooling or machinery companies in rural areas across America that would be surprised when I showed up representing Kenner, General Mills, or Tonka. I was always told how my work was superior to that of my peers. However, I felt that was the minimum I had to do to stay, and I loved the industry and wanted to stay. I remember Joe Mendelsohn telling me in my first month on the job that, if I could stick it out, I would be a very important person in this industry.

Some toy makers produced Black dolls, but they were designed as white dolls that were then molded in brown color. These dolls didn't accurately portray the look and culture of African Americans. The U.S. doll market in general did not reflect our country's diverse population. Therefore, I noticed there was a gap in the market for multicultural toys, which is why I created the Cultural Exchange Entertainment Corporation. The corporation had three segments: Cultural Toys, Cultural Exchange Publishing, and Cultural Exchange Content for TV and film.

AJP: Tell us more about Cultural Toys.

Miles: At the time, I had founded and was running my fine art business, Cultural Exchange Gallery, which featured multicultural art. While I enjoyed working in fine art, I discovered that I couldn't leave my passion for the toy industry behind. Therefore in 1993, I created Cultural Exchange Entertainment Corporation, with one of its three segments being Cultural Toys.

My research in the toy market showed that there was a tremendous gap for multicultural toys. Children of all different backgrounds needed toys that reflected their look and lifestyle. We also felt there was a need for toys that promoted nonviolence and multicultural friendships. Cultural Toys met these needs and filled the gap.

AJP: How did the toy industry and retailers respond to your company and its products?

Miles: We were thrilled to see Cultural Toys brand products become the most prominent, broadest multicultural toy line available in the U.S.A. In the first two years, we established a nationwide distribution channel of top retailers. Cultural Exchange Entertainment and Cultural Toys also received extensive national media attention from Black Entertainment Television, CNN, CBS, *USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, and others. Cultural Toys was even ranked in a list of the top hundred toys by Stevanne Auerbach's Dr. Toy.

All that to say, Cultural Toys was very successful. It proved that the toy market wasn't meeting the needs of a large portion of buyers. As more and more children received Cultural Toys, the toy industry realized what it had been missing.

AJP: Tell us more about Hollywood Hounds. How did that toy line come about?

Miles: Hollywood Hounds are the pets of America's diverse children. They have taken on the cultural attributes of their owners. I showed them to Clarence Avant, chairman of Motown, early on in their development. He laughed and joked about them becoming a singing group so I developed the storyline as their being able to sing and were a singing group. I knew that pets were always popular in the toy industry, and at Kenner, Tonka, and Hasbro, we always had a pet line, so that was what I decided would be my first toy line. We did a deal with DIC Entertainment, a division of ABC-Cap Cities at the time, to produce a Hollywood Hounds cartoon after the retailers said that, if they were on television, they would buy it. We did a Christmas special and that led to over a million dollars in orders thanks to Cultural Toys extensive marketing and education about the toy.

AJP: How did customers respond to some of your other toys?

Miles: Cultural Toys Preschool and Infant line was also received well. Our biggest success was the Dinkytown Daycare Kids, which consisted of multicultural dolls, finger puppets, and play sets. We also had a children's book and life-size character appearances, different from the Hollywood Hounds, which was a kid sell. The others were mom or parent sells. The moms welcomed our products with open arms, and I still get positive comments and request for the products today. We also added the Kenya doll line after it was released by Mattel, which I still work on and which is still very popular.

Dinkytown Daycare Kids (DDK) was a multicultural line of dolls, books, clothing, and a finger puppet play set. DDK included stories about sharing with others, believing in yourself, and spreading kindness. From 1994 to 1995, the line was included in the list of hottest selling toys from the Toy Manufacturers of America (today called the Toy Industry Association), and it sold out in 1995.

Another one of our products was the Double Scoop line. The Double Scoop books were illustrated by an eight-year-old boy and featured a drawing of him and his African American friend. In the book, the friends were represented as vanilla and chocolate ice cream cones and made the analogy of two kids being different flavors but still the same ice cream. Through these characters, stories, and toys, we promoted multicultural friendships and racial acceptance.

AJP: Are there other products or lines of products that you worked on, other than Star Wars, that you are especially proud of?

Miles: There are several projects or situations that developed throughout my career that I am, in hindsight, particularly proud of. I remember it was approaching Christmastime, and I was in a Baby Alive meeting. Baby Alive was a special engineering challenge because we were pioneering self-skinning foam, which required managing a lot of chemical reactions. Environmental regulations today would not let us experiment the way we did then. I asked the head of marketing why we did not make any brown Baby Alive dolls. I was told because Black girls did not like what they looked like, that they preferred white dolls according to the latest research. I was extremely disappointed in his answer but, as the only African American in the room or in engineering, I kept my cool but continued to push the issue every chance I got. One day I was out at our Oakley manufacturing facility and one of the plant managers said, "Jacob, we ran you some brown Baby Alive dolls so you can have some for your family." I told him to just

package them out and ship them with the white dolls. When the retailers received them and put them on display, they flew off the shelf, and they started calling sales and marketing for more. I remember the vice president of marketing, who I had been pestering for months, came to my office, called me a son of a bitch, and blamed me for having manufacturing put brown dolls in the shipments. He then smiled, and we figured out how to get some brown dolls in the system and manufactured.

I, of course, was very proud to be part of the Kenner Star Wars family, to be working with the Steiner family—Bernie Loomis, Armando Garcia, and Joe Mendelsohn—and of being the guy that brought Star Wars to China. I still get reminded of that by the kids of the guys I worked with in Hong Kong and China. My tenure at Tonka was exciting, and the products I was most excited about were working with Bandai on GoBots and other Japanese products and their telling me that I was the first African American engineer they had worked with. I was honored and proud of my work on the team that launched Sega Master System in America, which led to working with Tom Kalinske. Pound Puppies I was proud of because it symbolized rescuing dogs from the pound and raised awareness nationwide.

Cultural Toys gave me so much to be proud of with its focus on edutainment, nonviolence, and diversity. I received a lot of blowback for starting a company focused on social issues. It was not as popular as it is today. Cultural Toys Infant and Preschool line of African American and multicultural preschool learning aids made me especially proud. That line led to Bill Whaley, CEO of Children's Television Workshop, serving on my board of directors. The Dinkytown Daycare Kids was a *Better Homes and Gardens* and *Today* show top toy, and it was first an endcap and feature in Target stores. I can't forget the Hollywood Hounds because they were my very first product and my first animated TV program and led me to my mentor and board member, Clarence Avant, chairman of Motown.

One of the products I'm particularly proud of is Stretch Armstrong because it was the first toy of its kind. At the time, no one had produced a toy that could be stretched from fifteen inches up to five feet. We developed the manufacturing equipment and production lines ourselves. Stretch Armstrong became such a hit that it was later followed by the Stretch Monster and Stretch Octopuses Ollie and Olivia.

AJP: What are you working on now?

Miles: I recently founded MAP Esports Network, a "Play and Learn" company

and the first-of-its-kind multimedia platform and network to provide esports and robotics-based gaming centers. It includes a network of media platforms, including podcasts, streaming and magazines, and community touchpoints providing access to the fast-growing esports industry. MAP Esports Network also supports disadvantaged children and communities by helping them participate in esports with resources and access to non-violent video games, robotics, and coding via STEM (science, technology, engineering, and mathematics) and STEAM (science, technology, engineering, the arts, and mathematics)-based initiatives. Of course, once a toy guy always a toy guy. We are developing an esports toy and entertainment property that we plan to announce soon.