

# **How do we find comfort in unsettling times?**

## In conversation with Mark Boudreaux

Toys are more than just presents for children. We often take toys for granted, but they are an important part of our lives. Playing with toys helps children develop motor and cognitive skills, learn how to be creative, solve problems, and overcome obstacles. Toys also help us to learn to walk, talk, socialize, acquire knowledge, grow emotionally, and develop social and spatial awareness. However, some toys go far beyond this childhood stage of our lives and make a lasting impact, taking us into the world of nostalgia. As such, they serve as familiar cultural markers when we are confronted by change. And sometimes, when toys are connected with an additional signifier—a film, a TV series, or a cartoon that we used to watch as children—they also provide us with a sense of comfort.

Just a few months before the pandemic started, Disney+ (the video-on-demand platform of The Walt

## Design in the Age of Change

Disney Company) launched *The Mandalorian*—a spinoff of the popular *Star Wars* film franchise. The timing could not have been more perfect for Disney. The pandemic brought them a captive audience. The entire world suddenly went on pause and an unprecedented number of people all of sudden found themselves at home, with nothing else to do but to stream on-demand videos. *The Mandalorian*, leveraging the widespread fan base of *Star Wars*, became one of the most popular TV series in 2020. In fact, according to one survey, *The Mandalorian* became 109 times more popular than the average TV series in the United States during this period.

In a typical *Star Wars* fashion, *The Mandalorian* was also followed by its own toy series. While Boba Fett (the Mandalorian himself) was already a popular action figure from days past, the series introduced a new character that proved to be an irresistible toy—The Child (AKA “Baby Yoda”). This toy became so much in demand that Amazon quickly sold out their entire inventory and had to put a stop on pre-orders. Even more so, they had to ask customers to request to be e-mailed when the toy becomes available again. Unsurprisingly, a whole new demand for vintage *Star Wars* toys also emerged. As people become reintroduced to the franchise, many felt the need to reconnect with their childhood memories and find the action figures that they used to own as children. In recent months, the price of some of these vintage toys increased significantly.

To understand better why some toys have the power to give us comfort and keep our imagination

## How do we find comfort in unsettling times?

alive—long after we grow up—I spoke to Mark Boudreaux. Mark is a toy designer. In fact, he is one of the greatest toy designers in the world. He has worked as a designer of *Star Wars* toys since 1977, just as the franchise was first introduced. In recognition of his work, he was inducted in the *Pop Culture Hall of Fame* and the *Toy Collector's Hall of Fame*. In 2020, after 43 years designing *Star Wars* toys, Mark retired from Hasbro, the company that now owns the *Star Wars* toys franchise. Mark was also featured in the first episode of the hit Netflix series, *The Toys That Made Us*. The series opened with the story of the *Star Wars* toys—the most profitable toy franchise in history. But as they say at Hasbro, “All talk of toy sales aside, it’s nice to know people have something comforting like Baby Yoda to enjoy in these unsettling times.”

**Gjoko Muratovski:** In 2020, you retired after 43 years of designing toys for the *Star Wars* universe. How did you become involved with this project?

**Mark Boudreaux:** I joined Kenner Toys in January 1977 while I was still a student at what is now the Ullman School of Design—I graduated the following year, in 1978. These kinds of industry placements are a typical part of the design education at the University of Cincinnati. The great thing about Kenner Toys was that it was a hometown company—they were right here in Cincinnati. When I got this job, I was their first co-op student in their newly formed

## Design in the Age of Change

design department. Then, I realized that two other recent graduates from this school were already working in the same department—Jim Swearingen (Class of 1972) and Tom Osborne (Class of 1975). Tom was the Director of Design at Kenner and Jim was the Principle Conceptual Designer. Then, in February of that year—just a month or so after I joined Kenner—they acquired the *Star Wars* license from Lucasfilm. I was invited to work on this project from the very beginning. My first task was to design the Millennium Falcon. The rest is history, as they say. [Laughs]

**Gjoko Muratovski:** The origin story of the *Star Wars* toys franchise is quite interesting. In 1976, when George Lucas decided to commission toys to support the film that he was working on, he was turned down by all major toymakers, including Hasbro, who owns the franchise today. The only company that agreed to design and make the toys was Kenner. Jim Swearingen was the person who reviewed the script for the *Star Wars* film. Quite serendipitously, Jim was a sci-fi fan and he could immediately see that this film could translate into an exciting toy franchise. Jim took the trip to Lucasfilm in California to meet with George Lucas and discuss all of the details for the toy line. The most remarkable part of the deal was that Kenner kept 95 cents of each dollar made from the toys, while Lucasfilm and twentieth century Fox split a nickel. When *Star Wars* opened in the theaters in 1977, it quickly became the

## How do we find comfort in unsettling times?

highest-grossing film of all time. Kenner made a fortune selling the toys.

When you first started working on *Star Wars*, did you have any idea of how successful this project would potentially become?

**Mark Boudreaux:** I'm not sure if anybody at the time could imagine how big this was going to be. I don't know if anybody knew the true potential of this franchise, with maybe the exception of Jim Swearingen. Jim read the *Star Wars* script when Kenner Toys were approached by Lucasfilm to design the toys for the film. He could straight away tell that there was something special about this story. He could just see the potential—the characters, the vehicles, the worlds that people could experience; everything was there. He realized that this would be something that was totally new; something that no one had ever seen before. He started the ball rolling and Kenner embraced his passion that the *Star Wars* project was something that the company should pursue.

*Star Wars* as a film franchise was certainly something that touched a nerve with everybody. Somehow everyone could relate to the story. And yes, it was “a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away,” but it was something that people could nevertheless connect with. George Lucas really did a great job telling a story that had something for everybody. There was the action, the good versus evil, there was some comedy, and there was a little bit of romance. All of these things are very relatable.

## Design in the Age of Change

Now, 43 years later, *Star Wars* are still a part of our popular culture. You can see references from *Star Wars* all the time and everywhere. Whether they are from the classic films or the new *Mandalorian* show, *Star Wars* references are just omnipresent. And there is certainly a lot of passion involved. There is also a very large community of people that call themselves *Star Wars* fans. And it's really this community that makes *Star Wars* the success that they are. It's really all about the fans. We can make toys all day, but it's the fans that we're making this product for. It's their passion that feeds our passion. The true toy fans and collectors are as passionate as the toy designers are. For them—and for us—every detail counts. We put an incredible attention to the detail of every toy that we design; especially to those toys that we design for the older fans of the franchise, the collectors.

**Gjoko Muratovski:** Why do you think the *Star Wars* toys became so successful?

**Mark Boudreaux:** You know, when the first films came out, there was nothing else like it. People were lining up around the planet to go and see *Star Wars*. And back then, *Star Wars* films would stay at the theaters for a year. Even the best films today only stay at the theaters for maybe three or four weeks. *Star Wars* stayed around for quite a while. But you also need to understand the context of the time. Back then we didn't have social media, we didn't have computers, and we didn't have so many things to distract us. So

## How do we find comfort in unsettling times?

*Star Wars* really was something that you would go and see multiple times. “Hey, let’s go see *Star Wars* again,” people would say. And the following just grew and grew and grew. And with time, this following became a community. The toys were an extension of the films. The toys would allow you to recreate the excitement from the films at home. For fans that grew up with these films and these toys—fans that were young at the time—this was an experience that they have never forgotten.

In the meantime, they got older and they started having kids of their own, but their connection with *Star Wars* is still there. Kenner, which is now part of Hasbro, is still producing the same *Star Wars* toys that these people had as children. They see them, and they remember what it was like to be a kid back in the day. They probably no longer have these toys, but they would really like to have them again. They would like to rekindle their childhood memories. They allow themselves to be children again. And they would like to share that experience with their children as well. Toys like this have the ability to create exceptionally strong bonds with people.

Toys are often an integral part of the childhood memories that we all have. A lot of the older *Star Wars* fans are now passing along these toys and their memories to their kids, and their kids will be passing these along to theirs. They are timeless and multi-generational and, in this regard, many fans consider their *Star Wars* toys to be heirlooms.

## Design in the Age of Change

**Gjoko Muratovski:** This is one of the most successful toy series in history. According to the Netflix *Star Wars* episode on *The Toys That Made Us*, between 1978 and 2020, there have been over one billion *Star Wars* toys sold. As they pointed out, if you melt down all these toys, you will have enough plastic to make one colossal toy figure that would dwarf the Empire State Building.

**Mark Boudreaux:** Oh, my goodness. [Laughs] That's one heck of a number. I knew it was quite high, but I didn't know it was quite that high. That's a lot of toys.

**Gjoko Muratovski:** Yes, that's a lot. According to Netflix, the *Star Wars* film franchise to date has grossed \$7 billion, but the *Star Wars* toys have grossed \$14 billion—twice the amount that the films have made. That's pretty incredible, Mark.

**Mark Boudreaux:** I feel so fortunate that I have had the opportunity to play a small role in such a big story.

**Gjoko Muratovski:** So, what are your favorite *Star Wars* toys?

**Mark Boudreaux:** That's a big question. You know, there were a lot of exciting things I was able to work on with *Star Wars* over the years. However, I've always been kind of “the vehicle guy.” I've worked on action figures, as well, but vehicles were always what I had



## How do we find comfort in unsettling times?

a passion for. Kenner and Hasbro allowed me to pursue my passion in this area. But if I have to pick my favorite toy, I would say that the Millennium Falcon is nearer and dearer to me. Over the years, I've had the privilege of working on all major Millennium Falcon versions.

I have other favorite toys as well. You know, the action figure for Boba Fett, the Mandalorian bounty hunter, is a big favorite of mine. Jim Swearingen designed this toy. As you know, this became one of the most notorious action figures from the original collection of 1978. In the world of *Star Wars*, the original Boba Fett figure is known as the “Holy Grail.” This is the most renowned single *Star Wars* toy item and, at the time, this character was not even featured in the film. This toy could not be purchased at any stores and was only available via special mail-in promotion. Originally, Boba Fett was advertised with a rocket-firing capability in his backpack. However, due to safety concerns, the rocket-firing feature was never available to the public. Recently, a leaked prototype of the rocket-firing Boba Fett fetched \$225,000 at an eBay auction.

People today are so much into *The Mandalorian* series. I was so excited to see Boba Fett return. He was too cool of a character to just die in the *Return of the Jedi* installment. So, to have him return with his own series, and have him fly around in the Slave I spaceship—which is another vehicle that I designed—is really cool.

**Gjoko Muratovski:** I am surprised that you didn't mention Baby Yoda here.

## Design in the Age of Change

**Mark Boudreaux:** Yes, Baby Yoda! Well, now we also know his name, which was not disclosed when the character was introduced—it’s Grogu. That is a very interesting character and there is a very interesting story behind it. We knew that *The Mandalorian* was coming out, and Lucasfilm has shared many details with us in advance of the series so that we can start developing toys prior to the show release, but Baby Yoda was kept a secret even from us. This was a character that was really important to Mr Lucas and he really wanted to keep him “under wraps.” We were informed about the character in general, but we were not given any specific detail about how he looks. As per Mr Lucas’ request, we were asked not to work on the development of this toy until the character gets revealed on the show. He wanted the character to be a surprise. Once we got the green light to work on this, Hasbro quickly put together a “strike team”—a small task force made of designers, sculptors, engineers, packaging specialists, etc.—to develop this product in a record fashion. We developed multiple versions of this product that are now on the market. The little guy was so adorable that everybody wanted him so badly and they wanted him right now.

**Gjoko Muratovski:** What is your design process, Mark?

**Mark Boudreaux:** The design process for me starts with knowing the story. Let’s take *Star Wars*

## How do we find comfort in unsettling times?

as an example. Whether you do an action figure or a spacecraft, you first need to understand what that character or vehicle is all about. What's its purpose in the story? How does it relate from one aspect to another? Is the vehicle important to a particular figure? Is it important to the story point?

Being able to understand the story is probably the most important aspect of the process. Because once you understand the story you can start to dig deeper into what the design needs to project and what's the appropriate scale. Then, you need to think about your stakeholders. What's the appropriate audience? Is this being designed for a young fan? Is it being designed for a collector?

All of these things that you need to consider form a checklist of things that you must take into account as you design. For example, for collectors, the decoration and the amount of detail that you put on to an item are very important. You will approach your design for collectors differently than if you design for young children. Younger audiences would be more attracted to cleaner versions with more vibrant colors. Whereas, if you design for collectors, the designs are going to look more authentic and "battle worn." High-end collector items will feature much more complicated detailing than toys that children will actually play with.

Then, in the initial stage of the design process, I just like to take a blank piece of paper and a pen, and I'll just start drawing the concept. Once I get it the way I like, I'll

## Design in the Age of Change

scan it, and then I'll start to manipulate it digitally. I guess that's a little bit "old school," but that's how I do it. A lot of the younger designers that we have on our team will probably just start drawing right on the computer. I like a nice mix between digital technologies and pen and paper. Digital can let you do some things that you can't really do just with a pen and a piece of paper. But both can complement each other in a really great way.

**Gjoko Muratovski:** What would you say was the most exciting part about working on this franchise?

**Mark Boudreaux:** The most exciting thing for me was that I could expand the *Star Wars* universe beyond what George Lucas initially envisioned. I was allowed to design characters and vehicles that were never depicted in the original films, and my designs became as much a part of the *Star Wars* universe as those that you could see featured on the screen. Mr Lucas loved this work.

**Gjoko Muratovski:** Mark, thank you so much for being my guest. I love how you still have so much passion for *Star Wars* after working on this project for 43 years.

**Mark Boudreaux:** Thank you for having me, Gjoko. Working on the *Star Wars* project has really been an once-in-a-lifetime experience for me. After all these years, I still feel proud to have designed

## **How do we find comfort in unsettling times?**

products that have touched so many peoples' lives in so many ways.

May the Force be with you, and with all the *Star Wars* fans.