

Toy Ads: Little Hotties

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Barbie's New Rivals

By [Margaret Talbot](#), New America Foundation

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Indeed, marketers counsel companies not to feel guilty about “going around moms,” as the 2004 book *The Great Tween Buying Machine* puts it, and advertising products that parents dislike.

Barbie is forty-seven years old, and forty-seven years is a long time to have been the alpha doll. Over the decades, many competitors have been sent out into the world to get what Mattel's doll had: hugely profitable sovereignty over the imaginations of little girls. Some of these rivals briefly grabbed a small share of the fashion-doll market. The Tammy doll, which had a wholesome teen-aged look and came encumbered with parents, stuck around from 1962 to 1966, before Barbie squashed her flat. In 1969, Ideal Toy created Crissy, whose hair grew with the push of a button; you can still find Crissy on eBay, but not in Toys R Us.

Kenner's spookily big-headed Blythe, whose eye color could be changed from green to blue to pink to orange, lasted for one year: 1972. (She has since been rediscovered by hipster collectors; a photographer named Gina Garan poses her in myriad scenarios, as if she were a plastic Cindy Sherman.) In the mid-eighties, Hasbro launched Jem-corporate by day, rock and roll by night. Mattel moved swiftly to undercut her with its own Rock Star Barbie. And then there were the earnest attempts to make more “realistic” fashion dolls, an enterprise doomed to oxymoronic failure. The Happy to Be Me doll, which came out in the early nineties, when childhood anorexia was a

bigger media trope than childhood obesity, had a thicker waist, wider hips, and larger feet than Barbie, and left little girls cold. As M. G. Lord, the author of *Forever Barbie* (1994), wrote, "She may have been happy to be herself, but it was obvious, even to kids, that she had extremely low standards." And the Get Real Girls-muscular, sporty dolls who were supposed to be snowboarders, soccer players, and the like-might have appealed to athletic girls, except that athletic girls preferred to play sports. "They can kick Barbie's butt like you wouldn't believe," a promotional Web site promised in 2000. On store shelves, though, Barbie kicked theirs.

In June, 2001, M.G.A. Entertainment, a small toy company in Southern California, unveiled a line of dolls called Bratz. It was not an auspicious début. M.G.A. had enjoyed some success with handheld electronic toys imported from Japan – M.G.A. stands for Micro Games of America – and with a baby doll called Singing Bouncy Baby, but never with a fashion doll. The company was privately owned, and its headquarters were in a drab stretch of the San Fernando Valley, amid a jumble of taquerias and doughnut shops near the Van Nuys airport. Its C.E.O., Isaac Larian, an Iranian immigrant with a degree in civil engineering whose first company imported brass tchotchkes from South Korea, still made sales calls himself. When a doll designer and on-and-off-again Mattel employee named Carter Bryant brought Larian a drawing of a new doll he had in mind, Larian at first saw little to admire. "To be honest, to me it looked weird – it looked ugly," Larian told me. But Larian's attitude toward the tastes of children is respectful to the point of reverence, and his daughter Jasmin, then eleven years old, happened to be hanging out in his office that day. Larian asked her what she thought of the drawing. "And, you know, I saw this sparkle that you see in kids' eyes," he recalled. "They talk with their body language more than their voice. And she says, 'Yeah, it's cute.' " For Larian, that was enough: "I said, 'O.K., we'll do it.' "

At first, M.G.A. struggled to give Bryant's drawings three-dimensional form. The design showed a face in which the lips and eyes were cartoonishly prominent and the nose was vanishingly small: it was as if the doll had undergone successive rounds of plastic surgery. Molding that micronose in vinyl wasn't easy. At the Hong Kong toy fair in January, 2001, Larian and his team had only a rough sample to show vendors; the hair was Scotch-taped on. And in October of that year Toys R Us canceled its order for Bratz because initial sales were not what Larian had predicted. He borrowed money to fund more advertising; by Christmas, Bratz dolls had taken off.

In the five years since then, M.G.A. has sold a hundred and twenty-five million Bratz worldwide, and it has become the top fashion doll in the United Kingdom and Australia. Global sales of Bratz products reached two billion dollars in 2005; sales of Barbie remained higher, at three billion dollars, but they declined by 12.8 per cent. Last December, after five years in which domestic Barbie sales had either declined or stagnated for all but three quarters, Mattel replaced Matthew Bousquette, who had headed the Barbie line, with Neil Friedman and Chuck Scothon, who together had been running its successful Fisher-Price division. (Friedman, a president at Mattel, is known to be gifted at turning around flagging toy lines.) According to Sean McGowan, a toy-industry analyst at Wedbush Morgan Securities, Bratz has now captured about forty per cent of the fashion-doll market, compared with Barbie's sixty per cent. Barbie is still an instantly recognizable brand name, like Kleenex or Coke, but even Scothon says, "The competition has changed. There's no denying that."

Bratz dolls have large heads and skinny bodies; their almond-shaped eyes are tilted upward at the edges and adorned with thick crescents of eyeshadow, and their lips are lush and pillowy, glossed to a candy-apple sheen and rimmed with dark lip liner. They look like pole dancers on their way to work at

a gentlemen's club. Unlike Barbie, they can stand unassisted. I've heard mothers say that they would never buy their daughters a doll that couldn't stand on its own, but perhaps they should have been more careful what they wished for. To change a Bratz doll's shoes, you have to snap off its feet at the ankles. (It's creepy but ingenious; because the footwear is attached to the legs, all those little shoes are harder to lose.) Their outsized feet are oddly insinuating: you can picture the Bratz dolls tottering around on their stalklike legs, like fauns waking up from a tranquillizer dart. Bratz dolls don't have Barbie's pinup-girl measurements – they're not as busty and they're shorter. But their outfits include halter tops, faux-fur armllets, and ankle-laced stiletto sandals, and they wear the sly, dozy expression of a party girl after one too many mojitos. They are the “girls with a passion for fashion,” as the slogan has it, so their adventures – as presented in all those “sold separately” books and other paraphernalia – run to all-night mall parties and trips to Vegas. (“Deck out and step out for a party in the streets, as you spend the weekend with the girls in the city that never sleeps.”) A Bratz Princess – one of the newer versions – wears a tiara and, instead of a ball gown, a tight camouflage T-shirt and a short skirt. You could never imagine a Bratz doll assuming any of the dozens of careers Barbie has pursued over the decades: not Business Executive or Surgeon or Summit Diplomat – not even Pan Am Flight Attendant or Pet Doctor. Bratz girls seem more like kept girls, or girls trying to convert a stint on reality TV into a future as the new Ashlee or Lindsay or Paris. Whereas Mattel's Scothon likes to talk about Barbie's “aspirational” qualities – how she might inspire “a girl to run for President and look good while she was doing it” – Larian prefers to talk about “fashion and fantasy” and what's “cute.”

The Bratz girls also tend to look ethnic, or, rather, ethnically indeterminate: blond dolls are in the minority in the Bratz world, as they increasingly are in the world of

Bratz consumers. At the Toy Fair, the industry's giant annual trade show in New York, Larian told me, "When we came out with these dolls, one of the things we did not want to do was just label them. Don't call them African-American. Don't call them Hispanic. Don't call them Middle Eastern. Don't call them white. Just convey difference." Larian is fifty-two years old, and he has graying, closely cropped curls and shrewd, dark eyes; he was wearing a nicely cut gray suit and an understated tie. Nearby, a group of toy retailers from around the country, most of them middle-aged white men, milled around a magenta-and-purple showroom, solemnly handling Bratz dolls and their diminutive accessories. (No one under eighteen is allowed into the Toy Fair.) Southern California, where Larian immigrated on his own, at the age of seventeen, was an inspiration for Bratz, he said, because it is a place where racial mixing is commonplace. Larian and his team picked names for the Bratz dolls that didn't align them with any one ethnic group-made-up-sounding names (Nevra, Kiana) or names with offbeat spellings (Meygan, Roxxi) or "exotic" names with crossover appeal (Jade, Yasmin). "I was in Brazil," Larian recalled. "I asked some girls, 'Where do you think Yasmin is from?' and they said, 'Oh, she's Brazilian, she's Latin.' Then I was in Israel, and I asked, 'Where do you think Yasmin is from?' and they thought she was Middle Eastern. It's fascinating to see that, everywhere you go." When Mattel came out with the first black Barbie, in 1968, it seemed like a well-meaning afterthought. Bratz girls were born as a multiracial pack; each one is a slightly different shade. That is enough to earn them the approval of Naomi Wolf, the feminist writer. "If I were betting on culture as a form of stocks, I would get out of skinny Barbie and into multiethnic, imaginative Bratz dolls," she wrote recently.

What Bratz dolls are both contributing to and feeding on is a culture in which girls play at being "sassy" – the toy industry's favored euphemism for sexy – and discard traditional toys at a younger age. (Girls seem to be growing

out of toys earlier than boys are, industry analysts say.) Toy marketers now invoke a phenomenon called K.G.O.Y. – Kids Getting Older Younger – and talk about it as though it were a fact of modern life over which they have no control, rather than one which they have largely created. Mattel’s Scothorn said, “Kids are certainly exposed to more things at earlier ages. Their scope of reference is wider. Their exposure to media is greater.” Larian told me, “Little girls are really much more sophisticated now than they used to be.”

Barbie was originally intended for nine- to twelve-year-olds; today, girls widely perceive it as a toy for three- to six-year-olds. The association of Barbie with preschool girls sometimes leads slightly older girls to repudiate the doll with sadistic élan. Agnes Nairn and Patricia Gaya Wicks, professors of business at the University of Bath, and Christine Griffin, their colleague in the psychology department, published a study earlier this year revealing that seven-to-eleven-year-old girls enjoyed destroying Barbies. As one subject put it, “I just kept having to squish their heads off.” Sometimes, the interviewers seemed taken aback by the girls’ ingenuity in punishing their Barbies:

FIRST GIRL: Our friend does that with Barbies.

SECOND GIRL: Yeah, she microwaves them.

INTERVIEWER: She microwaves them? Oh, gosh.

FIRST GIRL: Did she parachute one out of the house?

SECOND GIRL: Yeah, she parachuted one out of the house and it landed in the next-door neighbour’s garden.

The study concluded that girls turned on Barbie because she seemed out of fashion and disposable (children had so many of them, in so many different guises, that they were “simply being imaginative” in getting rid “of an excessive commodity

in the same way as one might crush cans for recycling”), but most of all because she was “babyish,” and the girls “saw her as representing their younger childhood out of which they felt they had now grown.”

You used to hear the opposite theory: when girls rejected Barbie it was because she represented a sexualized womanhood they felt ambivalent about entering. But Larian, for one, thinks that Barbie now represents a “mommy figure” for many girls, and they don’t particularly want to play with a doll who reminds them of their mothers. In any case, there are some toys that kids love until they hate, and some they do not. Sean McGowan, the toy-industry analyst, said, “Nobody gets to a certain age and says, ‘I hate Mickey Mouse.’ But Barbie is now like Barney. Three-year-olds are addicted to it like crack, but all it takes is for one kid to be embarrassed and they turn on it.”

For M.G.A., holding on to the six-to-twelve-year-old market – a group that, until the eighties, wasn’t yet letting go of childish things – means making dolls that look like celebrity hotties. As Larian wrote in Brand Strategy earlier this year, “Bratz are not merely dolls but ‘fashion icons’ that look to the runways and what kids wear in and out of school for inspiration.” With Bratz, the company is selling the notion that divahood is something for girls to aspire to, with or without a talent to go with it. This is the attitude that fuels, for example, the success of Club Libby Lu, the chain of mall stores where six-year-olds can get makeovers for their birthdays, complete with hair extensions and lip gloss; it’s also the attitude behind T-shirts for little girls bearing slogans such as “So Many Boys, So Little Time” and “My Heart Belongs to Shopping.” Many parents find this aesthetic weird, even repellent, but somehow hard to dodge.

Indeed, marketers counsel companies not to feel guilty about “going around moms,” as the 2004 book *The Great Tween Buying Machine* puts it, and advertising products that parents

dislike. The book's co-authors, David L. Siegel, Timothy J. Coffey, and Gregory Livingston, who run the marketing agency WonderGroup, write that, thanks to the "nag factor," there are "plenty of examples of successful products that moms really don't like for themselves, but they buy anyway." They cite unusual color innovations like green Heinz ketchup and blue Hawaiian Punch: "Moms do not like any one of these products, yet each has generated millions of dollars in sales." Calling "Mom-centricity" a "heinous disease," they remind marketers that all they have to do is "appease" parents, not please them. With Bratz, a parent might think, Sure, they're sexy-looking, but at least a ten-year-old girl playing with them is a ten-year-old still playing with dolls. Fara Warner, the author of *Power of the Purse: How Smart Businesses Are Adapting to the World's Most Important Consumers-Women*, goes further, writing that Bratz represent "a future where young girls don't need their dolls to show them the career choices they have open to them. They already know they can choose any career and pursue it. It's a future where the rules about the size and shape of women's bodies, and how women express their sexuality, are far broader and more open." Whether a seven-year-old actually needs a doll that hints at how broad the rules of sexuality now are is not a question Warner addresses. This line of thinking gets even trickier when it comes to M.G.A.'s Bratz Babyz: baby dolls with makeup, lacy lingerie, and bikinis, and bottles slung on chains around their necks. ("Step back in time with the Bratz and see how it all began, as they xpress themselves with lots of style, and Baby 'Brattitude!' ") Parents buy Bratz Babyz for girls as young as two. A ten-year-old might see irony – or humor – in the outrageous shoes, collagen-plump lips, and attitude-laden pout of a Bratz doll; irony is generally lost on toddlers.

A few weeks ago, a couple named Christopher and Tiffany Himes were in the doll section of a Toys R Us in Rockville, Maryland, having a half-joking argument about Bratz dolls. Tiffany, who is twenty-seven, is a stay-at-home mother of

three daughters: Emma, seven; Madison, six; and Olivia, three. She said, "Unfortunately, the girls are really into them. I say 'unfortunately' because Bratz are just really trashy. My husband can't stand them."

"Oh, yeah," Chris, a thirty-two-year-old comedy writer, said. "I have some strong opinions on Bratz." He strode over to one of the Bratz shelves and peered at a box that contained something called the Wicked Twins. Ciara was the "spunky" twin (" 'cuz I'm always causing trouble"); Diona was the "sparkly" twin (" 'cuz I'm in love with my own reflection"). Both Wicked Twins were wearing black chokers, tight black T-shirts that said "Bad Girl," low-slung skirts (one chartreuse, one hot pink), and lace-up, high-heeled boots; one had bare legs, the other wore black fishnet stockings. "I mean, these are dolls that look like streetwalkers," Chris said. "Or, you know these underground 'pumping parties' you hear about, where people go for plastic surgery on the cheap? Well, they look like pumping-party victims." Tiffany and Chris had considered not letting the girls have Bratz – the first doll had come into their home as a gift – but Tiffany felt that banning toys was likely to backfire. Madison, the six-year-old, "was just really into fashion," Tiffany said, which was why she liked Bratz, and little Olivia liked them because her older sister did. Tiffany said she had noticed that the Bratz dolls did not elicit the kind of imaginative role-playing she had engaged in with Barbie as a child but, rather, focused her girls' minds entirely on taking the dolls' clothes off and putting them back on.

Chris pushed a button on a talking Bratz doll named Jade, which was dressed in a rhinestone-studded micromini, a tank top emblazoned with a biker tattoo, and a cropped fur-trimmed black vinyl jacket. "Do you ever get fashion ideas from celebrities?" Jade asked, and then confided, "Sometimes I get ideas from celeb photos in magazines." She added, rather unconvincingly, "Being smart is cool." Chris snorted, and

Tiffany said, "Bratz will fizzle out. Barbie will stay. She might have to get sexier, but she'll stay."

In 2002, Mattel introduced a new line of dolls: My Scene Barbie, which kept Barbie's basic dimensions but had bigger eyes, plumper, shinier lips, and hotter clothes. A recent incarnation of the line is the unsubtly named My Bling Bling Barbie. (The Barbie Web site says of one of these dolls, "Chelsea burns up the Bling Bling scene, in an ultra hot halter top and sassy skirt sooo scorchin'.") When not "getting their groove on," the Bling Bling girls are "mall maniacs." An animated video on the Barbie Web site depicts them struggling to lay off shopping for a day. They manage only a brief visit to the park – where the puppies they coo over turn into high-heeled boots, the fountain spouts jewelry, and the clouds above them spell out "SALE" – before they give in and head to the mall.

The competition between Bratz and Barbie has grown increasingly nasty. In April, 2004, Mattel sued the doll designer Carter Bryant, accusing him of developing his designs for Bratz while working at Mattel and taking them to M.G.A., thereby breaching his contract. Bryant, who claims that he was not working for Mattel when he envisioned Bratz, countersued, alleging that Mattel required him to sign an overly broad and unlawful confidentiality agreement, which he claims kept him from divulging even the names of its employees. And in April, 2005, M.G.A. sued Mattel, accusing the company of trying to "muscle M.G.A. out of the business" while engaging in "serial copycatting" of M.G.A.'s products. The complaint makes much of the allegedly proprietary look of the Bratz eye, and the ways in which, it claims, the My Scene eye has evolved to mimic it:

The "My Scene" eye [originally had] lashes that radiate almost straight out, circumferentially, from the eyelids and, although the eye is more almond shaped than a "Barbie" eye, the eye is not so sleepy and heavy lidded as a "Bratz" eye and is only lightly shadowed. The new "My Scene" eye, in contrast,

is dramatically more similar to a "Bratz" eye... . The doe-eyed innocent look of the "My Scene" eye [has been] replaced with a sultrier look, characteristic of "Bratz." The new "My Scene" eye ... boasts lashes that sweep out and away from the outer corner of the eye, just like the "Bratz" eye. The new "My Scene" eye is also more heavily lidded and thickly lined, and the make-up is more markedly pronounced and dramatic.

Barbie, chided the M.G.A. lawyers, "does not 'play nice' with others (particularly her competitors), and needs to be taught to 'share' (at least in the fashion doll marketplace)." The suit also alleges that Mattel has unfairly tried to lock up the market on Saran doll hair – the long tresses that crown the vinyl heads of both Barbie and Bratz dolls and that girls love to comb-by "buying up the supply from the two main hair supply companies."

Mattel will not comment on the lawsuits, because they are still pending in California district court – and may be for years. (It has filed court papers denying M.G.A.'s accusations.) On November 20th, Mattel amended its lawsuit against Bryant to include both M.G.A. and Isaac Larian as defendants. The new complaint alleges that "M.G.A. intentionally stole not just specific Mattel property, such as Bratz designs, prototypes and related materials, but also a vast array of trade secrets and other confidential information that comprise Mattel's intellectual infrastructure." Larian said in response, "This lawsuit just proves that Mattel is desperate. They are living in a fantasyland. They wish they owned Bratz but they know that they don't. We will continue to beat them in the marketplace in the old-fashioned American way, through better product innovation, better sales, and better marketing." When I spoke with Scothon, he avoided referring to M.G.A. or Bratz by name. He said, "The competition has done an awful lot of following. Barbie will be around for another forty-seven years. The same can't be said for the competition."

When I visited Larian at the Bratz headquarters in Van Nuys, he was full of righteous scoffing about Mattel. After Mattel reintroduced the Ken doll, in February – Ken had endured a two-year exile from store shelves after the company announced that Barbie had dumped him – Larian had told reporters that it was “stupid publicity” and that “Ken is not going to save Barbie.” (And indeed the whole Ken-is-back theme seemed so tongue-in-cheek – the campy Hollywood stylist Phillip Bloch effused on CNN about the new metrosexual look he’d developed for him – that it was hard to imagine his having much appeal for little girls.) During our interview, Larian dispatched an assistant to gather up a pile of My Scene dolls that he had on his desk; she dumped them on the table where we were eating lunch, so that I could study them. “My Scene was a knockoff,” he declared. “They don’t even look like Barbie! They look like Bratz!” Take the dolls home and show them to your six-year-old, he urged me more than once; see if she agrees that they look alike. Part of M.G.A.’s suit depends on its ability to prove that customers have been confused about which product is which. But in practice few Bratz – or Barbie – loving girls seem to have any trouble telling the difference.

Barbie occupies a unique place in the history of American toys. Before she was launched, in 1959, most of the dolls that children played with were baby dolls or sturdy-legged little-girl dolls. In 1987, the staff of the Strong Museum, a toy museum in Rochester, New York, interviewed ninety-eight women about their early-twentieth-century childhoods – specifically, how they had played. The recollections were often about climbing trees, jumping in haystacks, skating, and sledding; one woman remembered splashing in a stream and “getting bloodsuckers all over my legs.” Many of the girls played with dolls into their teenage years. They lavished baby dolls with maternal care – diapering and feeding them as they’d seen their mothers do with younger siblings. The Dy-Dee Doll, invented by a Brooklyn schoolteacher named Marie Wittam, in the early thirties, even wet herself: you pushed a button on

her stomach and water came out of a tube. The popular Betsy Wetsy, which was introduced soon afterward, performed the same dubious trick. The little-girl dolls – such as Patsy, whose manufacturer, Effanbee, touted her as a “lovable imp” with tiltable head and moveable limbs – were more like cheery companions to have tea with, read to, or take on special romps. “The dolls that looked like infants I would mother,” recalled one woman. “The dolls that looked like they could be miniatures of me were my friends.” Another woman recalled that she had played with her baby dolls until she was nine, when she acquired a baby brother.

Barbie was different – she was meant to be a young adult, a gal about town, possessor of a glamorous wardrobe and an imposing pair of breasts. Barbie was invented by Ruth Handler, the tenth child of a Polish Jewish immigrant family in Denver, Colorado. Her father, Jacob Mosko, was an entrepreneur who started a successful business making custom truck bodies. As a young woman, Ruth Mosko moved to Southern California, where she worked as a stenographer at Paramount Pictures and married Elliot Handler; in 1945, the couple, along with Harold Mattson, founded Mattel. It became the most successful toy company in the world.

One of Handler’s inspirations for the Barbie doll was a postwar cartoon character who had originally been featured in the German newspaper Bild. Lilli, as she was called, was a tough little blonde with an eye for the main chance; eventually, she had been turned into a lewd three-dimensional novelty item intended for purchase by men. Handler saw possibilities in Lilli, though she had to look past some of her trappings, as she recalled in her 1994 autobiography, *Dream Doll*. Lilli’s face was “too hard-looking,” but her body was “another story”:

Here were the breasts, the small waist, the long tapered legs I had enthusiastically described for the designers all those years ago. The idea had been the result of the many

times I had observed my daughter Barbara playing with paperdolls with her friends. While the toy counters in the early 1950s were heavy with paperdolls of every size, shape, and form, Barbara and her friends always insisted on buying only adult female paperdolls. They simply were not interested in baby paperdolls or even those representing ten-year-olds, their own age. Pretending to be doing something else, I'd listen, fascinated, to the girls as they played with these paperdolls hour after hour. And I discovered something very important: They were using these dolls to project their dreams of their own futures as adult women... . It dawned on me that this was a basic, much needed play pattern that had never before been offered by the doll industry to little girls. Oh, sure, there were so-called fashion dolls, those who came with more than one outfit. But these dolls had flat chests, big bellies, and squatty legs-they were built like overweight six- or eight-year-olds. The idea of putting a prom dress on such a doll, had such a dress even been available, was ludicrous.

Handler worried that "little girls would be intimidated by too much beauty" in a doll, but, unlike some of Barbie's future critics, she decided that the girls could handle it, and, after the first models, she made the dolls still prettier. Initially, Mattel produced brunette and red-headed Barbies, but the blondes were the runaway best-sellers.

In 1958, a year before Barbie's début, Mattel commissioned a study of toys by Ernest Dichter, one of the marketing gurus anatomized in Vance Packard's *The Hidden Persuaders* (1957). A Jewish émigré from Vienna who had trained as a psychoanalyst, Dichter reinvented himself with vulpine glee in the United States, offering his services to American brands such as Ivory soap and Chrysler. Like some sitcom parody of a Freudian, he tirelessly dug up sexual explanations for consumers' reactions to products. (Thus, the Edsel failed because its designer had

“castrated” it by putting an artful hole between the front fenders; it was a challenge to market hot dogs to women, because, as one man whom Dichter interviewed said, “My wife gets mad at me when I munch or suck contentedly on my frankfurter.”) Dichter’s work for Mattel, which is discussed in detail in Lord’s excellent *Forever Barbie*, was a prescient example of conducting focus groups with a psychological edge. Dichter detected a notable and exploitable wedge between mothers and daughters when it came to Barbie. Many girls loved her; many mothers did not – and the disapproval they expressed sounded a lot like the disapproval you hear mothers expressing about Bratz today. Either the complaints that children are becoming too knowing too early are to some extent perennial, or companies keep pushing the bounds of what parents find acceptable, and parents are limited in what they can do to push back. (Both explanations probably have some truth.)

One mother told Dichter, “I know little girls want dolls with high heels but I object to that sexy costume. I wouldn’t walk around the house like that. I don’t like that influence on my little girl. If only they would let children remain young a little longer... . It’s hard enough to raise a lady these days without undue moral pressure.” Another admitted that her daughter would be “fascinated” by Barbie, but said she wouldn’t buy the doll for her: “It has too much of a figure... . I’m sure she would like to have one, but I wouldn’t buy it. All these kids talk about is how the teachers jiggle.”

As Lord reports, Dichter believed that mothers could be bought off. One mother who initially found the doll too racy changed her mind when she heard her daughter say how “well groomed” Barbie was. Could Barbie make tidy little hair-combers out of grubby tomboys? If so, then maybe those pontoon breasts could be overlooked. Dichter concluded, “The type of arguments which can be used successfully to overcome parental objection are in the area of the doll’s function in awakening in the child a concern with proper appearance.” At the same time, a doll with

a “sophisticated, even wicked” wardrobe would satisfy a girl’s urge to rebel against her mother.

There were always mothers who refused to allow Barbie in the house. (Anna Quindlen once wrote of her desire to drive a “silver lamé stake” through Barbie’s “plastic heart.”) And there were always girls who didn’t particularly care for dolls. In the past, they probably called themselves tomboys; now they’re more likely to refer to themselves as what they are not – they aren’t girly-girls. Annie, a smart, dog-loving ten-year-old I know, says she’s just “not a doll person” and dismisses Barbie as “so twentieth century.” Other dolls invite a different fantasy than Barbie does, and tend to unite mothers and daughters more. Groovy Girls, made by Manhattan Toy, are soft dolls that wear trendy but not revealing clothes, smile rather than pout, look to be tweens themselves, and seem to fulfill the old doll-as-pal role. But Groovy Girls don’t command anywhere near the shelf space at major retailers that Barbie and Bratz do.

American Girl, the line of dolls from different historical eras, has positioned itself as a brand that helps girls hold on to little-girlhood for a bit longer. The dolls are meant to be nine-year-olds; they come with books that offer historically correct, if bland, details of life in the American past and tell slightly anachronistic tales of feminine pluck. (Felicity, from the eighteenth century, dons boys’ clothes to ride a horse she isn’t supposed to; Whartonian-rich-girl Samantha democratically befriends the Irish maid next door.) The American Girl Place stores in Chicago, New York, and Los Angeles offer themselves as approachably elegant, slightly retro sites for mother-daughter bonding; at in-store cafés, shiny-haired girls in party dresses and mothers with just-freshened lipstick and switched-off cell phones chat over tea sandwiches and chocolate mousse. (The restaurants even place a box full of conversation-starting questions on each table: If you were a character from

a book, who would you be? Would you rather have the power of flying or becoming invisible?) Last year, American Girl launched a campaign to "Save Girlhood." Its Web site bore the message: "Save unicorns. Save dreams. Save rainbows. Save girlhood." It went on, "The way we see it, girls are growing up too fast. From every angle, today's girls are bombarded by influences pushing them towards womanhood at too early an age—at the expense of their innocence, their playfulness, their imagination." Even some girls see American Girl dolls as an antidote to the K.G.O.Y. poison. "They look like regular girls — they don't have all that makeup on like Barbie or Bratz" is how Annie puts it. But the dolls are expensive—nearly a hundred dollars for a starter kit of doll and book — and sold only by catalogue, on their Web site, or at American Girl Place. American Girl, whose parent company has been owned since 1998 by Mattel, will never be a mass consumer brand, like Bratz or Barbie dolls, which cost less than thirty dollars on average. (Based on M.G.A. figures, Bratz products outsold American Girl last year by a rate of five to one.)

American Girl dolls — expensive, innocent-looking, and old-fashioned — are on one side of a class and cultural divide. Judging from the families you see shopping at American Girl Place, the dolls appeal disproportionately to well-off white parents willing to spend whatever it takes to help prolong their daughters' childhood. Bratz and My Scene Barbies, by contrast, are peddling the toy world's version of gangsta chic. Fara Warner notes that Bratz dolls mimic the fashions that their very young owners regularly see "on cable channels such as MTV and BET." And Sean McGowan, even more candidly, says that Bratz have the same allure that "makes rap popular with white kids in the suburbs."

Isaac Larian may hate Mattel, but he admires Ruth Handler, whom he calls a "true entrepreneur." Larian grew up in Tehran, where his father owned a textile shop, and he helped out from the time he was eleven. When he was seventeen, he told his

parents he wanted to go to the United States. They sent him to Los Angeles "with seven hundred and fifty dollars-a lot of money for them." In his first job, he washed dishes from eleven at night to seven in the morning at a coffee shop in the predominantly Hispanic city of Lawndale. Later, he waited tables and put himself through school at California State University, Los Angeles, where he got a degree in civil engineering. Entrepreneurship is what appealed to him, though. After graduating, he began importing cheap brass doodads from South Korea, starting a company called Surprise Gift Wagon. In the late eighties, he persuaded Nintendo to give him the American rights to their handheld games. "The first year, we sold twenty-two million dollars in games, and we had a thirty-five-percent profit," he recalled. "But the next year we had ten million dollars' worth of Nintendo games that nobody wanted anymore. The kids wanted something new." He concluded from that experience that a company marketing to kids has to keep an avid eye on trends. "With Bratz, we need to change them every three, four months," he explained. "What you see in the stores today was not in the stores last year. And when we come out with our fall line, what's in the stores in the spring is not going to be there. And the key is to be fresh, to listen to the kids carefully, because they change literally every week. And you have to think, What are they into now, and come up with products that let them be ahead of the curve. If we stop doing that, the same thing that happened to Barbie is going to happen to us. They're gonna throw us in the trash can."

Larian likes to tell a story about the first Bratz doll, which wore pants with fashionable embroidery trim at the cuffs. When M.G.A. released the doll for the international market, Larian decided that the trim was too expensive and it was left off the pants. He thought nobody would notice. But, he recalled, "You wouldn't believe how many letters we got from kids in the U.K. saying, 'I was in New York, and the Cloe doll or the Yasmin doll that I saw in America had this little embroidery

on the pants and the one I bought in London didn't have that.' Kids, he learned from that experience, notice visual details at a level of precision that surprises adults. And kids' opinions about toys, Larian believes, are always right. "I have insomnia – people in my company think I never sleep," Larian said, smiling but not joking. "I take home all these fan letters, and I read them at night. Our designers – it's mandatory for them to read those letters carefully, too. We pay attention – we make toys kids want. The secret formula is to listen carefully to kids. They tell you. If they don't like something, they say, 'This sucks.' If they like it, they tell you. And if they want you to make it better they tell you."

One recent afternoon, I sat in a darkened room behind a one-way mirror with Larian and Rachel Griffin, of the M.G.A. publicity team, as they watched a focus group for a new product line: the Bratz Genie Magic dolls. The four little girls gathered inside – Ember, Emily, Kristine, and Morgan – were between the ages of eight and ten. They all had sneakers on, and their sweatpants and windbreakers bore the marks of the back yard or the classroom: grass-stained knees, a dusting of chalk. They sat on bright-colored beanbag chairs, looking alert and easily amused, happy to have got out of school a little early. The interviewer was a beautiful young woman with spike-heeled boots, extravagant black curls, and a humorless mien. She started by asking why the girls liked Bratz. Kristine, who was ten, cited the difficulty of losing their shoes. Ember, who was nine, called out, "They're just so fashionable!" And Morgan, who was eight and had long straight dark hair, remarked that Barbies "all look the same. They're all blond." Larian, who sat next to me, murmured contentedly, "Good girl. Kids are so smart." In fact, Barbies now come in a number of hair and skin colors, but for Morgan an annoying aura of blondness still clung to the Mattel doll.

Kristine was the expert, the one who had seen "Bratz," the tie-in television show, and who appreciated specific qualities

about the dolls' hair and shoes. Emily and Ember were more reticent. Morgan had a goofy, anarchic way about her. Maybe it was because she was younger—"Dang, why am I so young?" she asked cheerily, of no one in particular – but she seemed to see something faintly ridiculous in the self-serious world of fashionistas. Still, she, like the other girls, had a disconcerting tendency to spout ad-style triads of adjectives when asked what she'd tell others about Bratz products. "How would you describe these to your mom?" the interviewer asked, gesturing to the Genie Magic dolls and accessories. "Cool. Fun. Playful," Morgan recited. "Awesome. New. Fantastic," Kristine added.

After a while, the interviewer left the room, having invited the girls to play with the Genie Magic dolls and some of their accessories, including a flying carpet and a bottle from which the genie was supposed to emerge. The girls didn't know one another, but they slipped into companionability easily enough. A couple of them made the magic carpet fly around the room. There was some desultory talk about which of the Bratz Genies had a boyfriend, and there were invitations to tea – amazingly, tea remains a central trope of doll play, no matter how incongruous. (It's hard to imagine Jade, say, being excited by her grandmother's quilted tea cozies.)

Kristine, who wore her dark curly hair in a ponytail, spent a lot of time combing the long straight hair of the big-headed Bratz Genie doll. "I've combed her hair, and it's finally pretty," she said after a while. "I love combing hair."

To which Morgan replied, "I know, but it's so boring."

"It's actually fun," Kristine insisted.

The girls seemed to regard the word "sassy" as code for something more exciting and scandalous. By the time the interviewer came back into the room, Morgan was bouncing around, knocking over packages and singing, "I'm sassy! I'm

sassy! Yeah!” and the girls were cracking up.

“O.K., guys,” the interviewer said primly. “I need you to focus for a couple more minutes.”

Meanwhile, on the other side of the one-way mirror, there were signs of distress. Larian was hanging on these little girls’ every word. Again and again, he fired off messages on his BlackBerry based on their more or less idle chatter. The girls were the unwitting lords of this realm, although their power was of a limited sort – the answers children’s marketers listen to so keenly are only to questions they have designed in pursuit of parents’ money. Nevertheless, in the moment, the keenness of the listening and the watching made Ember and Morgan and Kristine and Emily seem influential indeed. For instance, the girls had been blithely referring to a Bratz Genie’s bottle as her “house” or her “castle,” causing Larian to groan and type agitatedly into his BlackBerry. “Jesus Christ, we’ve got to fix that,” he said. The packaging and advertising campaign clearly called it a bottle.

The interviewer asked the girls, “What are you calling this over here?”

“The royal castle!” the girls cried out at once.

“If we call it a bottle, is that wrong?”

Yes, they said. They liked the “genie’s castle” or the “genie’s royal house.” Later, the interviewer asked about their preferences between genies and princesses. Bratz was putting a lot of resources behind the Genies this season. “Princesses!” the girls chorused.

“Most girls really want to be princesses,” Kristine explained. “Like Queen Elizabeth – girls at my school, they want to be like Queen Elizabeth’s daughter.” (Somehow, I don’t think she meant Princess Anne.) “When we were smaller, we used to play princess in the castle. A princess – you really want to be

one. You're really rich and stuff."

Morgan chimed in: "Genies are really unexpected, but princesses are something you really like." And she added, with daffy precision, "Girls will choose princesses because they'd rather be one – technically, of all the girls in the world, let's say five to one."

"Oh, my God," Larian moaned.

Other problems were discovered. The girls didn't realize that a design on the Bratz Princess box was supposed to be a picture frame; one of the girls thought it was coiled hair. Larian tried to take comfort in the fact that the girls recognized the handle on the box as a tiara that they could wear themselves. Still, he grumbled, "That frame costs a dollar-fifteen more a unit." Larian typed into his BlackBerry. "People from product development should be here," he said crossly.

Within a few weeks, M.G.A. had changed the labelling on the Genie Bottle – it was now a Genie Magic Royal Castle. By the end of the summer, the Genie Magic line had taken off, selling more than a million dolls. M.G.A. soon expanded, by acquiring the Little Tikes toy company, and began planning a move to bigger headquarters in the San Fernando Valley. Morgan, Kristine, Ember, and Emily had spoken.

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