The Shifting Thresholds of Paratextuality and Play:
The Case of Kinkeshi, M.U.S.C.L.E., and Exogini

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Toys possess an immense narrative potential, and are often employed by children as props for imaginative play. In the 19th century, the poet Charles Baudelaire had already noted that "toys become actors in the great drama of life, scaled down inside the *camera obscura* of the childish brain" (13). Modern scholars confirmed time and time again that children turn toys into simulacra of living and breathing beings, and use these magically animated creatures as catalysts for storytelling.[1] As "the action figure always signifies a larger spectacle well beyond its tiny idealized body" (Yezbick 14), large freedom is left to the user to fill in this imaginary space with content of her own making. Such narrative potential, Baudelaire believed, was particularly significant in toys based on preexisting fictional works. Children at the time, commonly used toy theatres and miniature actors as a springboard to develop their own stories (Fleming 83-84). According to Baudelaire, using toys to craft personal reinventions of stories from books or the theatre could increase a child's creativity, critical sense, and even appreciation for art.[2]

In recent times these ideas have found considerable currency in the field of analog game studies. Games have in common with toys the presence of physical props that act as mediators between the players and a fictional, representational space. Given this overlapping, it is unsurprising if scholars have echoed Baudelaire's intuition by commenting on the narrative potential of games based on preexisting stories. When playing games that reproduce the themes and dynamics of narratives like *Doctor Who*, *Star Trek*, or *Lord of the Rings*, players can "slow down, cut up, stop, recreate, reform, recuperate, restore, and otherwise play with" fictional sources they already know and like (Lancaster 104).[3] Games of this type have been labeled as "paratextual," that is, as deriving part of their meaning from a preexisting text that plays a large role in how the game is experienced.[4] Through the rules and the props of these games, players generate personal stories that may diverge dramatically from the original materials, resulting in essence in a form of performative fan fiction. It seems therefore reasonable to extend the label of "paratextual" to toys that, like these games, have strong thematic connections to fiction.

Paratextual games and toys have often been praised for the imaginative potential, but a different school of thought has also developed in the opposite direction, contending that toys related to popular fictional universes can harm a child's creativity.[5] According to these critics, playing with a toy based on a beloved movie or cartoon can represent "a shift from tools of imaginative play to imitative, closed objects that resist creative play but promote transmedia consumption" (Steinberg 113).[6] In this perspective, the presence of a strong connection between a set of toys and a known narrative would tend to channel the child's interactions toward a retelling of the plots from the source, in the process encouraging her to acquire new products to reproduce that source more faithfully.

In this essay I intend to contribute to the debate on toys and stories by discussing the ambiguous and multifaceted role of paratextuality in the experience of imaginative play. I will do

so by examining the case study of a line of stationary minifigures released in several countries in the 1980s, and framed by different types of ancillary texts and narrative cues. These miniatures came out originally in Japan, where they were called Kinkeshi, and were later published (among other countries) in the US under the name M.U.S.C.L.E., and in Italy as Exogini. A comparative examination of these three releases will allow me to argue that the paratextual background of a toy can have a strong influence on the kind of narrativity that the toy provides, as such a background will tend to suggest certain stories rather than others. At the same time, children are shown to be able to carve out a considerable degree of freedom in the actual and individual instantiations of their play activities. My argument is that from the synergy between a toy and its ancillary paratexts certain types of play and narrative are more likely to emerge, without however any preclusion for more original and idiosyncratic forms of storytelling.

To appreciate how this works we must however add a clarification, and remember that in media studies the term "paratext" has also been employed to refer to a range of phenomena that is much broader than the individual fictional sources of the games mentioned above. Starting with Genette's pioneering studies, and more specifically in media scholarship of the 21st century, the term "paratext" has come to define the totality of artifacts and messages that surround a certain work, and that, while not being technically part of the work itself, still frame, orient, and redirect the audience's interpretation. The paratext of a toy, for example, would include name, packaging, promotion, advertising, songs, placement in fictional works, reviews, discussions in media, and yes, also a possible fictional source (like *Star Wars* movies for *Star Wars* toys). Such broadly considered paratexts may not always illuminate the way a user actually relates to a certain artifact, but at the very least they "often tell us how producers or distributors would prefer for us to interpret a text, which audience demographics they feel they are addressing, and how they want us to make sense of their characters and plots" (Gray 72). Similarly, toy designer Mark Nagata wrote that "the connection between the packaging and the toy is necessary for the overall enjoyment of the figure. The artwork allows the viewer to imagine the figure as being alive and real." (53) Such elements are therefore of massive importance in our understanding of the semantic significance of mass-produced artifacts.

The release of Kinkeshi in the US and Italy is particularly relevant for the purpose of analyzing both "narrow paratexts" (specific fictional sources) and "broad paratexts" that encompass every message related to the artifact, and may or may not include a well-defined fictional source. While the miniatures of Kinkeshi, M.U.S.C.L.E., and Exogini remained vastly unaltered from one country to the other, they were surrounded by drastically different paratexts in each case. The "broad" Japanese paratext, for example, included a "narrow" paratext in the manga and anime series that had inspired the toys in the first place. The American and Italian producers of Kinkeshi dropped the original broad and narrow paratexts entirely, and while they deprived their audience of a pivotal frame of reference, they also opened unexpected horizons of signification and contextual repurposing. The resulting paratexts ended up being radically different from the Japanese source, and even from one another. In the process, the promotional campaigns invested the toys with different semantic and affective functions solely on the strength of communicative strategies external to the miniatures themselves, which, as it bears repeating, remained basically the same toy in each country. We will therefore see how the promotional environment that surrounds a playable artifact can incentivize different degrees of storytelling, and can influence the content, style, and mood of the imaginative activities that the users are likely to engage in.

Japan: Kinkeshi

Toys in the Kinkeshi line were originally released in Japan by Bandai starting in 1983. These small collectible figurines represented iconic characters from the successful *Kinnikuman* franchise. The franchise originated in 1979 with the manga *Kinnikuman*, soon to be followed by a cartoon of the same name. The titular character is the prince of the planet Kinniku, who was accidentally left on Earth by his parents while still a baby. At the beginning of the story Kinnikuman used his alien powers to defend Japan against giant monsters, in an explicit parody of *Ultraman*. Soon the series veered toward fantasy sport, and started focusing on wrestling matches between teams of bizarre creatures, becoming in turn a spoof of the manga and anime *Tiger Mask*. Whereas *Tiger Mask* featured costumed athletes who looked like a tiger-man, an ape-man, a demon-man, and so on, *Kinnikuman* went a step further by having humanoids whose heads and bodies were *actually* shaped in the most unusual ways. Pliers-man, teacup-man, lock-man, planet-man, walkman-man, Rubik-cube-man, or even urinal-man, were only some of the purposefully outrageous wrestlers that would fight in the tournaments of the series.

In 1983 Bandai capitalized on the popularity of the manga and anime by launching a line of small figurines based on the *Kinnikuman* characters. This family of toys was called Kinkeshi – a conjunction of "Kin" (as in Kin*nikuman*) and "keshi" (eraser), from the eraser-like size of the miniatures, which were approximately 1.5 inch tall. Kinkeshi were printed in robust but fairly flexible plastic, showed an impressive level of detail, were unpainted, and differed from traditional action figures by not having any point of articulation. They were, in essence, tiny statues.[7] Kinkeshi originally came out only in "flesh" color, but later the chromatic range was extended to include many other options. Ancillary products were released too, like a ring in which to set wrestling matches with the characters, and a board game that could be played using the figurines as game pieces.

Like all inexpensive collectibles released in extensive lines, Kinkeshi provided their users with the pleasure of acquiring, sorting, trading, and organizing the toys.[8] Sandwiched between a popular franchise and a series of accessories that confirmed the original wrestling theme, these toys were also imbued with "narrow" paratextual properties in the eyes of their original users, who, in most cases, were also the consumers of the stories. When it came to actually playing with the figurines, Kinkeshi could stimulate both types of interaction indicated by the scholars we saw earlier: recreation of sequences from known fictional sources, on one hand, and original, divergent, even subversive narrative variants on the other.[9]

The paratextual materials certainly allowed both styles of play in the case of figures sculpted in a generic pose, which could then be imagined as participating in any sort of narrative situation. Other figures, however, were molded in highly narrativized and defined situations, and naturally lent themselves to retrace the steps of the original sources rather than to create innovative plots. For example, some Kinkeshi represented two characters locked in the execution of some spectacular move, reproducing specific scenes from the anime and manga. The play value of these miniatures was accordingly weakened, as the range of situations in which they could be used became narrower. After all, how many situations can one create with a figure of Kinnikuman trapping Black Hole in a cloverleaf leg hold?[10] In this sense, Kinkeshi show that the paratextual qualities of a toy can vary considerably even between products of the same line and based on the same story. A figurine can encourage more or less original types of imaginative

play simply depending on how committed to specific moments of the original story it appears to be, with generic incarnations of the characters leaving much more leeway than visual quotations from the sources.

It is likely that, like for many other juvenile products in 1980s Japan, children would think of Kinkeshi miniatures as privileged access points to the original world of the story. As Steinberg noted, Japanese children of the time "were led to believe that through the act of consumption [of a paratextual toy], they were growing increasingly close to the total image of the grand narrative" (178). At the same time, we must remember that the struggle between the children's creativity and the producers' predefined storyworlds is not a static one, and should rather be seen as a series of constantly evolving negotiations. If this struggle continues for long enough, the child's individual perspective tends to prevail: "the closer consumers get to the grand narrative supporting a commercial narrative work, the more empowered they become to produce offshoots or variations of this work" (Steinberg 179). We might not have to choose between the interpretation of paratextual toys as oppressive or liberating, though, if we only consider that a same object may induce a more emulative type of interaction early on, when the memory of the original story is fresh, and more original narratives later, when the growing psychological distance from the source and the threat of monotony incentivize the exploration of different paths (Fleming 107; Richard Stevens 43).[11]

We can also add that Kinkeshi show several other characteristics that point to the possibility of creative styles of play. Low-realism toys in general stimulate the imagination of their users because of the conceptual gap between their objective appearance and the item or character they purport to represent. It is precisely in this intermediate space that the child can mentally wedge infinite variations, stories, and interpretations (Singer 10-15; Almqvist 65). Kinkeshi are small, monochromatic, and stationary, thus presenting a considerable gap of this kind. Like all "miniature people" they require a lot of emotional and psychological investment to turn them into living characters and exciting actors of imaginary stories (Singer 21). Being figures that represent combatants, they also share some of the creative qualities that scholars have attributed to toy soldiers – "a very old play medium … [which] takes on a new transcendent meaning by becoming the embodiment of the players' ability to express their inner needs, conflicts, and ideas" (Kline 2018 25).[12] When all of these factors are taken into account, we can state that the fictional background that propelled the sales of the Kinkeshi did not necessarily act as an overly compelling force in the resulting play experience.

Such a consideration in turn leads us to wonder what happens when a toy such as Kinkeshi, that was specifically created from the blueprint of a preexisting narrative, is presented to a new audience without its original narrow paratext. This occurred when Kinkeshi migrated to other countries, and the comparison should allow us to define in more detail the role and weight of paratexts in the experience of play.

USA: M.U.S.C.L.E.

In 1985 Bandai licensed the Kinkeshi line to Mattel for release in the American market. The *éminences grises* of Mattel do not seem to have considered the American version of Kinkeshi as a major endeavor for their company.[13] Mattel at that time was reaping the immense benefits of the success of their Masters of the Universe (MOTU) toys, and most other projects would have seemed small in comparison.[14] Kinkeshi might have generated little internal excitement also

because they were basically a ready-made product, which Mattel only had to repackage, promote, and distribute. And yet, even such a simple process could not be conducted on autopilot, and some executive decisions still had to be made.

For one thing, one had to decide what to do with the original sources. Mattel chose not to embark in the complex multimedia project of importing the *Kinnikuman* anime and/or manga to the US, which meant that the figures would be released to an audience who did not know the original context. This went against the tendency of the time to surround toys with fictional universes that suggested certain modes of play and provided a strong platform for narrativity. Toys based on movies, cartoons, or comics had been around for decades (Fleming 39-40), but it is only from the late 1970s that the stratospheric success of *Star Wars* products fully showed the profitability of "character" toys that connected fiction with play.[15] In the early 1980s, this move was also encouraged by the loosening of the FCC restrictions against cartoons that were basically animated commercials for toys. This allowed companies to create fiction specifically with the intent of promoting their toys. The 1980s revamping of G.I. Joe, the release of MOTU, and the American launch of Transformers were significant in this regard, as they were connected to toy-tied fictional universes fleshed out in comics and cartoons.[16] Throughout the decade toys packaged with distinctive stories became the norm, to the point that "by the early 1990s, there was hardly a children's product advertised on television that didn't have a 'personality' associated with it" (Kline 1993 239).[17]

Still, for their release of Kinkeshi toys, Mattel chose not to design a detailed frame of reference, and retained the original wrestling theme and sci-fi genre.[18] Sci-fi of course was justified on the grounds of the *Star Wars* frenzy, while wrestling had recently captured the attention of preadolescent audiences, and had also become the subject of a successful line of action figures produced by LJN (Bellomo 126). In their American release, the Kinkeshi figures would still be sci-fi wrestlers, but in a much more generic, narratively uncommitted sense. Sculpts that represented specific situations and moves from *Kinnikuman*, like the pairs we discussed above, were dropped, and only figures whose pose did not point to any particular action were introduced to the American market. In the selective process Mattel also framed the line as more markedly "for boys" by not releasing any of the female characters of the Japanese sets. The selection also left out characters that did not represent fighters, like the sport commentators that played a comedic role in *Kinnikuman* and were part of the Kinkeshi range. In so doing, Mattel sharpened the general sense of aggressiveness, action, and excitement of the product.

The line was called M.U.S.C.L.E., which stood for Millions of Unusual Small Creatures Lurking Everywhere. The frame of reference became that of a generic alien invasion. Every figure was said to represent an alien, whereas in the original story many of these bizarre creatures were simply (if inexplicably) from Earth. Potential buyers were told that these aliens had come to Earth to wreak havoc, and that they could only be stopped by engaging them in wrestling matches in which the "good" aliens would defeat the "evil" ones. This vague and surreal paratext was created entirely through advertisement, package, and ancillary products, and besides these few points everything that concerned the toys' storyworld was left to the children's imagination.

Boxed sets containing 28 figures, for example, had names that implied clear-cut moral stances, as for the "good" Thug Busters or the "evil" Mighty Maulers. On the back of these boxes one could also find a text that articulated the fictional context for the miniatures:

No one knows where they came from! Beastly little brawlers had invaded, and were suddenly storming across the countryside. There were slugfests in the streets! … M.U.S.C.L.E. monsters were out of control. Before long they were choosing sides! A heroic hunk took charge of the good guys – MUSCLEMAN! … The bad guys were really the baddest! Those creepy heels were led by a beastly barbarian that called himself TERRI-BULL.

The text continued by explicitly recruiting the child that would buy the set to the defense of the Earth. Since M.U.S.C.L.E. aliens seemed interested only in wrestling, it was the child's sacred duty to create teams of heroes to oppose those of the villains.

The entire project was designed around a careful interplay of thematic definition and narrative indeterminacy. Muscleman and Terri-Bull, for example, were the only two characters that were ever given official names, leaving it to the players to use their imagination to craft names, personalities, and backstories for hundreds of other figures (Robinson and Karp 172). For the characters not sold in box sets, not even the hint of personality implied in labels like "Thug Busters" was available. This effect of indeterminacy was magnified by the fact that the appearance of the characters in most cases did not follow visual conventions commonly associated with heroes and villains. Chances are that with toys like He-Man and Skeletor, even a child who did not know the original storyline could tell the side that each character was supposed to be on. With Oil Barrel Man, Anthropomorphic Peanut, or the Guy With A Bowl Of Rice On His Head, the same was not necessarily true.[19]

Another aspect that increased the narrative potential of these figures is that their low price allowed most children to create a sizable collection. Since "clusters of related toy figures are especially conducive to the development of pretend story lines," (Singer 23) large gatherings of M.U.S.C.L.E. figures could function as powerful casts of characters in an endless range of stories. As Phoenix wrote, "one action figure is just a toy; ten figures are a collection; a hundred can be another world" (9). In contrast, fewer children would have had access to a similarly large collection of characters from G.I. Joe or MOTU, and would therefore enjoy much more limited storytelling options. Such lines, moreover, did not show nearly as much internal variety as M.U.S.C.L.E. did. The problem was exacerbated for MOTU by the fact that many figures were only minimal variants of each other. It is safe to assume that the stories one could tell with regular He-Man did not differ from those with Battle Armor He-Man the way one could weave different narratives by combining Volleyball Man with Disentanglement Puzzle Man or Giant Living Hand.[20]

Ancillary products supporting the M.U.S.C.L.E. line also indicated the overall narrative situation (alien wrestling) while leaving ample freedom concerning the details. The toy/game hybrid *M.U.S.C.L.E. Hard Knockin' Rockin' Ring* was a plastic ring containing two pincers that could be maneuvered with a lever. The players could insert their M.U.S.C.L.E. in the pincers and use them to try to knock down the figure of the opponent. Like a toy, this ring did not have clear and codified rules to go with it, and players could use it just for imaginative play, as a stage for stories. Like a game, though, the affordances of the ring offered the possibility for structured competition through the addition of rules.

Almost perfectly complementary was *The M.U.S.C.L.E. Mega-Match Game*, a simplistic board game in which two teams of figures would fight a wrestling match. The box of the game doubled as the ring, and could be used to play according to the rules of the game or as a prop for loose imaginative play. The miniatures that came with the game were regular M.U.S.C.L.E., with no specific adjustment done to turn them into game pieces. They could be used for imaginative

play like any other figure in the line, and, conversely, any other M.U.S.C.L.E. figure could be swapped for them. These miniatures could be employed as game pieces or toys based entirely on the attitude of the user, and not because of some intrinsic quality of their design.

A further paratextual indicator was the *M.U.S.C.L.E. Battlin' Belt*, which was a plastic championship belt that a child could actually wear. The transparent cubic buckle could also be used as a carrying case for one's favorite miniatures, or converted into a small wrestling ring in which matches could be staged.

All of these ancillary products inscribed M.U.S.C.L.E. within the narrative and performative genre of wrestling. Here I speak of a genre because even children that do not know that wrestling is scripted still perceive the performances in terms of clashes of good versus evil, plot twists, shifting alliances, and developing biographies of the performers' characters.[21] For young audiences wrestling may be real, but it's a reality that still works according to the grammar of fiction. Even if deprived of a distinct paratextual source like *Kinnikuman* was for Kinkeshi, M.U.S.C.L.E. figures were positioned by Mattel within a recognizable narrative tradition, complete with its own conventions and combinatory rules.

While this promotional ecosystem channeled play toward fights informed by the narrative genre of wresting, the child was still afforded considerable freedom regarding the actual instantiation of these fights through the composition of the teams, the moral alignment of the characters, the progression and outcome of the matches, the background stories and evolving plotlines that could be developed, and so on. When playing with M.U.S.C.L.E., "it was up to each child to create matches, grudges, and stories involving toys *they knew nothing about*" (Robinson and Karp 174, emphasis added).[22] By removing the specificities of the paratextual apparatus of the Kinkeshi, M.U.S.C.L.E. offered many possibilities for varied, personal, and unpredictable play.

If this is true, we would expect that American users of M.U.S.C.L.E. would have found in the product enough thematic material to inspire many activities related to wrestling, while also still being able to explore divergent narratives. Evidence in favor of this hypothesis emerges from a discussion thread on the website BoardGameGeek, in which I asked the users to comment on various aspects of their play experiences with M.U.S.C.L.E. toys.[23] The replies came mainly from American men who played with the toys in the 1980s and early 1990s.

Most respondents shared that they used M.U.S.C.L.E. to create wrestling matches and sometimes full tournaments. User Matt G (matt0001) commented: "I don't remember doing anything with them other than wrestling. They existed to wrestle in a world that only included wrestling." Kirk K (Dice Is Right) wrote: "I never used them for other stories. They were always wrestlers for me." Accordingly, he imagined them as belonging to "good" and "evil" factions following to the conventions of wrestling. He also owned the *Hard Knockin' Rockin' Ring*, which he used only as a prop for imaginative play. Daniel Kearns (Dkearns) had his dad build him a wooden ring, and used the *Mega-Match Game* both as a game and a prop. He recalls: "We had tag teams too to the point that I might be able remember pairings today." Max Maximus (kingtreelo) "cut the pictures of belts out of the wrestling magazines and used to bluetak [sic] them onto the champions."[24] He also staged Royal Rumbles, and still owns the log in which he registered entrance numbers and winners.[25]

These are the most common types of recollection about playing with M.U.S.C.L.E. figures. A smaller group of players remembers playing with M.U.S.C.L.E. to fight wrestling

matches occasionally, and to use them more regularly for other types of action, often in combination with toys from other lines. Even such players were still influenced by the wrestling theme, and paid at least some homage to it before moving on. A smaller group reported using M.U.S.C.L.E. only as generic action figures rather than wrestlers.[26]

These testimonies show that the overall paratext Mattel designed for M.U.S.C.L.E., vague in nature and based on a genre rather than a specific work, had a considerable impact on the reception and conceptualization of the toys.

Italy: Exogini

In 1987 the Italian toy manufacturer GIG launched their own version of M.U.S.C.L.E. figures. Incredibly enough for a leading company, GIG did not acquire a license from Bandai or Mattel, and made and sold a bootleg version of 40 of the original characters. The line was renamed Exogini, a neologism that to an Italian speaker evokes a sense of mystery and otherness thanks to its assonance with *esotico* (exotic) and *estraneo* (extraneous). These figures were printed in molds that appear to have been derived from M.U.S.C.L.E. sculpts, and in the process the figures lost some of their detail. GIG also experimented with translucent colors that had not been used in any previous release and was not common in Italian toys. This factor made it harder to distinguish the already reduced details, but it also gave Exogini a truly otherworldly appearance, increasing the creative potential that characterizes low-realism toys. The figures still projected a strong personality thanks to their clear contours and unusual shapes, and yet the difficulty one had in identifying their specific features contributed to make them look undefined and mysterious. What could have been a technical shortcoming became an important element in the responses that the figures could generate.

While GIG retained the idea from M.U.S.C.L.E. that these miniatures were aliens coming to Earth, the Italian paratext insisted that no one knew why Exogini had come, what they wanted, or what their next actions would be. Exogini were not described as wrestlers, nor, in fact, as anything in particular. Like Mattel, GIG decided not to import the original sources from Japan, but went a step further in the way they handled the lack of a fictional background. Mattel replaced *Kinnikuman* with wrestling-as-a-genre; GIG dropped both ideas, and turned the absence of a theme *into a theme itself,* by relentlessly insisting on the very elements that were missing.

It is true that Italian children were given at least some narrative pointers. For example, the arrival of the Exogini was described as an invasion and a threat, and each Exogino received a unique name, which encouraged to think of the figurines as avatars of fictional characters. At the same time, everything else in the promotional campaign actively worked to preclude the possibility to access the background of the characters, or their personalities and intentions. The mystery of the Exogini's origins, the incomprehensibility of their actions, and their complete lack of communication with humans, became the background. GIG did all that they could to drill into Italian children the idea that Exogini had a story, but also that that story was unknown, and possibly unknowable.

This unusual perspective was already inscribed in the exotic name of the line, as we saw. GIG also put together a TV commercial that managed to show or utter the word *misteriosi* (mysterious) eight times in its meager span of 30 seconds. Printed advertisement on children magazines constantly reiterated the idea. Sets of 20 and 40 Exogini were sold in boxes showing a

label that said: "*Sono gli esseri più strani che si siano mai visti! Perché sono venuti sul nostro pianeta? Chi sono? Cosa vogliono? Da dove vengono?*" ("They are the strangest creatures ever encountered! Why have they come to our planet? Who are they? What do they want? Where are they from?").

A series of collectible stickers (*figurine*) was also created, showing groups of Exogini in different types of landscapes. The poses and the situations remained cryptic. Those Exogini were pretty much just standing there, without doing anything. This went against the Italian convention of designing lines of stickers for children as organized narratives. In many cases, collectible stickers were (and still are) meant to be glued on dedicated books that include captions about the images, and once the collection is completed it can basically become an illustrated story book. A sticker collection about *Duck Tales* came out in Italy in the same year as Exogini's stickers, for example, and retold the stories of the original cartoons. The Exogini stickers and sticker book, on the other hand, reiterated ad nauseam the idea that these aliens were everywhere (which caused a subtle sense of threat), and yet that their actions were completely impenetrable.

A further factor that prevented the interpretation of the characters according to clear plotlines resided in the selection of the sculpts. Having chosen to release only 40 out of the hundreds of figures available in Japan and in the US, GIG could have easily shaped their line in specific directions by focusing on this or that original trend, just like Mattel had done. By publishing mainly figures like Toilet-Man, Teacup-Man, or Walkman-Man, GIG could have turned the line into eminently comical. By selecting only humans in spandex, they could have branded Exogini as a sport-based, or maybe superhero-based toy. If Exogini had featured mainly monstrous figures, it could have been interpreted as a kaiju, fantasy, or sci-fi franchise. And yet, the characters that were published seemed to have been selected almost systematically to neutralize each other's theme or tone. For each comedic character there was another that was a fairly conventional strongman, and another that was a bona fide monster.

The same idea was at the core of the characters' Italian names, which accomplished a similar equalizing function. Exogini received names that seemed to point to a background, a personality, or a set of powers, but never converged with the others to form a clear picture. These names included *Centauro* (Centaur), *Cerbero* (Cerberus), *Samurai*, *Maciste* (a strongman from Italian film), *Fantasma* (Ghost), *Guerriero stellare* (Star Warrior), *Giusto* (Cool), *Vite* (Screw), *Ira* (Wrath) or *Cobra*. What kind of storyworld is one where Greek mythology meets Japanese warriors meets sci-fi meets ancient Egypt meets, well, everything else? Every interpretation then became possible, mainly because none seemed privileged.

Exogini's names also managed to muddy the original meaning of the characters, depriving them of any basis for unequivocal understanding. A *Kinnikuman* character that had two Rubik's Cubes for his head and torso was renamed *Testa di roccia* (Rock Head), a more general name that did not commit the character to a specific understanding. The original Urinal-Man was named *Faraone* (Pharaoh), hiding the comedic element of the original and inviting new interpretations. I, for one (a child living in Italy at the time), believed that his body represented the façade of an Egyptian palace! A character that in the original *Kinnikuman* had been Curryman (a racist caricature of Indian culture with a bowl of curry on his head) became *Testa piatta* (Flat Head). Personally, also due to the lack of detail in the figure, I thought that the top of the character's head showed a portion of his brain, and this led me to imagine that he had telepathic and telekinetic powers.

Exogini's insistence on the mystery behind the figures did not encourage any interpretation over the other, and left it to the children to decide how to see and understand the figures. From the point of view of the selection of sculpts, the names, the packaging, and the promotional campaign, Exogini did not appear to belong to any specific genre, and in this, too, they felt and looked different from any other toy released in Italy at that time.

Something that seems to go in a different direction could be seen on the blind boosters in which individual Exogini were sold. These boosters did show a selection of Exogini standing behind two ropes of a ring. Moreover, the store displayer that contained these blisters also showed ring ropes, with characters fighting behind them. Shouldn't these references play a role in the interpretation of the toys, and contradict the idea of Exogini as a narrative Rorschach's inkblot? Potentially, yes. In practice, the ubiquitous repetition of how mysterious the invasion was, and the lack of any other information about the characters, seems to have offset these occasional references to sport. Nor was the actual appearance of the sculpts enough to channel the interpretation in the athletic direction taken by Kinkeshi and M.U.S.C.L.E. figures. It may be true that "with character toys …all it takes is a visual personality and a narrative spark for children to engage in a world of fantasy," (Leclerc 291), and yet, the Exogini's burly physiques, their muscle-flexing poses, and the fact that those who wore any clothes had only briefs on, did not suggest the line of interpretation that had accompanied the earlier two releases. This is all the more remarkable if we consider that both American and Japanese wrestling were broadcast on Italian TV, and had a considerable following at the time. Still, the idea that Exogini were supposed to be wrestlers has not played a significant role in the way the toys were interpreted and played with. GIG's consistent marketing strategy turned Exogini into ciphers of an inscrutable secret. They could become actors in a comedy, heroes of an archetypical struggle, and anything and everything in between. They functioned as supremely pliable play dough for the mind, which any child could reshape to fit their personal preferences and mood.

Evidence that this was the way Exogini were perceived comes from several sources. Italian graphic novelist Sergio Algozzino wrote in his autobiographical *Memorie a 8-bit* (*8-bit Memories*) that it was precisely the unfathomable mystery that surrounded the Exogini that made these toys so special to him. Other Italians have shared their stories online, either on the BoardGameGeek thread about M.U.S.C.L.E. I referenced above, or in conversations in several Facebook groups for fans and collectors of Exogini. When added to my own memories (which include my personal responses as well as interactions with many children at the time), these stories show a strong family resemblance, and contribute to create a rather clear "Italian picture."

While American children regularly used M.U.S.C.L.E. for wrestling matches, Italian children employed them mainly for imaginative play involving archetypal confrontations of Good versus Evil, usually without a sport element. Lacking a proper background to rely on, Italian children preferred to adopt and adapt ready-made narratives from comic books and cartoons, adding unique touches to fit the possibilities suggested by the sculpts. Anthony Kingsley Frizzera wrote that "the marketing campaign in Italy never told us that they are wrestlers, but only alien invaders," and he never thought of using them as wrestlers. He divided his Exogini in factions based on colors (light for good; dark for evil), and he shared that: "the only stories I recall are regarding the evil alien faction trying to take control of the other for no reason."[27] Pier Luigi De Stefanis divided his Exogini in teams of evil aliens attempting to control the Earth, and good aliens trying to protect it.[28] He basically reinvented the general American plot, minus the wrestling. Sabrina Ferri used them in fantasy sieges against a Lego castle, and in

sci-fi raids against a Lego star base. In later years, she repurposed Exogini as miniatures for *Dungeons & Dragons*.[29] Alessio Novo used his Exogini for gruesome fights inspired by the post-apocalyptic anime *Fist of the North Star*, while Marco Macrì remade combat sequences from the video game *Double Dragon*.[30] When playing with Exogini alone or with my friends, I mainly created fantasy stories in the tradition of MOTU, with heroes embarking on quests to rescue a friend, retrieve a magical item, or foil the villains' plans.

Despite the objective appearance of the miniatures, the popularity of wrestling in 1980s Italy, and the images on the blind boosters and store displays, wrestling plots were not a real presence in Italy. Chances are that at least someone *did* play with Exogini in that fashion, but it is safe to assume that this style of play, if present at all, was a limited phenomenon. All indicates that GIG's massive insistence on the indeterminate nature of the characters effectively concealed the clues pointing to wrestling. In some cases Exogini did take part in sport events, but only when they were repurposed as miniatures for *Subbuteo* – a soccer game with tridimensional figures that the players flick around the field to maneuver the ball.[31] In this case it was Italians' burning love for soccer that brought children to overlook the objective appearance of the Exogini, which, per se, had nothing in common with soccer players, and wore no uniforms or shoes.

The importance of the mysterious nature of Exogini seems to be reinforced by the lukewarm reception that the second wave of miniatures received. The original release was a stunning success, and one that most likely GIG did not expect. Virtually every boy between the ages of 6 and 12 acquired, collected, and traded Exogini. As children were clamoring to purchase a second wave, the logical thing to do would have been to release more figures from the original line. This is what Mattel had understandably done when it incremented their M.U.S.C.L.E. range by adding new Kinkeshi to the original batch. Yet, for reasons that we can only speculate, GIG decided not to mine the mother lode any further, and for the second wave of Exogini they reproduced a different line of American figurines, the N.I.N.J.A. Mites (whether with a license or not, is unclear). As the name suggests, all these figures represented ninjas: axe-wielding ninjas, sword-wielding ninjas, bow-armed ninjas, kicking ninjas, jumping ninjas, sitting ninjas, two-headed ninjas, and so on, but all clearly identifiable as variants of the same theme. The campaign focus and packaging of Exogini remained the same, with an identical investment on the idea of mysterious and undecipherable aliens, but that paratextual environment was now contradicted by the obvious thematic consistency of the sculpts.

Children were disappointed by the second wave of Exogini, and preferred to keep trading and playing with the original 40 figures. Sales declined rapidly, and GIG decided to close the line. There may be many reasons for the sudden drop of interest in Exogini, but one may reside precisely in the fact that when Exogini specialized in *ninjutsu*, their original mystery was gone. No matter what the advertisement said, the galaxy of possibilities surrounding the original line imploded into a single line of interpretation. Who are these mysterious aliens? Ninjas. What do they want? Probably what ninjas want. These sculpts suggested answers, and right or wrong as they might have been, such answers turned Exogini into yet another character-type toy, depriving them of the unique positioning they originally enjoyed.

Incidentally, the difference in appreciation for the two waves was so deep that to this day, thirty years later, adult collectors appreciate the first series of Exogini much more than the second, and downright ignore or even despise later attempts to revamp the franchise.[32] Pictures of the original 40 Exogini are shared on social media much more frequently than those of the

second wave. Metal reproductions of the original 40 Exogini are now being made by and for adult collectors, and sell for the price of 15 euros each. Love for the original Exogini has also led many Italian collectors to include Kinkeshi and M.U.S.C.L.E. figures in their collections. No similar degree of interest exists in Italy today for Exogini based on N.I.N.J.A. Mites.

Conclusions

This brief cross-examination of three releases of the same toys helped us shed light not just on a bit of pop culture from the 1980s, but also on the complex, ambiguous, and constantly shifting role of paratextuality in the interaction between children and toys. In the case of Kinkeshi, M.U.S.C.L.E., and Exogini, we can confirm that the fictional world behind the toys, together with package, ads, and ancillary products, played a role in the way children could conceptualize and use the toys, and even defined the degree of creative freedom that was left to individual users. This can be seen in the limited possibilities for reinvention afforded by the double figures of the Kinkeshi line, in the larger space of maneuver allowed by the generically defined miniatures of the M.U.S.C.L.E. line, and in the complete openness that Italian children experienced due to the lack of a referential frame. In this last case, however, children seemed less interested in creating innovative plots than in adapting ready-made stories from elsewhere.

Still, in the American and Italian cases, children have proven able to articulate a variety of stories within the parameters assigned to them by the producers. For American children, this has often meant to choose how to handle a range of wrestling tournaments, according to which rules, and with what outcome. For Italian children, the emphasis was on choosing, combining, hybridizing, and retelling fictional elements borrowed from a variety of sources, to then project this narrative patchwork onto the physical reality of the figures. In both cases toy makers and advertisers designed the sandbox, so to speak, but the children, while still constrained by the limits of the sandbox, have continued to decide to an extent what was to be built in it.

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[1] See Johnson; Nelson; Glassner 2000; Schwartz 13-17; Gross 2012 xii; Singer 7.

[2] "It would hardly be surprising if a child of this kind, to whom his parents chiefly give toy-theatres so that he can continue by himself the pleasures he experiences from the stage and from marionettes, should early grow used to regarding the theatre as the most delicious form of Beauty" (Baudelaire 17).

[3] See also Booth.

[4] The concept of paratext was introduced in critical studies by Genette. For more recent discussions and applications to media, see Lancaster, Gray, Betancourt, Pesce and Noto, Pellegrini and Jones, Geraghty, Brookey and Gray.

[5] See Calvert 226 for an overview of the debate.

[6] See Kline 2018 25; Gummer 69; Leclerc 291.

[7] On the role of articulation in humanoid toys, see Yazbick 25-27.

[8] This aspect is so important that Kinkeshi remain highly sought-after collectibles to this day (Simone 21).

[9] See Booth, Lancaster.

[10] From wave 12 of the Kinkeshi line.

[11] A similar case could be the *Star Wars* action figures that allowed fans of the franchise to keep enacting personal fantasies in the long gap between *Return of the Jedi* (1983) and *The Phantom Menace* (1999) (Jenkins 146-147).

[12] See also Singer 24; Smith 77.

[13] See Bellomo 160.

[14] See Baer; Bellomo 38-43.

[15] See Kline *et al.* 102-103; Fleming 93-96; Gray 177-187.

[16] See Baer; Kline 1993 196-197; Bellomo 58-63; Fleming 124-126; Richard Stevens. Important information is also in the documentary *The Toys That Made Us* (Netflix), episodes 3, 4, and 6 respectively. On the early days of fiction based on toys, see Kline 1993 139-141, 174-175.

[17] See also Budnitz 9; Phoenix 27-29.

[18] On genre as a paratext, see Gray 64-65.

[19] These are not official names, and the descriptors I provide here are based only on the physical appearance of the characters. In so doing I tried to replicate the process by which someone who is not familiar with the original texts may try to describe and understand these figures.

[20] See previous note.

[21] Robinson and Karp describe the founder and president of the World Wrestling Entertainment as a great storyteller, at the same level as Spielberg and Hitchcock (205-207).

[22] Robinson and Karp shared some of the stories they created in the 80s about M.U.S.C.L.E. toys (176-177).

[23] https://www.boardgamegeek.com/thread/1994759/how-did-you-play-muscle-toys-and-games-research. Last accessed on 7/24/2018.

[24] See a picture of the surviving figures with belts at https://www.boardgamegeek.com/image/4137390/kingtreelo. Last accessed on 7/18/2018.

[25] https://www.boardgamegeek.com/image/4137392/kingtreelo. Last accessed on 6/4/2018.

[26] A different case is that of Tyler Kay (dying2live2k2) and John G. (theGardener) who never used them as wrestlers, but also did not see the original advertisement nor knew the Japanese franchise.

[27] https://www.boardgamegeek.com/thread/1994759/how-did-you-play-muscle-toys-and-games-research/page/2. Last accessed on 7/24/2018.

[28] Facebook conversation, 5/18/2018, publicly available on my Facebook page. Last accessed on 7/24/2018.

[29] Facebook conversation, 5/18/2018, publicly available on my Facebook page. Last accessed on 7/24/2018.

[30] From the Facebook group *EXOGINI - Il gruppo u.f.f.i.c.i.a.l.e.*, https://www.facebook.com/groups/226084330852752/. Posted on 7/24/2018 and 5/18/2018, respectively. Last accessed on 7/24/2018.

[31] Marco Lommi, in a comment in the Facebook group *EXOGINI - Il gruppo u.f.f.i.c.i.a.l.e.*, https://www.facebook.com/groups/226084330852752/. Posted on 5/18/2018. Last accessed on 7/24/2018.

[32] A third series called Exogini was released in the late 1990s by GIG. The only thing these toys had in common with the original Exogini was the name. For obvious generational reasons the audience was different too. These toys had little success, and virtually no impact on Italian culture.

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