

## CHAPTER 8

# Toppling Barbie

### *BRATZ PREDICTS THE FUTURE*

**B**y creating a toy brand that reflected the real world in which young girls were growing up—while keeping the roles of play and fantasy very much alive—MGA Entertainment Inc. struck a chord with new generations of girls ready for a post-Barbie future.

In 2001, it was virtually unthinkable that Barbie could be knocked off her pedestal as the world's best-selling doll and favorite "girl" brand.

Mattel Inc.'s powerhouse Barbie franchise had survived numerous attacks by critics who maintained that her overtly sexual body and blonde good looks placed unrealistic expectations on the girls who played with her. She had fended off the few attempts at marketing more realistic dolls, and even some knock-offs by strong competitors. She had even remained a consistent best seller and profit center for Mattel as new outlets for play, like the Internet and video games, grew in popularity with young girls.

But Barbie's more than four-decade grip on girls was about to be threatened by upstart toy company MGA Entertainment Inc., whose founder saw several chinks in Barbie's armor.

The privately held company was best known for licensing Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers and selling handheld electronic games. It was about to introduce a set of dolls it called Bratz in June 2001 to be ready for the year's holiday season. The dolls—with names such as Yasmin, Jade, and Sasha, which matched their ethnic features—were in sharp contrast to Barbie's white, Anglo-Saxon looks. Yasmin's Middle Eastern looks and her name took cues from the daughter of MGA's founder, Isaac Larian, an Iranian immigrant.<sup>1</sup> Her best friend, an African-American, inspired Sasha's looks. Bratz dolls also were more realistically shaped than Barbie dolls. Bratz were curvier and shorter than Barbie. If Barbie were a real woman, she would stand 6 foot 2 and most likely would be unable to stand because of her tiny waist and large bust. Her measurements were, until a slight makeover on a few Barbie models in 1997, 39–18–33.<sup>2</sup> By contrast, if Bratz were real girls, they would stand about 5 foot 6 and sport bodies that looked more like entertainers Beyonce Knowles and Jennifer Lopez than the Amazon stance of Barbie.<sup>3</sup>

But the differences didn't stop with the dolls' looks. With Barbie, there had always been a specific recipe for how she was clothed and what career choices were open to her. Through the years, as women pushed further into the world of work and men, Barbie was there with accessories, such as a doctor's stethoscope, an astronaut's space suit (introduced in 1965, 18 years before an American woman went into space), and even a NASCAR driver's outfit. But Bratz displayed none of the "role modeling" that had been such a major component of how girls had played with Barbie for decades. Bratz didn't have careers per se, or at least their clothes didn't reflect that. Instead, the dolls' clothing and accessories were knockoffs of the fashions young girls saw—and wanted—in the real world. The clothing options included belly-baring, body-hugging t-shirts, low-rise jeans, and clunky platform shoes that were de rigueur on the videos featured on cable channels such as MTV and BET. It was up to the girls to decide how they would play with their Bratz dolls. The girls decided what they wanted their dolls to be when they grew up or if they just wanted to hang out and try on clothes. There was no rule book on what was appropriate for these young girls, no role model of what they should be or shouldn't be.

However, one thing was less realistic than Barbie: Bratz facial features. While their skin tones and hair colors were far more in keeping with America's changing demographics than Barbie, Bratz faces were far more *unrealistic* than Barbie's small, sharp features. Bratz came with comically big, pouty lips and huge doe-shaped eyes that took up most of their faces—more like a cartoon than a real person. The unusual combination of realism and fantasy was a carefully planned dichotomy by MGA.

"We wanted to create dolls that would appeal to everyone. We didn't want to give girls just one idea of what was beautiful or what we thought they should do in life," Larian says. "Not everybody is blonde and perfect, and we wanted dolls that expressed that. We wanted girls to be okay with expressing themselves and being different."<sup>4</sup>

The combination of realism mixed with fantasy and fashion struck a chord with young girls during the 2001 holiday season. By the time all the Christmas shopping was over, Bratz had racked up \$100 million in sales for the year, according to company reports. While miniscule compared to the \$2 billion in global sales Barbie would bring in, those sales figures were just the beginning of a Bratz revolution. By November 2002, sales results for the first six months of the year revealed that Bratz had done what no other new doll had been able to: knock Barbie out of her first-place position, according to NPD, a research firm that tracks toy sales. For the first time in most people's memory, Barbie was no longer number one with girls. Bratz—with their funky fashions, clunky shoes, and comic-book features—had climbed to the top of the pedestal.<sup>5</sup>

During the next four years, Bratz proved that it was more than a one-hit wonder despite aggressive moves by Mattel to make over Barbie's looks. Mattel also filed lawsuits against Carter Bryant, the originator of the "Bratz" concept, and against a former Mattel executive who left the company to become head of sales and marketing at MGA. (The court dismissed the latter suit with prejudice in early 2005.) By the end of 2004, Bratz had held on to the number one fashion doll spot for three years—both in the U.S. and increasingly abroad in countries such as the U.K.—by employing many of the strategies that put them there in the first place. Primary among them was staying current with the fast-changing desires of girls by watching them at play and reading their letters that showed up by the hundreds at the company's headquarters north of Los Angeles. By the

time the holiday season for 2004 came to a close, the Bratz brand, which had expanded to include hundreds of licensed products, such as bikes and computers, had racked up more than \$3 billion in sales (including licensed products)—making the funny-looking dolls one of the most successful new toy brands in the industry's history.<sup>6</sup>

### *Looking into the Future*

Bratz's success is in many ways a natural outcome of the social and economic changes that have transformed women and girls over the past five decades. It seems inevitable that a generation of young girls—brought up in a world where women were gaining economic and social power and changing society forever—would gravitate toward a radically different doll from the one their mothers, and even sisters, had played with.

“This is the first generation of young women to have no collective memory of the struggles their predecessors have endured in securing the rights they now take for granted—the pill, abortion, and equality in the workplace, among others,” wrote Rebecca Gardyn in *American Demographics* in 2001. “Confident and commanding respect, they are taking with them into the marketplace a vastly different view of their ‘place’ in society. Some 35 million strong, a group almost as large as their Boomer foremothers, they are poised to alter every industry they touch.”<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, Bratz were far more in keeping with that different view than Barbie, despite her best efforts to keep up with the fast-changing roles of women in her 40 years as the number one doll. Barbie did advance as women advanced. She had a doctor's outfit, she went into space, and she wore glasses, even though Mattel's made-up backstory for her was that she was born Barbie Millicent Rogers and was a teen model from Willows, Wisconsin. But she was still blonde and blue-eyed when a majority of girls in the U.S. and the world were not. She still followed stereotypes of women, not necessarily setting them or ignoring them, as in the case of Bratz and their distinct lack of “career” choices.

Where Barbie represented the past, Bratz represents at least one view of the present and quite possibly some insight into the future of where women and girls are headed. It is 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. It's a world where purple and black—Bratz's primary colors—are as feminine as Barbie pink.

No doubt Bratz dolls still maintain girls' fantasy images, with their pouty lips, curvy bodies, and sexy fashions. Certainly, women still have more room to grow and expand their power, both economically and socially. But Bratz tapped into the same underlying trends that Nike and Avon followed as they overhauled their brands and products for new generations of women and girls. Bratz are brash and bold, sexy and sophisticated. In short, they can be anything they want to be, much like Avon's new generation of young women, who wanted nothing more than to "make their own mark" on the world.

"It's interesting that they call these dolls 'Bratz.' It undermines the notion that young girls are just sugar and spice," says professor of sociology Kathleen Gerson at New York University. "It conveys the message that girls aren't just sweet little things. In this way, it may help expand the range of possible identities beyond the image of Barbie. When many girls have grown up in a post-feminist world where rigid distinctions about gender are on the wane, perhaps we are beginning to see more than one ideal conveyed by dolls."<sup>8</sup>

Certainly, during the past 50 years women have shown that many of the ideas once considered inviolate about gender—especially about the abilities of the female gender—don't hold water. Five decades ago, many people believed women couldn't run marathons; they couldn't run companies; they couldn't fight in combat; they couldn't do math or science. (This last belief continues to pervade some parts of academia, given the early 2005 furor over Harvard president Larry Summers' comments that women may not have the same innate abilities in math and science as men.) Fifty years ago, the conversation about women was still more about what women "couldn't" do. In the 21st century, the conversation increasingly is about everything women *can* do.

As outlined throughout this book, women on the whole have come a long way in the past 50 years. Much of this change has come in the form of increased economic power and financial freedom. Women also had

experienced a great deal of social and psychological change. Even as women gained access to more money and power, their sense of self and self-worth have been transformed. That has given rise to a whole new attitude toward what is appropriate and acceptable for women. This includes the careers they can pursue to what is beautiful and sexy to what type of reflection they want mirrored back to them in the dolls they play with, the media they watch or read, or even the photographs they see of women on product packaging. No doubt, some of those images are tough to take for earlier generations of women, who fought not to be so highly sexualized. But the expectation by some feminists that the younger generations of women would throw off the desire to be sexy and pretty has been dashed. “Unlike their ’70s feminist ancestors, who believed that ‘acting like a girl’ was asking to be treated as such, most of today’s young women do not feel any disjoint between being a feminist (or identifying with feminine ideals) and being feminine,” Gardyn writes in her *American Demographics* article.

But still there is much to commend in the new images of women—images that helped spur the invention of dolls like Bratz. These images offer a far broader, more interesting, and ultimately more real view of women than the one presented by Barbie for so long.

Barbie reflected the world of much of the 20th century. She was a product of her environment and her history, just as the girls who played with her were shaped by the world in which they lived. Try as she might by changing her clothes and careers to reflect women’s move into the corner office or the space program, Barbie was still reflective of a world that was fast becoming history.

Indeed, even in 1959—the year Barbie was introduced to American girls—the world was on the verge of major social upheaval. Women were beginning to even more vocally question their roles in society. The first rumblings of yet another feminist movement, which built on those in the 19th century and early part of the 20th century, were being heard on college campuses. Other social changes were affecting the world of women as well. Some would help give rise to the multiethnic look of Bratz more than 40 years later. The civil rights movement and the increase of immigrants from Asia and Latin America would begin to lay the foundation for an America that looked and felt far different from the world of the 1950s that spawned Barbie’s looks. In the ensuing 50 years, the majority of women

would go to work. They would grow more confident and capable. Some would upset the rigid mores of American society by choosing to stay single and have children alone. Others would marry and divorce and marry again. Most women would say they were better off than their mothers and grandmothers as they made their own money, bought their own homes, saved for their own retirement, and created more equal partnerships with the men in their lives.

But Barbie, with her white middle-class sensibilities, stood the test of time against those changes until she came up against a force that she couldn't withstand—a generation of girls transformed by the social and economic changes of the past 50 years. As generation after generation of women defined and redefined women's roles in the workplace and the home, they were teaching their daughters—either consciously or unconsciously—that the stereotypes personified in Barbie were no longer valid in a world where women were questioning everything about their lives.

The concept of playing with dolls through predetermined roles—be they career woman or stay-at-home mom—had ceased to be a big draw to many girls, especially young girls ages 8 to 12, once a sweet spot for Barbie. Certainly, Barbie was and is just a plastic toy. But she was often more than that for young girls. She became whoever they wanted to be. It can be easy to overstate the impact of dolls, such as Barbie and Bratz, on girls and the women they will become. But the imagery that little girls have played back to them through toys—and increasingly for present and future generations on television, film, and the Internet—do have an impact beyond the playroom. “Imagery is by no means a purely superficial phenomenon, but is rather the means through which we articulate and define the social order and nature,” writes Sharon MacDonald, a literary scholar.<sup>9</sup>

By the late 1990s, Barbie had ceased to reflect the modern social order. Nor was she the type of role model to which young girls were gravitating. This new generation of girls had been raised in a world that played back to them very different ideas about what a woman was or could be from the images presented to their foremothers. Just as Torrid and Avon had found, girls' images of their bodies and beauty were far different from their mothers and grandmothers. Their ideas about what roles they would play in life also weren't as constrained as the women who came before them, just as McDonald's and The Home Depot had discovered. In a survey by the

National Opinion Research Center, only 9 percent of girls and young women ages 13 to 20 agreed with the statement “A woman’s place is in the home.” By contrast, 68 percent of women over 70 agreed with the statement “It is much better for everyone involved if the man is the achiever outside the home and the woman takes care of the home and family.”<sup>10</sup> While not surprising, these statistics reveal the significant changes that have occurred in the 46 years since Barbie was introduced.

MGA Entertainment certainly wasn’t the first company to tap into what had become obvious shifts in women and society. In fact, a number of companies—particularly in the film and television industries—had been reflecting the shifting roles of women for more than 20 years and had laid the groundwork for a new way of play and a new way of looking at women. They played back a broader, deeper, and ultimately more realistic view of women that would help shape a new generation of girls and their images of women—and force more industries like toys and comic books to pay attention.

Some film and women’s studies historians date the shift back to Sigourney Weaver’s breakout role as a tough, gun-wielding alien fighter in the 1979 film *Alien*. But for many girls of an even younger generation, the images of independent female characters came from watching Saturday morning cartoons. By the early 1990s, a whole new set of girl characters were everywhere on Saturday morning. They included the comically round-faced Powerpuff girls, intrepid Dora the Explorer, Kim Possible with her belly-baring T-shirts, and even the bratty Angelica on *Rugrats*. These girl characters were quite different from the female characters earlier generations had watched on Saturday mornings. By and large, cartoons in the 1970s and early 1980s featured traditional female stereotypes. For example, *Scooby Doo* had two roles for young girls to relate to and mimic in play. They could be pretty like Daphne or unattractive and smart like Velma—although both of them fought crime along with the guys. By the mid-1990s, cartoon girl characters were becoming as varied as the real girls who watched them. “A young woman growing up now can project herself into a variety of roles—one of the Powerpuff Girls, or a smart kid who isn’t a nerd, like Ginger,” said Robert Thompson, Ph.D. and head of the Center for the Study of Popular Television at Syracuse University in New York, in an article in *Child*. “It dilutes the power of any one stereotype. Now we have a whole pantheon of smart, adventurous girls.”<sup>11</sup>



The same has been true—in fits and starts, admittedly—on the big screen and on other days of the week besides Saturday on television. In 1997, a television show debuted that changed the way many people looked at the role of young women on or off the small screen. *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* featured Sarah Michelle Gellar in the title role as a brainy, pretty girl who happened to slay vampires in her spare time. The series' creator and main writer, Joss Whedon, was the son and grandson of television screenwriters. Notably and somewhat ironically, Whedon's grandfather wrote for the *The Donna Reed Show* and *Leave It to Beaver*, and his father wrote for *Alice*, the 1970s series about a tough-talking waitress.<sup>12</sup>

The Buffy character was a reflection of young teenage girls despite her vampire-slaying nature. She was so different that she soon became the topic of conversation in women's studies programs, and students began writing essays on the transformation of women characters on television. What made her different from past tough females was the mixture of the serious and the funny, the sexy and the strong, the feminine and the masculine that hadn't been seen that often in mainstream pop culture. "[Buffy exposes] stereotypes and coded symbols that shore up a rigid war-influenced gender system in an attempt to chart new meanings for womanliness and manliness," writes Frances Early, a history professor at Mt. Saint Vincent University.<sup>13</sup>

Buffy helped give rise to a cadre of stronger, albeit still sexy, female characters on television shows. While critics still complain about the overly sexualized roles that women are given on television and in films, today's young girls are as likely to see a woman playing a hard-charging lawyer or a smart, capable doctor on a television series as they are to see a woman in a subservient or sexist role—although those stereotypes still persist. During the 2004–2005 television season, the most popular show on television was *Desperate Housewives*, which featured every traditional stereotype or icon of women, including the neighborhood hottie, the overachieving mother who had left her high-powered job to raise her children, and the single mom looking for a date with her hunky neighbor.

Girls also were seeing far more strong, empowered women elsewhere in pop culture. On the big screen, the "female action hero" genre had become highly lucrative for film studios by the early 2000s. The studios were

discovering that young women, along with young men, were as likely to watch a film about sword-wielding heroines as they were an emotionally charged chick flick. In 2003, women showed up as the main characters in a number of action movies, including sequels to *Lara Croft: Tomb Raider* and *Charlie's Angels*. In 2004, Halle Berry appeared in *Catwoman*, and Jennifer Garner, who played a CIA agent on the hit television show *Alias*, appeared in the title role in *Elektra*. The executive director of *Catwoman* told the *Wall Street Journal*, "Today's action heroines are more in sync with the sensibilities of Gen Y. It gives more choices to an audience that is less sexist. You can now hit [all demographic audience targets] with a female action hero."<sup>14</sup> Of course, equality among genders meant that critics and audiences alike panned several of these movies, despite their tougher, stronger images of women. One duo of films that did receive both critical and audience acclaim was the two-part series *Kill Bill*, Quentin Tarantino's homage to spaghetti Westerns and Chinese kung fu films. It featured a primarily female cast of characters who were as vicious, cunning, and violent as any male cast could have been. In the film, Uma Thurman plays a wronged hit woman who seeks revenge on her former assassin-colleagues and the man who killed her fiancé and her unborn child and left her for dead. The film took in \$31 million the first weekend it opened, and women accounted for 40 percent of ticket sales, according to Rick Sands, chief operating officer of Miramax Films.<sup>15</sup>

Similarly, the horror film industry also has been transformed by the infusion of young women as both consumers and lead actresses headlining big-budget horror films. "You would think they would be the last audience to be excited about a scary thriller or a horror movie," Sony Pictures Entertainment's head of marketing Geoffrey Ammer told the *Los Angeles Times* in November 2003. "But they are the first audience." By 2003, some film companies began offering screenings to all-female audiences to gauge their interest. Five years ago, such a practice would have been laughable, but Sony's remake of the horror flick *The Texas Chainsaw Massacre* opened with a 50 percent female audience, mirroring other big horror movies like *The Ring* and *Jeepers Creepers*.<sup>16</sup>

Girls and young women also have invaded the male-dominated world of comic books. This has forced companies in the industry to overhaul their offerings to attract a growing number of girls who bear little

resemblance to past generations of young women, who rarely showed up at horror movies or cracked open the pages of a Superman comic. By 2002, young girls were driving U.S. sales of “shojo manga,” or girls’ comic books imported from Japan. Sales grew from about \$50 million in 2002 to \$110 million in 2003.<sup>17</sup> Those sales made the books, with their distinctive bright colors and characters with huge, almond-shaped eyes—not dissimilar to the looks of the Bratz dolls—the fastest-growing segment of the publishing industry, according to *USA Today*. Their popularity forced U.S. comic book publishers to create new lines of manga cartoons that appeal specifically to girls. Moreover, young women who read early “shojo manga” cartoons, such as *Sailor Moon*, which appeared in the U.S. in the mid-1990s, are helping fuel an explosion in sales of graphic novels—more involved, better-written, art-house comic books sold at big booksellers such as Barnes & Noble.<sup>18</sup> DC Comics, known for its Superman and Batman superheroes, publishes the hardcover graphic novel series *The Sandman* by Neil Gaiman, which has a big following among young women. Driven by that popularity, the tenth installment in the series, *The Sandman: Endless Night*, published in 2003, had a first printing of 100,000, the biggest for any DC Comics or its Vertigo imprint, which publishes Sandman.<sup>19</sup>

Unlike the traditional comic books, “shojo manga” and graphic novels feature more than the superheroes and villains that so appealed to boys. Instead, they are a fascinating mixture of traditional boy-girl relationships laced with girl power—all part of the gender somersaulting that virtually every generation of women is going through.

Many of the story lines, especially in “shojo manga,” feature a young girl who is transported to a fantasy world where she battles evil spirits and demons. “Shojo manga are popular because they tap into the social obstacles and challenges that girls face: feeling excluded by cliques, having crushes on boys, and often wrestling with issues of their own sexuality,” says Eve Zimmerman, who teaches a course on “Gender and Popular Culture” at Wellesley. “But they also are popular because they present a glossy image of a different kind of existence where everyone dresses up fashionably and looks cute.”<sup>20</sup>

Given such an onslaught of diverse, compelling, and sometimes disturbing images of women, coupled with all the real-world changes

affecting them, it was just a matter of time before the toy industry began to feel the effects of the past 50 years of change that had transformed women. But where other potential competitors to Barbie had seen only her negative side, Bratz creators saw the positive in play and fantasy that had made Barbie so popular for so many years. Indeed, Bratz followed the theme of many companies described in this book by melding the old with the new. Other companies had tried to create more realistic dolls to counteract Barbie's sexy influence, but they often ignored the fact that little girls still wanted a fantasy world in which their dolls were pretty. Barbie competitors often focused their efforts on breaking down the traditional stereotypes of body and beauty without asking the very girls who would play with these toys what they wanted from a new doll. Even Mattel, which has a solid reputation for its intense focus groups with children, had missed the core truth that MGA would use to create Bratz. "Barbie gave the message that in order to be good and successful as a woman, you had to be a lawyer, a nurse, a president," Larian says. "Today's generation of girls just doesn't see the world that way. These girls have no limits to their ambitions, so we don't tell her what those ambitions will be."

### *Listening to Girls, Not Their Moms*

Bratz successfully tapped into this new generation of ambitious, no-boundaries girls—and toppled an icon—by creating a new kind of fashion doll that would take a far different approach to young girls than most of the toy industry, including Barbie.<sup>21</sup> Larian's team of fashion designers and toy makers, many of whom came from Mattel and other toy companies, began by listening to their young consumers in unusual ways. They then used what they learned to react quickly to the changing interests and attitudes of young girls, a consumer group that was changing, it seemed, by the day.

Larian appears an unlikely candidate to have shaken up the world of girls' toys. For most of its history, MGA had focused heavily on boys' electronic games and products through licensing properties such as the Mighty Morphin' Power Rangers. The company's original name was Micro Games of America, which Larian changed to MGA Entertainment when he

began promoting Bratz. Larian's personal background, as an Iranian immigrant, also didn't lend itself to upsetting the traditional norms. But Larian was more entrepreneur than anything, he says, always on the lookout for new ideas and products for the company. By the late 1990s, he had begun to see an opportunity where others would have shied away—Mattel's monopoly on girls with Barbie. "The monopolist nature is often to stop being innovative," he says. "They had a 90 to 95 percent share of the girls' market, and that wasn't really good for consumers, and it wasn't really good for the toy industry, including their toy business."

Larian believed there was room in the market for another fashion doll—one that would appeal to girls whose tastes skewed away from Barbie. But it had to be more than a Barbie knockoff or another attempt to woo girls with a more "realistic" doll—an insight he says he gained from watching and listening to his own daughter and her friends. Larian says he learned from his daughter that only "little girls of 3 or 4 or 5 still played with Barbie," he says. "The younger girls looked at her as a mommy figure. But most little girls didn't want to play that game after a certain age. They wanted dolls that looked like them or like the teenage girls they loved to emulate." What Larian heard from his daughter and her friends tracked with what the rest of the industry had been recognizing for several years. Children were growing up faster earlier and were looking for toys that were more in keeping with that sophistication. The industry even had a term for the trend, "kagoy," which is short for "kids are getting older younger."<sup>22</sup>

Larian's insistence on focusing on what girls wanted in their dolls was a far different approach than what would-be competitors to Barbie had tried when introducing their realistic-looking dolls. In 1991, entrepreneur Cathy Meredig created a doll called "Happy to Be Me" that had more realistic measurements than Barbie. Although the dolls were far less sexy-looking, little attention was paid to how the girls really played with dolls or even what they thought of Barbie's looks. The focus was primarily on what adults thought of Barbie, not what girls thought of Barbie.

Even Mattel took that "parent-approved" approach when it began designing new products for girls in the early 2000s. A group of designers, model makers, and other employees working in a program called Project Platypus created a new toy for girls called "Ello" in 2001–2002. The toy,

which included unusually shaped, but still interlocking, pieces in bright primary and pastel colors, was meant to inspire girls to build and make things—but on their own terms and with materials they would like, according to the group’s leader, Ivy Ross.<sup>23</sup> The project’s members did look at how girls played and how they constructed things—noting the differences between girls and boys. But there was little discussion of how different *girls of today* are from the *girls of yesterday*. Instead, one of the highlights of the product was that it was “a rarity: a toy that appeals as much to parents as children.”<sup>24</sup>

Larian, however, wasn’t looking for a toy that appealed to parents. He was driven instead to come up with a doll that would appeal to his daughter and her friends. Older girls were looking for a doll that was more like themselves than a fantasy role model. He believed it was a core truth the company could build a brand on.

What he didn’t have was the actual doll. Throughout 2000, he told his people to find him a fashion doll that was different. But nothing really captured his attention until a new designer he had never met before and who had never created a doll, Carter Bryant, walked into his offices.<sup>25</sup> Bryant’s sketches featured dolls of varying ethnicities with cartoonish facial features. They had the pouty lips and big doe eyes reminiscent of the “manga” cartoons from Japan. The clothes they were wearing looked just like the clothes Larian saw his daughter and her friends wearing—the low-rise jeans and midriff-baring T-shirts made popular by music stars such as Britney Spears.

Their varied ethnicity hit a chord with Larian. Their fashion-forward looks appealed to his daughter. Both liked the fact that they didn’t offer a single ideal of what was beautiful. With their over-the-top cartoon looks, it was up to the girls playing with the dolls to create their own ideas of what was beautiful and fashionable. “The cartoonish look of them was important. They were fantasy, not reality. They didn’t necessarily look like real people, but they did represent diversity,” Larian says. “We set out to have dolls that weren’t realistic, who were more cartoons than mimics of real life. These dolls are more about fantasy and playacting with fashion and trends than they are about ‘I want to look like that’ when I grow up.”

Using Bryant's sketches as a springboard, MGA's team of young employees created the Bratz dolls. Larian knew from his informal research with his daughter that the dolls had to be more than physically different from Barbie. How the girls played with Bratz would be just as important to making the dolls a long-term success as their unusual ethnic looks would be to capturing the attention of young girls in the store aisle.

If Barbie had evolved into girls playing "mom" with her over the decades, Bratz would have to tap into the world of play that attracted older girls. After a series of informal focus groups with children, as well as bi-weekly dinners with Larian's daughter, nieces, nephews, and their friends, the team decided the dolls had to be on the cutting edge of fashion and pop culture, the biggest areas of interest for the 7-to-12-year-old set, often called the "tween" market in the toy industry. Capturing that "tween" market was crucial given how economically powerful the demographic has become. Harris Interactive, a marketing research firm, estimated in 2003 that the 30 million "tweens" in the U.S. had \$19.7 billion worth of spending power.<sup>26</sup>

By the time Bratz were ready for launch in 2001, the dolls were sporting the same fashions that girls would see in the stores as well as on their favorite actresses and singers. "What we were looking for primarily were designers who weren't conditioned to think about toys for girls in a traditional way," Larian says. He also pushed them to think beyond the fashions and put the same quality fabrics and finishings they would put into human clothes in the dolls' clothes. They also took care in the types of accessories they offered to girls. Instead of a house that mimicks middle-class life, Bratz have a three-story condo designed by architect Richard Landry, who has designed homes for Eddie Murphy and Rod Stewart. The condo was more like what girls saw on shows like MTV's *Cribs*.

Combining those two forces—the consumer insight gleaned from interactions with his daughter, her friends, and other young members of his extended family and the fashion sense of his designers—was enough to put Bratz in contention for the title of number one fashion doll. But despite the early impressive sales numbers, Larian knew he needed to keep pushing the envelope with Bratz or he could end up being outmaneuvered by Mattel. By 2002, Mattel was ready with several "Bratz fighters." During Christmas that year, it launched My Scene Barbie, a doll featuring more

fashionable clothing options. Then in 2003, it rolled out Flavas, a group of dolls with ethnic looks and more urban street fashions that looked similar to Bratz. Then in 2004, it rolled out Barbie Fashion Fever, featuring more fashion forward looks for Barbie herself. Mattel also signed a deal to create dolls based on the winners of *American Idol*, the highly successful television show. Mattel also had begun taking cues from MGA and other companies that were doing a far better job of listening to their consumers in different ways. By 2004, Mattel had begun using what it called “in-home intercepts” to gain a better understanding of how girls were interacting with the brand. Mattel’s senior vice president of girls’ marketing and design, Tim Kilpin, told an audience at the Licensing Letter Symposium in 2004 that it would always conduct focus groups and quantitative research. “But we’re finding that when you get out and watch consumers interact with your product and your competitors’ products in their own environment, you get much richer insights.”<sup>27</sup>

### *What About the Boys . . . and Computers?*

Given Mattel’s assault, Larian had to keep moving if he wanted to keep Bratz top of mind with the “tween” girls who were so important to the brand’s success. For inspiration, Larian would turn again and again to his consumers. By 2002 it wasn’t just his daughter and her friends who served as his research team. Letters and e-mails from girls around the world had begun to flood into MGA’s headquarters, suggesting ideas for new products. Like Hot Topic’s Betsy McLaughlin, Larian began taking many of the letters home over the weekend in a bright purple folder. Many of the letters asked for the introduction of boys to the Bratz lineup.

It was an interesting insight given that sales of Ken, Barbie’s male sidekick, had sputtered for years. Mattel would end up discontinuing Ken in 2004. But girls weren’t asking for boyfriends or husbands for Bratz, Larian says of the stacks of letters he received. Instead, the comments were more in keeping with a significant change that had occurred among the genders for at least one generation, if not more. But many toy makers hadn’t picked up on it. The girls wanted boys as part of their Bratz circle of friends, Larian says. It wasn’t about the type of “role modeling” that little girls of



earlier generations had often taken part in. Barbie and Ken were rarely just friends. He was often cast as the boyfriend or husband in play scenarios that mimicked the world of adults, not the real world of children. Instead, these girls said they had boys as friends in their group and would like to have the same for their Bratz dolls, Larian says. So in 2003, MGA added four boys to the mix—Dylan, Eitan, Koby, and Cameron—complete with fashion-forward looks and ethnic features to complement the Bratz girls.

The inclusion of boys in the lineup sparked criticism from parents, who expressed concern that the company was pushing adult ideas on young girls and boys. Larian countered the criticism by pointing out that the company launched the dolls only after young girls expressed an interest in having boys added to the lineup. “As adults, we put our adult paradigms on the dolls; we see them from an adult perspective,” he says. “That’s been a problem in the toy industry that we aren’t really aware of what is going on with our consumers. What do we as adults really know about the world of young children?” But by listening to his “kitchen-sink” focus group, as he calls his daughter and her friends, and reading the comments from girls around the world, Larian argued that adding boys was simply a reflection of the world of children of the 21st century. “They don’t look at this in a sexual way. My daughter has friends who are boys, who are part of her social crowd,” he added. “The world has changed, and these kids do have relationships between genders that have nothing to do with sex.”

This wasn’t the first time Larian had had to defend Bratz. Early on, critics and parents complained that the dolls were too sexualized, although they applauded the Bratz ethnic looks. Parents, especially mothers, complained that the quality of play also wasn’t very high given that most of what these dolls were about was dressing up in cool fashions. Some academics, however, say the Bratz dolls are no more harmful than any other cartoons and possibly offer a better depiction of women than Barbie. “They are actually a much healthier depiction of girls than Barbie. No girl will take seriously that this is a body image she ought to be striving for,” said Dr. Claudia Paradise, a psychoanalyst who works with children.<sup>28</sup> Barbie herself had come under fire for her sexy looks. In fact, her figure was based on an adult toy called Bild Lilli that Mattel’s founder Ruth Handler found in Germany.

Larian has countered much of the criticism by pointing out that the company responds to what young girls say they want in dolls. “Ask them what they think. They think the dolls are fashionable and let them express themselves,” he says. Larian says listening to his young consumers has helped him discard preconceived stereotypical ideas about what girls want or how they want to play. “We’re learning to break down a lot of barriers and misconceptions about girls, what they should be or shouldn’t be, what they will buy or won’t buy,” he says.

By listening and then acting on what his consumers want, Larian has been able to move quickly to pick up on trends that he otherwise would not have seen—like creating boy Bratz. Indeed, he admits that when he has had an idea for Bratz—and has pursued it—it has sometimes been less successful than the ideas from girls’ letters and e-mails. MGA came up with the idea for Bratz Tokyo-a-Go-Go, which featured a roller-skating rink and fashions mimicking those Larian had seen on teenage girls in Tokyo’s hip Shibuya shopping neighborhood during a trip to Japan. The Tokyo-inspired products sold well, but they weren’t the blockbusters that MGA had expected, Larian says. “In hindsight we realized that kids in America didn’t have much of an idea where Tokyo was or why Bratz would be there,” he says. The company helped solve some of the problem by adding information about Tokyo to the packaging. “It made it more educational,” Larian says.

Staying in touch with its primary consumers also helped MGA move beyond dolls and into areas that are now considered a must-have for survival in the toy industry: movies, television shows, and products like bikes and computers that take the brand far beyond the toy aisle. Such a broad range of items has moved Bratz beyond the dolls and into a lifestyle brand complete with furniture and accessories for girls’ rooms. MGA isn’t alone in pursuing a “lifestyle” brand approach for the dolls. At least as far back as 1990, Mattel was selling bed sheets and human-size clothes imprinted with Barbie’s logo as a way to extend the doll’s franchise. Ironically, the company moved into new products in direct response to focus groups that showed “girls still liked the doll, but were somewhat sensitive to playing dress-up or even advertising the fact that they still played with Barbies,” as Pauline Yoshihashi wrote in a *Wall Street Journal* article in 1990.<sup>29</sup>

More than a decade later, MGA found itself having to persuade retailers that expanding a doll brand beyond dolls made sense. Larian already

had had to persuade some retailers that Bratz—with their new view of girls and society—was something that would sell when he first began pitching the Bratz concept to retailers in 2000. Larian says he had to overcome some of the preconceived ideas retailers still had about girls, demographics, and even race. “Some of them said that girls wouldn’t buy black and white dolls that were packaged together,” he remembers. Bratz are sold together as a set, instead of the way Barbie often is, as a stand-alone doll. Other retailers, particularly electronics retailers, have suggested that girls wouldn’t buy products such as computers, boom boxes, or karaoke machines because girls aren’t into technology, Larian says. “We had the toughest time getting our Bratz laptop into retailers, simply because they didn’t think girls would buy it or that girls would even shop in their stores,” he says. Finally, electronics retailer Best Buy decided to give the Bratz-inspired laptop some shelf space. “They are flying off the shelf now,” Larian says. “We have taken the tactic that if consumers like it, then that’s what is important. We can’t be driven by what the retailer thinks. They are just the middlemen, and if consumers start asking for our brands, they will have no choice but to carry it.”

There’s no doubt that girls are asking for Bratz dolls or, for that matter, Bratz anything. In the four years since they were introduced, their sales have grown almost exponentially. From 2001 to 2003, Bratz sales surged from an estimated \$100 million to more than \$1 billion in retail sales, according to the privately held company’s statistics. In 2004, MGA estimated that its sales and sales of its licensed products such as computers, video games, bikes, and sleeping bags would top \$3 billion. By contrast, Mattel’s sales and profits continued to slide, although the Barbie makeovers and new products had begun to turn around the icon in the first quarter of 2005.

But as Larian and his team have learned from watching what happened to Barbie and Mattel, girls can be fickle consumers who move to the next trend as quickly as they picked up the last one. His designers continue to pick up ideas for new clothing lines, including more than likely more modest fashions going forward as the fashion industry and its consumers drive toward a “modest” look over the skin-baring fashions of recent years. Larian keeps reading his consumer e-mails and taking letters home to read in the purple folder and looking for the next idea that will take Bratz to the next level.

***Key Observations***

- ◆ Don't allow personal history or preconceived ideas of women—in this case, young girls—to overshadow insight from consumers.
- ◆ Read, listen, and respond to correspondence from consumers—not their parents. MGA used this strategy to create a line of boy Bratz.
- ◆ Consider the consumers' whole world, not just the time when they are using the product. This strategy was used to expand Bratz beyond dolls and clothes.
- ◆ Move with consumer trends, not industry timelines. MGA creates new clothing lines for its dolls every three to six months, not just once a year.

MGA Entertainment built a multibillion-dollar children's brand in just three years by listening to girls who had grown up in a far different world than their grandmothers, mothers, and, indeed, even their older sisters. As Bratz illustrates, the social and economic trends set in motion more than 50 years ago have created ripples and consequences—sometimes unintended—that are just beginning to be understood by companies that are fast realizing that women are their most important, yet sometimes most elusive, consumers.

The next and final chapter features a series of questions and core concepts culled from experiences of the companies featured in the preceding chapters. They offer insight into how other companies can navigate through the ripples from those trends that will continue to affect business for the foreseeable future.