

Mattel dusts off He-Man, with a nod to diversity.

He-Man, a brawny character that was a hit in the '80s, is finding new life in the toy aisle and in two new animated series on Netflix.

By Gregory Schmidt

Sept. 10, 2021 Updated 3:37 p.m. ET

When Mattel introduced the brawny superhero He-Man in 1982, he was an instant hit. Four years later, at the peak of its popularity, sales of the sword-and-sorcery toy line soared to \$400 million in the U.S.

Now, nearly four decades after their first appearance, He-Man and the rest of the Masters of the Universe are looking to conquer the toy aisles again.

But Mattel is trying to revive a dormant franchise for a new generation of consumers — ones who expect content that reflects their world. To help, the toymaker has teamed up with Netflix to produce two new animated series to go along with two toy lines that have already hit retailers' shelves.

And Mattel is expanding the Masters of the Universe's roster of muscled heroes with the introduction of Sun-Man, a Black character created in 1985 by a New Jersey mother who wanted to create a role model for her son.



Yla Eason started Olmec Toys in 1985 to make Sun-Man and other multicultural toys. Bryan Anselm for The New York Times



“The intention was to give positive Black presentation in imagination and creativity,” she said. Olmec Toys, via Yla Eason

“My son said he couldn’t be a superhero because he was Black. He was 3,” said Yla Eason, an assistant professor of professional practice at Rutgers University.

So she started her own company, Olmec Toys, to make Sun-Man and other toys for Black, Hispanic and Native American children. “The intention was to give positive Black presentation in imagination and creativity,” she said.

That concept resonates more powerfully today, said Ed Duncan, a senior vice president at Mattel who is overseeing Sun-Man’s official introduction into the lineup.

“Reintroducing a Black hero for today’s kids not only feels good, it feels important,” he said in an email. “Sun-Man is such an aspirational character, from his aesthetic design to his character traits and powers.”

In the two Netflix series — “Masters of the Universe: Revelation,” (developed by Kevin Smith, who created raunchy films like “Clerks” and “Jay and Silent Bob Strike Back”), and “He-Man and the Masters of the Universe,” (aimed at younger audiences) — some characters were reimagined as Black.

Children need to see themselves represented in the world around them, said Rob David, the vice president of creative content for Mattel Television and an executive producer for the two animated series. “The TV screen is a window and also a mirror,” he said.



Ed Duncan, the Mattel executive who is overseeing Sun-Man's official introduction into the Masters of the Universe toy line. Alex Welsh for The New York Times

The Masters of the Universe revival is part of a larger expansion strategy under Mattel's chief executive, Ynon Kreiz, to dust off aging franchises. "We have a treasure trove of brands, some that were shelved for whatever reason," said Richard Dickson, the president and chief operating officer of Mattel. Brands that are lined up for expansion include the Magic 8 Ball, the Major Matt Mason action figure and the card game Uno.

Expanding its intellectual properties could make Mattel more profitable at a time when the toy industry is booming. After tumbling 4 percent in 2019, U.S. toy sales jumped 16 percent to \$25.1 billion last year, according to the NPD Group, a research firm. Mattel reported a 40 percent increase in net sales in its most recent quarter compared with the same period in 2020.

"Ynon Kreiz changed a lot about the business," said Gerrick Johnson, an equity research analyst for BMO Capital Markets. "He looked at the profitability of the licenses." Pulling a brand like Masters of the Universe out of the vault is a smart strategy, he said, because

Mattel can turn around and sell licenses for a range of products, like bedsheets and backpacks.

Beyond toys and the series — and a long-gestating movie project — Mattel is lining up partnerships in publishing and in softgoods, which include clothing and bedding, said Mr. Dickson, who declined to provide additional details.

Adults who grew up with the original He-Man and kept the brand alive on fan websites and conventions like Power-Con, which starts Saturday in Anaheim, Calif., are excited about his comeback, but wary of overkill at mainstream retailers.

“I’m worried about there being too much and crowding the market,” said Danny Eardley, the lead author of “The Toys of He-Man and the Masters of the Universe.” “Poor performance could signal to Mattel that there is not enough interest.”

But Mr. Dickson wants to allay those fears. “It’s obvious that we let the property go dormant over time,” he said. But “we are strategic about every toy that we put out.”

Updated 31m ago

Daily Business Briefing >

- [An annual report on U.S. poverty and Apple’s newest products: What’s coming next week.](#)
- [The S&P 500 drops for a fifth day, its worst stretch since February.](#)
- [Toyota to cut production 40% in October because of the chip shortage.](#)
- [What you need to know about corporate vaccine mandates.](#)
- [F.A.A. awards \\$100 million in grants to efforts to reduce aviation’s environmental impact.](#)