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Masters of the Universe shows how companies learned to monetise childhood forever

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A new Masters of the Universe film is now out in cinemas – nearly four decades on from the original 1983 cartoon series and 1987 film.



For audiences who grew up in the 1980s, nostalgia alone may be enough to drive them to the theatre. Indeed, such reboots are often dismissed as attempts by modern studios to make a quick buck using "nostalgia bait".

But while nostalgia is part of it, it's not the whole story. In fact, many beloved 80s characters were deliberately created as part of franchisable intellectual property (IP) ecosystems, spanning toys, TV and merchandise.

In other words, they were never just characters or toys. They were designed from the outset to be profitable, across a variety of contexts, for decades.

A merchandising empire

Before Marvel built cinematic universes, companies in the 80s were creating commercial worlds centred around children's toys. Remember Transformers, Strawberry Shortcake, Rainbow Brite, the Care Bears and the Smurfs? These characters and stories were all carefully designed to sell merchandise and generate ongoing production opportunities.

Prior to the 80s, toys were generally created only after a highly successful cartoon had been released.

But this changed in 1977 with the release of George Lucas's hugely successful original Star Wars film. The following year, American toy brand Kenner Products reportedly sold some 40 million units of Star Wars items.

Lucas produced his subsequent Star Wars projects with merchandising in mind. This approach would go on to define popular character franchises.

Children's TV as a giant toy catalogue

Commercial and intellectual property strategies pioneered in the 1980s continue to influence how today's studios revive and adapt old franchises.

Several major changes occurred during this time. In 1983, there was a loosening of industry restrictions that had prevented children's shows from functioning largely as toy advertisements.

The Antitrust Division of the US Justice Department put legal pressure on the National Association of Broadcasters to change its industry rules, arguing they had unlawfully restricted competition. So the association abandoned its code of self-regulation.

By 1984, the US Federal Communications Commission had also changed its rules on maximum limits on advertising for children's TV shows. This meant cartoons created specifically to sell toys were no longer considered extended advertising, whereas they previously were.

Media and toy companies increasingly embraced a "character franchise" model, in which proprietary characters became the foundation for TV programs, toys and licensing opportunities.

The creation of a single character, such as He-Man (the lead in Masters Of The Universe) or Rainbow Brite, became a whole world built on an extensive network of licences.

Through these licensing arrangements, the IP owner controlled how the characters and stories were portrayed across TV, film, toys, merchandise, and various media platforms (such as into the video game space). This is known as “transmedia storytelling”.



The new film stars Nicholas Galitzine as Adam/He-Man. Amazon/MGM

Mattel deliberately created Masters of the Universe so the underlying IP rights would be entirely exploitable, and He-Man’s character reproducible across different types of products.

Mattel released the first He-Man toys and merchandise in 1982. This followed by a 65-episodes series, He-Man and the Masters of the Universe, in 1983.

Mattel provided its partners a brand bible depicting the character’s aesthetics and backstory – which had to be complied with.



Battle Armor He-Man figure from 1984. TransformerLand

The 1980s also saw the rollout of cable TV, with a massive influx of channels, including children’s networks.

This meant TV producers could distribute children's series through these cable channels and syndicated television markets, rather than relying on the major broadcast networks.

From 1983 to 1988, the number of US toy-based TV shows went from 13 to more than 70. Revenue from the sales of related products tripled. These products – including toys, books, comics, lunchboxes, apparel and stationery – were often licensed to specific manufacturers who had expertise in their area of production.

The transmedia model endures

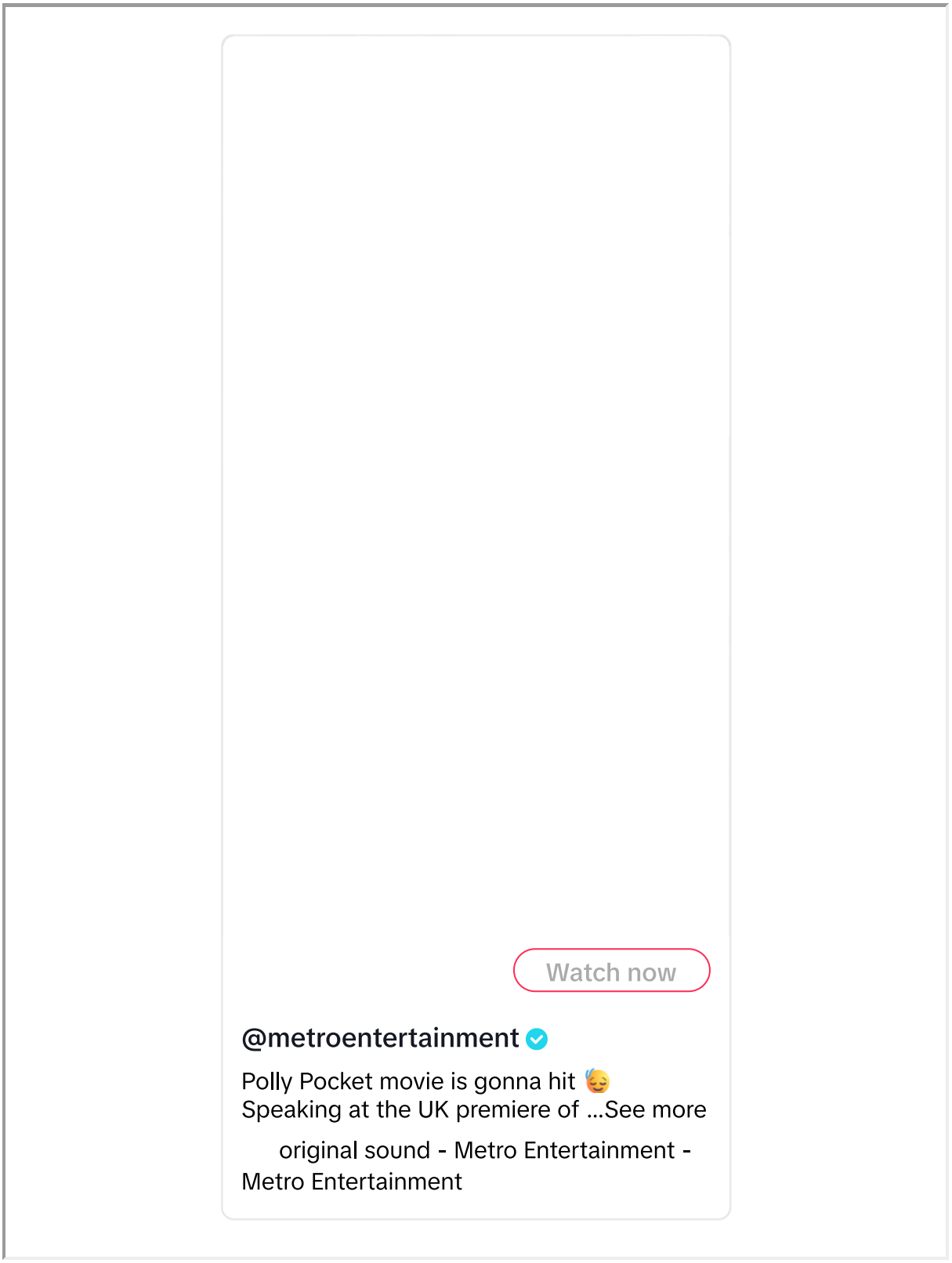
Toy-based TV shows started to diminish following the Children's Television Act of 1990.

This act restricted the amount of children's advertising allowed. It classified a cartoon as an advertisement if a commercial for the cartoon's associated toy or product aired during, or immediately adjacent to, that specific episode. It also mandated three hours of educational programs per week.

Nevertheless, the underlying IP strategies developed in the 1980s still hold relevance today, even if the context has changed in the digital era.

Today's media giants such as Disney, Universal, Mattel and Hasbro have built interconnected IP ecosystems that extend across films, TV, games, streaming, toys and consumer products.

For fans of the 80s, the longevity of the transmedia franchising model is good news; they can expect several more adaptations based on their favourite childhood characters. Transformers v GI Joe, Polly Pocket and Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles are all slated for future releases.



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