

# The New York Times

## With Power Rangers Scarce, Parents Are in Buying Frenzy

By GLENN COLLINS

Welcome to December, holiday shopping, mistletoe and the nation's second annual Mighty Morphin Power Rangers shortage.

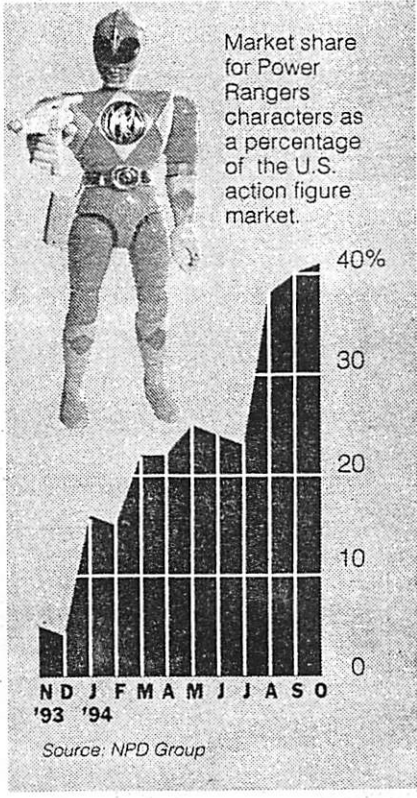
What, another case of missing Morphins?

It was not supposed be this way. After all, the manufacturer cranked up 11 additional factories and says it is shipping 10 times the number of Power Rangers toys that it did last Christmas. Then, the toys were so scarce that parents actually camped overnight outside stores to buy whatever they could get.

This year there are plenty of Power Rangers accessories, goodies like wristwatches, clothes and lunch boxes, but there also are spot shortages of some Power Rangers characters.

On Friday, for example, Macy's at Herald Square and the F.A.O. Schwarz store on Fifth Avenue were sold out of the scarcest of the Rangers figures, the white and pink ones. The Toys "R" Us stores in the New York City suburbs said the sought-after figures they had were selling quickly and new shipments would "blow out of the store," as one toy buyer said, when they arrived.

In little more than a year, the Power Rangers' share of the market for action figures has jumped to 40 percent, from 4 percent, and sales of the product line are approaching \$1 billion for the year. By comparison, sales of Cabbage Patch dolls were



\$550 million in their best year, while Teen-Age Mutant Ninja Turtles topped out at \$450 million.

To find a toy that sells as well as the Power Rangers, one needs to look in a different category: Barbie, the classic fashion doll, has had close to \$1 billion in sales each of the last two years, retailers estimate.

Now, desperate to avoid disappointing their children on Christmas morning, some parents are driving

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# With Power Rangers Scarce, a Buying Frenzy

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to out-of-the-way toy stores that have managed, word has it, to obtain a cache of Power Rangers. Some have offered as much as \$100 to clerks in toy stores to put aside hard-to-get Rangers. Others like Rosemary Biagioni, a mother of two boys in Tuckahoe, N.Y., is phoning stores every day, in search of three new Power Rangers toys.

The Power Rangers toys are based on the characters in an enormously popular children's television show, broadcast Saturday mornings and each weekday after school, in which six teen-age high school students "morph," or transform, into super heroes who defend the Earth against evil aliens. The creators of the show note the show's "multi-ethnic cast and strong positive female role models" — two of the six Rangers are girls.

"I've never seen such a terrible show in my life, but my boys just love it," Mrs. Biagioni said. "They are possessed, and so am I."

As Christmas approaches, a black market in Power Rangers has developed for certain scarce figures and play sets, and some entrepreneurs are charging up to \$50 for a pink Ranger, depicting the character Kimberly, that retails for \$13. Outside some stores, signs have appeared offering the phone numbers of Power Rangers black marketers.

People known as "diggers" are patrolling store aisles, filling carts with Rangers they hope to resell and prompting some store managers to limit purchases. Many shipments of Power Rangers never make it on to the toy store shelves; shoppers tear open the shipping boxes as they reach the aisles.

Bandai America Inc. of Cerritos, Calif., the American subsidiary of the Japanese company that makes the Power Rangers, says it gets 700 phone calls and 300 letters a week from parents trying to locate Power Rangers toys.

"This appears to be the biggest phenomenon we have ever seen in the toy business," said Michael Goldstein, chief executive of the Toys "R" Us chain. "We aren't able to have any inventory for more than a day or two, because the demand is so great."

One reason for the Power Rangers' popularity is that the action figures, like the television show, appeal to both boys and girls. It also covers a broad age range. "Four of my six children are crazy over Power Rangers," said Debbie Cotter of Hartsdale, N.Y., referring to Michael, 4; Tommy, 8; Aaron, 10, and even Wesley, 15, "who's just collecting them."

Michael Cotter, who has 13 Power Rangers figures, said of his collection, "Because the monsters die — that's why it's so good." He wants the hardest-to-get white Ranger "because my friends have it," he explained.

At Halloween, Power Rangers costumes sold four times more than any other costume in the history of Toys "R" Us, dominating the boys' and girls' market. Now, for Christmas, the merchandise includes 5.5- and 8-inch action figures, the Evil Space Aliens, and accessories like Thunderzords, Power Claws and Tiger Sabers.

Mrs. Cotter and many other par-



Chris Maynard for The New York Times

Shortages of some Mighty Morphin Power Rangers have caused a Christmas shopping frenzy. Two young shoppers looked at a display of the action figures and accessories at the Toy House in Hartsdale, N.Y.

## Is a shortage intentional? The manufacturer says it isn't.

ents wonder why shortages exist after more than a year of Morphin mania, and some of them complain that Bandai is manipulating the market.

Like many parents, Kathleen Weil, of Wayne, N.J., said she thought the scarcity "is artificially induced, to build up demand." But many retailers and toy analysts said unprecedented demand, and not skulduggery, was behind the shortages.

At Bandai, the director of marketing, Trish Stewart, said that this year and last the company was overwhelmed by "demand that was completely unpredictable." Because some of Bandai's earlier toys, like the Ultraman super hero, fell flat, the company was cautious about estimating the demand for Power Rangers. Indeed, other toy companies had rejected the idea of producing Power Rangers before Bandai went ahead.

The company insists that it has not tried to make the figures scarce. Ms. Stewart says it takes a full year to design, tool up and manufacture a new Power Rangers toy and get it to the stores. "There was nothing we could do in October 1993, when we knew it was a hit, to get more product by last Christmas," she said.

The company has increased the number of Power Rangers factories, from 5 in China to 16 in China, Taiwan, Thailand, Mexico and Japan, and Rangers are coming to life around the clock, seven days a week. The demand is highest in the United States, but is growing in other countries.

Sean McGowan, a Wall Street toy analyst, said: "There is no chance that these guys don't want to meet demand — that would be stupid.



Chris Maynard for The New York Times

Many stores are deluged with requests for certain hard-to-get Power Rangers action figures. Jim Dalton, the owner of the Toy House in Hartsdale, N.Y., took a telephone call from a customer.

Manufacturers do like to under-ship. But you wouldn't want to do that on this product. Parents have to buy something for Christmas, and if they can't find Power Rangers, then something else is going to get bought."

Saban Entertainment Inc. of Los Angeles, which owns the rights to the Power Rangers, in addition to its toys and television show, has tried to plaster Power Rangers images on everything from bed sheets to flashlights to toothbrushes by licensing 90 producers in the United States and another 300 internationally.

Peter Dang, president of the Saban Children's Entertainment Group, plans a Power Rangers movie for release by 20th Century Fox next summer and two Power Rangers arena shows that will appear in 65 cities. The first live show opens on Tuesday in San Diego and is scheduled for January at Radio City Music Hall in New York.

Yet not everybody is wild about the Power Rangers. A Canadian television network, YTV, took the show off the air after a Canadian industry council found that the series depicted violence more than 25 percent of the time. Some parents said their children played more aggressively and violently after watching the show.

Mrs. Weil, the mother in Wayne,

N.J., said her 4-year-old son, Seth, "would start jumping around the room, punching pillows and acting wild" after watching the show. She will not let him watch now. The show "sends a message to children that violence is a way of life and that it's a good way to solve your problems," she said.

In response to such criticism, the producers of the show have taken to putting public service messages after each 30-minute, commercial-rich episode. The spots address topics like resolving conflicts nonviolently and the difference between the fantasy of television and the reality of children's lives.

If Morphin mania has exasperated the toy superstores, it has given a lift to smaller toy merchants who have managed to stay well stocked. "We have tripled or quadrupled our customer base because people know we have Power Rangers," said Jim Dalton, owner of the Toy House, a small store in Hartsdale that carries 62 different Power Rangers items.

But in keeping with the mystique surrounding the Power Rangers craze, Mr. Dalton declined to disclose the source of his supply. "We're a mom-and-pop store in a small town off the beaten path," he said, "and thanks to Power Rangers, we've sold not only that product, but also our store itself."