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### The Turtle Effect: The Cultural Impact of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles

In the most recent television incarnation of the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles, their origin starts when a man named Yoshi bought four baby turtles and ran into the Kraang, that are aliens inside robots disguised as humans. In a fight, a canister broke, releasing a glowing mutagen that splashed onto Yoshi and the turtles, mutating them. The turtles changed into intelligent humanoids. Yoshi transformed into a giant rat, and is now known as Master Splinter. They started a new life in the sewers of New York as Splinter taught them ninjitsu. The Ninja Turtles began in 1983 from a comic written by Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird; this franchise has affected America's view during the Cold War, culture, and became a positive influence on children.

Kevin Eastman's first sketch of the Turtles began with the intent of silliness: drawing one of the slowest and least agile creatures as ninjas. Together with Laird, they created a black and white comic of these characters as a spoof of Marvel's Daredevil. The origin of his heightened senses was obtained from a radioactive chemical, and the Turtles were mutated from strange ooze. Daredevil was trained by a martial arts master named "Stick," a name and character type similar to Master Splinter's. The Ninja Turtles are known for battling against Shredder's group of ninjas, "The Foot", who are spoofed off of a group of evil ninjas, "The Hand" that Daredevil fought against. At the start of the Ninja Turtles, Eastman and Laird were aware of success stories, like Jack Kirby, and people that lost control of the rights of their character. Eastman narrates their beginning in a Panel at a Staples Convention,

“We had enough success with the early issues of the turtles and we were paying our rent and eating all the macaroni and cheese we could eat... off the success of our comic books. So when Hollywood came knocking and said, ‘We think this will be a great toy...,’ we didn’t honestly believe that. Most of the people that approached us, we thought were really slimy and nasty and we didn’t want to work with them anyway.” (Eastman)

They rejected a lot of the early people that offered to represent them with a five-year contract, exclusivity, and saying that they would control their characters for them. This continued until, “Mark Freedman show[ed] up with his perfect hair cut, his 800 dollar suit, and his briefcase” (Eastman), at Eastman and Laird’s North Hampton Massachusetts Office. He gave them the same pitch that they heard before and was rejected, but they did agreed on a napkin at a local coffee shop to give him thirty days to come back with a more interesting offer. They developed a level of respect early on. Unlike other agents, he was aware that Eastman and Laird would protect and control their characters. They did:

“Everything you ever saw with a turtle on it, we saw first, we approved it or we either drew it... It was Pete’s idea to do the different colored bandanas at one of the toy company meetings to the changes to the origins to the animation episodes to approving the movie scripts. We worked on all 300 episodes of the cartoon. You know those awful turtle hostess pies that you ate, the turtle cereal that you gave your kids that made them bounce off the wall on their way to school. We were involved in all of that craziness.” (2012)

They set a new standard of the treatment to the rights of a creator. The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles paved the way for individual publishers to be successful starting in a time where nuclear power was feared.

The Ninja Turtles began during the Cold War in a time of worry about a possible nuclear war. Americans already knew of the power of nuclear weapons because they were the first to make and use the atomic bomb. According to the Encyclopædia Britannica, in the event of the Cuban missile crisis, Soviets secretly installed missiles in Cuba possibly to launch nuclear attacks on American cities. The Americans were in fear of the mystery and power of nuclear chemicals. But when these fictional baby turtles came in contact to nuclear waste, instead of dying or contracting a disease, they grow and obtain intelligence. John Bisques stated that, “the careless disposal of nuclear waste into the middle of a populated city is NOT a negative action in this story. On the contrary, the presence of radioactive waste in the heart of New York leads to its salvation from an evil foreign force, not the deaths of thousands of its citizens” (921). Then, these mutants become heroes, whereas in previous media, mutants and anything nonhuman was commonly the villain. Examples of previous mutant animals that kill people go from features like *Godzilla*, *The Beast from 20,000 Fathoms*, and *Mysterious Island*. But these movies could only increase the fear of nuclear power, which made the Ninja Turtles stand out from other stories of mutants or heroes. The American culture became more relaxed from their fears in the Cold War because of how this fictional nuclear waste is positive and the story is wacky and humorous.

The Ninja Turtles questioned the American culture’s values with several inversions by inverting the cultural meanings that are associated with certain creatures or ideas. Turtles are seen to be slow, powerless creatures, but are being cast as heroes capable of swift athletic

accomplishments. Also, turtles are reptiles, and are usually used for evil villains, going way back to the snake in the Garden of Eden. Then, their mentor and father-figure is a rat, which is defined as, “a contemptible person: one who betrays or deserts friends or associates” (Britannica). Even where they live, the sewers, culture sees as dirty and dark, but that is where the heroes are born. The sewers also reference an American legend in current culture of alligators in the New York Sewer System. According to the legend explained by George H. Lewis, alligators were bought as exotic pets and flushed down a toilet when they grew too big, or if they owners lost interest. A fellow mutant and friend of the turtles, Leatherhead is a crocodile that was flushed into the sewers when he was a baby and then mutated by the same mutagen that created the Ninja Turtles. His origin is also similar to the 1970s horror film, *Alligator*. In the film, a pet baby alligator was flushed down a Chicago toilet and ate the lab rats that were thrown down. It grew monstrous and large then rampaged onto the streets. Leatherhead has the anger and fights like a beast as well, but unlike the horror film, he is full of intelligence, wisdom, loyalty, and kindness that exceed a human’s. Cultural inversions used in different versions of the Ninja Turtles go beyond mutations and animals. The character, April O’Neil proves to be of help repeatedly in different situations, though she is a woman. Instead of being treated a damsel in distress, she is valued as part of the team. The other human character, Casey Jones, wears a hokey goalie mask similar to Jason’s. But, instead of being a manic murder, he fights on the streets of New York as a vigilante. These inversions rebel against the culture’s views and opens minds to new ideas.

These mutant heroes naturally appeal to children and become positive influences.

Previous cartoon heroes of that time included He-Man and G.I. Joe. These characters tended to be strong, American white males that focused on seriously saving the day. The Turtles are more laid back heroes and tend to accidentally find themselves in situations where they need to fight.

The American heroes fought with guns and the turtles use Japanese ninjitsu techniques to try to stay out of or get out of trouble. Peggy Dunn-Snow expresses the strong importance of Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles by stating, “The turtles and their mentor represent a nontraditional family unit in which each turtle is accepted as an individual with a distinct personality. Many children in therapy live in the non-traditional settings of group or foster care homes, single-parent households or with grandparents or other relatives” (1993). The turtles are more relatable because their original forms are tiny and helpless, like young children. Their dramatic change into skilled ninjas gives children hope that they can grow strong. The turtle’s constant use of slang, humor, and childish pranks on each other make them more relatable and understandable for the children. Children relate to the Ninja Turtles need for privacy in their sewer home, friends from above ground, and each other. Shredder shows how evil exists, but it can be challenged. The turtles are good examples for children because, “unlike the He-Man/G.I. Joe characters who focused on actively protecting the world by hunting down threats, the Turtles are much more laid-back in their pursuit of justice, only fighting when their friends or family are directly threatened” (Bisques 924). The turtles main reason for fighting is to help instead of causing pain or violent anger. They also show the struggles of the turtle, Raphael, who is a hothead. His brothers and Master Splinter help him to change into a better person. The Ninja Turtles express the consequences of violence through episodes 14 and 16 of season two in the 2003 television series. Leonardo goes out to stop all the fights between the Foot, Purple Dragons, and mobsters. By picking fights, he creates chaos and gets himself and family mixed up in it. The turtles teach important life lessons that children need to learn and appeal to kids by how relatable they are.

The Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles have greatly impacted culture. The creators, Kevin Eastman and Peter Laird changed the future for individual publishers through the turtles. By

treating the dangers of nuclear power as a positive change humorously, they calmed down the American people's fear during the Cold War. The reason for their popularity is how every main character is a cultural inversion that makes it appealing and refreshing. The turtles prove to be positive role models and easily relatable.

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