

My secret history with Monster in My Pocket



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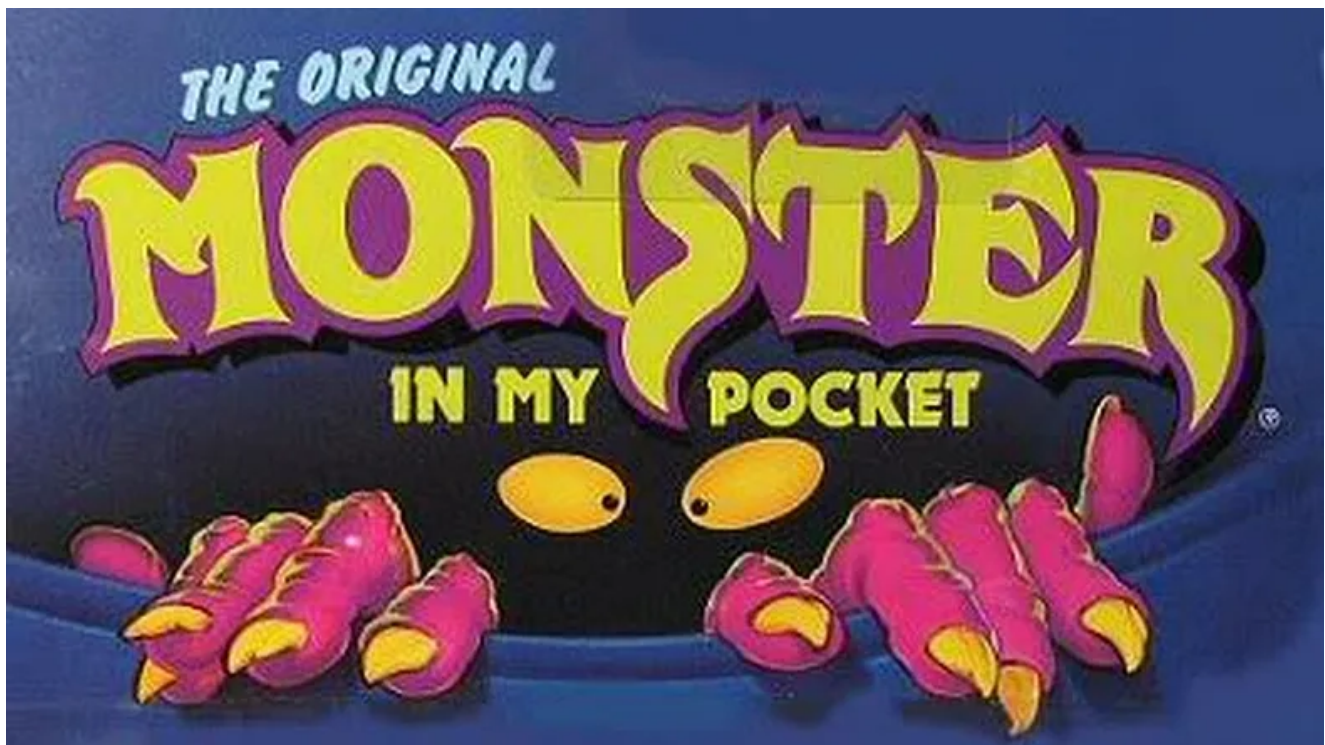
“Nostalgia” has become a red flag for me.

I’m frustrated at how it has hijacked culture, how artistic criticism is stifled by middle-aged men, refusing to grow up, who insist that shit films from the ’80s are brilliant while companies pump out any old tat featuring Emmett Brown or a Ghostbuster — the bloke ones obviously — knowing full well that people will lap it up.

The word has shifted from meaning a longing for a past time to a marketing

gimmick; the joys of childhood shifted from memories to merchandise. I know some films I enjoyed as a child are utter garbage so make no attempt to defend them and I admit to a prickish air of moral superiority in not falling for The Man's attempt to capitalise on my youth. Culture is too infantilised and you all need to grow up.

Needless to say, I'm cynical about nostalgia, or I was until I stumbled across a childhood obsession I had forgotten I had: Monster in My Pocket.



My favourite form of procrastination as an adult is wasting hours hitting the random article button on Wikipedia. One day, while I should have been doing something much more important, my online lucky dip pulled up the page on Monster in My Pocket and I was immediately excited.

MIMP for short, Monster in My Pocket was a series of rubber avatars of famous monsters and I'd spent hours playing with and studying the little neon ghouls as a boy. I immediately started a Google search and found wikis

and fan-pages listing the entire line.

The unusual designs pressed the play button on long-forgotten tapes in my mind. I had visions of the Lego box The Vampire and The Jabberwocky drowned in, assembling The Mad Scientist and The Invisible Man on my window ledge — presumably to current theories on chemistry — and I could almost feel my pockets bulging with monsters as I took them out to play with friends.

I mentally ticked off the ones I owned in my mind. It was almost all of them. What had happened to them? Mine were probably in a skip somewhere but in general how did they come about and where did they go?

Displaying a level of investigative journalism that will one day form the basis of an Oscar-winning drama, I manage to track down one half of the duo that created the Monster line. The CEO of Morrison Entertainment Group, Joe Morrison.



Once the enigma-like code of the time difference between my flat in Leeds and MEG HQ in California was cracked I was pleased to find that Joe was charming, modest in a humorous way, and good at telling a story, knowing the golden rule — start with a joke.

“I’m always willing to talk about my genius ideas”

Morrison had previously worked at Mattel on the boys’ line before starting his own company with his partner John Weems. They had had previous but fleeting success on an imported, line of miniatures of flesh coloured miniatures named Kinkeshi from Bandai. In translation, they became M.U.S.C.L.E (Millions of Unusual Small Creatures Lurking Everywhere).

I had the type of recollection that you have when a parent is telling you gossip about some relative you don't really know. There was no throb of nostalgia from the Japanese monsters, at least not these ones.

Morrison had acquired the rights to a few old properties including Dick Tracy and Godzilla. Immediately a reservoir bust and a memory spilt forward of being allowed to stay up late one evening to watch BBC2. Jonathon Ross was hosting a marathon of classic Godzilla films. I was excited at the possibility of some connection between the monsters of my youth.

Morrison and Weems were having difficulty designing a Godzilla poster.

"It's very difficult to scale Godzilla, he supposedly 400 feet tall," Morrison tells me as if someone someplace was bullshitting about Godzilla's height just to annoy him. "So we're trying to do a poster with people and kids, just tinkering with it and the whole thing is really difficult and then John, over a weekend was standing in a movie line and suddenly said, 'What if we had the monster pocket-sized?'"

Morrison, already fed up with Godzilla — "oh Jesus, it just wouldn't work" — remembered the popularity of M.U.S.C.L.E. and thought that pocket-sized monsters could work. If only they had a name.

"There are a number of really good kid's words. As you probably know, boys and monsters, that's just a thought that's already there. It's just a perfect word and pockets, y'know all boys always have 22 things in their pockets. It's one of those little ideas that goes a long way."

Again a swell of memories rise. This time is being told off for the ridiculous content by pockets had acquired over a summers day. Miniature monsters, sweet wrappers, orbs of glass cast off from the nearby factory that we imaged mystical properties other than cutting us and one time, a frog. Morrison is in

my mind!



If you enjoy this story you can help me write more by buying me a cuppa.

As I looked through the old Monster in My Pocket series, I noticed that they drew from a broad range of inspirations. There are creatures from folklore, myth, religion, the occult and literature; all subjects that I'd enjoyed as a child and became fascinated with as an adult.



I began to feel that Monster in My Pocket, though I'd forgotten about it, had implanted itself deep in my sub-consciousness, planting seeds that would eventually effect important decisions in my life. I had to know why they had chosen these creatures.

“[From M.U.S.C.L.E] I had learnt the hard way. We had a big hit for a very

short time and the reason that it didn't work, they didn't have any names, they didn't have anything that meant anything, there was no history — and I had two sons at the time who loved them but it was like 'hey whose this one? What is it, who is it, how is it?'"

Morrison used "real monsters" so that they had immediate recognition and backstories that could be introduced to kids. It was as simple as a flash of creativity to get around a difficult job, then good business sense to avoid replicating a previous mistake.

It was then that I realised as much as I might resist The Man's attempt to capitalise on my youth now, at least one man already had. The sense that the origins of Monster in My Pocket were important because of my nostalgia faded, but were replaced with a respect for and interest in the creative process.

Surely it was a risk to use such icons like The Beast from the Book of Revelations or the Mad Gasser of Mattoon or the Demon Astaroth in a time when "satanic panic" was sweeping the States and even the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles were accused of being satanic influences?

Morrison tells me that they were just looking for ideas and pulled as many monsters as they could from as many sources as they could find. They never had any resistance or backlash from parents save for one instance from here in the UK.

Ganesha, the Hindu elephant-headed god of Wisdom, featured in the early run of the second set of monster.

"I think it was up in Rugby, some kids started teasing an Indian kid at school. 'Your god is a monster', something like that, so anyway, we get a call from our small little office in California from the Home Office asking if we could do

something about it.”

Joe immediately pulled Ganesha from the line, costing the company about a hundred thousand dollars, and even though it hurt the bank balance, the company’s reputation was maintained.

“It was very unfortunate but we’re not trying to upset anybody.”

I felt oddly proud of Morrison. He had made a mistake and rectified it at a cost to himself. But it came with a sense of nostalgia’s more depressing cousin, melancholy. I considered The Simpsons, another fond childhood companion, and how its legacy and my ability to enjoy it, has been smeared by its inability to recognise the offence it has caused to South East Asian communities.



Perhaps there is a reason parts of our childhood should remain there, kept as

memories before they have a chance to disappoint us. Monster in My Pocket had been a huge hit and had spawned a video game and several TV specials. What happened? Unlike The Simpsons — it hadn't sealed its own fate. I ask Morrison about the elephant in the room, the pocket monsters that are still with us, Pokémon.

“So here is the background and it eventually ended up in litigation,” Morrison tells me. The relationship between Pokémon and Monster in My Pocket has a few legal twist and turns. Morrison implies that it was Nintendo's intention to call Pokémon “Pocket Monsters”, in the West but that the similarity probably would have infringed on the Monster copyright. Nintendo changed the name to Pokémon and launched all the same.

Morrison didn't do much about it than grumble. He couldn't afford to do anything about it until a licensing agent showed up with a proposal to distribute Monster in My Pocket with an upfront fee of three hundred thousand dollars.

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little legal language that says we would never, ever go after Nintendo. Then I look into it, and it's from a law firm in Seattle and it turns out the law firm is in the same building as Nintendo, and I say ‘wait a minute, these guys are obviously feeling some pressure’.”

Sensing Nintendo might know they are crossing a line, Morrison took his claim that Pokemon was an infringement on the Monster franchise to court. He lost — “Our lawyer did an awful job”– and Nintendo tried to counter sue but the case was thrown out.

I was never in love with Pokémon, not like I was with MIMP. We couldn't

afford a Gameboy and I was reaching the age when it was time for me to put away childish things and become a man. As all Northerners will know, on your tenth birthday you have to decide whether your future is in the pit or the mill, there is simply no time to catch them all.

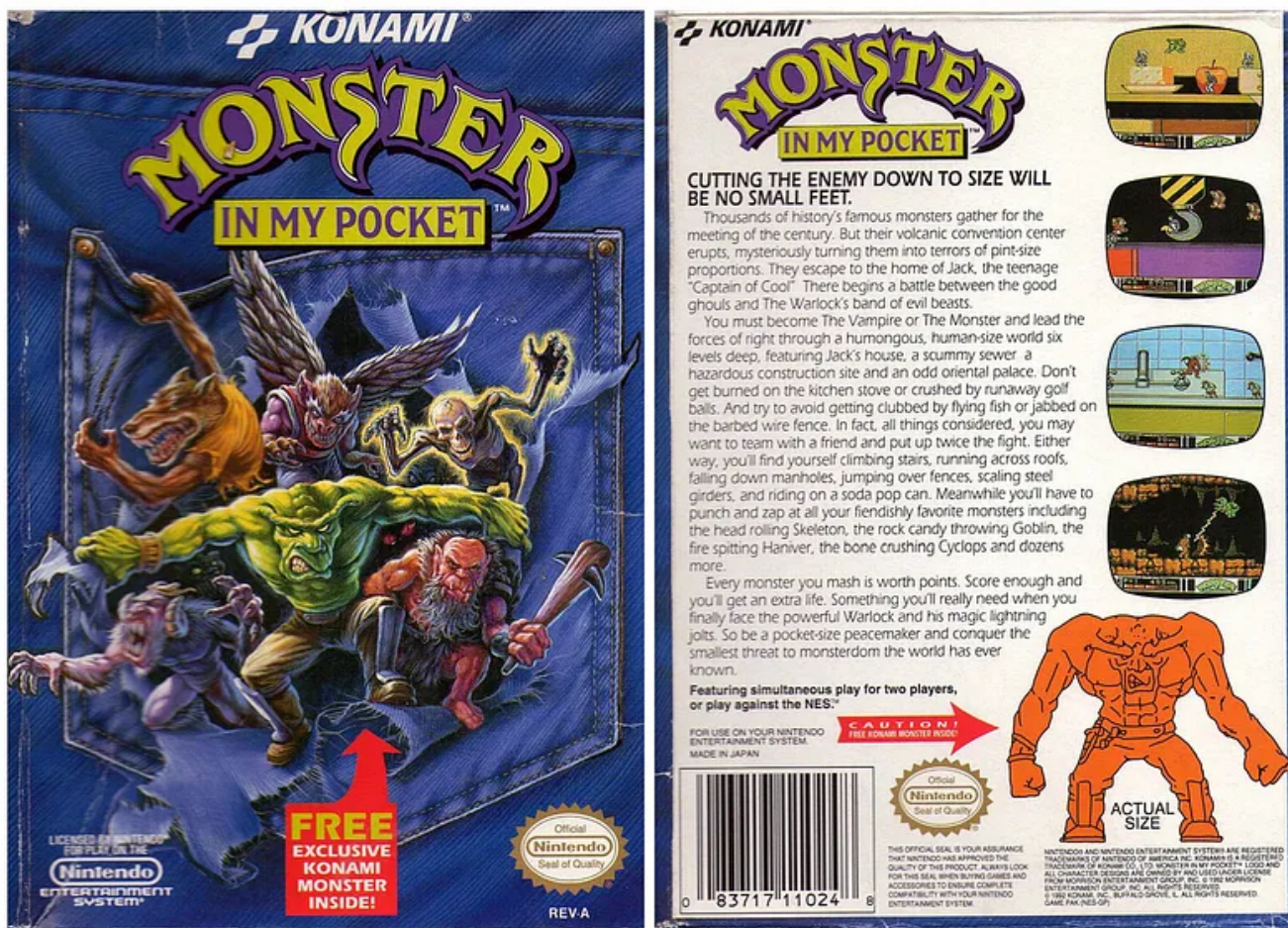
Monster in My Pocket has never really been killed off, and there have been a few iterations over the years, it just that the boys who fell in love it grew up and moved on. They're in their late twenties now. and some of them have

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rocket could provide some magical doorway to nappier times?



Morrison tells me that they're in talks with "entertainment people" to produce some new Monsters content and that they may be capitalising on the

nostalgia trend by bringing back the old monsters with new designs. I even get to see a sneak peak of a sizzle-reel of the upcoming line that I am sworn not to reveal the content of.

I keep my promise.

I wish Morrison luck and genuinely hope that some kids somewhere will love the monsters again.

After our chat, I weigh up the idea of eBaying the original Monster line, or maybe even getting the new set but my again my cynicism returns. Would owning these little rubber demons make me feel happy? Where would I put them? Is it weird to play with them? Could I write them off as a tax expense for this article? And most importantly, how do I explain to my fiancé that as I'm turning 30 I've decided that Monsters should be in my pocket once more?

I decided against it. Even if I tracked down the old line, or invested the new one, they would never be *mine*. Mine are trapped in a time and place and I'm happy with Monster in My Pocket being a memory and something about trying to resurrect that memory feels like it would only cheapen it.

But I'm glad I got to talk to Morrison, a man whose existence I never dreamed to consider as a child. It was a bit like finding a secret history to my memories and a way of indulging them without endangering them, an attempt at the grown-up appreciation of a childhood love and a type of nostalgia that I'm on board with. Having the monsters back won't make me any happier than just having the memories does.

Plus my fiancé won't tell me off for wasting money on creepy little toys.

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