

INDUSTRY Career focus

Get the job you want with tailored advice from industry insiders

So you want to be a... Vinyl toy designer

The vinyl or 'designer' toy market has expanded vastly in less than a decade. Read on to find out how you can design your own pieces of modern art

Introducing the experts

Craig Anthony Perkins

Craig runs his own company called Genshi: Toy. He's worked as a vinyl toy designer for four years and his most famous vinyl toy is the Broken Heart Robot. He's currently working on a screenplay for TV based on his toy designs.

www.genshi.com and www.genshi-toy.com

Ron English

Ron has been a designer of vinyl toys for eight years. His clients include Kidrobot, MindSTYLE, StrangeCO, Secret Base, Dark Horse and Popaganda.

www.popaganda.com

Paul Budnitz

Paul is the president and founder of Kidrobot, one of the biggest designer toy companies. He's collaborated with many famous designers and graffiti artists for toy designs.

www.kidrobot.com

Whether you consider them toys or art or both, there's no denying that vinyl toys are incredibly popular and have become a profitable opportunity for designers and graffiti artists worldwide. While many in the industry would argue that it's unlikely that you'll be able to secure a whole career on vinyl toys alone, as many artists and designers tend to run it as a side project alongside apparel design and so on, it's certainly a fun and creative outlet for your talents. We spoke to three experts for their top tips on how to get your designs created.

Do I have the skills?

What key skills do I need to be a vinyl toy designer?

Craig Anthony Perkins: I think one of the key skills is the ability to communicate your idea. Whether that is through illustration or sculpting, you need to be able to show your design (or have it interpreted) to the producer/manufacturer/distributor. In my case, since I'm not that much of an illustrator, simpler was better. I had a little sketch of my first character, the 'Broken Heart Robot' that I had done, and as simplistic as it was, it immediately



communicated what the character was all about.

Ron English: I think that you need imagination as well as an understanding of the processes involved.

What about a portfolio?

Do you have any tips for putting one together?

Ron English: In my opinion, your toys are your calling card. **Craig Anthony Perkins:** Turnarounds! Everyone wants to see turnaround drawings of your character so they can get a better representation of what it will look like from all sides. Also, various colour options and alternative designs always help, and it shows that you've got more than just one good idea.

How do I get my creations made into toys?

How would I go about getting my designs into production?

Craig Anthony Perkins: Since this is a fairly new industry, the best way is to do it yourself. I found many veterans in this industry were very tight-lipped and wouldn't give out any advice, so I really had to research to find a manufacturer. I lucked out and found ThreeZero in Hong Kong who manufactures most of the top vinyl toys in this industry. From there, I got a loan, sent them the sculpt and as they were in production, I found a distributor (DKE Toys) who was willing to get it into the stores for me.

Alternatively, the other way, now that the industry is growing and there are a couple of established producers/companies around, is to submit your portfolio to one of

KRICKY (LEFT): Kricky The Alien Frog is a limited-edition item available in several colour-ways © Craig Anthony Perkins/Genshi Media Group



I've sketched up an initial design – now what?



"From my initial sketch I was able to have someone make a 3D mockup of it. I then used a SLA (stereolithography) machine to make a sculpt from the mockup"

Craig Anthony Perkins,
Founder/Creative director/Designer,
Genshi: Toy



GRINS (ABOVE): Ron's 'Grin' vinyl toy is inspired by the Peanuts character Charlie Brown. It's a seven-inch vinyl toy that was released last year. This image shows three colour-ways of the figure © Ron English

RAFFY BOX (OPPOSITE TOP): Made from super smooth white vinyl and all ready for drawing, scribbling, piercing, painting and posing, the figure comes with a mystery accessory, sticker and marker © Paul Budnitz

MINI SET (OPPOSITE BELOW): This set of ten mini figures released late last year includes many of Ron's iconic characters such as Ronnie Rabbit, Mouse Mask Murphy and Obese Alien © Ron English

them and ask them if they will produce your design. The thing about this industry is, you really need to already have a name as an artist before many of these companies will even speak to you, which is why most artists in this industry end up doing it themselves.

Job hunting tips?

Do you have any tips for interviews and job hunting?

Craig Anthony Perkins: Go to the gallery showings that feature your favourite designers and always go to the conventions, such as San Diego Comic Con, and bring your portfolio to show what you can do. Even though I produced my own toys myself, I still carry samples of the actual toys just in case I run into somebody who might be interested... you never know what it might lead to.

Any other advice?

Do you have any other tips?

Ron English: Study what is already out there and create something that stands out from the crowd.

Craig Anthony Perkins: Let your imagination run wild – never stop jotting ideas down.

Industry insight



Paul Budnitz
President and founder
Kidrobot

Budnitz studied photography, sculpture and film at Yale University, earning honours and a degree in Art. While he was at university he started his own business customising vintage clothing and "wearable cultural artefacts" such as classic trainers. He went on to set up his own company called MiniDisco, which dealt with customising MiniDisc players for film and sound recording. However, in 2002 he opted for a change in career. "I decided to pursue a career as a vinyl toy designer because I fell in love with early Bounty Hunter toys that I'd seen in Harajuku," says Budnitz. "There weren't any vinyl toys made in the United States, so I founded my own company to make and sell them."

Budnitz sold MiniDisco that year. He and illustrator Tristan Eaton then worked together to create Dunny and Munny, two vinyl toys that have now become two of Kidrobot's most well known characters. Budnitz has since joined forces with other designers, graffiti artists and illustrators to work on toy projects together.

"What I enjoy most about the job is making and selling things I love to people who love the things I love," explains Budnitz. Meanwhile, the success of Kidrobot has meant that Budnitz was able to expand the Kidrobot brand by launching a limited-edition clothing line. Budnitz and Eaton's Dunny and Munny toys were also accepted into the permanent collection of New York City's Museum of Modern Art in 2007.



How do I capture the attention of the larger vinyl toy companies?

Craig Anthony Perkins
Founder/Creative director/
Designer, Genshi: Toy

"One way is to customise ready-made blank toys such as the Munny or Dunny by Kidrobot. If your designs stand out then people will take notice"



WHAT OTHER EQUIPMENT WILL I BE USING?

You'll find programs such as Adobe Photoshop and Illustrator key. You may even want to use something like Autodesk's Sketchbook Pro software. A piece of hardware that'll be beneficial to your work is a graphics tablet. Wacom is a popular brand and you can take a look at the range on www.wacom.com. Don't forget that a good quality sketchbook and a Sharpie marker or a pencil is vital to carry around on your travels too.

Want to know more?

Feed your mind with these tasty morsels of information

Inspirational websites

www.vinylpulse.com; www.kidrobot.com

Essential training

Interactive Toy and Game Design BA (Hons)

Cost: TBC Location: Huddersfield University
Website: www.hud.ac.uk

Illustration BA (Hons)

Cost: £3,225 Location: University College Falmouth
Website: www.falmouth.ac.uk

Must-have resources

I Am Plastic

Author: Paul Budnitz
Publisher: Harry N. Abrams Inc. Price: £24.95/\$40
Website: www.abrambooks.com

Pens Are My Friends

Author: Jon Burgerman Publisher: IdN Price: \$55 (approximately £34)
Website: <http://idnworld.com>