

At 50, Lego still going strong

Posted 3 hours 22 minutes ago

Lego is celebrating its 50th anniversary after resisting fierce competition from high-tech computer games that nearly brought the company down a few years ago.



Lego has become one of the most well-known and popular toys in the world. (File photo) (Reuters: Paul Vreeker)

On January 28, 1958, Godtfred Kirk Christiansen submitted a patent for the interlocking and studded plastic brick that can now be found in almost every child's toy box.

The simple building block has become one of the most well-known and popular toys in the world.

The key to its success?

"The Lego brick doesn't age with time and continues to fascinate because it allows children, and others, to develop their creativity, imagination and curiosity and let it wander free," said Charlotte Simonsen, a spokeswoman at Lego's headquarters in the western Danish town of Billund.

The family company Lego, whose name comes from the first two letters of the Danish words "Leg godt" or "play well" in English, was founded before the invention of the famous block, by Ole Kristiansen in 1932.

The company's iconic toy allows an infinite number of assembly combinations. With just two bricks there are 24 different combinations, and with six there are 915 million possibilities, according to Lego.

Lego says more than 400 million children and adults play each year with the bricks, spending five billion hours a year putting them together and pulling them apart.

The bricks made today can still interlock with those made in the first batch in 1958, note avid Lego fans.

And make no mistake about it, Lego bricks are not just child's play - they also capture the imagination of adults.

South Korean adventurer Heo Young-Ho, who climbed Mount Everest in 1987, left a Lego toy behind in the snow after his ascent.

"I've kept a box in the attic with Lego from my childhood. They never go out of style and they box is full of memories of long hours spent building things with my friends," said 21-year-old Alexander.

After its planetary success, Lego experienced a severe crisis at the end of the 1990s, hit hard by fierce competition from interactive electronic and computer games which brought the Danish company to its knees for the first time in its history.

Named "Toy of the Century" in 1999 by US business magazine Fortune, Lego suffered through a dark

period that almost ended with the plastic brick being relegated to the history books.

The company had diversified into theme parks and branded products, including clothing, books, watches and multimedia games, but reported millions of dollars in losses in 1998, 2000, 2003 and 2004.

Some experts were quick to eulogise the colourful brick, including educationalist and toy researcher Torben Hangaard Rasmussen.

"Lego bricks belong to the industrial era when children liked to build things, playing wannabe engineers. Nowadays, the most popular toys are inspired by the virtual world," he said in 2004.

Then, at the height of Lego's crisis, owner and chief executive officer Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen tried to get a hold on the situation and save the family business from bankruptcy, injecting more than 800 million kroner (\$178 million) of his personal fortune into the business.

Several months later he resigned as chief executive, handing over the reins to 35-year-old Joergen Vig Knudstorp, who brought a breath of fresh air to the company.

Determined to bring the company back to financial stability, he proceeded to lay off staff, focus on core operations and close down production sites.

The company began to prosper again, and in 2006 it posted sales of 7.8 billion kroner in 130 countries and a 1.4 billion kroner net profit.

Seven boxes of Lego are sold every second around the world, and 19 billion components are produced each year - enough to wrap around the Earth's circumference five times.

-AFP

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• elle:

29 Jan 2008 11:03:05am

loved lego then, still love it now. it was an integral part of my childhood and it stimulates the imagination without end!

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• bvan:

29 Jan 2008 10:38:20am

There are two things that annoy me about Lego nowadays:

1. It's become hopelessly expensive!
2. It seems to come almost exclusively in boxes of the "build a spaceship" or "build a racecar" type, not the box with 200 assorted bricks for you to build whatever you want.

Fond memories... Actually, I still play with my nephews' Lego whenever I get a chance. :)

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■ AFOL:

29 Jan 2008 10:58:52am

Yes, it has become more expensive, but consider the number of hours play that kids can have with Lego compared to computer games - once they're finished a new game is wanted.

You still can buy the boxes of assorted bricks, just somewhat harder to find now days, and if parts from the newer sets are used in conjunction with the old style sets, it expands the creativity possibilities.

As for the "build a spaceship" or "build a racecar" type, the company is catering to the market, if they continually don't make money, they wil close and Lego wont be anymore.

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- **Mark:**

29 Jan 2008 10:22:31am

Lego was certainly a favourite toy of my childhood, although (sadly) my old Lego buckets (one wasn't enough) were passed onto a family friend, so I won't be able to pass them onto my kids.

A good example of how times have changed, on the weekend I bought Lego Star Wars - The Complete Saga. It is fantastic, hillarious while still being challenging and true to the movie series.

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- **Roland:**

29 Jan 2008 10:21:08am

Happy B'day Lego!

I remember my days as a child making everything and anything that my imagination let me with Lego!

Plus to this day I'm still facianted by what new boundaries Lego is pushing by what they let you build these days.

Bravo!

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- **Stephen:**

29 Jan 2008 9:55:50am

My children inherited my "vintage" lego and it has been the only toy that survives all fads. On the weekend my youngest and his friend made a multimedia spectacular using their lego creations, digital cameras, PC editing and so forth.

As long as imagination, creativity, and the joy of making something yourself are valued, Lego will be here to stay. New technologies simple enhance (and record) the lego experience!

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