

Children's Birthdays and Still More Lego!

Shôn Ellerton, June 29, 2022

Every time my son's birthday comes around, we become inundated with more Lego.



When it comes to being practical during children's birthdays or any other occasion that requires the passing of some sort of gift or present, the Chinese and other Asian communities have seemed to have got this right.

Handing out money in red envelopes.

In western cultures, many consider money vulgar and crass and for some reason or another, would rather prefer to buy bits of mass-produced plastic which will, at some point in time, be either thrown away, become damaged, or made incomplete and essentially useless and unwanted.

But now I dread the thought of yet more stuff proliferating at home with each passing year of my young son on his birthday. And what springs to mind on every parent on deliberating on what gift to choose for *someone else's* birthday often a few hours before the big occasion?

That's right. Lego! More Lego! And still more Lego!

Now don't get me wrong, there's nothing quite as enticing for young children when in receipt of a shiny new box of Lego. The box, which will then be disposed of because it has been irrevocably damaged during the process of opening it. Ferreting around for scissors to open the little plastic bags of Lego bits which they, themselves, contain even *smaller* plastic bags, containing tiny little pieces of Lego that require extensive magnification for most adults. Do not try to open these bags by pulling them apart with your hands because, no doubt,

the act of doing so will inevitably result in a mini-explosion of Lego shrapnel, some of which may be lost for time immemorial only to be discovered by some poor soul stumbling around in bare feet in the middle of the night.

So, then the fun part happens. Putting it together.

Now, there are two schools of thought. Learning how to think for yourself and learning how to follow instructions. They are both equally important in my opinion. A medical surgeon *must* follow established procedure and instructions; however, a scientist, particularly that of one who is pushing the frontiers of science *needs* to be able to think ‘out of the box’. Such a scientist may work in fringe territory but remember that most good ideas have at some point in time originated from the fringe.

Well. Back in the ‘olden days’, at least in my childhood during the early 80s, Lego generally came in bulk form with a quite limited selection of different pieces, what we, these days, nostalgically call Classic Lego. The usual two by fours, the flat pieces, the flat long strips, the four by four blocks, the basic 45-degree angled pieces and so on. Colours were somewhat limited and interestingly, I don’t remember encountering any green pieces except for the thin base plates meant to support the structure.

But this is the thing, you had a *lot* of the same piece and you could build many interesting things ranging from such inanimate objects like skyscrapers, railway stations, castles to animate ones like dragons which I attempted to create but ended up looking more like a giant duck in reverence of the Atari Adventure game I played on my Atari 2600 console. There just weren’t any strange little bits of Lego to adorn and beautify such creations making the world of Lego look not to dissimilar to the world of Minecraft. Come to think of this, Minecraft *is* the new Classic Lego, and, in the case of my son, he can build far more interesting and impressive structures, although it’s in a virtual environment.

But today’s Classic Lego? It’s just not the same.

Probably three years ago or thereabouts, I was enticed in buying one of these 1500-piece Classic Lego affairs from my local K-Mart for my son’s birthday. It was in a plastic tub and when opened, it contained a number of different plastic bags, each containing a matching colour scheme. We found out that each of these bags had the required pieces to build some object such as a helicopter,

sports car, or some sort of spaceship along with a set of instructions on how to assemble it. Within each bag was, yet again, an assortment of tiny little pieces which could never be used for anything *except* for the intended structure. Even after combining everything into one bin and removing the ‘useful’ more generic pieces, more than half of what was left comprised of esoteric and essentially useless odds and ends. One could still create something from scratch and ad-hoc with the remaining standard pieces, but the supply was disparagingly limited.

How can that be Classic Lego? Classic Lego was meant for children to think out of the box and create something new without adhering to any set of instructions in the box.

During the late 70s into the 80s, there was Lego to teach children how to *follow instructions*. It was called Technical Lego, the usual kind of Lego which we buy today. Such kits on building elaborate spaceships, tractors, cranes, and other wonderful works of mechanical and aeronautical engineering. It was the perfect complement to the civil and structural engineering world of the *original* Classic Lego.

Although I once enjoyed getting a big pack of technical Lego and putting it together as per the instructions, that’s where the enjoyment stopped. The assembled item sat there taking space on a shelf collecting dust and that was it. Even as a child, I saw no point at all in disassembling it and putting it back together again. Now, for an adult to take apart an Ikea Malmo chest of bedroom drawers and then to reassemble it for no good reason is enough to consider sending in the men with white suits. As for the original classic Lego pieces I had, they were used frequently to build better and bigger things.

Every person is different. I was, personally, never enchanted with building those plastic boats and planes from those kits that contained sheets of plastic yokes containing bits you had to twist off and then, in my case, make an awful mess by gluing them together to complete the model. If I was successful and didn’t make a pig’s ear of it, I had a Spitfire or an HMS Dreadnought which then required further work by dipping tiny paintbrushes into little Humbrol paint pots and making even more mess. Once completed, I didn’t really know what to do with them. I confess that I built model rockets out of tubing and balsa wood, but at least I could launch them over and over again to heights of a thousand feet or more using a parachute and disposable powder discharge cartridges which I’d ignite with a fuse or electrical discharge.

What does one do with unopened boxes of technical Lego? The obvious answer is, like most toys which are either unwanted or have too many of, give it to some other unsuspecting child on his or her birthday whose parents will probably be thinking precisely the same way as I've been!