

material world

Rants, raves, ideas and news

Unhappy Shopper

#4 Lego: we don't make it like we used to, says the Shopper

Knowing that child labour and vitamin D deficiency are tricky for youngsters to grasp, teachers concentrate on simpler things when relating the hardships of Victorian Britain. 'A Victorian child was expected to amuse themselves with a piece of coal and a length of string', they explain. 'You kids don't know you're born, with your Transformers and your Lego.'

Today it's Lego that's having a hard time, not children. Do debts of more than £400 million reflect the dominance of PlayStation or have the Danes lost their way?

Lego's strap-line used to be 'a new toy everyday'. One day you had a dragster to play with, the next a forklift. But now Lego kits contain special pieces – you just get to stick the wheels on the dragster, and maybe slap a sticker on the bonnet. They're little more than flat-packed toys – no wonder kids are bored of it.

To get back in with them, Lego has resorted to licensing. Harry Potter and Star Wars rub shoulders in a star-studded catalogue that will surely boast an Oscars ceremony set before long (complete with miniature golden statuettes). After all, the perma-grins of Lego men are eerily similar to the Botoxed smiles of today's ageing Hollywood stars.



How to buy...

RETRO VIDEO GAMES

the gadgeteer

This month's most peculiar new hi-tech gadget

Epson has produced a remote-controlled flying robot which can take pictures with its minute digital camera. It's controlled by Bluetooth, the wireless system you get on mobile phones and the like.

The picture quality isn't perfect, and the robot looks as though it'd lose a fight with a daddy-longlegs. But, according to Epson, it could be used in the future to find survivors of disasters.

Far more likely that pre-pubescent nerds will be sending them on forays into the girls' changing rooms – just as well this is still a prototype.



ILLUSTRATION HARRY MALT

Video games are increasingly like films – violent, nasty films, at that. Remember a time when games were games? Time to go retro...

1 SAVE UP FOR A COIN-OP

With arcade cabinets, you pay for rarity, condition, and whether the game has a following. eBay is a good source, but try specialists such as www.arcadewarehouse.co.uk. You can buy new cabinets and old games to go in them, or complete originals. A decent cabinet will cost at least £400 – sit-down driving games have been clocked exceeding £2,500.

2 CONSOLE YOURSELF

If you're more of an armchair gamer, you could be back in the 80s playing Donkey Kong. As the first generation of gamers becomes nostalgic, a collectors' market is springing up – a mint Sinclair ZX80 recently went on eBay for £183. But don't be sucked in: you could pick up something similar at a car boot sale for next to nothing or, for a bit more, at specialist sites such as www.ukretro.co.uk.

3 USE A CHEAT CODE

Any PC bought in the last five years is powerful enough to pretend to be a console from the pre-PlayStation era. You can download software which emulates consoles from the internet – try www.romhustler.org, for example. It's illegal to play the games if you don't own the originals, but the makers are currently turning a blind eye to emulators.