

Toy story: Old favourites fight rise of the tablet

January 26 2014, by Alfons Luna



Alexandra Delage from Lexibook holds a tablet connected wirelessly to a mini camera attached to a helmet during the Toy Fair at Olympia exhibition centre in London on January 21, 2014

The big players in the traditional toy market have come out fighting in Britain as little fingers are increasingly occupied by iPad-type devices at playtime.

Previously seen as the preserve of grown-ups, tablets are increasingly top of children's wish-lists.

The best-selling toy in Britain last year was the Furby, the cuddly robotic "pet" that has irritated millions of [parents](#) with its constant chatter. But tablet computers designed specifically for kids came close behind, according to the NPD market research group.

With toddlers frequently more nimble on touchscreens than their parents, major players including Samsung are cashing in with tablets designed for the lucrative and tech-savvy youth market.

At this week's London Toy Fair, manufacturers of traditional toys insisted they face a bright future—but admitted the rise of tablets means they're in for a tough fight.

"We have to recognise these days that there's a place for tablets and for technology," said Jamie Dickinson, marketing manager at Playmobil, the German-based brand that has produced some 2.6 billion plastic figures since 1974.

"When children grow up and go into the adult world, they need to know how to use the technology," he told AFP as he stood in front of a display of Playmobil figures at London's Olympia exhibition centre.

"But there are lots of other skills that they need to learn, which only traditional toys can give them."

Playmobil is resisting the digital onslaught, with its global sales increasing by 5.3 percent to 531 million euros (\$726 million) last year.

In the British market, the building sets and action figures markets will enjoy a 10-percent jump in growth this year, NPD predicts, partly

thanks to toys linked to the football World Cup in Brazil.



Toy characters walk past visitors during the Toy Fair at Olympia exhibition centre in London on January 21, 2014

Many of the toy firms displaying their wares in London were counting on the support of parents with an instinctive suspicion of the Internet and, by extension, tablets.

Metal construction kits by Meccano have been a boys' favourite since they were invented in England in 1909—and are "still very popular, especially in the eyes of parents, grandparents and those who buy gifts", said Kevin Jones, European marketing director for the brand's owner Spin Master.

"The great thing about traditional toys is that they have longevity. It's

great value for parents," he told AFP.

Lego is another perennial favourite that has diversified its range, partly through movie tie-ins. The Danish firm saw a 13 percent increase in global revenue in 2013, although Asia accounted for much of the positive figures.

Roland Earl, director general of the British Toy and Hobby Association, played down the threat posed by tablets, arguing that there is plenty of space in the playroom for a variety of games.

"We've found that the traditional toy market has held up very well over the last ten years," he told AFP.

"In fact, we've posted growth in the UK in most years out of the last ten—and the computer game industry has actually suffered in the last year, possibly from less expensive free games that are available on the web."

Tablets have a "novelty value" that may yet pass, he suggested.

Some parents may worry that having these gadgets at such an early age could create a dangerous tendency towards lethargy—but after all, say manufacturers, iPad-loving adults are hardly setting a good example.



Businessmen look at the Doll World stand during the annual Toy Fair at the Olympia exhibition centre in London, on January 21, 2014

French maker Lexibook said it now makes tablets aimed at users as young as two.

"They want to copy their parents and use a tablet themselves," said Lexibook CEO Emmanuel Le Cottier.

"So we've created a range of tablets going from two to 14 years old, with dedicated content for each target age-group."

He added that Lexibook's kids' [tablets](#)—like many of their rivals—come with parental control features, including the ability to set a daily time limit on their usage.

Nine-year-old Emilie Brun said she prefers playing with her parents'

tablet to traditional toys—but she's usually ready to move on to something else after a couple of games.

"There's loads of interesting games on the tablet to play when I'm bored in my room," she told AFP.

"But I'm also happy to play 'teachers' with my sister."

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Citation: Toy story: Old favourites fight rise of the tablet (2014, January 26) retrieved 6 June 2023 from <https://phys.org/news/2014-01-toy-story-favourites-tablet.html>

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