

FUN AND GAMES



The Vindicator/Kristina M. Barker

HOT ITEM: Jay Horowitz, president of American Classic Toy in Sebring, shows the Sudoku Cube he created. Orders have been flying in for the cube, which presents the popular Sudoku puzzle in a Rubik's Cube format.

New twist on an old number

Merging the Sudoku puzzle with Rubik's Cube creates a growing toy sensation.

By DON SHILLING
VINDICATOR BUSINESS EDITOR

SEBRING — A local toy maker has twisted the latest puzzle craze in just the right way to gain national attention.

Jay Horowitz, president of American Classic Toy in Sebring, has transformed the Sudoku puzzle from a two-dimensional, pen-and-paper exercise into a three-dimensional, twisting, turning toy.

Retailers are enthusiastic. "It's one of my better new items," said Ken Moe, managing director of the Back to Basics Toys catalog, published in Virginia.

The cube's first big break came when the October issue of *Readers Digest* listed it as one of "Five Things We Don't Want You to Miss."

"From the moment that issue hit the stands, we've been overwhelmed with consumer orders," said Horowitz, 60, a Brooklyn, N.Y., native who now lives near Salem.

Many orders for the \$9.87 cube have come through his company's Web site — www.sudokucube.net — but retailers also are jumping on board.

Nicki Shekalus, a buyer for the legendary FAO Schwarz toy store in New York, said she placed a test order of 36 cubes.

"It blew out of the store in the first week," said Shekalus, who has reordered for Christmas sales.

Barnes & Noble also had to reorder after just three weeks of sales at its online store.

New melds with old

Shekalus said the toy's success is the combination of something new — the Sudoku puzzle — with something old and familiar — Rubik's Cube.

"It blew out of the store in the first week."

Nicki Shekalus
Buyer, FAO Schwarz, New York

"It was a clever combination," she said.

Sudoku is a logic puzzle that requires a player to fill out a grid so that columns, rows and three-by-three boxes contain each of the numbers one through nine, each used just once. The puzzle starts partially filled out so that there can be only one solution.

By the time Horowitz saw someone working on the puzzle on an airplane in March, the craze already was popular throughout the world.

He missed the start of the craze, but the longtime toy lover had something that no one else did. He owned the molds that produced the original Rubik's Cube.

Because the first Rubik's Cube consisted of three-by-three grids just like Sudoku, Horowitz immediately began to wonder if he could make a cube that would have a solution just like a paper Sudoku puzzle.

He sketched cubes on paper and worked and worked to try to figure out a numbering pattern. Eventually, he decided the best he could do was to create a puzzle with a five-sided solution. He figured he would leave one side blank.

His patent attorney didn't like that plan, however. Players could just twist the cube to get the blank side to match up, without even thinking about the numbers.

"I went two nights without any sleep," Horowitz said.

Then he figured out a six-sided pattern. He filed for a patent in May

See Sudoku on Page H2



AWAITING SHIPMENT: Boxes of Sudoku Cubes sit inside the warehouse of American Classic Toy in Sebring. The company has been flooded with orders since *Readers Digest* featured the new toy.

BUSINESS

SUDOKU

Continued From H1

to protect his numbering pattern, which allows for just one Sudoku solution. When aligned just right, the cube produces six sides that each use the numbers one through nine, as well as six vertical columns and six horizontal rows that do the same.

If that's too taxing, players can choose easier levels, such as just aligning one side correctly.

Mold owner

By August, Horowitz was using a Chinese manufacturer to make toys using the Rubik's Cube molds.

Horowitz owned the molds, but not the Rubik's name, because he bought the assets of Ideal Toy Co. in 1985 when it went out of business. He previously had bought the assets of Marx Toys and Remco.

Moe, of Back to Basic Toys, said Horowitz at one time had one of the largest collections of toy molds in the U.S. because so much production had moved overseas.

"He has been a cornerstone in our

industry for quite a few years, with a passion and an energy that I love," Moe said.

In 1990, Horowitz resurrected Marx toys and operated his company from Miami, mainly selling the Marx line of miniature Western play sets.

In 1994, he formed a joint venture with a former Sebring company, Mahoning Valley Plastics, that did custom molding and moved his company here. In 2000, he sold the Marx line and stopped local production work.

Horowitz also is involved with making Ideal toys in partnership with the owners of the Slinky toy. Those operations are run out of Michigan.

Horowitz said he has kept his home in this area, however, because he enjoys his home in the countryside.

"In New York, you make an appointment and leave two hours early, and you're still late," he said.

Locally, American Classic Toy oversees production of building sets, Skittle pool and other toys from long ago.

The four-person staff receives products from Chinese manufacturers and ships them to customers from its South 15th Street office.

Related games

The Sudoku Cube has been the company's biggest product launch by far, Horowitz said.

"It's hot. It's exploding. It's the right category at the right time at the right place," he said.

Horowitz is not slowing down now that he has the product out. He has a cube with another solution on the market and has plans to launch two more. He also has introduced Sudoku Slide, a board game that allows two people to compete head to head.

He attended a trade show in New York last month in which he signed up distributors to sell the cube in 10 other countries. He has met with national toy retailers who said they are considering carrying the product next year.

Horowitz said he thinks Sudoku has the staying power of crossword puzzles, which will lead the Sudoku Cube to long-running sales.

"My aspiration is for the Sudoku Cube to become like Slinky. It's been around 61 years, and they sell as many units now as they ever did," he said.

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action figures, clothing and a televi

just keep coming back."