

Perspective

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THE COLORS

The six primary colors and perfect symmetry make the cube instantly understandable. What other toy out there needs no directions?

THE CUBELET

The Rubik's Cube is a cluster of 26 "cubelets" that rotate around a core or 3-D cross piece—a fact discovered by many cheaters who took the cube apart.

THE LOGO

Rubik's Cube hardly needs a logo, but Rubik's Brand uses one to discourage counterfeiting. Incredibly, only one in six cubes sold are authentic.

THE MATRIX

Some have said the cube is a manifestation of Max Planck's early quantum theory, which he expressed as "the mind is the matrix of all matter."

BRAND NAME

Rubik's Cube

ONE IN SEVEN PEOPLE HAVE PLAYED WITH THIS OBJECT. THE TWISTED TALE OF THE MOST POPULAR TOY EVER. BY ROBERT KLARA



PHOTO: NICK FERRARI

The event, in case you missed it, was called the Zonhoven Open. It took place in Belgium last March, and it witnessed 18-year-old Mats Valk do something remarkable. The lanky teen picked up a color-scrambled Rubik's Cube, whirred it around in his fingers and slammed it down—solved—in 5.55 seconds. It was a world's record—and still is.

The doe-eyed Valk is too young and on the wrong continent to remember it, but the feat he performed in a few moments was one that, two generations ago, perplexed much of America for months. It was Christmas 1980, and millions of people found a Rubik's Cube under the tree. Sold by the Ideal Toy Company, the \$10 cube was the year's hottest gift, and one that people were soon prying apart with screwdrivers because the device's very allure is also its trap. "The Rubik's Cube has a devious simplicity," noted Mike Drake, who today serves as special projects director for toy company Mezco, but who cut his teeth with Toys 'R' Us. "You're expecting it to be quick and easy, but in fact for most of us it's not."

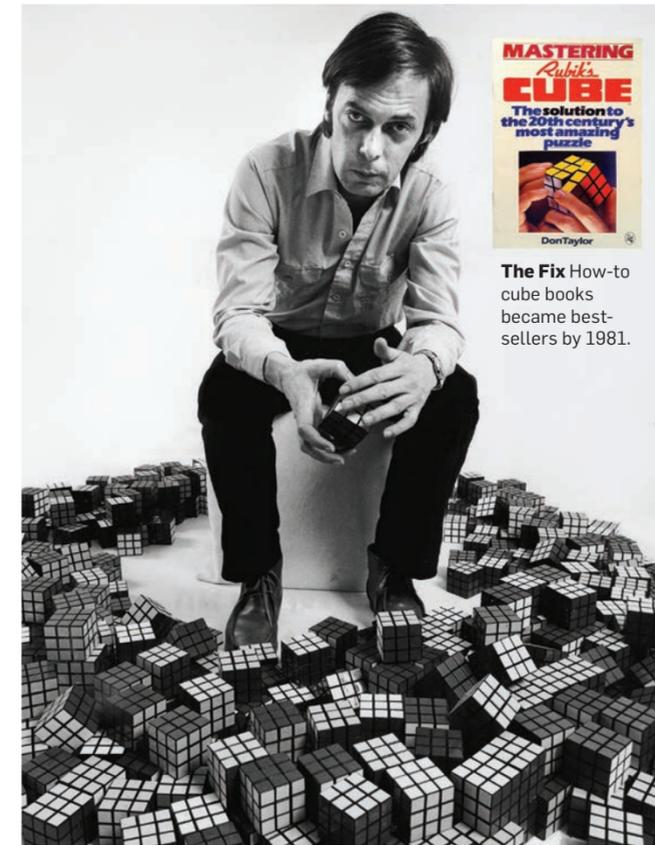
Not at all. The universally jointed puzzle with 26 moving parts is capable of 43,252,003,274,489,856,000 possible color arrangements. And while the gifted few "cubers" tell us the thing can be solved in 20 moves, most of us mortals never got close. But we tried, and still do. Over 350 million of the cubes have been sold.

Rubik's Cube turns 40 this year, and just got inducted into the National Toy Hall of Fame. With the possible exception of Barbie, it's the only toy that created an entire culture around it. But it wasn't meant to be a toy originally.

In 1974, Budapest architecture professor Ernő Rubik was tooling around for a way to teach his students about spatial relationships. His first cube puzzle prototype was made of wood and turned with the help of paper clips and rubber bands. The first plastic "Buvos Kocka" ("Magic Cube") appeared in Hungarian stores in 1977. The puzzle would never have made it beyond the Iron Curtain had mathematicians not started toting their cubes to international conferences. Eventually, a toy broker named Tom Kremer managed to sell the idea to Ideal—which, fearing occult associations with "Magic Cube," marketed the cube to Americans under its inventor's name.

Today, it's estimated that one in seven people alive on Planet Earth have played with a Rubik's Cube, which continues to sell based on its own momentum. "It's a toy retailer's dream," Drake said. "It's self-explanatory, and the display adds to the desire to own it." Rubik himself recently commented that, removed from its teaching context, his cube has "no practical use." And maybe he's right—so long as you don't count the invention's ability to occupy, frustrate and entrance countless millions.

BRAND NAME



The Fix How-to cube books became best-sellers by 1981.

What a square Ernő Rubik, shown here in the 1970s, took more than a month to solve his own puzzle. It was "an emotional moment" when he did.



Birthday bash To salute the toy's 40th year, New Jersey's Liberty Science Center has opened an interactive exhibit featuring all things cubic.



Do the Twist Ideal changed the name from "Magic Cube" to "Rubik's Cube" when it put the toy in stores in 1980.



- Fast Facts**
- 1974 Wooden prototype cube created
 - 1977 Cube goes on sale in Hungary
 - 1979 Ideal Toy Company licenses the cube
 - 2014 Rubik's Cube turns 40



Wonder kid Cubing enthusiast groups like the World Cube Association sponsor competitions and take records very seriously. Right now, the man to beat is shown above. Belgian teenager Mats Valk solved a scrambled cube in 5.55 seconds. Don't believe it? The video's on YouTube.

RUBIK: PICTORIAL PARADE/GETTY IMAGES