Interview with Alex Hochstrasser, inventor of Bilibo

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What was your favorite childhood toy?
I was very much into Lego but usually didn’t bother with the instructions that were included and kept building my own space ships and moon bases. On the other hand I have very vivid memories of playing with other kids in the nearby forest or at a small river. We would build secret huts or jump around the boulders in the river. There were no actual toys involved, the natural environment provided plenty of exciting materials and objects that could be used and transformed in our games.

What was your inspiration for Bilibo – was it grounded in design background? An understanding of child development? Your own childhood? Did it even start as a toy?
It’s probably a mix of all those things. I did a research project about the playing behavior of preschool children as part of my final thesis at University of Art and Design in Zürich. So I read a lot, interviewed several experts on the subject and spent quite some time in kindergarten observing how kids play, especially how they use ready-made objects like chairs or card-board boxes as accessories in their games. Based on all this information I then tried to come up with a fresh approach to toy design by creating objects that build on and come to life through the imagination of the kids. For the design of Bilibo and other open-ended toys like Babal I was also drawing heavily on experiences and memories from my own childhood. I think I’m lucky to have retained a sense of wonder and a fascination for “magic” objects I had as a child.
Did you feel there was a need for a toy like this?
There is indeed a need for sustainable, well designed toys that don’t just entertain kids on a superficial level but engage them both physically and mentally. I also think that many of the classic learning toys feel a bit too “wooden” and dogmatic, appealing more to (over)concerned parents than to kids.

Are there children in your life?
I have three god-children and there’s a day-care centre just around the corner from where I live. So I have plenty of eager “guinea-pigs” when I come up with a new idea or a prototype to try out.

What do you hope they experience with Bilibo?
I hope that Bilibo arouses their curiosity and inspires them to come up with their own games and ways of using the shells. It’s very much about the children becoming inventors and authors themselves.

What do you find most interesting about the way children play with Bilibo?
I’m usually surprised how naturally they just grab one and start playing. It’s also a relief to see that most children, despite living in an ever more virtual world with TV and electronic games, still retain their basic playing instincts and imagination.

What do you think of adults’ reactions to Bilibo?
The reactions of adults vary quite a lot. Some immediately get it and fall in love with the object while others, a majority unfortunately, just shrug and ask what you are supposed to do with an oversized helmet. It always reminds me of the scene in Saint Exupéry’s Petit Prince where the little prince shows his drawing of a boa (that just swallowed an elephant) to an adult who asks in return why he should be afraid of a hat ...

Do you think the limits of children’s imaginations and capabilities are often underestimated?
I believe most adults have lost the ability to imagine how children think and look at the world. They are used to a world where everything must have a function and a specific purpose. An ambiguous object like Bilibo confuses them. Children are much more at ease in blending different realities and imagined worlds into their story lines when they play.

How do you find a balance between giving them structure and focus, and freedom to explore?
That’s probably one of the trickiest parts. Too obvious ornaments like faces or explicit functional elements will limit the possibility to reinterpret the toy in different ways. An object that is too abstract and generic will feel cold and uninviting on the other hand. So it needs to have a character, feel friendly and trigger memories and images in a very subtle way.
What is your favorite “use” of it?
If I had to pick just a single feature it would probably be sitting and spinning in a Bilibo as long as possible without touching the ground.
Personally I sometimes use Bilbos as punch-bowls when I throw a party.

Did you have any hopes or intentions for the way children would play with it?
Sitting on or in a Bilbo was obvious, children should experience gravity and different states of equilibrium. Using the shell as a container or accessory in role play was also planned from the beginning. One of the first sketches was a hill with a tunnel for the toy train that would become a seat when turned upside down.
But I’m of course constantly surprised to see the new things that kids come up with when they play.

Children see lots of things in the Bilibo – turtles, boats, a smiling sphere.
What do you see?
Even when you have just one shell there is a smiling expression I like very much because it kind of encompasses the entire object.
Bilibo also reminds me of some friendly aquatic creatures.

What does the Mini offer? What’s its best feature?
Bilibo Mini complements the large Bilibo and adds new possibilities for games. Especially in symbolic play it’s an interesting accessory.
The doll can now have her own Bilibo to sit in. Or you have the baby Bilibo seeking shelter under a big Bilibo.
The mini is also great fun when playing in the bathtub either as a little ship or as a vessel to pour water.

Are your other designs like Bilibo?
Most of the products I designed share a certain playfulness and simplicity I think.

Is there an underlying philosophy that guides or connects your designs?
Growing up in Switzerland I come from a modernist/functionalist tradition. I like simple, essential things that work. But really good design must do more than just work. There needs to be some poetry, something magic which is very difficult to describe. I think with Bilibo I was fortunate to create a simple piece of plastic that actually seems to have something like a soul.
MOLUK™ (pronounced mo-look) is a young Swiss toy company founded by Alex Hochstrasser, the designer and inventor of Bilibo, and his sister Doris Hochstrasser, an architect. Driven by a passion for great design MOLUK strives to create innovative, sustainable products that do not just entertain kids on a superficial level but invite real interaction. In a time where everything is getting more virtual, MOLUK offers toys that are totally manual, toys that get children to move and explore, toys that simulate their senses and minds. There are no ON and OFF switches, batteries or complicated instructions – MOLUK toys are powered simply by a child's imagination.

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