

## The cuboro marble track system - history of origins

Memorandum by Matthias Etter, author and designer



### Introduction

The first version of cuboro construction set destined for sale, consisted of a selection of 12 differently worked wooden cubes (holes and channels) that were chosen out of approx. 30 prototypes. This first edition took place in 1985 under the name "Konstrito".

Simplicity, combination possibilities, geometrical balance (symmetry) and technical producibility were the main objects. Especially notable is per element two to three functions can be connected at the surface but also inside. The number of elements decisive for the size of the construction set was itself an important factor of the geometrical balance and optimum combination possibilities (out- and inside function). Therefore a first basic set of 48 resulted, soon followed by the definite standard-size/number of 54 elements, a compromise between game variety and price level. Later, for reasons of costs, a reduced standard set consisting of 30 elements was issued ("basis"). Even with a relatively small number of cuboro elements one can create numerous marble runs.

Now, it goes without saying that a great number of other varying cubes and more complicated processes (more functions at the surface and in the inside) could be thought out, which would allow even more complex constructions. Therefore, little by little, additional sets were issued offering ever-increasing possibilities with the new elements. The latter are compatible with the basic elements as well as among themselves. They only differ from the basic characteristics of the standard elements according to their special theme/feature. Throughout, the geometrical principle remains founded upon the cube and its combining possibilities; additionally available:

- supplementary elements (cuboro-plus)
- coincidence-, accelerator-, jump- and multiple-elements (cuboro-multi)
- complex multiple elements (cuboro-profi)
- demanding tunnel elements (cuboro-metro)
- and now even double-track elements (cuboro-duo)

As supplement to the additional sets six-packs are obtainable (same themes, partly new elements). Today the cuboro program comprises 82 different elements (12 basic elements and 70 variations or supplementary elements).

### **In search of alternatives**

Even as a boy I enjoyed experimentation and rebellion, in other words I enjoyed the search for alternatives. For instance in the relationship with my brother: competition/completion. He is playing with the model railway, all right – in that case I will just build an airplane construction (which was to be created out of paper, technical construction sets, record player, thread, wire, clouds were made out of tissue paper). Playing and experimenting, searching, finding – inventing belong together. Independence, space and freedom, as well as self-determination were all helpful qualities. Ideas can have various sources: inspiration, challenges (as example: “How can I make information, knowledge, explanations more “handy” for a handicapped child?”), outside stimulation (problems) or several circumstances altogether, discussions (combining together knowledge and wishes), dream projections. A quote of the game/toy-authors guild: “Inventions are answers to questions”.

### **Playing as the most natural need**

To a child playing comes as the most natural need, a basic need. That is where the child’s experiences (of life) begin, by the means of intuition, imitation, animation and creation. Playing helps to discover one’s own and personal abilities and talents, aids to explore the world of “things” and coherence and to find out about emotional and social relations to other beings. From this point of view, playing never comes to an end. Who wants to claim that growing older puts an end to exploration? Some of the games change during adolescence and “growing-up”, they become more “serious” activities or functions. Toys make room for tools, instruments, vehicles and so on. Game as a source for experience, excitement, fun, joy in regards to competition as well as a social medium remains vital and essential. As to the definition of “game”, “playing” (where does it start and where does it end?), this everyone has to find for her-/himself. Socially “playing” and “games” can differ very much when observed under the influence of culture and tradition. Education, behaviour vary and can have a strong influence on “the art of playing”. One could go far back here: from the history and social significance of the game in various cultures and civilizations to the questions about meaningful toys and possible danger, responsibility and pedagogical importance of the game.

### **The cuboro marble track system is born**

The work with physically and mentally handicapped children motivated me to develop various very special musical instruments (for instance offering exceptional

and specially fitted handles, adjusted sizes or instruments producing imaginary sounds). For my dissertation I wrote a guide with the title "playing sounds in groups". Later I developed puzzles (corresponding to the individual talents and abilities of the children) and various "skill games". That's the way the archetype of cuboro was born: a simple game of elements with the goal of connecting the cubes' tunnels and channels. The task is considered to be completed if the marble finds its way to the end without any interruption.

Depending on age and ability the solution can be found with the aid of logical thinking, experimentation, memorized copying, learning by heart (step-by-step) and even through groping and touching (e.g. for partially sighted children). Whatever way is chosen, the experience stays the same: through "wise" combination of individual elements a functioning system is created.

### **Commercialising an idea**

During my studies to become a social education worker I continued with the system's development. First prototypes with a set of 48 elements were created. At a later date, I was already working as a crafts teacher, the search for a qualified and capable joinery started. The plan was to produce a small series for sales at the Christmas market. The quest's success was rather poor. Even though the quality of the wooden cubes was not satisfying and the price quite expensive, the public interest was surprisingly big - big enough to dare to go for more.

The hint of a colleague lead to a first contact with the joinery Nyfeler (manufacturer of Näf-products ), which remained a valuable partner up to this day. The joiner Hans Nyfeler possesses the genius as well as the necessary equipment and surroundings (family business) to put my game into reality. A very fruitful partnership was formed.

I applied for copyright and protection of trademark. No suitable company could be found that considered the idea worth being commercialized. Consequently the inventor himself applied for a booth at the trade fair ORNARIS 86 in Bern.

Well, trade fairs offer quite some obstacles: deadlines, waiting lists (up to 3 years), requests for business reports and documents and so on. I did not give up. Accompanied by a cuboro set I directly called at the trade fair's administration office. What followed was a common expert's opinion on the game (where everybody present at the office participated). Thanks to the uncomplicated interpretation of the regulations, the fair management offered me a little space for my "booth", situated in a side passage between the ladies' and men's toilet. Well, everybody has to pass by sooner or later. That's how WWF's product manager laid

eyes on cuboro for the first time. How could this functional sculpture made of crude wooden cubes be placed in such a bleak spot? That beats everything! He guaranteed the purchase of 200 sets and immediately requested a sample in order to introduce cuboro and list it in their catalogue. Besides some more orders being placed by courageous toy shops, this was the actual prelude to the business development.

Even though WWF decided for a repeat order the same year, output remained unsatisfactory. Business was handled in a flat share, where I was living at the time. Someone translated documents into French, someone else designed simple brochures and every Wednesday was "packing day". The neighbouring health food store served as postal and phone address. But income failed to come, due to overdue credit repayments and accounting failure of expenses and taxes.

Since there was no escape from the demolition of the house, the flat sharing community had to leave two years later. My sister took over the health food store and moved as well. Despite sales increase high production costs and minimal profit margins made financial success impossible. However later after another increase of the business volume the inclusion of a trustee was justified. Later a friend joined as partner (until 2000) and handled business relations and coordination. The situation offered new possibilities and allowed me to live in Italy.

A former flat sharing mate, interim student at the Institute of Design in Zurich, created new covers, brochures and he increasingly took over the areas of promotion, trade fairs and the Internet (designing a website). In the meantime stock and distribution were run directly by the joinery.

Since 1994 cuboro attends the International Toy Fair in Nürnberg. 2005, cuboro is one of the "best of Switzerland products" at the world fair in Japan. The cuboro products are exported to many countries in the EU as well as to the USA, Japan, Korea and Russia.

#### Current company structure

For fiscal and legal reasons cuboro is a public limited company today:

- Headquarters and administration situated in Hasliberg Reuti, Bernese Oberland.
- Production, stock and distribution (for Switzerland and foreign countries except EU) in Gondiswil (Nyfeler Holzwaren).
- Distribution and part of administration for EU-countries in Wieren (by Loewe GmbH, Germany).

- Coordination, promotion, animations, development of new games and concepts (events, educational games and didactics) in Hasliberg Reuti (Matthias Etter).
- General business contacts, marketing, purchase/sales, payment transactions and so on are done by the business administration in Hasliberg Reuti.
- For strategies, product arrangements and planning team up.
- Financial matters and advice, as well as accountancy are carried out in cooperation with the trust agency «Lehmann und Bacher» in Meiringen.
- Graphic and website in cooperation with Atelier KE and Visioninternet in Meiringen.

*1630 words, 10492 characters*

*Hasliberg, revised in September 2008*

#### **Details about Matthias Etter**

Born 1954 in Romanshorn, Switzerland. Etter spent his childhood in the village of Gümligen, near Bern. Apprenticeship as a mechanic, training as social education worker, disobeying obligatory military service, working with handicapped people, teaching handicraft (direction metalworking and fine arts). 1982 purchase of a farm in Tuscany (wine, olives, garden), founding a family with Barbara Hegglin, Sebastian (1988) and Tommaso (1990). Since 1999 back in Switzerland (Bernese Oberland). Main fields of activity: management, promotion, animation, presentation, development of games/toys and conceptions for the company cuboro Ltd. Family tasks and music.

#### **Information for media-creative**

Quotations from Matthias Etter can be taken from this text after consulting first. More information and press photographs to be found online [www.cuboro.ch](http://www.cuboro.ch) or at cuboro Ltd.