

Of Mice and Men



Inventing a new toy is difficult - inventing a good one is even harder. Toys, teaching and learning aids are far from being simply the realization of an idea for a game. They should be fun, fulfil learning goals and last but not least, bring together the young target group and their parents on a sustainable basis. To achieve this, medium sized manufacturers of toys are pleased to avail themselves of an expert place of toy design: Burg Giebichenstein (Giebichenstein Castle), the School of Art and Design in Halle/Saale. The school is home to creative people like Christian Walter who have learnt to have a sense for everything and an eye for detail.

Who is the most successful teacher who conveys complex themes in an exciting and stimulating way, and not only to children? It's a mouse. With its funny and factual stories it has been a fixed presence on German children's TV since 1971. What very few people know, however, is that the mouse actually comes from Halle/Saale. Isolde Schmitt-Menzel, the creator of the classic orange creation, studied at Burg Giebichenstein, the School of Art and Design, from April 1948 until August 1950. She first thought of her idea for the character that can be found in many children's books, toys, tableaux, cups, and cuddly toys in the Zoo of the town on the river Saale.

The study programme in Play and Learning Design at the castle in Halle is unique in Germany and famous far beyond the boundaries of the state. Even during the GDR era, the students here were able to try out and learn about the innovative conceptualisation and design of play and toys, the use of different media and scenarios for different play and learning situations. Self-employed Halle toy designer Christian Walter also studied at the Burg from 1991 to 1996. Almost 30 years after the creation of the famed prototype, Christian Walter is also designing and building a mouse intended for tiny tots. His professional career started with hand-held mouse-shaped and duck-shaped cuddly toys, and now incorporates over 50 play, teaching and learning aids.

His work harks back to old favourites: from classic toys for toddlers, to dominoes, a German 'Logigramm' puzzle, buckets, spades, toy trucks and a German 'Shadow Memory' game which won an award from a non-profit consumer advice group. In his work, Walter makes use of all available materials such as wood, plastic, steel and aluminium. The playing surfaces are designed in bright colours, easy to understand and easy to play on. "It is important for me that my products are fun and have a high learning effect. Their use should aid hand to eye coordination, dexterity as well as the ability to think and concentrate," says Christian Walter, discussing his work.

He works tirelessly with his ideas and celebrates his own sense of playfulness and childhood every day. Colourful, merry, clever. His orders are the perfect demonstration of his success. The 40 year old toy designer has successfully created entire product ranges for market leading companies. Walter managed the Design Department at HaPe Kiga GmbH (since 2011 lifu GmbH) for over seven years. When the company which started life as a sales-only company took its first steps in developing its own products in 1999, management got Christian Walter on board. Yet Walter, loyal to Halle, decided to become self-employed in 2008. Since then he has realised numerous additional products including ones for spiele gut Vertriebs GmbH, Wehrfritz GmbH, project Schul- und Objekteinrichtungen GmbH from Eisleben and for the company Egermann in the Erz Mountains region. "My products shouldn't be seen as individual works. Each of the product ranges has a high recognition value. They carry the signature of the philosophy of the corresponding contractor as well as mine," explains the Designer. His toys are primarily sold to kindergartens, schools and after school centres. Walter's products are popular and some regularly go out of stock. And they aren't only popular with children, senior citizens also like them, as they are also used in geriatric homes and in the area of occupational therapy.

In mid May 2012, Christian Walter launched a new product, this time on behalf of Dragon Toys GmbH & Co KG. The company from Soest which was established in 2010 wants to establish itself in the hard fought market with the help of the work by the toy designer. With products which stand out and that are different. "Games are emotions. We want to create experiences. This is only possible with sophisticated concepts that stand out from the competition." Quita Marques, Director of Dragon Toys, is certain that she has found the right man for the job with Walter. Someone who has his own signature, who things everything through down to the last detail - from the first screw to the last brush of paint. Who can think outside the box when it comes to concepts. Since Walter develops more than just straightforward games, his creations are complete works. From the idea for the game, to the choice of materials, to the draft design to the construction of the prototypes and ideas for stable storage.

JAGO - the name of the first game in the new series - is finger golf for players aged four years and over, and is set to be marketed and sold internationally. Additional products for the company are soon set to follow. For the planned range of products Walter designed stories and figures which make the game a charming experience. With detailed illustrations, Prince George and the Dragon Girl who loves him, Conny, guide you through the instructions and tell the story of their adventure - game by game. And perhaps it will appear again sometime here - the mouse from the town of Halle-on-the-Saale.

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