

Toying with IMAGINATION

These achievers track success to playing with kid's stuff — each created exactly 50 years ago. **BY DAWN WEINBERGER**

FOR MANY, 1956 means Elvis, Eisenhower and the debut of *As the World Turns*. But 1956 also was a milestone year in the toy and game department, as three enduring classics — Yahtzee, Play-Doh and Uncle Milton's Ant Farm — were introduced. And all three are still fixtures in American toy chests. Every year, more than 50 million Yahtzee games are sold in the United States, as are 95 million cans of Play-Doh and about 500,000 Ant Farms.

We looked at how these seminal games came to be and how their influence was sometimes life-changing.

Yahtzee

Originally called the "yacht game," Yahtzee was created on a yacht by a Canadian couple who wanted something to do when friends came aboard. Their friends loved the game, so the couple enlisted the services of bingo tycoon Edwin S. Lowe to make the first 1,000 as gifts and in return, he got the rights. Lowe changed the name, took it to the marketplace and never looked back (now Hasbro owns Yahtzee).

And although Yahtzee was created by adults, for adults, part of the game's appeal is its ability to cross generational boundaries. Just ask Mark McKibben, a mathematics professor at Goucher College in Baltimore. The 32-year-old

started playing Yahtzee with his grandmother before he was speaking in sentences.

"The game was instrumental in my [development of] pattern recognition, which is important in mathematics," McKibben says. "It started me down the road of other things that would eventually get me here."

Play-Doh

The inventors of Play-Doh didn't intend to create a plaything for kids. All the Cincinnati cleaning company wanted was a wall-paper cleaning compound. But before long, a scientist realized the substance's potential, and the rest is history.

Since then, Play-Doh has morphed from a modeling compound available only in white to its current 50 colors and an array of accessories, including the unforgettable Fun Factory. To this day, Play-Doh's formula is top-secret, and no other manufacturer has been able to create a product quite like it. Its primary distinguishing factor: the smell.

"From the time I was a child, I always enjoyed the smell of Play-Doh and the freedom you have with it," says artist Jeff Koons, who, incidentally, is working on a sculpture and a painting that both bear the name "Play-Doh."

FUN FACT:

Artist **Jeff Koons**, whose favorite Play-Doh color is blue, used 100 cans of the compound in the process of developing his sculpture.



JEFF KOONS

"The scent gives you an essence of home," he says.

Koons, 51, went on to introduce Play-Doh to his now-13-year-old son, whose simple creation at the age of 3 inspired the artist to begin work on the aforementioned pieces; although he'll use polyethylene for the final product, the sculpture's prototype is made from genuine Play-Doh.

Uncle Milton's Ant Farm

Ants usually aren't welcome at picnics, but when the critters invaded his gathering in 1956, Milton Levine was inspired.

"It gave him the idea for a bunch of new products," says his son, Steve Levine, president and CEO of Uncle Milton Industries, which

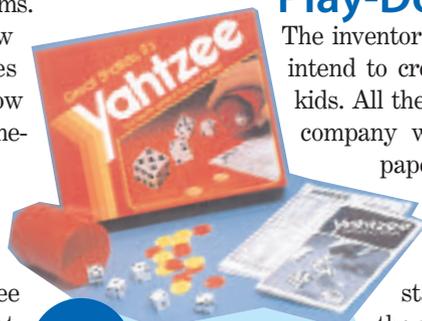
specializes in science and nature toys.

One of those products: Uncle Milton's Ant Farm, an ant habitat that teaches children about habit formation through observation. Fifty years later, the original product is virtually unscathed; Ant Farms still come with coupons for live ants, which the company ships in tiny plastic vials.

While the Ant Farm is primarily for fun, learning is the natural side effect of such a toy. Some, like Stephen Buchmann, have even chosen careers because of it. An entomology professor at the University of Arizona, Buchmann, 53, received his first

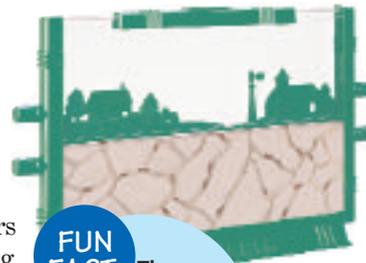
Ant Farm when he was about 9. He went through several before he hit junior high; by high school, he was set on a career studying insects.

"I was always interested in stuffing insects into jars," Buchmann says, "but this was a lot fancier." **EW**



FUN FACT:

After traditional advertising failed, Edwin S. Lowe began hosting Yahtzee parties in his home to spread the word.



FUN FACT:

The official scientific name for ant farm is "formicarium."