

# Polybags

*Good things come in small packages...*

By I Luisgib

Images by Brickset

Without realising it, they have become part of our lives. Since a couple of years, the small LEGO® sets that are offered (mainly) for promotional purposes have caused quite a stir in the world of LEGO fans and collectors. In the last couple of years the subworld of polybags has boomed and now we have a multitude, in different themes and with a strange distribution that is giving collectors some serious headaches.

My first encounter with the polybags was a number of years ago. A small promotional LEGO set came with Colgate toothpaste. There were three models, of which I managed to get two, a micro helicopter and a small excavator, both without a minifig. At the time I was in a semi-Dark Age, maybe my darkest period when, although I never completely disconnected from LEGO, I kept a certain distance, collecting only catalogues and some occasional sets. I remember I bought those two little polybags out of curiosity, as I was quite surprised to see they came with a tube of toothpaste.



Since then they disappeared from my life for quite some years, although for some time I think polybags were in fact little boxes containing sets with only a few pieces, like those offered by Shell at their petrol stations, for a low price. During my trips to Germany I would always stop at the petrol stations to see if I could find any of those sets and I loved the small sets that gave you an endearing model with just a couple of dozen pieces.



But in my opinion, although there were polybags in earlier times, like for example the 1195, a promo for Life on Mars, or certain local promotions like the Kabaya sets in Japan or those commemorating the World Championships Football and the LEGO Studios specials that were launched in collaboration with Coca-Cola™, they didn't become an important part of the LEGO world until the launch of the first Star Wars™ polybags in 2002. These were micro-scale reproductions of several ships that appeared in the catalogue for that same year.



We all know of the attraction generated by the Star Wars sets from their very beginning. The fact that the first polybag was a Tie Fighter, an iconic ship from the saga, resulted in a kick-start for collecting Star Wars polybags and, subsequently, of all kinds of themes.

Step by step the polybags became more widespread. I remember how at the beginning of the millennium, searching on eBay I found some of these little gems, and normally the asking price was way beyond what you would get in exchange. In France and Belgium, the fast-food chain Quick launched a promotion to obtain 4 City polybags in 2007. I was especially interested in one of the four sets, the 4937 - Life Guard, consisting of a life guard with an observation post and a

water scooter. Although I live relatively close to France (about 150km), It wasn't possible for me to make the trip 4 weeks in a row in order to get all 4 polybags. I therefore decided to get into contact with the French and Belgian Quick offices, soliciting the purchase of the 4 sets. Both offices were very kind and answered that they couldn't do anything until after the end of the promotion as they didn't know if there would be any bags left over. After several weeks I received two envelopes, one from each office, with a complete set of polybags and a letter offering me the sets free of charge. My passion for polybags started after building all 4 models and feeling fascinated at the beauty of models created with so few pieces.



In 2008 LEGO® “blew up” the polybag market with the massive launch of promotional sets. The promotions started with the British newspapers and the Brickmaster sets. Additionally, the fan clubs were gaining momentum and they all (or mostly) knew Bricklink and eBay. The polybag market had become a fact.

I'll go over the last 5 years to review the evolution of the polybag world and to show how, little by little, they have invaded all themes.

## 2008

This first year of the massive launch of polybags could be summed up as Brickmaster and Daily Mirror. Until 2008 the magazine Brickmaster (exclusive to the USA) had offered some Racers or Bionicle polybags, but it wasn't until 2008 that the first polybags labelled “Brickmaster” appeared. The simple fact of having an exclusive Brickmaster set was reason enough for collectors to try and get one. But additionally, that first year there was one set dedicated to Indiana Jones and another on to Star Wars™.



You can imagine the stir this caused among collectors of licensed polybags. And of course they could only be had in the USA, so the prices these sets reached were extortionate... and still are (the 20004 for example is at about 50€).

In October of that same year, the Daily Mirror offered a first promotion of polybags you could get buying the newspaper to get the coupon and collect the polybag in one of the affiliated shops. This first promotion resulted in my first “clash” with the tough reality of the polybags in set nr. 5626. It was the first appearance of a cross motor, and it was in a polybag that (like 99% of polybags) was not available in Spain. I fell in love with the motorbike and moved heaven and earth to get a couple of them. This anecdote is a good opportunity to mention that at this time LEGO made a “declaration of intent” with regards to polybags. Exclusive minifigs, pieces or elements were going to appear in these little promotional sets. It is a fact that later on more motorbikes of this type have appeared, and even in the same colour, but the polybags have offered, and continue to offer certain exclusives that cannot be found anywhere else.



There were other occasional promotions in some countries, with some sets that have not appeared again anywhere else, as was the case of the 4898, which (according to www.brickset.com) was available in Poland.



One of the sets that appeared in 2008 has been the longest-lasting and easiest to get in the history of LEGO®. It was 8028 - Tie Fighter, which even now in 2012 has been included in some promotions, albeit with a new packaging.



On the other side of the Atlantic, Brickmaster had no less than 3 Star Wars sets that year, micro-scale reproductions of ships of the saga, like the 20009 - AT-TE Walker and the 20010 - Republican Gunship.



But 2009 would be remembered as the year on the exclusive minifig. While it is true that in 2007, in the USA, there was a promotion with a golden C-3PO that appeared randomly in 10,000 Star Wars sets, and in 2009 the same was done with a chromed Darth Vader, it is no less true that this chromed Darth Vader could be obtained through other channels and there are rumours that the production was a lot higher than the theoretical 10,000 units.



## 2009

The promotions in the UK increased. There were two waves in the Daily Mail which, in addition to the sets, provided a cardboard box and a mat to play with them. In this second year, RACERS and City were once again present and Star Wars™ sets were added regularly to the list. In the City theme there were some especially interesting sets like the 4899 - Tractor or the 30003- Road Roller.



In the Star Wars theme there were several sets with a minifig, a clone, a Stormtrooper or a droid.



The C-3PO was packaged in a somewhat special way, different from the typical polybag. But in the case of the Chrome Darth Vader the format was that of a typical polybag and all later promotions followed the same line. Therefore, although strictly speaking the C-3PO could be considered a polybag, in my opinion it is a separate case and I consider the Darth Vader to be the pioneer in this area.

## 2010

In 2010 the large increase of polybags continued. While in 2008 there were 22 and in 2009 there were 33, in 2010 the total of 50 models was reached. The themes are expanding as they do the options to get one of these little treasures. Evidently the City, Creator and Star Wars polybags continue to be the flagships of the promotions, but the temporary themes find their place and in 2010 there are sets from Atlantis, Prince of Persia, World Racers, Castle, Toy Story...



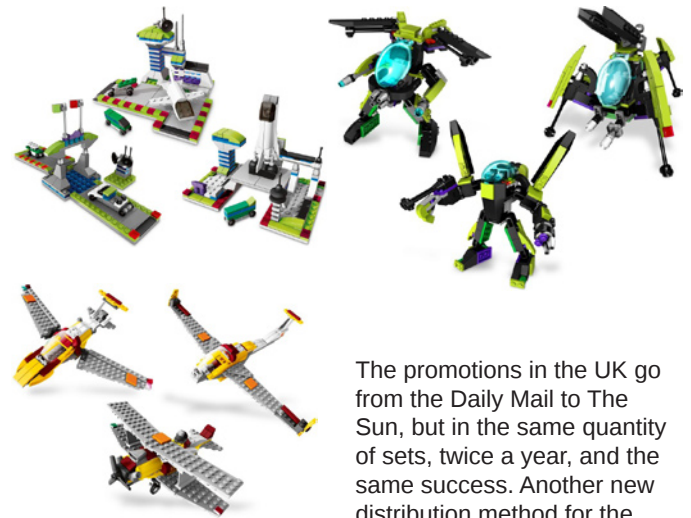


2011

The increase in polybags continues, with a total of 59 and the number of themes is further increased. Brickmaster is a good source of slightly larger (and exclusive) models. Halfway through the year, the Brickmaster sets disappear, replaced by the Master Builder Academy (MBA) with more polybags containing more parts and even harder to get.

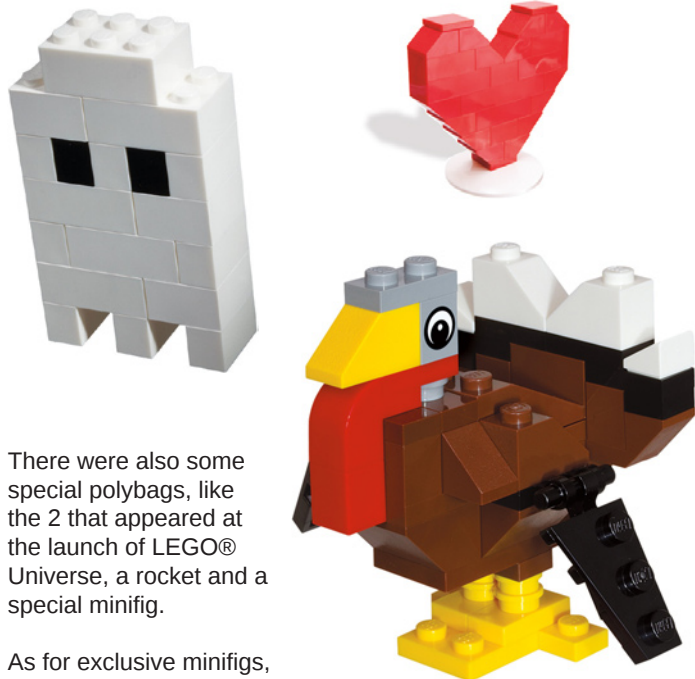
The distribution is also more global and exclusive, which means that polybags can be found in more countries, but many are exclusive to each particular country. For example, of the 4 Toy Story polybags, 2 were exclusive to the UK in another one of the Daily Mirror promotions and there were 4 magnets for the Bricktober promotion in Toys'R'Us in the USA.

On the other hand, in 2010 the Seasonal polybags are introduced, to commemorate Saint Valentine, Halloween, Thanksgiving, Christmas... Many of these were available through Shop at Home, although not always in all countries.



The promotions in the UK go from the Daily Mail to The Sun, but in the same quantity of sets, twice a year, and the same success. Another new distribution method for the polybags is at charity events. In 2011 there was one together with the BBC in the Children in Need campaign. It was a small yellow bear with a plastic tiara. Quite curious and beautiful.

Another curious fact in 2011 were the ghost polybag . A series of polybags were listed that (unfortunately) never appeared on



There were also some special polybags, like the 2 that appeared at the launch of LEGO® Universe, a rocket and a special minifig.

As for exclusive minifigs, there were several in 2010, like the Chrome Stormtrooper™, the white Bobba Fett or the exclusive minifig of the LEGO Club, named Max.

50 headaches in a prolific year. Unfortunately, in Spain we only had the opportunity to get the Chrome Stormtrooper™



the market. For example there were supposed to have been an astronaut with a satellite in the City theme and a bee for Creator.



The licences become more prominent (if possible) and in this year there are polybags for Harry Potter™, Cars™, Pirates of the Carribean™...



together with many LEGO® owned themes like Alien Conquest, NinjaGO or Pharaoh's Quest. The Bricktober exclusives continue as well as the seasonal sets with new models for significant dates.



Evidently in this year there was also an exclusive minifig, a Shadow ARF Trooper that could be obtained through Shop at Home by buying Star Wars™ sets for a certain amount. At least in this way the "less favoured" countries had a shot at getting a polybag with an interesting minifig.



## 2012

And we arrive in 2012 We still do not have the final number, but I believe this year we will reach 50 without much of an effort. Two great novelties have appeared this year, coinciding with two new successful themes LEGO has launched: Friends and Super Heroes.

5 Friends polybags have appeared, each one with one of the girls doing their favourite activity. These polybags are a great way to get 5 Friends minifigs and pieces in new colours. The distribution has been quite massive, and they have been on sale in the USA and in newspaper promotions in Belgium and probably in the UK.



As for Super Heroes, there was a first series of polybags (DC) in a promotion of The Sun in May and they were on sale in the USA. Later on, when the Marvel Super Heroes appeared, there was a second wave with a more limited distribution, like for example Lex Luthor who could be obtained by pre-ordering the LEGO Batman 2 game.



The American LEGO division has also contributed, and this year they have offered an exclusive at the Rockefeller Center in New York: two cute models to commemorate the icons of the city: The Statue of Liberty and an amusing yellow cab.



The exclusive minifigs have also been present this year, with a Hulk, a TC-14 or a Darth Maul with a naked torso. The distribution of these minifigs has been quite generous and they have been available in many countries either through Shop at Home or in Tous'R'Us promotions.



Shell has brought out a set of 7 Ferrari polybags that are (supposedly) available worldwide at their petrol stations, in cooperation with Ferrari.



### What makes polybags so special?

We have seen a bit of the history and discussed the past 5 years, but... what turns polybags into objects of desire for collectors and fans?

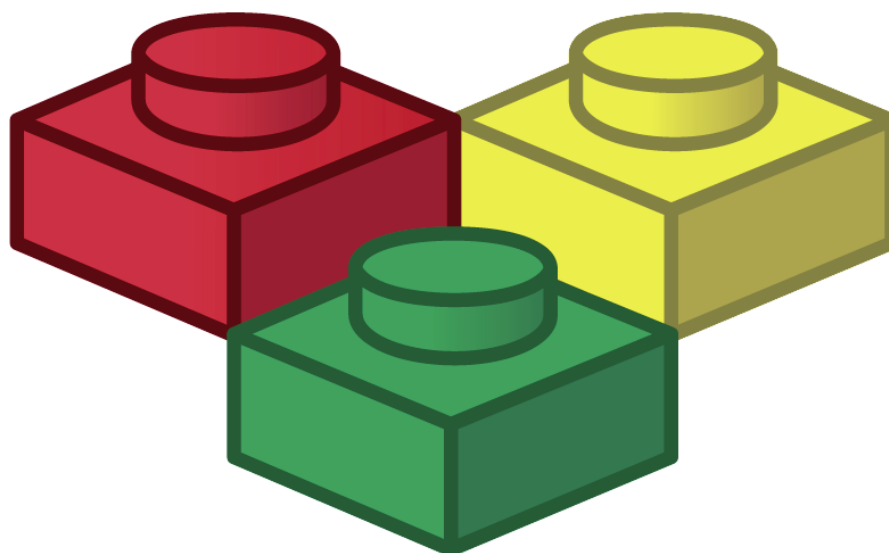
It is complicated to answer that question clearly and simply. In my case it was the fascination with the fact that with a relatively limited number of pieces some very well built models can be achieved. I love the miniature reproductions of sets like the mini-ships from Star Wars™ or the Creator sets. In the case of City, which is my favourite theme, these little sets are a complement to our displays, often with new and singular models.

Licensed polybags are a headache as often they include special minifigs or models, or exclusive or hard to get parts. The "erratic" distribution results in a lot of frustration, or in the worst case, an excessive inflation of the sales prices between private sellers.

Luckily, this year I have discovered the fascinating world of bartering through the Brickset forum, where you can meet AFOLs from all over the world and where solidarity with fellow fans who are having a hard time getting certain polybags because they are practically non-existent in our countries prevails over a tough business attitude. Thanks to many friends in the UK, Germany, the US or Poland, among others, I have been able to complete an important part of my collection by bartering. I would like to take this opportunity to thank Huw for allowing these transactions to take place and all the fans for their friendliness and willingness to help me in the difficult task of trying to complete my collection.

As I said in the title of this article, "Good things come in small packages". The essence of LEGO® is creativity. Building beautiful, stable and realistic models with less than 50 pieces is a challenge and the polybags meet it...let's hope for many more years to come.

Acknowledgements: Brickset for the images in this article.  
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