

Review: 21305 - The Maze

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Pictures by Oton Ribic and LEGO® System A/S



Without a doubt, the old-school mechanical mazes, where one had to carefully navigate a ball through a treacherous path, were among the most common items on the children's Christmas wishlists for decades. While nowadays less common in their original wooden form, thanks to the LEGO® Ideas programme they have recently been reincarnated as a new LEGO® set.

If you are familiar with the originals, the similarity of their LEGO® counterpart has surely not escaped you. The colours, the layout, the wheel controls at the sides, and even the rotating mechanism are precisely reconstructed, and offer the very same functionality. However, this LEGO version has a few other tricks up its sleeve.

Maze architecture

Contrary to the bitter experience of Daedalus, building this maze is very enjoyable and simple. The entire model rests on a standard 32x32 baseplate, upon which two tilting mechanisms and a cradle are built. These mechanisms rely on a bit of Technic, and employ two tricks to make building them less prone to errors: they use varying colours at different sides (not visible once the model is completed), and there are many auxiliary internal parts that serve as guidelines for accurate spacing and positioning. LEGO actually went to great lengths to minimize any chances of confusing sides or gaps between the internal mechanisms.

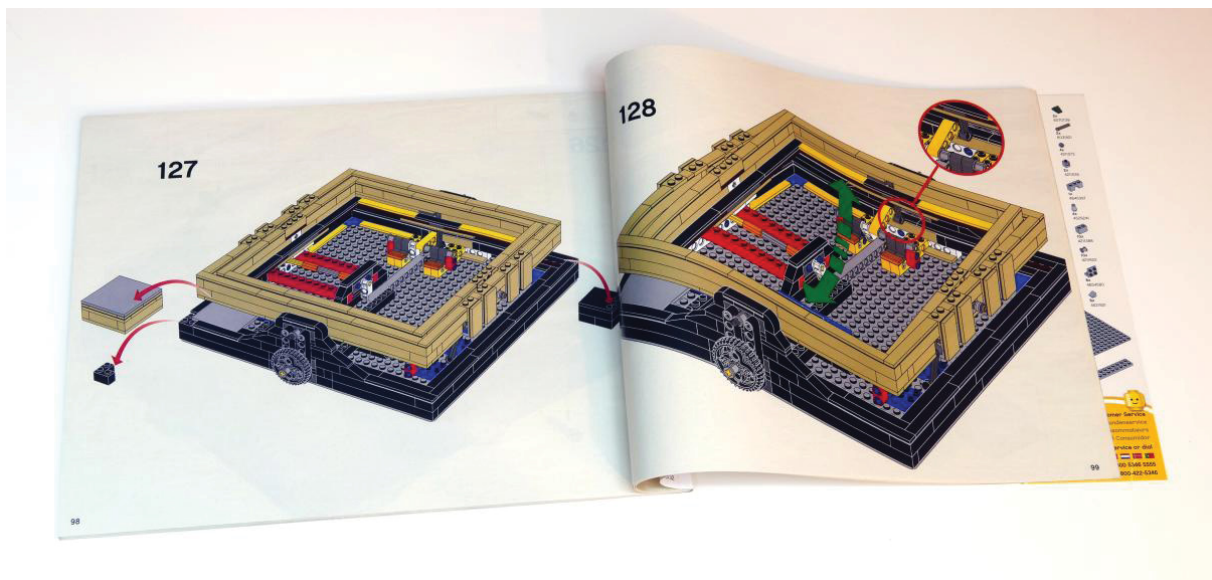


The set includes parts for two maps or “levels”, though they share some parts and therefore cannot be built at the same time — at least not using the supplied parts. One is a reconstruction of the old wooden mazes, while the other represents a small, cute fantasy setting in microscale including a little fort the ball rolls through on its way, as well as a tiny castle and a mill with a tiny water wheel. They are 24x24 studs in size and rest snugly in the cradle.



There is no ball return mechanism, hence the traps for the ball are not really holes, but just areas exposing the studded black plates underneath. However, they serve their purpose as they trap the ball anyway.

Apart from the maze itself, this set includes a small box for four supplied balls. It can be stowed into the side of the maze in a small cradle, and along with an additional little black cube, also serves as a blocker to prevent the maze from tilting during transport.



So, let's play!

Once the last brick is in place, one can hardly wait to place one of the balls in the starting position and give the game a try. And let us say right away that, just like the wooden originals, this game is far from easy. It requires some coordination, thoughtful planning, and most of all — plenty of patience; attempting to scramble through the narrow passages and over the tiny bridges will invariably end in the ball being trapped.

Of course, the parts included are enough to create an almost infinite number of personalized levels, and if you combine them with your own parts, the possibilities are even higher. You can build your own levels - the real objective of any LEGO® set - and it wouldn't be a surprise if we will see in the near future hundreds of proposals from the community.

Fortunately, the designers of this set have avoided the pitfall of using the Technic gears for the tilting mechanism, because the minute backlashes between their teeth would probably make accurate movements nearly impossible. It relies on liftarms and ball-links instead, which offer adequate precision — there is a minimal amount of backlash, but it does not hamper playing in any way.

Nevertheless, not all is perfect. Before building the set, we were suspecting the creases between the level tiles may interfere with very precise movements. It turned out that they actually do not cause any troubles whatsoever, but there was another difficulty. Namely, the balls (part 72824) have two small yet existing moulding dents. For usual playing or Great Ball Contraptions these dents are too small to be significant, but here, if one is adjusting angles very slowly and accurately as it is often required, it is not uncommon for these dents to change the direction of the ball. Or worse, if the ball comes to rest on one of its dents, it is sometimes impossible to dislodge it even under full tilt — then the only “legal” way further is to shake the entire level and risk it storming around. A well-polished metal ball, though unconventional for LEGO®, would have made the precise playing much more reliable.

The only other slight criticism is aimed at the control wheels. They are, in fact, double-beveled Technic gears with 36 teeth. While undeniably common and usable, these gears are not particularly comfortable to hold for a while. Though slightly more expensive, proper wheels with tyres, such as 44293c01, for example, might have been a better idea.



Raw materials

From the viewpoint of supplies, The Maze consists of 769 parts — it offers no particularly unusual or exotic parts, but in return comes up with plenty of generally useful building material. Most of it is in black and tan colour, with an amount of brown as well. There is a fine amount of standard one stud-wide bricks, of course plenty of 4x2 tiles both in tan and green, and a grey baseplate is a nice addition too. Although the 9-stud long axles are very common, its rare yellow variant, of which four are present in here, may be attractive for advanced Technic builders. The total weight of the model along with the boxes is slightly under a kilogram: 986 grams, to be exact.



The large instruction booklet is typically clear and generous at 140 pages, and apart from the instruction for the mechanism and the aforementioned two levels, it includes an interesting introduction about the designer and the original maze game, as well as three photos of additional levels for inspiration.



Customizations

Thanks to the levels being easily interchangeable, this set is easily customizable to the extreme. Supplied parts suffice for building virtually any “standard” level consisting of beige corridors, walls and holes, and there is also enough to build any simple fantasy setting similar to the one in the instructions.

Of course, adding one’s own parts into the mix increases the possibilities even further. The ball can pass through any corridor with a flat surface which is at least two studs wide and two studs high, so the combinations are countless. There are many additional tricks possible, which have not been used in this official version — e.g. the ball cannot climb slowly over a single tile, but if given enough speed, it can.

Likewise, very narrow one-stud wide catwalks can be built, as well as mechanical contraptions and ratchets that allow the ball to pass in one direction only, collapse the path after it has been used, employ more than one ball at once, etc. The basic platform of the cradle and its tilting mechanism has been cleverly designed to allow as diverse level configurations as possible.[1]

The LEGO® community will undoubtedly come up with plenty of other interesting ideas, which may in time even go as far as holding competitions. For an even further level of customization, the very same concept can be relatively easily expanded to accommodate larger levels, resting on a 48x48 baseplate, or perhaps even larger.





To sum up

Altogether, our impressions of The Maze firmly lean towards the positive. It is certainly something completely different and a refreshing occasional departure from the more standardized theme sets. Easy to build, fun to play with and possibly among the most customizable sets ever launched by The LEGO® Group, it is an attractive set for many a LEGO® fan, and even after being disassembled it brings a substantial amount of universally useful parts.

True, we cannot overlook that the playability of the supplied ball should have been better. A more even, rounded ball would have made the gameplay much easier. But this is a relatively minor inconvenience in comparison to plenty of good time one can expect from this, somewhat unusual set. And after all, if you are ready to sacrifice a grain of purism, it can be solved by replacing the ball with a steel ball, a marble, or something of the sort.

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[1] as a matter of fact, the designer of the original maze, Jason Allemann has posted several suggestions for mazes on his website: <http://jkbrickworks.com/maze>

HispaBrick Magazine® would like to thank LEGO® for the set they provided for review. We can't guarantee they agree with our opinions on the set.