

Fidget spinners



Product Name: Fidget spinners

Manufacturer: -

Model Number: GAD198574

The fidget spinner is a toy that sits like a propeller on a person's finger, with blades that spin around a bearing. Depending on your personal taste, watching the spinning motion is either mesmerizing or irritating. But even for those who don't want to play with the spinners themselves, the gizmo's story provides a classic parable of the small-time inventor with the big idea who got cut out when the time came to cash in. This kind of narrative is reliably compelling even when—as in this case—it's not really true. Over the last week or so, a wave of media outlets, including the Guardian and the New York Times, have declared that Catherine Hettinger, a woman living in the Orlando area, is the inventor of the fidget spinner. Hettinger isn't involved in any of the companies that are making the popular toys and told a reporter at the Guardian that she is having financial difficulties. The press coverage quickly congealed around an interpretation summed up expertly by the headline writers at the New York Post: "Woman Who Invented Fidget Spinner Isn't Getting Squat." Hettinger, 62, is a chemical engineer by training and said she's always been a tinkerer. She first got two patents for a placemat that would help people control their diet by telling them how much the food they were eating weighed. In 1993, she filed for a third patent, which covered a circular device molded from a single piece of plastic that spins on the tip of a finger. In her patent application, Hettinger described the device's shape as akin to the U.S. Capitol building. It could also be a weird frisbee or a toy UFO. She called it a "spinning toy." Hettinger's patent was granted in 1997. She said she began making the devices in her laundry room, using a machine she bought from a defunct sign-making manufacturer and selling them at art fairs. Hettinger traveled to toy conventions and pitched the spinner to Hasbro Inc., which market tested it and eventually decided not to pursue a deal, she said. Hasbro didn't respond to an interview request. Patent holders have to pay periodically to maintain their patents, and Hettinger let the spinning toy patent lapse in 2005. Over a decade later, in 2016, the current generation of finger-spinning toys became a hit. Aside from the spinning, these devices had little in common with Hettinger's toy. They relied on a completely different mechanism for movement. Yet, when someone created a Wikipedia page for the fidget spinner this April, it described Hettinger as the inventor. When she first heard of the Wikipedia page, Hettinger said she assumed that one of her friends had made it. But she asked around, and no one would cop to doing so. Reporters started calling, and she was happy to tell them the story of how she had invented the spinner. Aside from the Wikipedia page, Hettinger acknowledged that there is no evidence of a direct connection between her own plastic disc and the fidget spinners that are popular today. She said she doesn't have an opinion on whether her patent would apply to them. "You're going to have to call a patent attorney. This is way beyond me," she said. Bloomberg asked two patents experts to review Hettinger's idea for a spinning toy. They came away skeptical of its connection to the current fad. "In reading it, it doesn't appear to cover the products that people are selling now," said Jeffrey Blake, a partner at Merchant & Gould, a law firm focused on intellectual property. Hettinger didn't argue with this conclusion. "Let's just say that I'm claimed to be the inventor," she said. "You know, Wikipedia claims, or something like that." A patent search for the words "spinning toy" pulls up thousands of patents covering everything from yo-yos to a "flying toy for propeller launching with liquid dispersing parts," and dating back over a century. It's not clear which patents, if any, would cover the current fidget spinners. If the toys have a true inventor,

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he or she remains in obscurity. Even if Hettinger's patent had covered the current spinners, and she hadn't let it lapse in 2005, she would have had no claim to any fortunes created during the spinner boom that started last year. Her patent would have expired in 2014, 17 years after being issued, said Blake. This is the philosophy behind patent protection: Inventors make their work public in exchange for the exclusive right to commercialize it. But that right has to expire to avoid perpetual monopolies. "The patent system worked the way it should," said Blake. This isn't to say that solo inventors or small companies aren't often outgunned, especially when they're making products like toys that can be copied and distributed with relative ease. The legal process is a bear even for those with legitimate claims. "The cost and time involved in the enforcement system makes it difficult for the small inventor," said Mark Gober, senior director at Sherpa Technology Group, which consults companies on intellectual property-related issues. Many inventors find themselves pushed into the arms of larger companies precisely because they can't handle these issues on their own, he said. The inventors of another suddenly popular toy for the restless—the Fidget Cube—raised \$6.4 million through Kickstarter to make their toy but recently decided to license the rights to a company called Zuru rather than do it themselves. "The increased ability to aggressively pursue counterfeits and knockoffs certainly added to the benefits of our licensing agreement," said Mark McLachlan, one of the inventors. Hettinger recently launched her own Kickstarter campaign to help her pay to manufacture her spinners. "Wikipedia credits Catherine Hettinger as the original inventor. That makes it a Classic," the pitch starts. She has also been working on an iPhone app, a project she has held back on, because she knows how hard it is to break through the noise on the App Store. She's thinking that her newfound celebrity status might help. "After this blows over somewhat, I'm sure I'll be making a lot more connections for that," she said.

Price: R37.00

Availability: This product was added to our catalog on Monday 15 May, 2017