



Interview Tormod Askildsen

Head of LEGO® Community Development

Text Hispabrick Magazine

Text & images Tormod Askildsen

Hispabrick Magazine: First of all, congratulations for your 25 years in the company. What feelings do you have after all this time working in The LEGO group?

Tormod Askildsen: I felt good, because the LEGO Group is back on track. I also felt good because I deeply support the current direction of the company i.e. focusing on our core (the brick, the building system and the LEGO community) and respecting our heritage. I took some time to think back and be proud of my own accomplishments for the company as well

HM: How did you start in the company?

TA: I started in the LEGO Group back in 1983 as a marketing trainee. Spent almost two years working in 7 different departments.

HM: And which functions have you developed in all these years?

TA: I joined LEGO Education (called the Institutional Department at that time) in 1986 as assistant product manager. Over the next 10 years I worked on product development and general marketing. Responsible for products such as DUPLO Early Simple Machines, Ethnic DUPLO people and LEGO Dacta Control Lab. Started a "home learning" project in 1995 which led to the development and launch of LEGO Mindstorms in 1998. Started FIRST LEGO League with FIRST in the US in 1998. Started LEGO Community Development in 1999 and have spent most of my time working with LEGO Fans of all ages since then, only with a "break" of around a year where I worked on the LEGO Factory project.

HM: Which are the objectives of LEGO Education?

TA: LEGO® Education is determined to deliver experiences that engage a passion for learning in students and teachers. LEGO Education experiences are motivating, fun and relevant; and always best experienced together with others

HM: Why did The LEGO Group decide to launch a Robotic theme?

TA: Two projects came together around 1996. One was the evolution our work with robotics technology which started in the early 1980es. The first LEGO Education robotics product “LEGO Technic Control” launched in 1986. Our collaboration with the MIT Media Lab, led to the “intelligent LEGO brick” concept in the early 1990es. At the same time we worked a lot on understanding what really motivated kids to learn. Not only in the classroom, but also in a home environment. We concluded, among others, that technology played an important role. By marrying these two projects – we developed LEGO Mindstorms..

HM: And were you involved in the main development?

TA: Oh yes, from around 1989 to 1998.

HM: You are Head of the LEGO Community Development since the beginning of this year. Which tasks do you have to do in this position?

TA: : Well I came back early this year, but I have been engaged with Community Development since we launched LEGO Mindstorms in 1998. My team and I have a broad variety of tasks. We spend most of our time interaction with the AFOL community, supporting fan driven initiatives, visit fan events and help making connections between fans and fan groups. We also spend a significant amount of time facilitation connections and collaboration projects between AFOLs and colleagues across the LEGO Group. In addition we run programs like LEGO Ambassadors, LEGO Certified Professionals and LEGO Universe Partners. We also make efforts to reach other groups of LEGO fans among parents, teachers and teenagers (our focus is on the age group 13 years and older).

HM: When did The LEGO Group discover that there were communities of adults who still build and play with bricks?

TA: I think this was in 1998 when we launched LEGO Mindstorms and found out that the majority of the sets were purchased by adults.

HM:How did the company discover that the worldwide fan communities were so important to take the decision to create a special department for them?

TA: Several things happened since 1998 and the following years. We started to discover that AFOLs posted amazing LEGO models online, some of them brilliant. Around 1999, we had the first face to face

discussions with AFOLs who provided input to LEGO Direct products. With the launch of LEGO Star Wars in 1999, adults also amounted for a significant share of sales. Then we discovered more and more online groups and events which started to pop up, like BrickFest in 2001.

HM: And which were the first objectives of this department? Are these objectives actually the same?

TA: Hmmm – the objective of building relationships with fans and fan groups has not really changed. What has changed or rather evolved over the past 10 years is our knowledge about the AFOL community and more clarity in which value the LEGO Community brings to the LEGO Brand and business. This means that we work more focused today than we did in the beginning. I would say that we see the major value drivers as “inspiration” (fan created LEGO models and events inspire a lot of people), “innovation” (fans constantly innovate and want to share their ideas with both other fans and with us) and “publicity” (fans drive a lot of publicity which we believe help spreading the LEGO message online and offline). In the LEGO Community team, we see it as our job to stimulate these activities by building relationships with our fans and support what they do the best we can..

HM: Are communities important for the growing of the company (and not only in economical terms)?

TA: We consider the LEGO Community to be quite essential in growing the LEGO brand and business – keeping in mind that the LEGO Community is broader than the AFOL community. It consists potentially of everyone who, for different individual reasons, like LEGO products and experiences for what they are.

HM: What does The LEGO Group think about the growing number of AFOLs meetings around the world?

TA: Community is about connecting likeminded people. Meetings online and offline helps grow the community. So yes, that is great.

HM: Are profitable to the company the big sets focused to AFOLs?

TA: Yes, although they represent a small share of overall sales

HM: What did The LEGO Group learn from the bad economic times from the past?

TA: That we need to be extremely cost conscious. But also that bad economic times does not seem to affect sales of LEGO products so hard as many other toys. We believe this might be because in bad times, people stick to good quality and brands they trust and are familiar with.



HM: LEGO® Ambassadors. Why?

TA: Essentially to build bridges between the AFOL community and people in the LEGO Group. The current cycle of LEGO Ambassadors represent 47 LEGO User Groups so they also help us keep track of what is going on in the community almost on a daily basis. Btw – for my 25 year anniversary, I got this wonderful greeting from the LEGO Ambassadors (picture attached)

HM: How LEGO Ambassadors interact with the company?

TA: We use an online discussion forum which is hosted and operated by the LEGO Group. All discussions are open and LEGO Ambassadors can and should share what is being discussed with the larger community. In some cases, LEGO Ambassadors are invited to work with us on “Top Secret Projects”. In this case they will have to sign an NDA for that specific project. But we are also inviting AFOLs who are not LEGO Ambassadors to work on these kind of projects.

HM: For many fans, become a LEGO Ambassador would be an honour. It seems an important figure in the community and they make an important task, but how does the LEGO Group see the Ambassadors internally?

TA: : The awareness of the LEGO Ambassador program is increasing inside the company. To keep spreading the word, the LEGO Community team

shared the profiles of all LEGO Ambassadors on the LEGO intranet so all employees could read about them. We have also sent letters to all LEGO Group offices where there are LEGO Ambassadors and suggested that they contact their local LA and explore collaboration opportunities.

HM: Another important collaboration with the community is to launch Factory Sets “Designed By LEGO Fans”...

TA: : Yes, I was involved in all these sets. It was a great experience for all involved I think, but I also know that several fans discovered that there is a huge difference between building MOC and designing a LEGO set. There are plenty of rules, processes, and limitations which most experienced as pretty frustrating.

HM: Spanish community is really young (2 and ½ years). Which is your opinion of our community?

TA: Great community! You have achieved a lot in very short time, this magazine for one. There are also several Spanish fans who are exceptionally talented LEGO builders.

HM: Is now Spain in the map for the company (knowing that LEGO bricks are not a top seller in our country)?

TA: Spain has always been on the map. I remember spending months back in the mid 1980es on a project with special focus on Spain. One of the



things we found out at that time was that a huge part of sales was concentrated in the 3 major cities, Madrid, Barcelona and Bilbao. But yes, the Spanish AFOL community contributes nicely to put Spain on the map and I think you are driving a lot of value.

HM: And now, some short questions. Did you play with LEGO® bricks when you were a kid?

TA: Yes

HM: Your most-liked LEGO Theme

TA: LEGO Mindstorms, LEGO Technic, LEGO Star Wars, - there are many actually

HM: One which you don't like

TA: Except from LEGO Star Wars I have never really been big time into the other Licensed products.

HM: Your favourite set

TA: Well, I got my old VOLVO as LEGO Factory set last year. I love it!

HM: Your favourite MOC

TA: I'm not building MOCs myself. Among the 3 mio.* LEGO MOCs on BrickShelf, MOCpages and Flickr, there are so many I really like – I cannot pick one.

HM: Do you want to say anything else?

TA: I'm done – talked far too much!

HM: Many thanks for your time and your answers.

TA: Thanks for inviting me to this interview, I enjoyed it. Need to get back to my business plan. ■

*Estimated number of LEGO MOCs on the net.