

Photographing the cold Hoth

By HispaBrick Magazine®
Pictures © Vesa Lehtimäki

Sometimes you find great pictures on the internet, where the protagonist is a construction made with LEGO® bricks, but sometimes LEGO is only part of the work of art, a character within the composition. Today we talk to a genius of the snowscape of Hoth, ..., LEGO, The Empire Strikes Back, photography, ..., what more could we ask for?

HBM: First of all, tell us about yourself, your name, where are you from, your work ...

My name is Vesa Lehtimäki, born and living in Helsinki, Finland. I have worked as a designer since late 80's, time period includes a decade as a magazine designer and an Art Director. Free illustrator since 2006, free and happy.

HBM: Why did you start photographing LEGO minifigs and sets?

VL: There was no particular reason why LEGO, I just started a project of documenting our kid's toys to save them in photographs before they break or vanish over the years. The part about Star Wars™ toys just got out of hand and curiosity took over. With Flickr the photography took a turn that I did not expect and I'm enjoying it very much. I built LEGO a lot when I was a kid, I guess, to my own surprise, it is something my inner kid relates to strongly.

HBM: Do you build with LEGO bricks or do you leave that task to your kid? What does he think about the appearance of the minifigs after they are photographed?

VL: I do not build LEGO myself, everything in my photos is built by our kid and borrowed from his fun and play. Sometimes I have to rebuild some items because of playwear and erosion, the snowspeeder is one of those items, I think I've rebuilt it three times for photography by now. I try to keep in mind that the bricks do not belong to me, I do not want be one of those dads who buys toys for the kid and steals them to his own purposes later on. I return all items to the kid, no restrictions.

There are a couple of exceptions to this rule, the Blade Runner Police Spinner is mine and I have bought an extra AT-ST walker because I got tired of rebuilding the kid's walker. Of recent images, the 3A toys stay on the shelf, too.

I honestly do not know what the kid thinks about the photos. He's curious enough to taking a look from time to time, and he liked the book with the LEGO Hoth photos I made for him at Blurb. I think it's more like him allowing me to borrow his stuff and being big hearted enough not to give me any hard time over it. Watching me photographing has probably stripped any mystery from the photographs themselves, so it's not that big

a deal. Besides, he's more into making his own, like LEGO animation movies, mostly Clone Wars related stuff.

HBM: One of the aspects that attract attention in your work is the atmosphere you achieve. Getting those fantastic snowy scenes from Hoth can't have been easy. Why the search for that not easy to get environment? Which was the path to reach the desired effect?

VL: Hoth is a dear place to me. I was a kid when the original trilogy came out and I saw them all in cinema at the time. The Empire Strikes Back is special for me because of the snow element, and the fact it was filmed in Norway, our neighbour country. I have always loved snow and, especially as a kid, I played in it a lot, built snowcastles and such.

When I first tried the snow with LEGO something just clicked and I wanted to do more. One experiment led to another and gradually the technique I use now emerged. It's all trial and error with a twist of determination. To pursue this particular snow spray effect is because I simply think it's cosy and beautiful, but also because I haven't really seen it elsewhere. It almost feels as if I'm doing something that's mine.

The technique is a bit laborious and I think I'm developing some kind of allergy to the baking powder I use. At least I'm getting nosebleeds if I'm careless and end up breathing the stuff. It's a bit painful sometimes, really.

HBM: From the moment you have a new idea for a picture until the finished result, which are the steps you take?. How many attempts you make before you get the desired effect? How long can the whole process take until you make the photo public?

VL: This varies a lot. The quickest shots with snow effects may come about in couple of hours from start to the finished photo, but usually it takes longer. Much longer. I think the most laborious shoot was "The Arrival" which I had to shoot three times over a five day period, with about 350 exposures to get it right. That means building and dismantling the whole setup on three separate occasions.

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/avanaut/4577963694/in/set-72157622579369884>

The most annoying shoots have been the ones with huge blizzard effects. To capture that I have to set the whole thing up in our bathroom, block the doors, protect the camera, take my clothes off and shoot with remote while simultaneously creating a blizzard by blowing on the baking powder snow with a hairdryer. It looks great but the stuff gets everywhere,

“The Empire
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literally, I'm all white from the stuff afterwards. The cleaning and washing may take an hour, or two. There is something I like about this madness, the effect is not as grand as the effort to achieve it, actually, I think it could be achieved in Photoshop alone. I just I like the idea that I do it all in-camera.

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/avanaut/5014470554/in/set-72157622579369884>

I usually have a starting point, an idea towards which I'm going. I build a simple setup, usually on our livingroom desk and start working. The process itself is flexible, I allow the ideas to change according to what works and what doesn't during the shoot. Sometimes an idea gets abandoned altogether and a new idea takes place, an idea that can emerge from discovering something unexpected while working with the first idea. Sometimes it's easy, sometimes it's all dead ends.

I often shoot random frames during the shoot to catch lucky strokes, firing the camera sometimes not even looking at it, just banging away (I just love digital photography!). The luckies may lead to having them uploaded instead of the carefully prepped actual photos. If this happens, I just put together fun little backstory that fits the image, not the other way round.

After any photosession I go thru the lot of RAW images, when a decent frame is found I open it in Photoshop and adjust the colours and that's about it.

HBM: Have you given up on any project because of not getting what you wanted?

VL: Yes, many. I have numerous folders with hundreds of photographs of abandoned projects, things that just did not work. For example, I'm really frustrated with the Tatooine concept, I just cannot get it to work properly and I cannot





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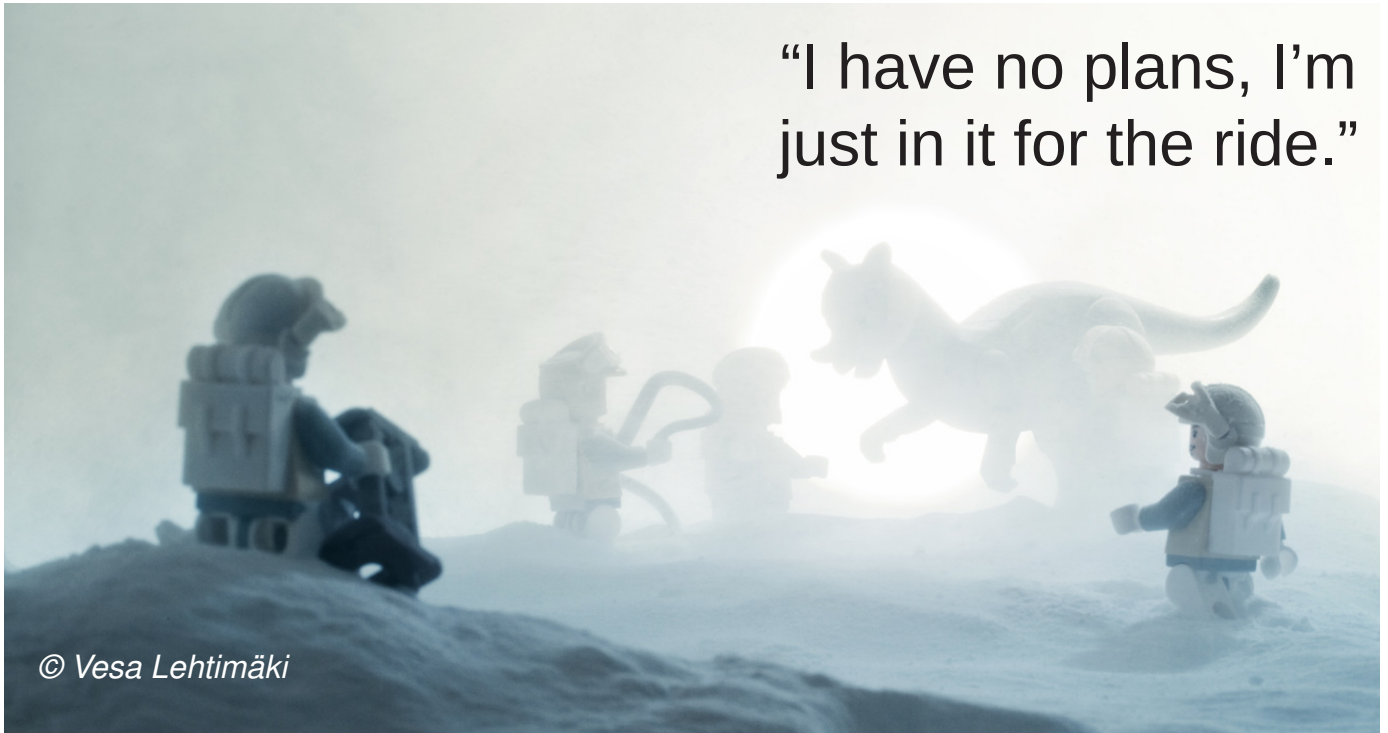


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“I have no plans, I’m just in it for the ride.”



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figure out where the problem is. Sure, there are some Tatooine shots I've uploaded, but if you only knew how many I haven't uploaded. I thought about uploading some of the failures to Flickr labeled as "Fails" at some point, but the discarded photos really are not that interesting, they're just fails.

HBM: Another of the aspects that determine the atmosphere of your creations is how you manage the light. How much is the result of the illumination for the picture and how much is post processed?

VL: I think this is due to the process of taking so many variations, I can shoot up to 500 exposures at best for a single photograph, changing the lighting for each exposure just a bit holding the lightsource(s) manually. I go thru the exposures a bunch at the time, try to see what is good and shoot more until I get it right. I do not add any light effects afterwards, actually, I do not add anything to my photos afterwards. The only photomanipulation I do is removing unwanted elements, such as threads, supports and dust. If I deviate from this I try to remember to mention it in the caption of the photo.

I do, however, process the images, sometimes heavily, I use filters, and layers, I adjust colours, contrasts and such but I do that for the whole image, maybe a little masking here and there, but never adding any elements to the photos.

More fun this way.

HBM: Lately you're making new versions of old works. Have you changed your technique or the way of thinking about those scenes in particular?

VL: The reason I've revisited old photos is that I purchased a new camera. The difference between a Canon 400D and Canon 5D Mark 2 is very big and I wanted to see if the old stuff gets any better with higher resolution. In the revisited shots there have been a lot of airborne snow, It shows way better with the new gear, I like that.

HBM: If you had to choose one of your pictures, which one would you choose? Why?

VL: Of the LEGO® shots I've always been really happy with "The Moonlight Shadow". There's something in it that summarizes a lot of the photography I've done with the LEGO. It has snow in it with only a very subtle airborne snow effect, it has very good lighting, the moon and the background mountain range worked great, the colour of the snow lantern adds warmth and drama to the otherwise very cold atmosphere, and the little snowtrooper minifigs happened to stand almost perfectly in different places so that the one staring at the lantern steals the show. And this is all in-camera, nothing's been altered, except minor adjustments to contrasts. It is not the most popular of my shots but I'm quite fond of it personally.

<http://www.flickr.com/photos/avanaut/5411192881/in/set-72157622579369884>

HBM: Do you plan to change the theme of your pictures in the future? Perhaps taking advantage of the return of the superhero minifigs?

VL: I have no plans, I'm just in it for the ride. If it gets boring I do something else, if not, which is what I hope for, I'll stick to Star Wars™ and LEGO for a little while longer. The kid is growing up and taking interest in a larger variety of stuff, if he starts to do something entirely different than playing with LEGO, I do not know what to do. The whole LEGO photography is very much connected to what he does. I honestly don't know.

There is still at least one thing we're really waiting for, however, and that's the upcoming Lord of the Rings sets. See, I read the Hobbit to the kid as a bedtime story – twice. Then I read the Lord of the Rings, the whole thing! It took almost three months' worth of evenings to finish but it was worth every second of it, it was a wonderful experience. Not long after finishing the book, the news of the new LotR sets came out and we've been waiting eagerly ever since. It's going to be great fun, I already have made some test shots for those. I have to start saving money now. :D

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