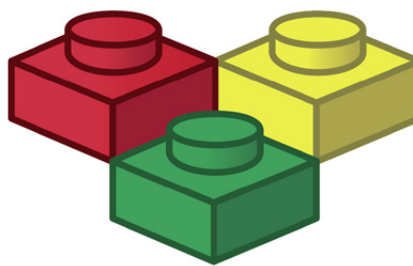


# Pillars of the Community: Brickset



Brickset.com

By HispaBrick Magazine®

Images by Brickset

We continue our interviews with the leading online resources on LEGO® with the largest available database of sets: Brickset. We talk with Huw Millington.

**HBM:** How did the idea of BS come up and what was its original purpose?

**BS:** I started Brickset in 1997, although it wasn't called that until 2000. The original idea was to create a web page to provide information on the many promotional sets that were available in various places across the world at that time. In 1997 the online community was much smaller, of course, and most communication was done in the Usenet newsgroup rec.toys.lego. I'd collate the information from the newsgroup, add pictures and make it easy to find and read.

However, it wasn't long before I started adding normal sets and making it more comprehensive.

**HBM:** To what degree has that goal been fulfilled?

**BS:** I think it still fulfils its original purpose. It's no longer the only source of the information but I like to think it's still the best!

**HBM:** How many people are working on the site and how did you meet? How do you distribute the work?

**BS:** I originally teamed up with Grahame Reid, in New Zealand, whom I 'met' in the rec.toys.lego newsgroup. He maintained his own comprehensive set lists that became the basis of the Brickset database.

I created the code for the site and we both maintained the database. I am still the only one who works on the actual site code but, in addition to Grahame, there are now more database admins, including Ian Grieg (bluemoose).

There is now a small team that helps with the site: moderating reviews and the forum, and writing news articles. I think there are around 15 helpers in total.

**HBM:** A website like Brickset must cost money. How is it funded?

**BS:** Yes, it certainly does! It started out being hosted for free by Northstar Computer Services, who offered free hosting for LEGO websites, but as traffic increased it soon outgrew its basic hosting.

You could say that, indirectly, it's funded by Amazon, eBay and LEGO, via affiliate marketing. Every time a user clicks on a link to one of these sites and then buys something or bids on an auction, Brickset receives a small commission.

However, I have no plans to 'sell out' to advertising: I hate adverts. I think they make sites look cheap and difficult to read and use. You only have to look at some of the LEGO wiki sites around to see the negative effect they have.

**HBM:** Do you have your own server? Can you explain some of the technical features?

**BS:** The site is still hosted at Northstar, who also host BrickLink, but it now runs on a virtual Windows 2008 server and SQL Server database. I know Microsoft hosting and web technologies are not as popular as open-source alternatives, but I use them extensively at work and have built up skills in them so it obviously makes sense to use them at Brickset. So far, they have proved to be very robust and reliable, and the virtual server has coped well with the peaks in traffic over the holiday season.

**HBM:** What is your relationship with TLG?

**BS:** The only formal relationship I have with the LEGO® group is as an affiliate. However I think I am probably quite well known in the company and have been an Ambassador in the past, when the ambassador scheme first started, and I've also participated in several product development workshops.

**HBM:** Have you had problems with TLG due to the news leaks?

**BS:** Yes, you could say that! I always try to 'do the right thing' and not antagonise LEGO, as that's in nobody's interest. However, there are times when information escapes, is published on legitimate websites, which we then republish, only to have LEGO on our case asking us to remove it.

An example of this was when Amazon.com listed, with photos, the Prince of Persia sets months ahead of their official release. Brickset, along with other sites, grabbed the images and published them, only to receive sternly worded emails from LEGO lawyers a few hours later. I believe in this case the problem was that their publication was considered to be a 'spoiler' for the movie by Disney so LEGO had to act fast to get them removed from Amazon and everywhere else. I was of course only too happy to oblige in this instance, but another, more recent, example highlighted a problem where one group within LEGO didn't know what another one was doing and I was caught in the crossfire.

Last year, the Brandenburg Gate Architecture set was put out for sale in the Manchester LEGOLAND Discovery Centre a few weeks before its planned official announcement at an event in Berlin. A Brickset member bought it and posted pictures in the forum, which I then put on the home page. Someone in LEGO saw it and then asked LEGO's Community Engagement team to get it removed. I did so when asked, but after thinking more about it (and returning from a short vacation) I reinstated it on the basis that the set, and picture, were obtained legitimately and LEGO had no right to ask for its removal, just because they had wanted to keep it under wraps and were trying to close the stable door after the horse had bolted, as it were.

Since that incident, I believe LEGO's emphasis is on preventing internal problems like that happening, rather than on punishing the community after the event, which is of course the way it should be.

**HBM:** Which criteria do you follow to add a picture of a set to the database?

**BS:** We'll add any legitimately obtained images, even if they haven't officially been released by LEGO.

Pictures of the modular Town Hall are a good example. A Hungarian toy shop listed it on its website, and started selling it some months ago, but as of the time of writing it still hasn't been officially announced.

We do, however, draw the line at scans of retailers' catalogues or any other image that has 'confidential' watermarks. It's quite clear these are not for publication, yet other less scrupulous sites still go ahead and do so.

**HBM:** Can you give us some interesting statistics on Brickset?

**BS:** I love digging through the database and coming up with interesting statistics -- with over 9,000 sets and the collections of 30,000 people in it, there are a lot to be had!

So, apart from those shown on the site's home page:

- 55,000 people have registered an account on the site, of which 36,000 have logged in since January 2009, when I started recording log-in dates.
- Brickset members own 4,665,000 minifigs, which if lined up hand-to-hand would stretch 116,000 km, or about 3 times round the world.
- The most owned minifig is the battle droid: 116,000, if all variants are taken into account.
- The site's busiest day ever was on September 23, 2011 when 48,000 people visited. The cause was later to be found to be a prominent mention at reddit.com.

**HBM:** What do you think attracts so many LEGO fans to have their collection in Brickset's database?

**BS:** I like to think it's a combination of things: the ease at which you can do so, the accuracy and currency of the database, and the feeling of being part of a worldwide community.

**HBM:** Where do you find the ideas of all the new features of the website?

**BS:** I enjoy the software development side of running the site so I probably spend more time on it than I need to, adding new features all the time! Of course I come up with ideas myself but actually the vast majority of new features are as a direct result of suggestions from users, either in response to the annual user survey I run, or received by email.

I think it's important that the site does what its users want so I am only too happy to receive comments and suggestions. After all, if it didn't, there wouldn't be any users and the site would die.

**HBM:** How much time do you spend to add all these features?

**BS:** Probably far too long -- at the moment I usually spend a couple of hours a day, either working on new features or maintaining the database and images.

**HBM:** How do you take the pictures of the minifigures? Do you have all of them?

**BS:** I wrote an article [1] explaining how I take them, using a light tent, a piece of white card and some macro flashes a while ago.

I do own all those I've photographed, except for the classic space figs. I had most of them before I started but had to resort to BrickLink to fill a few gaps here and there. There are loads more themes I want to add to the galleries: Atlantis, Alien Conquest, fantasy era Castle and, of course, Star Wars™. I have all but a few Star Wars figures so I just need to find the time to do it.

**HBM:** How do you see the future of Brickset?

**BS:** Simple: keep improving it, keep it current, increase traffic, and maintain its position as one of the most respected cornerstones of the online LEGO® community.

[1] <http://www.brickset.com/miscellaneous/articles/minifigPhotography/>

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