

# Pillars of the Community: The Brothers Brick



By HispaBrick Magazine®

Pictures by The Brothers Brick

In this issue we interview the founder of most famous and most viewed blog about LEGO on the Internet, Andrew Becraft of The Brothers Brick.

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

**AB:** I started "Dunechaser's Blocklog" back in 2005 to highlight my own LEGO models – mostly minifigs at the time. By the time six months had passed, I was highlighting models and minifigs from lots of people, and I wanted help, so I asked Josh Wedin to join me. That meant the blog wasn't just "Dunechaser's" anymore, so we held a contest to change the name. Josh and I liked how LEGO can tell a story, so we chose "The Brothers Brick," like "The Brothers Grimm." We've been telling stories with LEGO ever since.

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

**AB:** The Brothers Brick has become far more successful than we could ever have imagined. We highlight LEGO models from all over the world, as well as LEGO news, reviews, and interviews. Tens of thousands of people visit the site every week, but we take the most pleasure when something we post sparks an interesting discussion in the comments.

**HBM:** How many people are working on the site and how did you meet? (You can do a presentation of the team here if you like)

**AB:** Today, we have twelve contributors, from all over the world. Since we're an English-language blog, most contributors are naturally from the United States, Great Britain, Australia, and Canada, but Croatian LEGO fan Matija Grguric recently joined us as well. In general, we invite people who are active in the online LEGO fan community and who are good builders themselves.

**HBM:** How do you distribute the work?

**AB:** We don't really distribute the work in any specific way. We tried that for the first few years, with each contributor responsible for specific themes, like Castle, Town & Train, or Space. But we've found since then that it's simpler if people just blog what they like, regardless of the theme or where they found it.

**HBM:** A website like The Brothers Brick should cost money. How is it funded?

**AB:** Yes, it's not inexpensive to run a website that averages one million page views per month. To me, advertising is a "necessary evil" to cover server and bandwidth costs. However, we usually have money left over in any given year, and we turn that back around into the LEGO fan community. We sponsor events like BrickCon each year in Seattle, for example. But having to cover expenses means advertising is necessary, and for a LEGO fan site, the most logical way to do that is to sell some LEGO through the LEGO Shop online. Naturally, that changes our relationship with the LEGO Group.

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

**AB:** Our relationship with LEGO has evolved considerably over the years. Before we moved to our own domain at Brothers-Brick.com near the end of 2006, running the website was free, and there was no need for advertising. By adding advertising through LEGO's affiliate program in the US, UK, and Canada, we have much more frequent contact with LEGO about new and upcoming sets, to coordinate the release of information timed alongside launch events at fan conventions, for example.

Getting this type of information from LEGO directly makes the information much more reliable, but it also means that we tend to avoid blogging about poor-quality information like unconfirmed set lists or low-resolution scans from LEGO's retailer catalog.

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

**AB:** I think people suspect that we don't highlight that kind of pre-release information because LEGO has asked us not to post "leaks." To be honest, "leaks" are LEGO's problem, not ours. (Occasionally we are contacted by someone who wants to share leaked information with us. That information is stolen, and The Brothers Brick does not trade in stolen goods.) Regardless, we decided several years ago to focus on reliable, high-quality news about LEGO sets and product releases, which means that we do find ourselves relying on the LEGO Group's official sources more often than we did in the past. Thankfully, LEGO knows that we exist, and it's rare that we're not one of the first websites to release information.

However, there have been times when we've highlighted high-quality, reliable information from a source other than LEGO. For example, Amazon.com was the first place most of us ever heard about the Prince of Persia sets – complete with high-resolution photos, prices, and release dates. We promptly blogged about this news, but LEGO sent their lawyers after us (not after Amazon.com, as far as we know). We're a small, fan-run website, and we don't have the resources to fight a legal battle with LEGO, even when we're in the right, so we agreed to take the pictures down. LEGO hasn't pulled a stunt like that in several years; I think they've learned that they do more harm than good when they punish LEGO fan sites rather than trying to fix the information leak at the source.

**HBM:** Which criteria do you follow to publish a MOC in the Blog?

**AB:** That depends on the contributor, I suppose – we each have our interests. Two things that are fairly consistent across all our posts are that the models are well-presented and that the photograph itself is well-sourced.

Far too many LEGO® models are poorly lit against a cluttered background, even when the model itself is pretty good. When I've found ten great MOCs and only have time to blog two, the presentation of the model can be the deciding factor. Thankfully for LEGO models overall, photography has improved dramatically over the last five or six years. Unfortunately for us, that just makes it even harder to pick the best ones to feature.

It's also important that the builder gets well-deserved credit for the model that they've built. Until a few years ago, LEGO fans were talked about on major websites as though we were a nameless bunch of nerds who had too much time on our hands. As a result, websites and blogs would do what all our relatives do in email – “Look at this hilarious thing that someone built!” I felt that both builders and their models deserved to be taken seriously. Today, websites like Gizmodo, Boing Boing, MAKE, and others do just that, crediting both the builders and the talent that goes into building the model. I like to think that The Brothers Brick influenced that change in some small way.

**HBM:** After so many years blogging the best MOCS of Internet, is it difficult to find new material that surprises you every day?

**AB:** Yes. Even when I find MOCs to blog, I sometimes find myself with nothing to say. That's when I take a break from blogging for a while and focus on other interests. I even build myself sometimes!

**HBM:** During these years of daily following the LEGO community, which do you think are the main changes that have occurred in the AFOL community?

**AB:** The threat of Brickshelf going away for good back in 2007 has had the single greatest negative impact on the AFOL community over the last six or seven years. I'm not exaggerating. As a result, the LEGO fan community splintered into all sorts of different directions. Even those who argue that most of us ended up on Flickr don't account for the fact that Flickr itself is split across hundreds of groups. These groups themselves, combined with commenting directly on photos, have pulled discussions away from the traditional LEGO fan communities like Classic Castle, Classic Space, and so on. Whether directly or indirectly, the uncertainty surrounding Brickshelf's future splintered a fairly unified community to all corners of the web.

Now, all that said, I actually think we're in a better place than we were five years ago. Sites like Flickr and blogs like ours have exposed a huge number of people to LEGO in ways that a standalone site like Brickshelf never could have.

**HBM:** Have you done any activities in “real life”? Can you explain them?



**AB:** I attended my first SEALUG (Seattle LEGO® Users Group) meeting in May 2006, and attended BrickCon here in Seattle later the same year. I've also attended BrickFest when it was in Portland, and contributed to LEGO displays at Emerald City Comic-Con earlier this year. After six or seven years interacting with fellow AFOLs only online (going back to the very earliest days of FBTB), it was wonderful to meet people in person whom I'd only known by their screen names. Today, some of my best friends "in real life" are LEGO fans, and LEGO is one of the things that keeps me close to my younger brother, who travels up to BrickCon each year.

**HBM:** Can you explain any interesting anecdotes related to Brothers Brick?

**AB:** I think of myself as a reasonably talented writer and editor who can build some cool things now and then. I'm proud of what TBB has accomplished, but I don't think of myself as particularly interesting or worthy of celebration. But at least once every LEGO convention, someone will see my name, see "The Brothers Brick" on my name badge, and ask something like, "Are you that Andrew Becraft?" This is mostly embarrassing, and I always suspect that I'm a disappointment in real life to fans of The Brothers Brick, but it is amusing to be treated as a celebrity from time to time.

**HBM:** In your opinion, which is the key point for TBB to become a reference blog in the AFOL Community?

**AB:** Consistency. I can't say that we always succeed at this – either in the quality of the models that we highlight or ensuring we don't miss anything interesting or important – but a consistently high level of writing about interesting LEGO models, posted on a consistent basis is what we strive for.

**HBM:** How much time do you spend to keep TBB running?

**AB:** I used to spend three hours every evening, and many more hours each day on the weekend. That wasn't sustainable. This is one reason we bring on new contributors from time to time, ensuring we have a consistent rate of new posts without overburdening our contributors – all of whom have relationships, careers, and other aspects of real life that are far more important than LEGO ever can or should be.

Every one of our contributors is a volunteer. We do this because we like doing it – like writing about LEGO, like contributing to the conversation across the LEGO fan community, and even like finding ourselves representing the AFOL community to casual fans and "observers" who don't build themselves. But one thing I don't want The Brothers Brick to ever feel like is work – it's just something we do in our spare time, for fun.

**HBM:** How do you see the future of The Brother's Brick?

**AB:** To be honest, I think I kind of like things the way they are. I'd like us to do more interviews and set reviews, but BrickJournal does a great job at the former while BrickSet does a fantastic job at the latter. We wouldn't be filling a gap by doing more, I think – just creating more work for ourselves. And as I said earlier, "work" is the last thing that I want TBB to feel like. LEGO is fun, and that's what The Brothers Brick is all about.

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