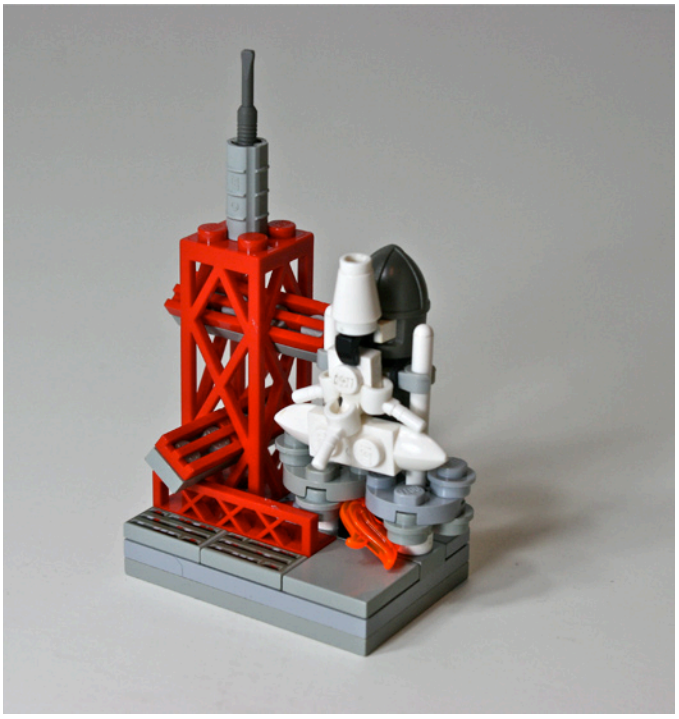
Interview with Steph and Sean Mayo

By Katie Walker
Images by Steph and Sean Mayo

Sean and Steph Mayo (Siercon and Coral) burst onto the LEGO® scene two years ago with a series of incredibly detailed and inventive fantasy models. Since then, they worked together to create an enchanting Faerie Forest, filled with charming details, creative use of parts and a sense of magic, both in the subject matter as well as in the ability to create an organic world out of LEGO. Sean and Steph are not limited to fantasy creations, but seem to master any theme they tackle, creating micro NASA shuttles, sailing ships, anime characters, and missile-shooting Big Macs with equal dexterity. Nor are they afraid to set a Mega Bloks castle on fire.



Katie: Tell me a little about yourselves.

Sean and Steph: Sure! We're a LEGO couple that loves to build together. But before and beyond LEGOs, we have tons of fun in all kinds of medieval fantasy or sci-fi environments. You can easily find us playing computer games, listening to books on tape, making arts and crafts, or dressing up and attending various cons. Also, we're aspiring authors. One of our long term projects and true goals is to finish a book that has been in the making for several years. Many of our builds are built in the same genre, and even our LEGO online names are from two of the main characters in our story. Do all of our builds

have a place somewhere in the story? No, not particularly, the storyline is much more cohesive than our often random whims of inspiration, but many of our fantasy MOCs at least have the same kind of "feel."

When we aren't busy having fun in imaginary worlds, Sean works as an environmental scientist. You can find Sean trouncing through the woods, delineating wetlands, streams and forests, then going back to the office to write reports about what was found. He secretly takes mental LEGO® notes informed by a closer study of nature. Sean also loves playing sports and practicing Jujitsu.

On a more personal note, Steph is currently staying at home, due to suffering with extreme chronic pain in her back and most of her body 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. She is an amazing person who is not defined by her pain, but we want to mention it if only to highlight the consistent joy in which she lives her life when every day is a battle to be strong, and when most of us would just curl up in bed and want to die. She is always creative and exploring imaginary worlds, while working on writing the book, and is still down to earth enough to keep finances together and particularly LEGO expenses from taking over our lives!

Katie: How did you get started with building LEGO?

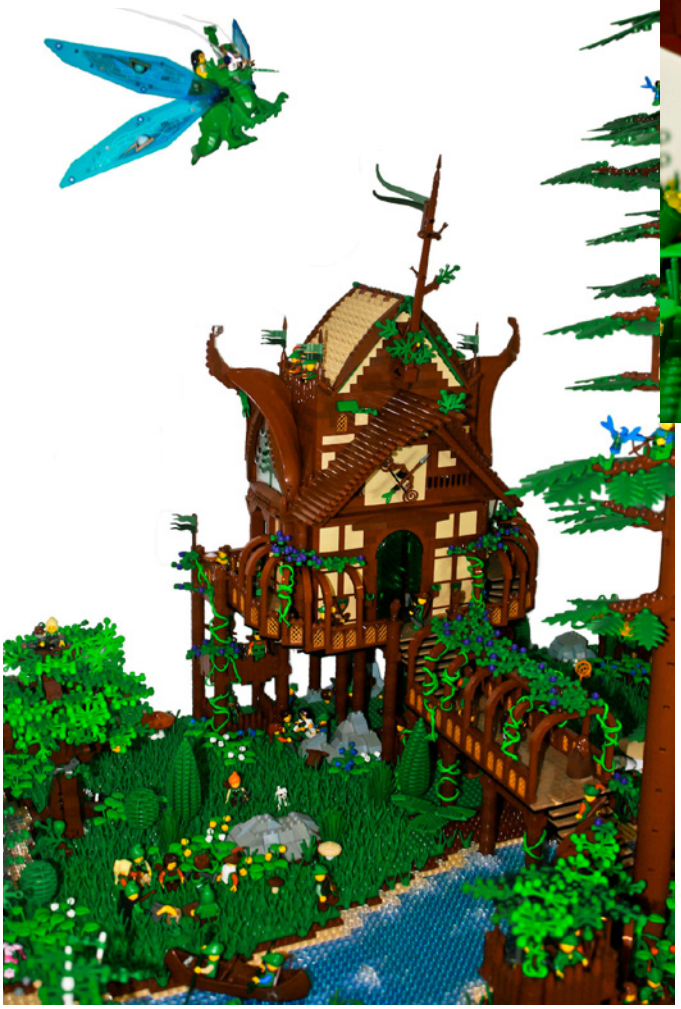
Sean and Steph: Both of us have been building at different points in our lives to some extent, Steph when she was a kid and Sean up until college. But it wasn't until we got married and brought out Sean's LEGO collection from storage that we thought it might be fun to post some of those small builds online and perhaps slowly make houses and environments for the many men Sean had collected throughout high school. Up to that point about 2 years ago, the Internet as an avenue for LEGOs hadn't crossed our minds, and we had much to learn. We learned about new concepts like SNOT (Studs Not On Top) or brick building baseplates. But what got us started building the most in the last 2 years was wanting to jumpstart the medieval fantasy aspect of the LEGO community. We could find a fair amount of MOC dragons, but many of the classic fantasy beasts had little, poor, or no representation. So we set out to construct a fantasy realm.

Katie: You work together as a team, sharing a single flickr account and publicly stating that you don't want anyone to know who built what. How does that work?"

Sean and Steph: I think we picture it this way, if either of us is going somewhere in life it's completely indebted to the

Faerie Forest

By Siercon and Coral



other. How this plays out in LEGO® is not just simply adding two people's building skill or building 'twice as fast', but the encouragement and hard work in all the other areas. Beyond building the actual MOC is the encouraged patience, edits, and sometimes even prods to redo the entire thing. It's sort of an accountability system. We don't post anything until the other looks at it, and often we'll get to simply build together. I think the main result of this is that rather than things taking half the time, we still take the same amount; the end result is just more refined than it would have been. Too often, I (Sean) get on a 'building high' and become completely satisfied, excited, and happy with the result of a few short hours of late night building. Steph often stands as the voice of reason in saying "Maybe you should go to sleep on it, it doesn't have to be posted tonight, and I think it could use some work." Only when I wake up the next morning do I think, "Wow... that doesn't look good at all." Typically what follows is a massive edit of the project and a solid post the night after. Two of the difficulties are entering contests and events. In contests, opponents can mull

over the idea that “I’m going up against two builders” and while that could be true, we honestly do keep it separate to honor the spirit of the rules. And in events, you are often forced to just put one name on the project, when in fact we both worked on it. We do our best to see that there really isn’t a “Sean” build vs. a “Steph” build. I think the basic truth is that all of our LEGO® would still be in boxes if it weren’t for both of us doing and enjoying this together!

The Faerie Forest

Katie: Could you tell us a bit about the Faerie Forest? How did you come up with the original idea? How did the Forest develop over time? Was the final model what you expected when you started, or did it change significantly as you went along?

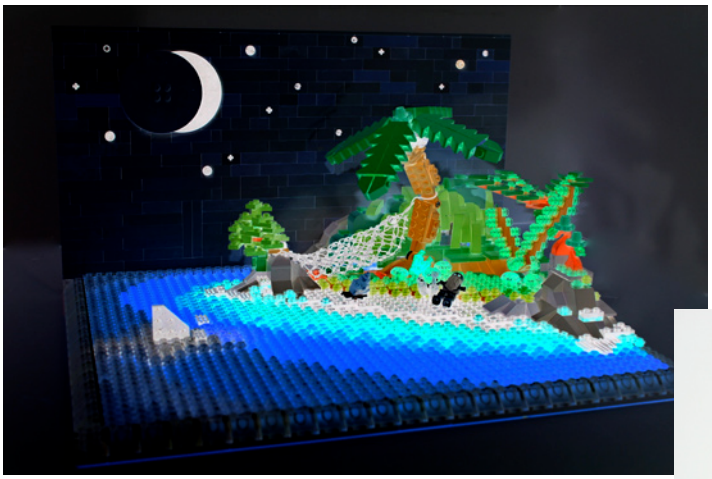
Sean and Steph: Well, one of the large armies Sean had collected in high school was Forestmen. In fact, they were his favorite, and as the most domestic and cheery of the lot they just seemed easiest to start with. So we set out to build them a home. The initial thought was, “If I were a Forestman, my dream home would be high up in the redwood forest.” And the idea developed from there. This build has been passively and incrementally built over the last year and a half. It did evolve over time, but not as drastically as one might expect. I think a good rule of thumb is that we build many things twice. Once a rough draft is built, we usually tear it down to fix some problem that was missed in the flurry of inspiration. Building late at night when you’re on a roll is awesome, and many times we go to bed happy with what we’ve done, but then we wake up. Only then once a build has incubated are we able to more accurately see aspects of it that we want to change, improve on, or scrap altogether. Fortunately this build was slightly different. Because it took so long much of the inspiration had time to sit, develop, and simply be added slowly. It is such a life-heavy build it was able to grow organically; trees, houses, or a river could be added after the fact without much adjustment. Some of the major additions that weren’t there for the first year of its existence were the lodge, the river, the spiral staircases, pinecones, and giant ferns. Our typical thought is that good things get better the more patient one is and the more refined you are able to make it. As a result, we have many creations that have been evolving over periods of time. We couldn’t tell you what creation we’re coming out with next, simply because we are typically working on about 10 MOCs at a time.

It seems people always want to know how many bricks are in it and how long it took. The “how many bricks” question always baffles us. We don’t understand how people keep track of how many pieces are in their creations, and we definitely couldn’t tell you with really any of our builds. One thought is that it seems like it could be easier to calculate parts used in less organic builds. Regardless, our hats go off to people who know how many pieces are in their creations, and also those who can build digitally.

Thinking Outside of the Box

Katie: You recently came up with some very interesting ideas for a “Thinking Outside of the Box” model-building contest. You set a Mega Bloks castle on fire; created another castle entirely by stacking bricks without connecting any of them together; and created an island with wild colors, meant to be seen through the “invert colors” filter on a computer. Can you tell more about the inception and execution of these ideas?”

Sean and Steph: Thanks! We were encouraged to think “outside the box” in a contest Nannan Zhang was running through the Builders Lounge on Flickr. “Thinking outside the box” was one of the categories. At the same time as that was happening we were moving to a new home. All of our LEGOs were (and still are to some degree) in shambles. Because of this finding specific pieces or creating refined or more elaborate displays would have been very difficult. It’s very hard to build when you can’t find pieces you know you have. So as a result we gravitated towards thinking about what could be done with LEGOs in general without using seed parts, or shuffling through bins for ideas or NPU (“nice piece usage”). The first thing we thought of was “Hey, we have all these rogue Mega Bloks! Lets make something really pretty out of it and post it online and see if all of the super LEGO/anti-Mega Bloks fans even notice.” When it became apparent that we didn’t have the pieces to make anything better than a average moc the idea to poorly film it and light it on fire kept the idea alive of getting a shock factor. So instead of announcing after a couple of days that the build was completely Mega Bloks, we rather tried to stun people into thinking we were burning LEGOs... only to hopefully relieve some fears by announcing that they were Mega Bloks. After that, we decided it probably wouldn’t be the best idea to enter a creation into a LEGO contest that did not contain LEGOs. So the idea of building something without locking the pieces together sparked. What was more anti-LEGO than to not have the pieces connected at all? Thus “Avalon” came into being. It was several fun nights of carefully stacking pieces like a card house or playing Jenga. A little known fact about LEGOs is that the vertical sides aren’t parallel! Try stacking 20 1x2 bricks on their sides without compensating for the slant of the sides. This made the build very difficult as all the pieces wanted to fall outward. Lastly, the inverted MOC. I saw a photo online of two different piles of colored bricks inverted, and it simply struck a chord. I wonder what makes green, and if someone could make an entire ugly MOC and have it invert to be something beautiful. And from having a good amount of pink pieces left over from various ‘Friends’ builds “Invert Island” was born. It was mind numbing trying to think in inverted colors. We frequently had to go back to a key photo that we used of various colors and combination of colors inverted on our computer to maintain that we were building with the right colors. Are the outside of the box MOCs done? Is there more outside of the box... Sure! I don’t know if we’ll be able to get to any of the ideas soon, but there are lots of outside of the box builds people can still build. One idea that has yet to be done is a refraction moc. If you’ve ever held a trans LEGO up to the light it can often make pretty patterns on the wall. Imagine cataloging the projection from lots of different pieces and making a mural triggered by a beautiful laser show... The door is open.



Katie: One of the things that I find the most impressive about your building is your ability to take a piece and use it in a completely novel way. Hair pieces become flowers and blackberries, a castle helmet turns into a micro-rocket, wheels transform into bee hives. How do you come up with these ideas? I know it's not always easy to understand how inspiration happens, but is there anything that you do in order to promote this kind of creativity?

Sean and Steph: Two steps stand out to us. First is that we have all of our pieces organized by color. We find that this encourages matching and strong color themes that often remove business and give MOCs life. So many of our MOCs start by looking at a single color, or bin of specific trans pieces, and assembling a disjointed version of whatever those pieces as a whole look like they could create. If we were to construct a dragon, rather than build a basic underlying structure, we go through the bins pulling out all the pieces or combination of pieces that look like they make the best version of a hand, tail, eyes, head, or teeth, while trying to keep within our desired scale. This process is done with no consideration to how the legs will attach to the body, or the head to the neck. There is no assembly at this point, just pure thought on what piece objectively looks best for this body part, in spite of ease of use and very often biased towards difficult pieces that people avoid. During this process we also utilize a small bin we have titled "Rare or Unique Pieces." If we have a piece we have never seen before, disassemble one, or find a rare or exceedingly odd or useless one, it goes in this bin. This is our random treasure trove of wacky and rare pieces. So during this process this bin is always kept in mind.

Lastly, we work on assembling the finished modules. It's a passive conviction that some connection can put anything together, and often it takes days to figure out how to attach the head to the body, or waist to the upper torso. But we always tell ourselves "there has to be a way." Rarely do we have to scrap an entire idea simply because we cannot connect the components. I think working in this disjointed and connection-less fashion and ignoring a potentially impossible connection leaves room for using pieces in ways others might not have done so before.

Katie: What advice would you have for other builders who are looking to improve their models?

Sean and Steph: Learn from others, and get involved online. There are so many amazing builders to learn from. Also, be patient. When you are involved online there often develops a drive to post MOCs the second you think they might be done. Instead, let your creations incubate. Sleep on it and add to them and they will become more refined. This also helps when you are stuck on a creation and can't finish. Just put it aside, work on something else, and come back to it when you have more inspiration and creativity for that project. Some of our MOCs sat for up to a year before we posted them. It can definitely be hard to let things wait, but eventually it's worth it.

Katie: I want to thank Sean and Steph for not only taking their time to answer my questions, but also for sharing their incredible passion and building skills with the LEGO® Community.

Resources

Sean and Steph on flickr: http://www.flickr.com/photos/legocy/

Sean and Steph on MOCpages: http://www.mocpages.com/home.php/68828

The complete Faerie Forest set: http://www.flickr.com/photos/legocy/sets/72157630846954680

Sacrilege (burning Mega Bloks) video: http://www.flickr.com/photos/legocy/7882966434

Avalon destruction video: http://www.flickr.com/photos/legocy/7977937143
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