

Interview: Jamie Berard

By HispaBrick Magazine®

Pictures by Jamie Berard

Most of our readers won't need an introduction to our interviewee. For the absent-minded, Jamie Berard is a Design Manager Specialist, which means he is the designer who creates the most fabulous sets in the LEGO® catalogue. An AFOL hired by the company, he designs models for the Direct Exclusives and Creator Expert themes. Aside from a great creator he is close, cordial and fun. So it is a pleasure for HispaBrick Magazine to offer you an interview that Jamie has been kind enough to give.

Name: Jamie Berard

Age: 37

Born in: Boston, USA

Degree: Bachelor of Arts in English (2 years studying Civil Engineering)

HBM: Did you play with LEGO when you were a child?

JB: Yes. I especially enjoyed the Town series. As I got older, I dabbled in a Pirates, Star Wars™, Trains and Technic, but Town/City has always been where my heart is.

HBM: Did you make MOCS when you were younger?

JB: All the time. I especially enjoyed making functional amusement park rides. My inspiration would come from my family's summer vacations to various amusement parks around the US. I loved the challenge of making them work just like the real thing.

HBM: Did you dream of becoming a LEGO designer?

JB: Yes, from a very early age. The cool thing is that my family supported me and made me feel like I could actually do it for a living. I'm convinced I'm only here today because of their tireless encouragement and support.

HBM: As a fan, what is the MOC you are most proud of? Why?

JB: I'm not sure if it counts as a MOC, but I'm most proud of the work I did on the Mill Yard Project at the SEE Science Center in Manchester, NH. Along with many other members of NELUG, I had the privilege of working with LEGO Master Designers Steve Gerling and Erik Varszegi. I learned so much from them and the other members of our club. It was an amazing collaboration that I will always be grateful for.

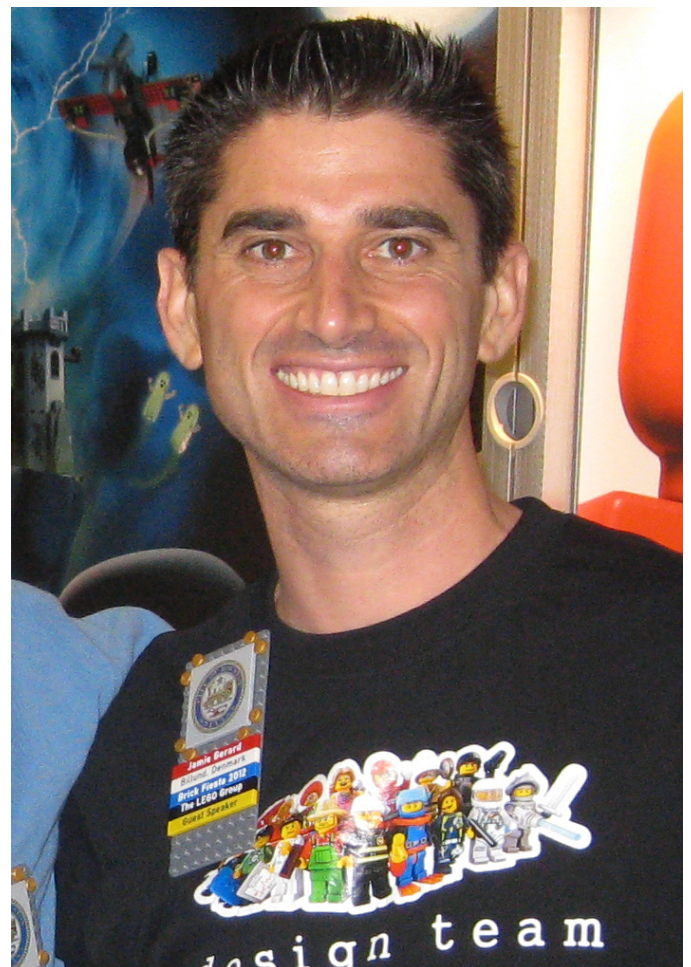
HBM: How did you get into the AFOL world?

JB: I actually bumped into it by accident while shopping at a toy store in the Boston area. I saw a bunch of full grown adults hanging around the LEGO isle with piles of LEGO boxes in

their arms. I asked the store manager what was going on and he explained they were in a club for adult LEGO fans. I got the contact info for NELUG and showed up for the next meeting which was back around 2000.

HBM: Did LEGO contact you to become a designer or did you try to?

JB: I actually was a finalist for the same Master Model Builder Competition that Nathan Sawaya won. In retrospect, I didn't stand a chance against his talent ☹. However, I still stuck with the hobby and eventually ended up at Brickfest 2005 in Washington D.C. It was there that I had an unexpected encounter with one of the managers at the LEGO Group. After chatting with him for the weekend and showing him my amusement park rides, I gave him a link to my website where there were more images of other things I've worked on



including the Mill Yard Project. He wrote me a few days later and said they wanted me to come to Denmark to work with the Creator team. It was pretty amazing the whole way it worked out ☺.

HBM: Is it very difficult to “change sides”?

JB: Yes. I think I struggled most with feeling like I belonged here. It's not like everyone wasn't bending over backwards to make me feel welcome and comfortable. I just couldn't shake the feeling that all the other designers were so much more qualified to be here. I was just a geeky LEGO® fan with an English degree and a background as a video editor, carpenter, monorail pilot and surveyor. They all had professional design degrees and amazing drawing and photoshop skills. I also felt extremely humbled and slightly intimidated working with so many of the legends who helped create my childhood happiness. Lucky for me, I have since appreciated the balance we have in our teams where all our different skills come together to make amazing stuff.

HBM: What was your first official design?

JB: My first official design was 4953 Fast Flyers. It was really a fun challenge having to learn the Creator DNA while still incorporating cool functionality that could be built by 7 year olds ☺.

HBM: Have building techniques evolved a lot since your first designs for TLG?

JB: Very much so. I'm really blown away at how much our system has evolved since I first started. We have so many more options for building cool details that would have previously been molded as a special pieces. It also helps that we now acknowledge an older consumer with our Direct Exclusives and lines like Lord of the Rings and the Hobbit. This gives us the chance to push the building possibilities without being constrained by the abilities of younger kids.

HBM: If you were to design that first model again, do you think it would be very different?

JB: I might have added more chrome ☺.

HBM: What set has been the most challenging to design?

JB: My most challenging set to design is coming out later this year. Before that, I'd say the Emerald Night was the most tricky. It was my first train and proved to be quite a challenge when they told me the XL motor was the one I had to use for the train. I had to figure out how to place a 5-module wide motor in a 6-module wide train scale without changing the aesthetic when Power Functions were added. Oh, and it had to be easy to retrofit the PF components without many changes and without compromising on pulling power or battery life. I'm fairly happy with what came out of it all, but it definitely has been improved by several fans since its launch.

HBM: When a UCS set is designed, how is the price/piece count determined?

JB: We get a budget for the bricks based on the set's pre-determined retail price. We then keep track of that budget as the model is designed. The price/piece thing is the last thing we notice because we first and foremost need to build an amazing model that will blow people away.

HBM: Is there a red line that must never be crossed?

JB: Yes. We have many internal rules and guidelines which are designed to prevent children from getting hurt and safeguard the hard-earned good reputation of the LEGO brand.

HBM: To what extent is the opinion of AFOL consumers taken into account when designing a set?

JB: For the Creator Expert line, I'd say fan opinions are especially valuable for us. It makes sense since the fans are ultimately our main consumer ☺. We read reviews, chat with fans at events and read your comments to consumer services. Our model choices are often influenced by fan polls, input from ambassadors and dialogue with our community relations team. Hopefully you also enjoy all the cool bricks in yummy colors that we include in our sets. We're one of the few groups that can rationalize a very mature and realistic color palette.

HBM: And in the building techniques?

JB: I actually try to avoid looking at too many building techniques used in fan creations. Of course, I can't help but be impressed at the models I see at the fan events I attend. But in many ways the more I see the harder it becomes for me to come up with my own new ideas. I know it sounds weird, but I would feel horrible 'borrowing' someone else's idea without being able to properly give them credit. It's just easier coming up with things on my own.

HBM: How does criticism from consumers affect a set that in first instance was destined to be a commercial success?

JB: Criticism is critical because it means that people care enough to comment. Silence can mean indifference, so I'd much rather hear the good and the bad because it gives us a chance to continuously improve. It was criticism of 10213 Shuttle Adventure which highlighted an opportunity for us to react and improve the model. 10231 Shuttle Expedition is an excellent example of how we were able to address consumer criticism in a positive way that improved the model and assured commercial success.



HBM: Is each set created by a single designer or do several designers work in parallel for the same set and then merge ideas?

JB: Our retail models are often shared by several designers. The Creator Expert and Direct Exclusive models are more often handled by one designer because of their size and complexity. Of course there are exceptions both ways. Palace Cinema, for example, was conceptualized by our intern Jordan Schwartz, but then developed and finalized by Astrid Graabæk.

HBM: What is more important when designing a new set, playability or the aesthetics of the final construction?

JB: It's always a happy balance. If anything, the play features are often reduced to focus on fewer key features that are easier to communicate. We designers often have a bad habit of trying to cram as many cool things into a model as possible. Lucky for us, we have marketing to step in and help us to focus ☺.

HBM: How did the idea of designers presenting their creation in a video come about?

JB: I can only speak for our team, but we decided to do launch videos for the Direct Exclusives because it quickly became apparent that we would never be able to travel to all the fan events where the models were unveiled at. The videos allowed us a chance to not only show off key features and development stories to the fans at the events, but also to all the other fans around the world.

HBM: How many designers work for LEGO® currently?

JB: There are about 100 product designers here in Billund. There are many more designers who work on graphics, element design and promotions.

HBM: How are you organized internally?

JB: We make the new hires and interns buy cake for made up occasions. After about a year, we require cake for anniversaries and birthdays. Once you're established, you're tasked with coming up with new excuses for the interns to buy more cake.

HBM: Are you still as excited about designing as when you started?

JB: More now than ever. Seriously ☺.

HBM: Of all the sets you have designed, which do you consider the best and which the worst?

JB: My favorite is probably the Green Grocer, but I wish I could have done more interior. It's my favorite because it's the one model that I really had a hard time getting people excited about as a follow-up for the Café Corner. It was very encouraging to see it so well received when it finally made it to market. The model I learned the most from was probably the Emerald Night. As much as I'm proud of the work I did on making it the best model possible, I still think I learned a lot from its development and launch which will only help us make even better models going forward.

HBM: Which are, in your opinion, the 5 best sets in the history of LEGO?

JB: Best ever is too tall an order to fulfill. I can instead mention 5 sets that made me smile for various reasons:

- 7412 Yeti's Hideout (I love the string mechanism. It really inspired me to add functionality while designing 10226 Sopwith Camel)
 - 8043 Technic Excavator (A true engineering marvel that looks gorgeous and makes me happy)
 - 6285 Black Seas Barracuda (Such a cool flagship for the Pirates theme)
 - 6392 Airport (the first set I ever asked for twice. My parents couldn't understand since they had already bought it for me the previous Christmas! That's when I knew I was a true LEGO fan ☺)
 - 10020 Santa Fe Super Chief (a real standout among LEGO trains. I distinctly remember the taste of the floor when my jaw dropped seeing it for the first time)
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