

Searching for a minifig

Interview with Christoph Bartneck and a look at some of his books

By HispaBrick Magazine®

Pictures by Christoph Bartneck and Brickset

Christoph Bartneck has been so kind as to send us some of his books for review. After having a look at the books we wanted to know more about this gigantic project of investigation data collection and taking pictures, so we asked him a few questions:

HBM: How did the idea of the books come up?

CB: The books got started out of a research project on the analysis of colours in products. We were looking for example of products that exhibit clear colour variations. Minifigures seemed a perfect example. I tried to get photos from LEGO® for this project, but all my attempts to even get in touch with the right person failed. At that time I did not know about the existence of the LEGO Community Managers. By now I am pretty certain that they do not have such a collection of photographs. I started to look for collectors and visited several AFOLs. I was blown away by their collections of LEGO and Minifigures. I previously worked for LEGO in Billund and I also used Mindstorms for my university teaching, but I completely underestimated the dedication of AFOLs and the depth of the LEGO cult. I had no idea how many minifigures there are and I also learned about Bricklink (BL) and other online resources. The problem with Bricklink was that the photos available were often very small, blurry or really just bad photographs. I was always interested in photography and I concluded that the minifigures deserve a better representation. I started photographing, not even knowing how this would all end up.



HBM: Why did you choose to publish these books yourself?

CB: I started to contact publishers to discuss the idea of a Minifigure book, including DK and Fantasia Verlag. Most publishers discourage authors and on some of their web pages I even read that they do not even want any unsolicited manuscripts. I was disappointed about the peculiar publishing world in which authors only get a meagre 5% of the sales price as royalties. The publishers' negative attitude towards authors and their unfair conditions made me look for alternatives. In my view, the publishing industry is going through change process that is as dramatic as the process that the music industry already went through. The internet and computer technology are moving us to new publishing processes and business models. Authors and musicians can now free themselves from the traditional publishers and offer their works directly to the fans. You can write a book or record a song and then publish it directly through online platforms such as Amazon or iTunes to an international audience. The key to the publishing revolution is in eBook readers and Print-On-Demand services. The latter prints the book only when it is ordered. This enables authors to publish a paper book without having to invest thousands of dollars into the print of a full edition. I compared many print-on-demand publishers and decided to go with CreateSpace, a daughter company of Amazon. We live in amazing times in which each and every one of us can write a novel and bring it directly to an international market of millions of readers. The technology is all there, the only constraint is our imagination.

HBM: How you collect all the information for your books?

CB: Besides photographing all the minifigures with the help of collectors I also had to gather all the meta data. The big online databases were the starting point, but I still had to edit many entries. Sometimes even BL has errors in its database. For correcting all the names of the Minifigures I used the Crowdsourcing platform Mechanical Turk. I collected all the information, including the photographs into a large database. Maintaining this database is my biggest task. It certainly takes more time than photographing all the minifigures.

All of the catalogs have only come to life through the help and support of the AFOL community. Without their help I would have never been able to bring together all the data. The catalogs are therefore an example of the true AFOL spirit. It is a project from a fan for the fans. I am grateful for all the feedback and suggestions I received and I hope to be able to share my appreciation for the amazing beauty of Minifigures with the AFOL community.

HBM: What are your plans for the future?

Christoph
Bartneck



The Unofficial LEGO® Minifigure Catalog

CB: There are several improvements that I would like to make in the future. Although print-on-demand has many advantages, it suffers from the high costs of printing. The books only get printed once they are ordered. These individual prints cannot compete with the production costs of traditional printing in large editions. I would also like to improve the design and usability of our catalog App. We made a good start, but the app is currently very functional. Users of iOS in particular are being spoiled with beautiful interface designs against which our app looks a bit simple. I would also like to explore new digital representations of Minifigures. We already experimented with creating 3D models of minifigures based on visual reconstruction software. This project is still at a very experimental stage. We are also working on a software tool to automatically identify minifigures. Beta testers are very welcome.

About the author:

Dr. Christoph Bartneck is an associate professor and director of postgraduate studies at the HIT Lab NZ of the University of Canterbury, New Zealand. He has a background in Industrial Design and Human-Computer Interaction, and his projects and studies have been published in leading journals, newspapers, and conferences. His interests lie in the fields of Social Robotics, Design Science, and Multimedia Applications. He has worked for several international organizations including the Technology Centre of Hannover (Germany), LEGO® (Denmark), Eagle River Interactive (USA), Philips Research (Netherlands), ATR (Japan), Nara Institute of Science and Technology (Japan), and The Eindhoven University of Technology (Netherlands). Christoph is one of founders of the LUG 4/2 and also one of the organisers of New Zealand's biggest LEGO event: The Christchurch Brick show.



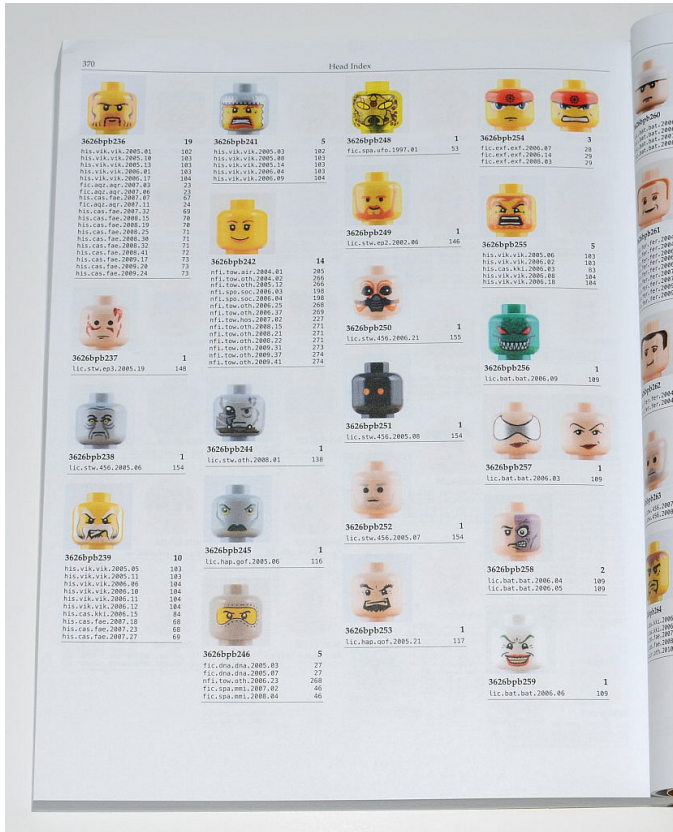
About the books:

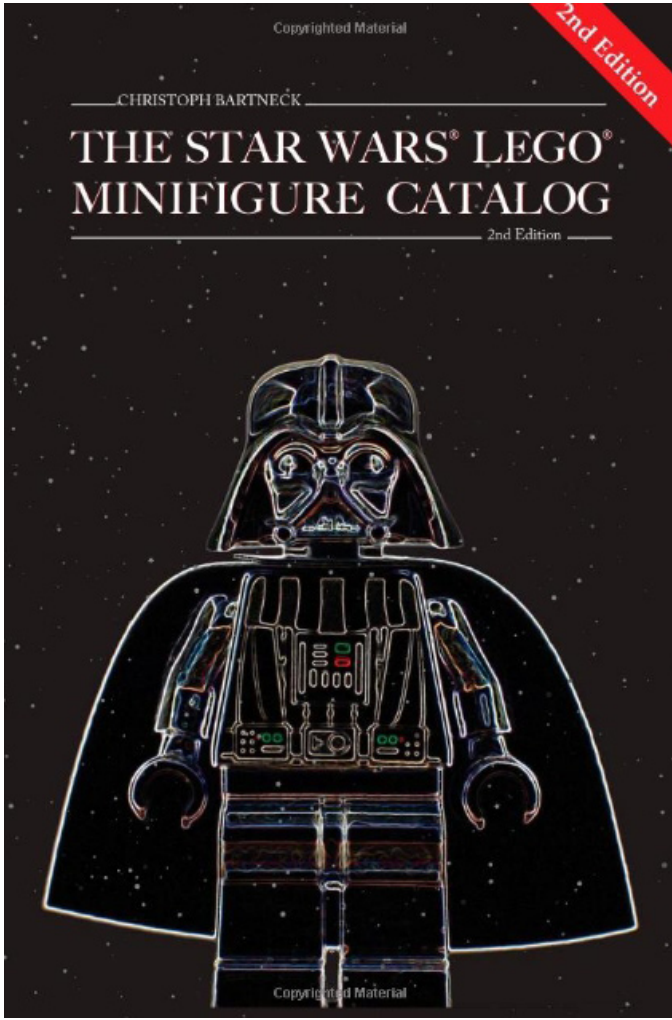
The most important one of these, both in size and in the wide range of its contents is "The Unofficial LEGO Minifigure Catalog". This paperback, of almost A4 size and 390 pages, includes pictures of all minifigs from the 70's till 2010 (there are complementary books for 2011 and 2012).

The minifigs are classified by theme and each one is accompanied by its name, number of pieces, Bricklink code and author's own classification code.

The pictures are large and detailed enough to appreciate all the details of each minifig without difficulty.

In the final pages there is a series of indexes with cross-references, minifigs organised by year and a list of minifig heads with a reference to the minifigs the heads appear in. These indexes are very useful, keeping in mind there are about 3600 minifigs!!





Personally I believe this is fundamental material for any fan of these little characters. The main problem is the cost of the book, but if you have read the interview you will know about the efforts made by the author to publish it.

Like satellites turning around the main work, there are other books about minifigs that extend the information around some of the most successful themes with exclusive minifigs. For example "The STAR WARS™ LEGO® Minifigure Catalog" or "The Harry Potter LEGO Minifigure Catalog". In these books



Star Wars

Old Republic

Satele Shan

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| | |
|------------|------------|
| Bricklink | sw389 |
| # Parts | 4 |
| Price New | |
| Price Used | |
| Head | 3626cpb635 |
| Sets | 9497-1 |

T7-O1

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| | |
|------------|--------|
| Bricklink | sw390 |
| # Parts | 15 |
| Price New | |
| Price Used | |
| Head | |
| Sets | 9497-1 |

Jace Malcom

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| | |
|------------|------------|
| Bricklink | sw391 |
| # Parts | 4 |
| Price New | |
| Price Used | |
| Head | 3626cpb769 |
| Sets | 9497-1 |

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the information about each minifig is much more detailed, including images of the back of the minifigs and the different expressions of their faces. In addition there is data concerning pricing in the secondary market or the sets the minifigs appear in. These are undoubtedly fundamental for fans of these themes.

Finally I'd like to mention a book that is a little different in this collection of books: "The Complete LEGO Figure Catalog". It is a tribute to the other figures that populate the various LEGO themes that have been available since the 70's until 2011. Duplo, Belville, Fabuland, ... all have their place in this book, making it a kind of journey through the history of the "other" LEGO figures.

The author has certainly made a commendable effort to collect and make available these fabulous sources of information.

As a final note, Christoph has started a project to get funding for a card game based on minifigs. You can find more information here:

<http://igg.me/at/lego-minifigure-quartet-card-game/x/3878995#>