

The LEGO® Journey

By Yun Mi Antorini and Lluís Gibert

We all use the acronym AFOL as a description of an Adult Fan Of LEGO®. It doesn't matter which kind of adult LEGO user we are talking about. "AFOL" comprehends all them. But there is a team in Billund, headed by Yun Mi Antorini, that has done long term research into the broad term called AFOL to have a better understanding of the people who have LEGO as hobby.

Yun Mi invited HispaBrick Magazine to share the results of her research with the whole community. We visited Billund on March 16th and we had a very interesting and engaging conversation which we will try to summarise on the following pages.

Introduction

AFOL means "Adult Fan Of LEGO". The acronym was created by a US fan on 1995 to define adults who play with LEGO bricks. It was quickly adopted by other people on the Usenet forums and very soon also by the LEGO Group (TLG). From that moment, AFOL has been the term to refer to all the adults who are playing or building with LEGO products, at all levels of involvement. TLG has been researching for a long time about fans of LEGO and they have concluded that AFOLs are only one of the subgroups among the adults who have LEGO as a hobby.

The research that has recently been initiated to shed light on the subgroups of adult LEGO users drew on various data sources:

- 2 huge surveys, one in 2012 and another in 2014. The survey was published in 14 languages. More than 14.000 fans answered the 2014 survey and respondents came from all over the world.
- 43 interviews were conducted with adult LEGO users to inquire the aspects of LUG membership and the LEGO hobby in general.





- 2 Workshops were carried out to learn more about adult LEGO® users' journey into the LEGO Hobby and the different stages of their hobby. The workshops had participation by adult LEGO users from all over the world. The workshops took place during the LEGO Fan Weekend 2014.

There are different types of adult LEGO users. From "occasional", casual users to the very active and engaged users. Thus, whereas all types can be characterized as LEGO enthusiasts, not all are AFOLs.

"On one end of the spectrum, we find the people who are really active. They organize events, host websites and manage forums. They spend several hours a week absorbed in LEGO related things like planning a new MOC, talking with friends and sorting their often huge collection of LEGO elements. At the other end of the spectrum, we find the type of users who are not that into the community or participating in events. They enjoy their LEGO hobby on an individual basis and have very little contact with other LEGO users. They like to build and read LEGO set reviews online, but they are less active", says Yun Mi.

The main difference is the time they invest in the hobby and the kind of LEGO related things they like to do. Less active does equate being less passionate. Thus, one of the main results of the research shows that whether one is at one or another end of the spectrum, users share many similarities. One of such similarities is what can be described as the typical LEGO journey users go through.

The LEGO Journey

To start this journey let's think about a child, 3 or 4 years old. The child receives his or her first LEGO set from a parent or grandparent. For the people who never leave LEGO play or who return after a dark age, this early childhood experience will often serve as a defining moment. Many will describe it as "love at first sight". But there is often something else at play too. A relationship between the child and the LEGO set is formed at a deeper and unconscious level. The relationship has to do with the perfect match between the interests of the child and the kind of play experience, LEGO products offer. It is not unusual that adults will clearly remember the exact LEGO set they were given and the feelings that was evoked when they first played with it.

Despite the strong bonds that many develop with LEGO products, many reported that they experienced a change of interest when they become teenagers. Studies, homework, lack of money to support a hobby... there are several reasons to enter the period known as the dark age. Yet, there is also a type of teenager who do not experience dark age, but a grey Age. Although they are not playing with LEGO as they did in their earlier ages, they are still in contact with LEGO, keeping informed through LEGO catalogs, buying some sets and building a MOC once in a while.



"It was very interesting to see that it doesn't matter if an adult LEGO® user is a very dedicated enthusiast or a more casual one. They all have very common stories about why they enter the dark age and what brings them back into the LEGO hobby" Yun Mi Antorini

For those who become adult LEGO users, the dark ages typically ends when they enter their 20s. There are several reasons for coming back to the hobby. Perhaps the most obvious one is when people form families and rediscover their LEGO passion when playing with their children. Many adults also end their dark ages because they see a new LEGO set, and the set appeals to their childhood recollection of what LEGO used to mean for them. Other will come across a MOC that they are exposed to online, become inspired, and start building again.

A decade ago, social stigma would play a much greater role for the adults who chose to come out of their dark ages, Yun Mi explains. "Playing with LEGO as an adult was seen as less socially acceptable. While there are still some people who can't get their head around the fact that LEGO can be a very gratifying hobby for adults, our research suggests that adult LEGO users experience a much greater acceptance. By displaying the creative ingenuity of adult LEGO users and by promoting the cultural aspects of the LEGO hobby and the user communities, the Internet and social media has clearly played a huge role in facilitating this shift", Yun Mi says.

Types of LEGO Users

As mentioned, all AFOLs can be described as adult fans but not all adult fans are AFOLs. Let's take a closer look at this fact.

An **AFOL** is *"a person who is extremely creative, curious and skilled in many ways. Becoming an AFOL often represents a long journey that is closely linked to childhood"*. An AFOL is the addition of many interests and characteristics from his or hers childhood, like perseverance. An AFOL has an in build strong urge to creatively express him or herself. People who haven't play with LEGO when they were kids, have a much lesser chance of becoming an AFOL. However, people who were very much into LEGO play as children, when they connect two bricks after the dark ages, they are symbolically connecting themselves with their own history. There aren't too many things in life that can facilitate such a link. *"When an AFOL builds something, he's is giving life to ideas that exist inside him or herself. Throughout the history of man, creative expression represents perhaps the strongest search for meaning, what it means to be alive and what it means to be a person. For many AFOLs, playing with LEGO elements offers the same fundamental opportunities of self-expression."*

Not surprisingly, AFOLs are the most active people in the Community. When they come back from the dark ages, they typically become part of a LUG. They start to collaborate with others in many aspects and they often open a Bricklink store. They drive events and are engaged with the Community. For them the social aspect of the hobby is very important. They see a benefit in the relationship and the friendships they form. For some AFOLs, entering the LEGO hobby offers a chance to improve their skills and through becoming a LUG member, they see the opportunity to grow.

A second group of adult LEGO users are the ones who are very active online. They can be described as **Online Hobbyists**. For

the time being, the social aspects of the hobby may not appeal so strongly to them, not that they object to being socially engaged with other LEGO® users. In many cases, they just don't know where to find a LUG. At present they don't attend events and they are not into communities. But they build MOCs and they are very interested in reading reviews. They sometimes participate in online discussions and they even help others online. And of course they buy LEGO. For LUGs who wish to increase their number of members, it would make a lot of sense to try and recruit the Online Hobbyists.

A third group of adult LEGO users are the ones who have just recently picked up LEGO play and who don't spend a lot of time on the hobby. Most of them don't see any benefits in becoming part of the LEGO Community and they are usually the less active ones. They like to play with LEGO, but it's merely one spare time activity out of many. They can be described as the more **Casual users**.

Conclusions

When asked to pinpoint some of the findings that fascinated Yun Mi the most, she points to the fact that many adult LEGO users share the same pattern when it comes to how they pick up LEGO play, how they grow with it, how they drift in and out of the dark age. The things that attract people to LEGO and the things that keep appealing to them are often very similar. Yun Mi believes that we have to look beyond the physical LEGO products to fully understand what people are drawn to when they are drawn to LEGO. "Essentially, it's about being able to express yourself. And it's about having, in the abstract sense, a conversation with your younger self back when you didn't have to pay mortgages, be mature and all grown up! When you were free to just be and create whatever idea that came to mind. In a world where there are so many readymade experiences, so many perfect and complete products to consume, people still have a very strong need to freely express their own ideas. More than ever, there seems to be a need for people to go beyond the given. It's a very powerful emotion and drive. Combine that with the social aspects that LUGs offer, and it's no surprise to me why people choose to dedicate many hours of week on the hobby."

It doesn't matter if the person is from Hong Kong, Germany, Spain, US... *"There are many similar patterns and it's deeply fascinating"*

About Yun Mi Antorini

Yun Mi Antorini is Community Strategist at the Community Engagement & Events (CEE) department. She defines herself as *"Fan of the AFOLs, but I am not an AFOL myself"*. Yun Mi is very grateful to all the people who took time to answer the surveys, and participate in the interviews and the workshops.

There will be a CEE team meeting in April to analyze the research. All the results will give more insights to the team, and this will help to create new programs for the community, and to find ways in which the many more loosely connected LEGO users can get to know the fantastic LUGs all over the world. HispaBrick Magazine would like to thank Yun Mi Antorini for her kind support for this article.

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