

Interview: Marcos Bessa

*By HispaBrick Magazine®
Pictures by the LEGO Group*

Since a few years ago, LEGO designers are increasingly known by the general public. The videos by the LEGO Group, usually made public on YouTube with each new major release, where the set designer talks about his/her design, have become very popular among AFOLs. In addition many of these designers were known in the AFOL world before they started designing for the LEGO Group. Today we bring you one of the designers that has grown in popularity in recent months, Marcos Bessa.

HBM: Name?

Marcos Bessa

HBM: Age?

MB: 26 years old

HBM: Nationality?

MB: Portuguese.





HBM: Tell us how you ended up working for the LEGO Group.

MB: Ever since I was a kid, LEGO bricks have always been my number one toy. I used to build every day, for hours, and I dreamt of one day being able to make a living of “playing with LEGO bricks”. But then I went through my “dark ages”, like most fans, from 13 till when I was 18 years old. Around that time I came across the – until then unknown for me – AFOL online community and joined the Portuguese LUG Comunidade 0937. Three years later, after building up a portfolio of LEGO creations, I saw a job offer posted online and decided to apply. It all went great and I ended up being offered a position as a Junior Designer.

HBM: What is your position at the LEGO Group?

MB: Currently I am a Senior Designer.

HBM: How long have you been working for the LEGO Group?

MB: I have been working for the LEGO Group for almost 4.5 years. I'll celebrate my 5th year anniversary later this October.

HBM: Can you describe how your department is organized?

MB: I'm part of the Product Group 2, which is in charge of the development of lines like LEGO City, LEGO Star Wars, LEGO Super Heroes and many other themes. And I'm part of the LEGO Super Heroes team, which currently has 6 model designers, 2 graphic designers and one Creative Lead, among many other professionals in other fields, like marketing, engineering, etc...

HBM: What are the main starting parameters a designer gets before starting to work on a set?

MB: It varies a bit according to the project you're working on and also the product specifically, but in general we get an idea of the size we want the model to have (defined by a price point and the size of the box it will be packed in), a brief description of what it should include and reference images or an illustration if it applies.

HBM: What main stages does a set go through?

MB: - Sketch phase, where we explore different approaches, design languages, play features, color schemes...

- Testing. The main purpose is here to ensure our products offer children great play experiences that are difficult enough to challenge the child but within reasonable limits to keep the experience fun and exiting for the child.

- Optimization, where we focus on ensuring the best play and building experience for the final consumer.

- Review, where a team of experts make sure our product lives up to the highest global standards before it hits production.



- BI development, where a Building Instructions developer designs the book and steps that will guide our builders through their LEGO® experience.
- Packaging design and model photos, where we focus on getting the best looking packaging.
- Production, where the bricks get sorted into the bags and boxes, ready to hit the shelves all around the world.
- Some of these phases overlap each other and even get more than one round.

HBM: What is harder to design, a set based on a license which means you need to adjust it to an existing model, or a free set without an existing reference to work from?

MB: Both offer great and different challenges: on one hand, when designing a model based on existing reference, you have to make sure you get the most accurate LEGO version possible, without forgetting all the other parameters we always focus on when developing a LEGO model, and often compromises have to be done in order to get the best out of both ends. On the other hand, creating something from scratch puts the pressure on creating something new and awesome, but here we have more freedom to readjust the concept within our own storytelling. So both design tasks force us [designers] to think creatively when designing, and the main purpose to create fun, safe and high-quality LEGO play experiences for children worldwide is the same, but the means by which we acquire inspiration to the final product varies somewhat..

HBM: How many designs do you work on at the same time?

MB: It varies as well, but often I have about 3 products of different sizes and at different stages of development in my hands.

HBM: Do the designers choose the minifigs that come with each set?

MB: That decision comes from a pool of different people and based on many different questions. So, I would say we have the chance to give input on what characters to have, but often the final decision comes from the Creative Leads.

HBM: What possibilities do you have for requesting new parts or parts in new colors?

MB: We do have some restrictions to how much we can expand our library of LEGO elements, in order to keep the company's production complexity level in a healthy place. Having said that, we do always try to put our resources into everything we believe is going to add up to a greater experience and better product for our final consumer. As a designer being restricted can also be an exciting challenge to use current elements in new creative ways. At the moment we have more than 3,500 different elements to chose from, based on a colour palette counting more than 60 different colours.

HBM: Which of the models you have designed is your favorite and why?

MB: It's always hard to answer to this question, because it's often the latest one I've been working on. It's the dearest at this time, it's the one I've been so passionately working on for weeks or months now, and I get to develop a deep connection with it. But, if I really should name a set that is out now, I'd probably say the Milano ship, from the Guardians of the Galaxy movie. I love the original design of the ship and I'm very happy with how the final model turned out to be so close to the reference material. It's always a big question mark in these cases, because we are developing our products at the same time that the movie productions are happening and things can always drastically change on their end, leaving us with no option other than releasing whatever we have agreed upon back when we had to finalize our products in order for it to hit the markets in time with the movie. And by the way, that movie was amazing!

HBM: Which of the sets you have designed has posed the biggest challenge for you?

MB: The S.H.I.E.L.D. Helicarrier most certainly, for many reasons. First of all, for its size. If taking a small LEGO® model through all phases is hard and demanding, taking an almost 3000-brick-sized model is certainly a huge task. But I loved every single bit of it. Even the frustrating late evenings where I couldn't go home without solving that issue that was bugging me for days. I had to really work hard to make it the most interesting built ever, with each and every brick serving a purpose, making the main function work the smoothest possible, allowing a motorization to happen the easiest possible, getting it as accurate to the reference as possible, and yet making it a fun experience building without wasting hours searching for that one brick in that one color...

HBM: Has "building with LEGO bricks" gone from being a hobby to a means to earn a living?

MB: In a way, you could say so, but I prefer to look at it in another way: I'm one of those few lucky ones that doesn't even have to work to earn a living. I get to do what I love and that happens to – amazingly – pay my bills.

HBM: Do you design your own MOCs when you are not working?

MB: No, only very rarely. I spend on average 8 hours a day at work and that's enough LEGO time in my life. I have many other interests, like music, movies, writing, cooking, so I try to use my spare time as much as I can on those others interests I have. That way I keep myself always excited and inspired to go back to work the day after.

HBM: What advice would you give someone who dreams of becoming a LEGO designer?

MB: Don't ever give up on your dreams, but don't just sit around and wait for things to happen. Make it happen!

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