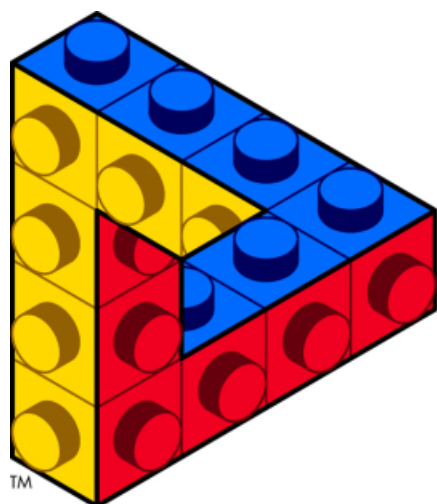


Pillars of the community: LUGNET

By HispaBrick Magazine®

In the beginning ... there was LUGNET. The AFOL world changes at an incredible pace, but for the “oldies” (or the early arrivals), LUGNET was THE reference for all things LEGO®. So where did LUGNET come from, how did it change, and where is it now? HispaBrick Magazine talked to Todd Lehman and Suzanne Eaton, the founding parents of LUGNET to find out.



LUGNET™

HispaBrick Magazine: What was the original goal of LUGNET and to what degree has that goal been fulfilled?

Todd & Suzanne: Quite a bit of the original goal was fulfilled, although not always as originally imagined. The original design plan for LUGNET was very wide in scope. As laid out in the project plan (November, 1997), the goal was to create and collect together a central repository of LEGO® information on the Web, to foster discussion among LEGO enthusiasts worldwide through theme-based, topic-based, and location-based discussion groups, and to promote and encourage the exchange of LEGO items in the physical world through barter and sale, using an integrated marketplace, and to nurture the formation of LEGO User Groups (LUGs) worldwide.

<http://www.lugnet.com/admin/plan/>

All of the above were fulfilled, to varying degrees: (1) The discussion group system was the biggest success, with thousands of active participants daily and an

overall sense that there is a center of the LEGO community where everyone is welcome. This was the case from 1998 through 2006 or so, and gradually trailed off after that. Peak activity on average was about 500 to 600 new postings per day, totaling half a million postings over the years. (2) The central repository of information (set database and related data) developed quickly, but did not keep pace with demands of the community, and consequently the LEGO® set database and parts databases fell behind. (3) The marketplace was achieved to a much lesser degree by way of discussion groups (sort of the old-fashioned 1990s way of buying and selling) rather than an automated agent-based system. BrickLink has done an amazing job of filling that gap. (4) Finally, the huge proliferation of LUGs was another success story we are proud to have been a part of. Many people we talk to today tell stories of their LUG being formed after finding people in their area through LUGNET.

HBM: How has LUGNET evolved over time?

T&S: LUGNET began life as a highly active website, a place where pretty much everyone congregated, sort of like a town hall or a park, or a town with many buildings and parks. Over time, as more specialized websites arose (1000Steine.de, ClassicSpace.com, FBTB, etc.) and other information and trading sources popped up (BrickLink.com, BrickSet.com, Peeron.com, and so forth) to fill more gaps, LUGNET remained active, but became more of a central meeting place rather than _the_ meeting place. Nowadays, LUGNET is sort of the old grandparent oracle who knows everything about the past but isn't much hip to the present. You can still post new messages there, and read old posts, and update your profile page and everything as before, but people don't much do that anymore.

HBM: How many people are working on the site and how did you meet? (You can do a presentation of the team here if you like).

T&S: We (Todd & Suzanne) met in 1996 via our LEGO webpages, and got to talking one day about how cool it would be if it were easier to find LEGO information online all in one easy-to-use spot, and so we decided to form LUGNET. Todd & Suzanne developed and ran the website from 1997 to 2008, with help from dozens of online contributors (database and discussion group curators) and occasionally with some system administration help from friends locally. Currently, no one is "working on" the website. It is up and running and alive and healthy --- but no one is doing any new development. Todd moved on to pursue other things around 2003, and Suzanne sometime around 2008. The site is now running on servers in Germany, kindly hosted by René Hoffmeister and Gereon Stein.



HBM: How do you distribute the work?

T&S: We just each did whatever was necessary and what came naturally best to each of us. It was a very full-time job in the early years.

HBM: How is LUGNET funded?

T&S: It has always been funded by financial contributions from members.

HBM: What is your relationship with TLG?

T&S: In the early days, we met often with LEGO® attorneys in Enfield and occasionally with LEGO Direct in New York. The relationship was cordial and The Lego Group was always respectful.

HBM: During these years of daily following the LEGO

community, which do you think are the main changes that have occurred in the AFOL community?

T&S: There are so many more LUGs and events these days --- it's amazing and heartwarming. And people are sharing in so many new ways --- writing books, making documentaries, sharing gorgeous building instructions, giving technical talks at events, hanging out in real life. These things were rare in the 1990s and even in the early 2000s. Now they're happening all the time, everywhere. It's awesome.

HBM: Have there been any "real-life" LUGNET activities / gatherings?

T&S: Not of LUGNET per se, although that would be fun thing maybe for old-timers. Interestingly, it just so happens that we created a "LUGNET Reunion" private group on Facebook in October, for old-timers to keep in touch and catch up. It's quieted down a lot there now, but initially it was hard keeping up with all the posting activity. This was on the heels of BrickCon (Seattle), where many people had mentioned how much they miss the old days where you could just go to one site for everything LEGO discussion-wise. If we could magically teleport everyone from the old days into a convention hall and have a real-life gathering, we imagine it would be pretty cool! So many people have known one another online for 15, sometimes 20 years, yet never have met.

HBM: How do you see the future of LUGNET?

T&S: We see it as a repository of historical information and as an important part of the community's heritage.

For the future, we are exploring ideas involving real-world items bearing the LUGNET logo and related original artwork. In the early 2000s, there were LUGNET-branded coffee cups (with variations on a theme), mousepads, and of course t-shirts, which were popular and actually still in demand today.

HBM: Do you have any anecdotes related to LUGNET, how it functioned or what the community was like back then?

T&S: The LEGO enthusiast community was always

very vocal and energetic, and still is... But back in the old days, when people were first finding the Internet, it tended to be more nerdy types of people -- engineers, scientists, people with generally strong computer backgrounds -- and accordingly, most people were accustomed to living with a higher amount of complexity and were willing to go through more work to share their ideas than maybe they are today. (Sharing on the Internet nowadays is easier than it ever has been before!).

From our point of view, the community always seemed to have a sense of cohesion, but at the same time, it tended self-organized around themes into groups and sub-groups and sub-sub-groups, sort of like a fractal.

Accordingly, we encouraged separation of discussions by theme, so that topics could be explored as deeply and as focused as possible without overwhelming everyone with everything. That is, a long discussion thread about the new Shell promotional soccer polybags isn't necessarily of interest to someone wanting to get into a deep discussion about the latest Technic Supercar, or the new Insectoids sets, or who would win in a fight between Pirates and Ninjas, or whether or not the new gray is the eighth sign of the apocalypse. These general division lines (often blurred, but largely respected) helped reduce congestion and helped contribute to a generally very friendly and welcoming atmosphere. LUGNET was sometimes referred to as "The friendliest place on the Internet." But we also encouraged the discussion of general topics and location-specific topics.

One thing that was particularly surprising in the first or second year is that the location-based discussion groups (forums, as they're called nowadays) started being used for things we never had imagined. We'd fully expected (and encouraged) the location groups to be used for people to find others in their areas so they could form local clubs... but it was a very pleasant surprise when someone posted a message in a group saying they were going to be in town for the weekend and asked if anyone there could recommend food, lodging, and so forth, and instead they were offered a place to stay, and they ended up making new friends.

HBM: How did people register for the site (I have seen LUGNET membership cards etc.)

T&S: There are two types of registration: (1) Registration for posting to the newsgroups (forums), and (2) registration as a member. For posting, the only requirement is filling out a webpage form with name and e-mail address. For membership, the process is more in-depth: The enrollment form has about 20 questions -- things like where you're located, what clubs you belong to, your favorite themes, things you'd like to build, how you got started with LEGO, your favorite movies, music, etc., and other fun things that you might want to say about yourself. These answers become part of your membership page that others can see. In modern terms this would be called your public profile. Then after filling out the enrollment form, you send payment, which is a one-time fee for a lifetime membership, and you set the amount yourself (with a US\$10 minimum).

HBM: What was there before LUGNET (i.e. where did LUGNET come from)?

T&S: Before LUGNET, there was a Usenet newsgroup called rec.toys.lego (affectionately known as "RTL" or "rtl"), which began in 1994. It was one newsgroup for a few thousand people, and there were no subgroups. Before RTL, there was alt.toys.lego, which began in 1993(?). These were basically the same thing, except rec.toys.lego was carried by more NNTP news servers than alt.toys.lego. Once people began using RTL, people pretty much stopped using ATL.

A couple other things of note that preceded LUGNET: Sometime in 1994 or 1995, there was a long-running thread called the "RTL Roll Call". In this thread, people introduced themselves and talked about what themes they liked, their collections, what they were busy building, and so forth. This was sort of a "census" for RTL, and there were several hundred responses. Also, sometime around 1995, Paul Gyugyi announced that he was going to start a thing called "LEGO Net", which was going to be a way for LEGO enthusiasts online to register themselves and find one another. He received at least 500 applications. Alas, LEGO Net never got off the ground. But looking back, it was definitely an inspiration for LUGNET.

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LUGNET: <http://www.lugnet.com/>