

Interview: LEGO® Ideas

By HispaBrick Magazine®

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CUUSOO, LEGO CUUSOO, LEGO® Ideas... different names for one idea. The opportunity for fan-based sets to be produced by LEGO. Hasan Jensen, Community Specialist of LEGO Ideas (LCE Team), answers our questions about one of the most successful programs that LEGO has ever created.

HBM: It all started with a project submitted on the Japanese website CUUSOO (21100 - Shinkai 6500 Submarine), when it reached 10,000 supporters. How did CUUSOO contact LEGO?

LEGO Ideas: In fact, the Shinkai only reached 1,000 supporters, since that was all that was required at the time for a project to be considered for review. LEGO CUUSOO existed only on the Japanese market and in Japanese.



The founder of CUUSOO SYSTEM, Kohei Nishiyama met former Head of New Business Group, Paal Smith-Meyer around 2007. In 2008, they launched LEGO CUUSOO in Japanese as a pilot project. This was followed by the international beta version in English in 2011.

HBM: Why did LEGO decide to accept this project?

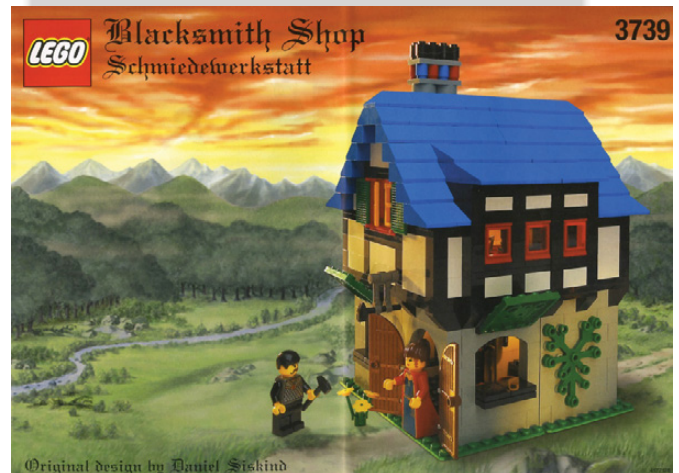
LI: The LEGO Group saw it as a way to involve LEGO fan communities to generate ideas for new and exciting LEGO products. We were aware that there were many talented designers out in the community that all had fantastic ideas and built beautiful models, while The LEGO Group had in the past also had some successful experiences in involving the LEGO fan community. We were also inspired by a case study of the Japanese company, Muji, who used CUUSOO to crowdsource ideas for their potential products.

HBM: After the first project another one (21101 – Hayabusa) reached 1,000 supporters. Was this the moment when LEGO saw that there was a new market behind fan models?

LI: Since Hayabusa was submitted to the Japanese pilot program, it also only reached 1,000 supporters.



The LEGO Group has seen market opportunities behind fan-inspired models since the Blacksmith Shop released in 2002, as well as collaborations with the LEGO MINDSTORMS community, LEGO Train builders, etc.



LEGO CUUSOO was an experiment in how we could open up these opportunities to the broader public, and begin to consider and release fan inspired products at scale rather than as one-off projects.

HBM: The next step was LEGO CUUSOO under the CUUSOO site. Was it easier than creating what currently is LEGO Ideas?

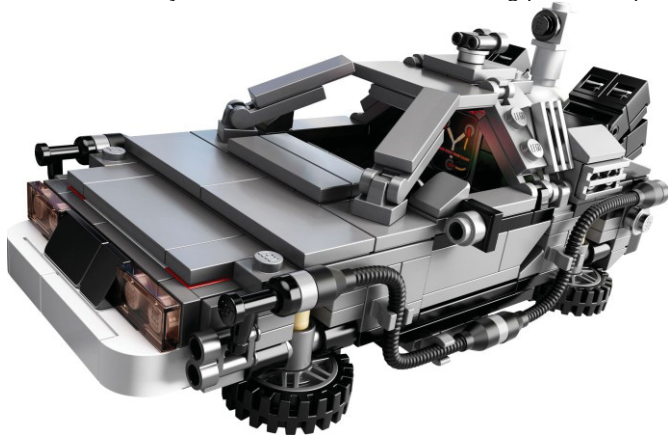
LI: Each project presents its own individual set of unique challenges. LEGO CUUSOO was a brand new experience at the time and provided a lot of challenges and learning experiences, which naturally helped evolve LEGO Ideas into what it is today.

HBM: Did LEGO expect the success and the level of the models submitted?

LI: It started as a test and exploration of opportunities, with recent years having demonstrated that this is a sustainable concept. We are very pleased that so many people take the time to submit projects of high quality.

HBM: Three projects were launched under the LEGO® CUUSOO brand. All 3 were licensed (Minecraft, Back to the Future, NASA). Was this fact a difficulty in making the sets a reality?

LI: Unfortunately, we can't comment on licensing partnerships.



HBM: Why did LEGO finally decide to open LEGO Ideas?

Hasan Jensen: Having experienced the positive way in which the LEGO community received and engaged with LEGO CUUSOO, that made continuing this community experience an important decision going forward.

Historically, The LEGO Group has been an industry leader in working with fans, and it made a lot of sense to create the LEGO Ideas platform to create mutual value for both our fans and The LEGO Group.

HBM: Once a project reaches 10,000 votes, what is the internal review process?

HJ: Even before a project reaches 10,000 votes we are already collecting data. Every time you support a project you are asked how much you would expect to pay, whether it is hard to build and so on. That's part of the first round of information we pass along to the review board. From there they look at the different models: all models are individually assessed according to the review guidelines. Many different departments are also involved, like for example branding, to see if the IP is actually suitable for LEGO, also designers are involved to determine if it is feasible to create the model. For instance, the exosuit; that was a challenge to build as a standing model. So they check if the model can become a good LEGO model. And then there is obviously the business side to see the reactions of the different markets and see if that is something they are interested in; how people react to it. And that data we receive at the start can help give them some idea of what the expectations of the market are. Obviously there is a lot of back and forth between everyone to determine what the right products are and then to see if it is possible to get the right licenses. Sometimes there are conflicts - so these are all small elements that need to be sorted out in the review process before we can announce anything.

HBM: Do all the projects follow all the steps? Or are there any milestones that must be passed during the review to keep working on it?

HJ: Yes, all projects are analysed in the same way and follow the same steps in the review process. That is regardless of whether a project was in this next coming round or if it was from a year ago. They follow the same kind of process. We judge them individually. So a project that might have been from last year won't have an effect on this next one that might be similar.

HBM: Which are the main milestones that every project has to pass?



HJ: Some important steps are getting licensing approval and design approval in term of feasibility. Then the secondary elements are the design of the box, the building instructions and so on.

HBM: During the review process, is there constant communication with the person who submitted the model?

HJ: There is not constant communication, but we may pull them into the process. Sometimes they are involved in giving input on the model, but that is only after the model has been chosen. We don't make contact before a model is chosen, because then the review board cannot objectively make their decision. But after we have announced that something is going to be produced, then the fan designer would be involved. For instance, for The Maze, Jason Allemann visited us in Enfield to shoot some videos, to show the maze and to do a general interview about his inspiration behind it and so on. So it's mostly afterwards that we get fan designers involved in the process.



HBM: Would it be possible to develop a new mould based on the needs of a LEGO Ideas project?

HJ: Unfortunately not. That's one of the limitations we have for the LEGO Ideas programme. As you might know, we do allow new stickers and printed parts, so that we are open to, and that is why we are able to produce new minifigures for the various sets.

HBM: Are you allowed to ask for new colours (inside the palette) for existing parts?

HJ: Yes

HBM: And finally a project passes the review process. After this point, what is the remaining work before the launch of the set?

HJ: Then it is involving the fan designer in the process, and also marketing-related activities. For example, with The Maze

Jason Allemann did a signing event in Toronto — this kind of practical elements to promote the product. We also want to get to know the fan designer a little more to learn more about them and tell the community about them, because I think they have some fascinating stories about how they became LEGO® fan designers — what they have been inspired by, the different backgrounds they have. Jason Allemann for example is a programmer by occupation, but then he is designing LEGO sets. So it's fascinating to see the stories that come out of this.

HBM: What is the general profile of submitter and customer of the LEGO Ideas sets?

HJ: Typically slightly older, but it depends from set to set, so there is not one standard. A CITY set is typically for a certain age range and a Technic set for another age range, but LEGO Ideas sets cover a wide range and varies. I guess you could say it's for middle aged kids and upwards, but because there is also an adult fan community, we know those who submit are over 13, but the majority over 18.

HBM: Is there a limit of LEGO Ideas sets per year?

HJ: No, not specifically, but historically we do have an average of 3-4.

HBM: Do you try to keep a balance between non-licensed vs licensed sets?

HJ: There is no rule about that. It's about creating the best possible set that people will also be excited about, whether that's an IP or an original concept. We do want to promote creativity and originality, but at the end of the day we are not limited by that factor. There is no quota to reach.



HBM: If a model does not pass the review process, could it be submitted again on LEGO Ideas?

HJ: Yes. Of course we don't know if it will reach 10,000 again, but in general people are allowed to re-submit their projects if they don't reach the necessary number of votes.

HBM: And what if it reached 10,000 votes, but didn't pass the review. Can they resubmit it?

HJ: We don't actually have a policy about that. We haven't experienced that yet, but I don't think we would have a problem with it. Sometimes a reason why it might be rejected could be bad luck, bad timing. As an example, some years ago the license for Doctor Who wasn't available. Later it became available and then we allowed people to submit their projects. In that sense, anything can happen and many factors have to play together to make that possible. They are welcome to resubmit and then maybe the timing will be better and maybe it will pass.

HBM: Is there a limit of units produced of each set? Why?

HJ: That depends on the feedback we get from the different markets. It varies from set to set.

HBM: What is the most successful set at the moment?

HJ: Unfortunately I can't share that information.

HBM: Let's talk about licenses. How do other companies react when LEGO asks for a license?

HJ: Personally I am not involved in the licensing process, but from what I have heard companies are quite open and approachable. But not everybody is interested; that's just life. So far we have had some very good experiences with different partners which we are very happy about.

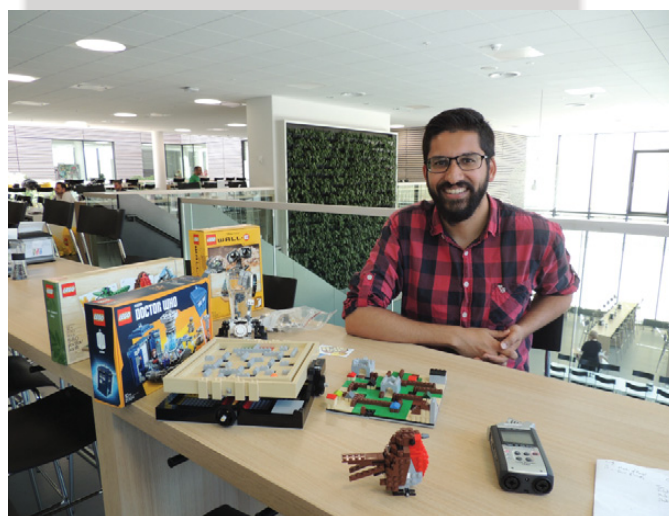
HBM: What do you think is the secret for the perfect idea?

HJ: The secret is that there is no secret. It's a combination of ... Creating a good product is as simple as setting it up nicely, the way you sell it. That means creating a nice picture, a good description. Then you also have to market it. Create updates to it. What we hear from many of the fan designers whose ideas have reached 10,000 supporters is that they have to work quite hard. They have to go out to different related or relevant blogs and forums and promote their projects. So for Doctor Who it could be a Doctor Who community site somewhere and maybe it doesn't have anything to do with LEGO, but they go there and say "Hey, I've created this cool LEGO set, maybe some of you guys who just generally enjoy Doctor Who will also like it". So it's about trying to sell your project. But of course you can't sell a project if it isn't very good. Of course it has to be a good model. It's about being unique. We do communicate that IPs we currently have in our portfolio have a lesser chance, because sometimes there is overlap. If we are producing a Millennium Falcon and someone creates a Millennium Falcon in LEGO Ideas, then obviously there is a conflict.

HBM: Without being specific, are there any projects that LEGO liked, but that didn't reach the necessary support?

HJ: Not really. We don't really start looking at any projects before they reach 10,000. Of course everybody has their personal favourites, but that is so subjective and it is nothing we discuss. We only focus on the projects that have reached 10,000.

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Hasan Jensen
Community Specialist of LEGO Ideas