



Interviews

Interview: Kim E. Thomsen

By HispaBrick Magazine®

Images by Kim E. Thomsen, lluisgib and LEGO® System A/S



Kim E. Thomsen is Community Manager of Operations & Community Engagement, LCE. He's responsible of the Recognized LEGO® Fan Media (RLFM). RLFM have a different approach to the LEGO Hobby than the classical RLUGs. HispaBrick Magazine is a RLFM, so we wanted to talk with the person in charge of us, and what's behind this idea.

HispaBrick Magazine: When did you start playing with LEGO toys?

Kim E. Thomsen: I don't recall having baby LEGO, but I do know from pictures at my parents' house that I had some DUPLO when I was an infant. So I guess from very early, from the age of 1 or 2 years old, I started playing with DUPLO and then moved on from there, until I turned 13. The last set I got was the Black Monarch's Castle I think. The one with the dragons and the scale armour. That is when I entered my dark age.



HBM: How did you become an AFOL?

KET: I guess we are all latent AFOLS. It is just a question of being triggered. What triggered me and re-inspired me to play with LEGO was the coming of LEGO Star Wars in 1999. I clearly recall walking in midtown Aarhus where I lived at that point and seeing the LEGO Star Wars sets through the window of a toy store. And then, for no obvious reason, I went inside and bought the X-Wing that came in the first launch, brought it home and built it, and I was instantly re-hooked. Since then I have acquired many Star Wars sets.

For the first couple of years I thought I was alone. I have a friend who got very excited when he saw the Star Wars sets that I was buying and he also started buying them, and we thought we were the only ones – until the Internet sped up, and became more than just a 56k modem that served you poorly and where all sites were terrible. A few years later we stumbled upon Eurobricks and that is when things really took up speed for me. In that same year, we joined the Danish user group Byggepladen.

HBM: You were part of the Eurobricks staff. What were the main tasks you performed there?

KET: I was a regular member for a handful of years. When I joined I think I was member 101 so there weren't that many of us. It grew massively over the following five years and there was a dire need at some point for new regulation and moderation of the Star Wars forum as the previous moderators left. I was one of those who were very vocal towards the current staff at that point about needing moderation in there. So I guess they did what anyone would do in that situation and said "Put your money where your mouth is" and gave me regulator access initially and shortly after moderator access in

the Star Wars forum. That meant I did the day-to-day tasks and moderation in the Star Wars forum and set up contests there from 2008 till 2012 when I landed a job at the LEGO Group.



HBM: Why did you decide to apply for the LEGO Community Team?

KET: I guess that over the years it becomes a dream. As an AFOL you really want to work for the LEGO Group. You really want to work in the department that has direct interaction with the community. You get ideas on what could be improved and how things could be done differently along with the dream of your job and your hobby melting together into one thing – to wake up every day and simply do what you are very passionate about. At the time I was living in Copenhagen and we moved back to Jutland to be closer to our families, my wife's and mine, and at that time there were a lot of reforms and changes in the school system in Denmark. I am a teacher by training, and it was very difficult to find a job as a teacher when I moved back to Jutland, so I was looking for jobs everywhere, applying for all kinds of things that I found interesting. Then for some reason, I think we moved here on December 19, and on December 21 I was browsing the Internet, looking for job opportunities and I decided to check out LEGO.com and look for jobs. Who knows, they might have something in education or something else. By mere coincidence, I stumbled upon the job listing for community coordinator. I don't even recall the name of the department back then because we changed names so often. It was probably CEE (Community Engagement and Events), because I wasn't part of it when it was CED (Community Engagement and Development), which was probably just before me. I applied for the job along with a couple of hundred other people and succeeded to land it on April 1 the following year.

HBM: An April 1st joke?

KET: It was kind of weird telling people I was going to start at the LEGO Group on April 1st. They'd ask, "Is that an April fool's joke or did you just land the job of your dreams?" I guess I landed the job of my dreams and that's what it still is for me.

HBM: How was the change from being an AFOL to being a LEGO Employee?

KET: You'd think that it would be difficult, but actually I didn't find it that difficult. I was already working as a volunteer as a moderator on Eurobricks, where you already have a change in how you can act. With every type of responsibility comes a different requirement in how you act towards the rest of your fellow community members. When you are a moderator on Eurobricks or a staffer, an 'authority' in some ways, you have to consider how you act. You have to think about what you say and write. I won't say I always succeeded, not then and not now, but I already had that to consider. I also had that

consideration in my daily work as a teacher, because you are an authority, and with that comes a certain responsibility. Taking the final step from the community into the LEGO Group wasn't that difficult, because I also made it very clear to myself what the consequences were. I had to stop being an AFOL with the community because I was now going to sit at the other side of the table with everything that the community wants. If I had landed a different job at the LEGO Group, in education for instance, I could probably still be very active in the community, but you can't be when you are the one controlling the support programs for example. So I made that very clear. I also had some good talks with my very close friends in the community on how this would or wouldn't affect our relationship and they have all been extremely supportive and understanding. They barely ever try to pump me for information about upcoming sets, and when they do it is mostly in jest and good fun. From all those that are really important to me it has made no changes and has had no effect on our friendships and relationships. The transition felt like a natural evolution. You start out as a community member, become a moderator in the community and then one of those who has the engagement with the community, trying to assist and support as best as possible, creating a win-win situation for both the LEGO Group and the AFOL community.



HBM: What were your first tasks as Community Coordinator?

KET: My first task was to get to know all of you. I was lucky to start in soft mode as a coordinator. There was a lot of learning the ropes and trying to figure out what everything is and where everything was going and how our support structures work – all the things that Jan had set out with the community that he had the responsibility for at that time; figuring out how everything works internally. Since I started in April, I also assisted in the second half of LUGBULK, making sure that everything was sent out, what wasn't sent out, making sure it was sent and replaced and getting an idea of how that program worked. As soon as that was over – half a year after I was hired – I was ready to run it by myself, with heavy assistance from Jan. After that I started to build on suggestions for how we could differentiate between the different types of user groups.

HBM: How did you handle all the LUGBULK workload?

KET: It was insanely manual back then. People would send in wish-lists. A user group would make a list of 100 elements that they would like to order and we would get 80-90 of these lists. Since they didn't have access to a decent database or an excel sheet with all the element numbers and IDs they were usually taken from BrickLink or other sites, and we would have to identify each individual element, line by line, in our system. We needed to find the true name, the true element number, and calculate the LUGBULK cost for that element and figure out whether or not that element would actually be available when we would order it. That was a very long process. It took weeks

to go through all the lists. Once we had gone through a list we would send it back and the user group could order 80 of those elements, with the same quantity rules as we have now. Then the list would come back and we would have to manually enter all that and place the order individually with the warehouse. There was a lot of manual work and it took forever. Luckily, we were still at Havremarken where we also have the warehouse, so we could just walk two minutes to be at the desk of the manager in the warehouse where we could directly speak to him if there was an issue.

Back then, we had maybe 80-100 user groups for the rest of the world; maybe 160 in total. Now have close to 160 user groups outside the Americas, plus close to 60 Fan Media globally. We are now at 310 entities we talk with in total.

HBM: How did the idea of the Online RLUGs come about?

KET: I think one of the reasons I was hired was my long affiliation with the online community through the various online communities I belonged to. I did my primary work on Eurobricks, but that does not mean I didn't frequent other communities. I was a weekly if not daily reader of The Brother's Brick and I spent a lot of time on FBTB, Brick Horizon, and similar sites because different things happened in different communities and sometimes it was nice to go somewhere and just be a regular community member again.

I think that was one of the reasons I was taken in – that I had this knowledge of the online community, and that was seen as a resource for trying to identify where we go from here. LEGO had spent the last decade, prior to my hiring, figuring out how to work with user groups. The classic perspective of a user group is someplace where you have a group of members who do a lot of physical activities and do events and meet physically about the product. But what do we do with those who are primarily online or only function online? How do we identify the different groups? Then we came up with the idea of differentiating between physical LEGO User Groups and Online LEGO User Groups.



HBM: Recently the term 'Online RLUGs' changed to 'Recognised LEGO Fan Media (RLFM)'. Is this only a change of terminology or is there something more behind it?

KET: It comes from realizing that while a classic view of a LUG was a group engaged in primarily physical activity, we now know that most user groups also have a very heavy online presence. Most of them have a Facebook page, a lot of them have a Twitter account, Flickr pages... all sorts of things that connect them online and virtually. They have forums where they do a lot of discussion. As a result, the term physical LEGO User Group didn't really apply anymore, and differentiating between them and the rest of the online virtual activity as being either an Online LUG or a Regular LUG didn't really cut it anymore because a LUG has physical presence, but also online presence, and a lot of it. We discussed



how to differentiate that and thought maybe the rest of the online community isn't really a LUG. This is of course our terminology. We would never say to anyone that they couldn't call themselves a LEGO User Group – that's very important to stress. Anyone can use that and if some of the fan media now consider themselves a LEGO User Group, that's fine. Our terminology, the sorting that we do in order to get a better idea, is that we have the Recognised LEGO User Groups which do online and physical activities – they have a strong online presence, but also do events, build meetings, these classic things – and then we have the online community, which is now sorted within the box we call Recognised LEGO Fan Media. These are YouTube channels, major blogs, giant online communities like Eurobricks or The Brother's Brick or Brickset for example. Some of them have overlap. Some are blogs and forums, some are databases. We are looking closely into the Fan Media now to see if it makes sense for them to be sorted into just one box. There is a vast difference between HispaBrick Magazine and Eurobricks in what makes sense and in what ways we can best support each one. We don't want to set up the same requirements or criteria if it doesn't make sense. We are looking at that, but right now this is the box and the reason we have called it Recognised LEGO Fan Media is that it was confusing to call it Online LEGO User Groups, since a lot of the physical LEGO User Groups were saying: "We are online, so why are you telling us we can't be an Online LUG?" To a larger extent – and this is generalising again – the Fan Media have a global reach or they are of important tactical value. A user group can have an online presence, but that is often quite local, as in a country or region. That is not global; hence, they are not Fan Media. That's one way of explaining the difference. Some would ask why we have recognised Fan Media that are German, or for instance Revista Bricks in Chile. Germany is a large market for us, so we have a strategic and tactical interest. They are more or less considered so important that they are equal to global reach. South America is very important to us as a new market that we want to build, so we want to add a little extra in that market.

HBM: How do you think the RLFM will evolve?

KET: I started out with 20-25 communities that we identified. We have opened up applications for recognition and now we are close to 60. I think we will see a massive growth in that area. If we can ensure a steady flow of resources, we might see it grow even further to where we have as many fan media as user groups in a handful of years. But it is very hard to predict the future in an online world. If we had sat down five years ago and had this talk, none of us would have expected the landscape to be what it is today, and it is hard to predict where we will be in another five years. For this year and the next year I think we will see a lot more interest in being recognised as fan media and a lot of good talks and discussions on what it means to be fan Media. I hope to have some of these discussions at the fan media days that

are coming up, with the representatives who come, because we also want the community's take on what fan media is and whether it would be a good idea to split it even further. There are, of course, differences between the fan media we recognise. There are different needs. We need to think about what we can support from LEGO Community Engagement and what the hopes and expectations of the Fan Media are. We are not primarily marketing. We try to promote value creation and inspire activity in the community, whereas some of the fan media have a dire need for marketing interaction, because that is where a lot of their scope is, for instance with reviews or product analysis. That is not our primary function. We do some of it on a global level, but most of it lies with the local markets, which is why with recognition we are pushing both fan media and user groups in the different markets to those markets. In the end it is a marketing decision if they want to activate all of those channels or just some of them or even none of them.

HBM: Last year LEGO organized the first LEGO Fan Media Days. Why did you decide to organize this event?

KET: That was to make everything as simple and easy and as much of a win-win situation as possible for everyone. We could see with the growth of the fan media that it simply wasn't possible for us, for example, to offer the opportunity to do interviews for everyone. There was no way I could persuade the company to do daily interviews, not even by email or Skype with so many communities. At the same time, we wanted to offer all the communities good content. It is easier to persuade a team here in Billund to take one day, rip it out of the calendar, and sit down in a room to talk with as many people as possible about what they do. That would result in some eight articles for each of the media that they could use as content on their sites. We also did it to create an opportunity for networking so we could have fan media come here to network with us and network with each other. We could look each other in the eyes and have some good talks on how we could support them the best, how they network best and what both their and our goals are. In emails, and even in phone calls, it is very difficult to decipher exactly what people mean, or if what they say is said with a smile. It is also easier to have email discussions with people once you have met them face to face. We wanted to create that opportunity and we wanted to create the opportunity for the community to come here and get a lot of solid content they could bring back and share with the community afterwards.

It is primarily a networking event to meet face to face and there is a bonus for everyone in that the community gets to bring home content. We also get to promote some of the things that we would like promoted, and we try to pick interview opportunities of interest. It not that we want to push Ninjago on all markets so you only get to interview Ninjago this year – that's definitely not the intention.

HBM: How was the experience in your opinion?

KET: It was insanely successful. Much more than I dreamed of. The fan media are slightly different because in some ways they are also competitors when they come here. One of my personal concerns was that maybe the competition would be a little too strong, but there was nothing like that. It was a couple of fantastic days where everyone enjoyed themselves. Afterwards, all those who were interviewed came back and said "Those were the best and nicest interviews we have ever had". The fan media are so interested, so passionate it's not at all like being interviewed by regular press which are always looking for scoops or insights whereas the fan media was all about the brand, the passion, the process – all those things that also interest us here at the LEGO Group. I had calls from

different product groups saying "We want in next year, please include us". The real problem right now is finding a place that suits our needs in being able to do better interviews. The venue we used last year was a little too small and a little too noisy. It is difficult to find a good spot in Billund, where all meeting rooms are always booked. We are working on that. But it was a huge success.

HBM: You have announced the second Media Fan Days. Will there be any changes, or is the philosophy mainly the same?

KET: The philosophy is the same. Some of the feedback we had last year was that it was a little too short, so we have added a full day to do more networking. Last year we had a morning session where we discussed the community and topics of interest to the community. This year we will do more of that to have more talks so I know – and don't just think I know – what the community would like to get out of the support and cooperation they have with us. There will be more of that, but the basic idea is still the same. It is a networking event and it's an opportunity for us and for the community to get some strong content out there to the AFOL community.

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LEGO Fan Media Days 2016 group picture