

# Interview: LEGO® Bionicle Design Team

By HispaBrick Magazine®

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From left to right: Christian Vonsild , Cerim Manovi and Steen Lindeberg

Bionicle is a relatively unknown theme for AFOLs. When we were asked to interview the Bionicle team, it was really a challenge for the HispaBrick Magazine team. We put all our efforts to prepare the best questions. But after interviewing Steen Lindeberg (Director), Cerim Manovi (Designer Lead) and Christian M. Vonsild (Designer) we have to admit that we see now Bionicle with another eyes. They transmitted us their point of view and their passion about this theme, and what's behind the characters and the storyboards of the theme. Here you are this interesting interview. Enjoy Bionicle!

**HBM:** Did you choose to be a designer with the BIONICLE line?

**Cerim Manovi:** I started 9 years ago here. I had an opportunity, and by coincidence I started in the construction department when there was no system yet done for BIONICLE. I think BIONICLE was just about to end and HERO FACTORY was just about to come out. I was working at a front end team at that point where we were working on the system, so no I didn't choose to go into BIONICLE, but I am very happy to be part of BIONICLE.

**HBM:** Are there other LEGO themes you would like to work with on in the future?

**CM:** I think it is great to have a lot of different experiences. I think it is always nice to have a change here and there. I have been working on this for 9 years and I don't miss anything, but of course, if the opportunity were to come up I wouldn't say no.

Christian you asked to work for another team.

**Christian M. Vonsild:** Yeah, I have a background as a industrial designer. One of my friends was working down here and she said there was an opening position in CREATOR. So I applied for that, and I didn't get that job, they turned down my application. A month later they called me, "by the way is it

possible for you to come to this workshop?". Everybody when they get hired goes through this workshop where over two days we sit down and build stuff to see if you are able to build and how well you work with other people. I went to that. Then I decided to go out sailing for three months. So I was out in the Pacific when my boss called me and asked me if I wanted a job at LEGO, and I said "Yes, of course". Then he said "you are going to work for HERO FACTORY". And right when I put down my phone I could not remember what theme it was that I was working on (laughs). So it was actually 3 months later when I came back from my trip, I came here and the first day I had to say to my boss "what is it that I am working on?". Basically I got put into the construction team where we did HERO FACTORY back then and now we are doing BIONICLE and also STAR WARS™. I couldn't be more happy, we're a small tightly knit family of good friends. And of course as an industrial designer it is very much a process of design and I don't think the process is very different among themes, if I worked at some other place in the company it wouldn't bother me, but I am happy, we are good friends and we are creating an awesome product.



**HBM:** What part of designing BIONICLE models do you like to most?

**CM:** I am the lead designer so I like very much to set the direction and to see that you start on the front end, where are we heading towards, and then really work with the guys on setting the direction and saying, okay this is what we are going to do and this is what we are going to put in there. So I really prefer the conceptual phase, but I think also doing the product at the end is also great. I prefer really to work with a bunch of amazing creative people, trying to come up with something awesome.



**CV:** I think the one thing I enjoy the most is actually the whole process. It sounds a little bit weird but the whole process of starting something and also going out and testing with kids and seeing their glow and totally engulfed in this.

**CM:** or not understanding what it is about. It is always nice to get the feedback from the kids.

**CV:** For example when we tested the Episode VII Star Wars stuff, talking to the kids and then seeing, yes, they know that character. I've seen the movie (no you haven't). I also work a lot designing elements, most of us also do elements, and I really enjoy that also.



**CM:** The great thing about working on this theme is that we do everything. We design elements, we build the models, we work on the concept part of it, we collaborate with our friends in Marketing. We see the whole picture and that's really nice. And of course in a theme like BIONICLE, you have the whole story on top of that, which is just amazing, to work also beyond the product you have something where you can communicate what this is all about. I'm always being reminded of how it was for me as a kid and watched all those cartoons and now you are in a place where you actually do this same thing and you can influence the kids in the same way as you were influenced when you were a child. The awakening of the inner child, it's amazing.

**HBM:** Do you have any feedback from the kids that play with BIONICLE? What does they like? and what don't they like?

**CM:** When we have tested it with the kids there hasn't been anything they said they didn't like. They tend to get engaged with the storyline. The storyline is very engaging for them: they like the conflict between good and evil, fighting for the masks, but the love the characters. Some like Tahu, the red character, some like the white character, some like the villain character more and so on. Everybody has their different preference. Some like blue more than red or fire more than ice, so their likes are very different, but I think for Bionicle it is more the sum of things: an interesting and engaging storyline, great visuals, both in terms of the boxes, but also the posters that we make and the animations we made for the first series and the Netflix series we are doing for this year. And then the amazing models with functions.



Tahu - Master of Fire

**CV:** If you can give a kid something like this where you can play out a story in a nice way. They are searching and fighting for their masks and when they find them they can combine with their elemental creatures. If you can do something like this, the kids are really engaged in the playability, the functions

**CM:** That transformation of the character and being able to go back and forth without having to rebuild - they get an instant kind of play. They like the expressions and also the functions, which help them to play out their inner movie.

**HBM:** You are probably aware that BIONICLE is one of the themes with less followers along the AFOLs. Why do you think that this happens?

**CM:** I think it's just a smaller portion. It is a more specific theme. There is a whole portfolio and in the community there is more something for everybody. Here you have to be engaged with a more fantasy world and drawn into this more robotic aesthetics, so it is a bit more special or different in that way. It is also a different entry point.

**HBM:** How important is the TV series to support the product?

**Steen Lindeberg:** It's always important if you can get a TV series or a film or something that can engage the kids deep in the story. The box is usually the first thing the kids meet and there is a limit to how much story you can convey on a box. When you go online you may be able to read something, but animated series, like a TV series or an online series or a movie just fleshes out the story and shows the kids how to play. That's a great way of talking about the different characters. When you are talking about action figures like these are, they need to know the characters; the characters are the interesting ones.



**CV:** It's a different experience. When you have franchises or IPs you need to have a story that supports it. If you go for something like Creator it's a different play pattern that you use there and you build something that you know all about so that helps them to understand and engage and to play out their own stories around these characters.

**HBM:** Due that BIONICLE is inspired in fantastic worlds Where do you get the ideas to design worlds and characters?

**CM:** The starting point was generation 1. These came from Voodoo masks with robotic aesthetics. When we did generation 2 we took a lot from there and then the rest we came up with whatever inspires us in our daily life, like nature, something you have seen somewhere ins cave or a glacier, but it can also be influenced by a cultural or subcultural aspect or movies, TV shows, comics, novels, whatever inspires us. The cool thing about a big theme like this is that everybody brings in something different and different viewpoints. Maybe someone is more interested in supercars, the other guy really loves sci-fi. That's a great starting point.



Bionicle Generation 1

**HBM:** When designing new parts What level of freedom do you have knowing that those parts will probably not be used in other themes?

**CV:** We actually try to design the parts so that it is possible for others to use. Of course when you talk about Star Wars, there is a head that will only suit that figure, but we try to develop elements that we can use in other themes also.

**CM:** Here you can see are different approaches, because as Christian mentions, Star Wars is a theme related element and that is most likely going to be used in that theme and that theme only. But if you look at the weapons or a flame, that is so generic that it can be used all over the place. Then of course you have System elements, or from our Construction system that is based on this system.

**SL:** I.e. there are element from Elves, so we also cross-use from other themes. And that's the goal of all things we do in terms of elements, to make it fit together with the rest. Of course ours are more Technic based, so maybe we have a greater fit with Technic elements than with System elements.

**CV:** The masks are pretty unique to us, nobody else would use those and then maybe the chests, but other than that, most of the other elements can be used by others.



Skull Scorpio Mask - San Diego Comic Con 2015

**SL:** The ball caps were used in a lot of mech builds for system based sets, Ninjago, and also some technic parts. There are a lot of things that are also used by other themes and teams.

**CM:** It is a great benefit for our product if other themes can use it as well. It helps. The more you make of one element the price goes down.

**HBM:** Do you have any influence or benefit from the fact that a license like Star Wars is doing similar products to Bionicle?

**CM:** We are actually doing the Star Wars figures. Of course we try to make sure that as much as possible can be cross used. Again, volume is a big help for our themes, but there are some that

**CV:** We can only have a certain number of new elements per year, so we have to try to cross use.

**SL:** Of course we have some freedom, because we base this on the themes we are doing, so if we need masks for those guys, we make them specific for this theme, because that is also what differentiates it, because we have, let's say 80% of the same frame we use, like bone structure that is what gives



shape to the figure, and also the shells. And then you have some elements that are specifically for that theme. And then you have the design freedom to express what you want to express.

**HBM:** Do you think that BIONICLE is more dedicated to boys than to girls?

**CM:** It is definitely a boys target group we are going for in this, but we know there are quite a few girls out there playing with BIONICLE as well. Also when you look at the fan groups there are quite a few girls that are into the story. Some of the greatest models we have seen were built by girls, but they might also be artists that do fan art or write stories. I think the story is appealing to girls as well and the models and the build are definitely relevant for girls as well.

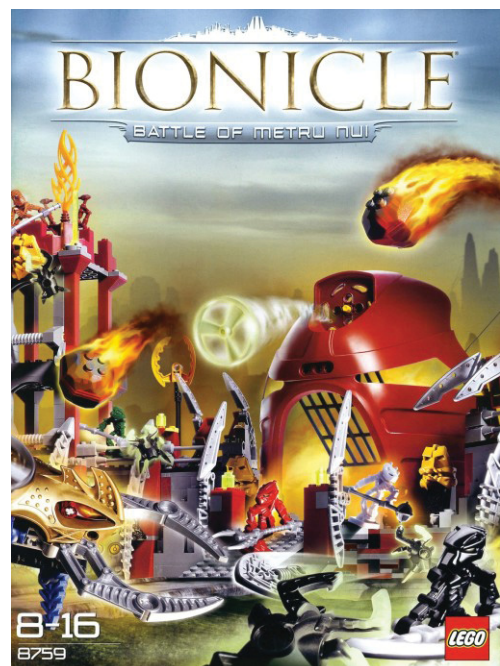
**HBM:** Have you ever considered doing a huge Bionicle set like a UCS?

**CM:** In our dreams maybe (laughs). We can build quite big as you can see, but if you look at the action figure market, the price point is around 10-25€ so we have to know what market we are competing in also.

**SL:** Our inner child says yes, but it's kids that are playing with it and if they have to move around this huge model then it's not really playable for them. Of course then you are talking about a completely different target group.

**HBM:** Is that also the reason there are more characters than vehicles or scenarios?

**CM:** This is a theme based on figures. Sceneries or vehicles is not something we would build out of these elements. That's why we say we are character/creature based



**HBM:** But there were some in the past...

**SL:** The sets become more Technic based when we go into vehicles. And we saw a bit of a clash.

We are not saying we would never do vehicles, but first and foremost we need to do the characters that are important for the story. Then we can look at what else we can do.

**CM:** That's also where you get the emotional hook.

**HBM:** have you ever considered a model with electric / electronic mechanism?

**CM:** We did have one in the old serie, a remote controlled crab, again more Technic based. Typically it becomes very expensive when you start putting electronics into it. And again, we know that the market for action figures is around 10-25€. That is the price range we are moving in. And if we start putting an engine in then you are not getting a whole lot of bricks with it.

**HBM:** Is there any idea that you'd like to add to the theme and couldn't?

**SL:** You always start with a big model and then have to scale it down, but not really.

**CM:** You are bound to a certain price point. You have a specific number of bricks you can put into it. That's your brief.

**SL:** Then there is also playability and safety. The models need to be stable and sturdy. This is about as big we can build on this kind of torso and still have a function in it. And if we build it any bigger than that it is just going to fall over and it is not going to be playable in the way we want it. So we have to consider different things when we are doing this . You might have an idea that you either have to do in a different way or you have to scale down or do something else with in order to put it in, to live up to price point, safety, buildability and all these things. I think the designers are pretty creative to get the things that we really like in there.

Of course it is not an AFOL build. That's the big difference. This is done for a certain target group. A certain age group, it has to be playable, it has to be stable, and in the end, there is only so much you can spend.

**HBM:** Do you think BIONICLE is a violent theme?

**CM:** No, it's a conflict based theme. We definitely think that conflict is an important part of the theme - the conflict between good and evil, the conflict over the masks.

"Conflict adventure"

That is also a big part of the way kids and especially boys play, with the conflict, and they learn from acting with the conflict, so we don't see BIONICLE as a violent theme, but as a theme with a built-in conflict.

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LEGO® Bionicle design team during the interview