

Interview: LEGO® Minecraft™

By HispaBrick Magazine®

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MINECRAFT™ is an exceptional LEGO® theme in that it started out as a LEGO® Ideas set. Despite being a licensed theme, it also has one of the highest percentages of “standard” bricks per set in any LEGO® theme. This means it represents the essence of LEGO® very well, but at the same time it exists on a different plane from evergreen LEGO® themes like City and Creator.

We had the opportunity to talk to Joseph Kyde, a designer on LEGO® MINECRAFT™ and discussed some of those idiosyncrasies, and how MINECRAFT™ has made substantial contributions to the core of LEGO®.

HispaBrick® Magazine: How did you get involved with MINECRAFT™?

JK: I originally got involved in MINECRAFT™ around 2010-11 when I started playing the game. I’ve been at LEGO® for 3 years and I started at Creator. I’m not sure if they found out I was a fan of the game or not, but they asked me to get on the team and I was all about it because it is nice to have a designer on the team that is into it, that plays the game and is familiar with it. I have been on MINECRAFT™ for the last two years.

HBM: There are lots of Steves in the sets. Do you think that adding more character would make the sets more interesting?

JK: We try to strike a balance between offering Steve and Alex, the other main character, but the difficulty is that Steve and Alex are the default skins, the default appearance of your character when you play the game and we think it is really important to offer that. We recognise that people really want new skins and we are always looking at opportunities. We released two skin packs (ed: 853609 and 853610), that contain four different skins each, so there are a total of eight different skins. One is like a spaceman another like a knight. We offered those in recognition that there is a desire for more skins.

HBM: Are the sets you launch all taken from existing MINECRAFT scenarios or are there things that you make to expand on that?

JK: It’s a blend. For example, 21131 – The Ice Spikes is based on the ice spikes that occur naturally in the colder environments. We really liked the ice spikes in the game and we wanted to make a set based on them, but what do you do with them? In the game they are just big spikes of ice, but for the set we thought it would be cool if a player could make his home out of the ice spikes. So we looked at what kind of home you would make with the ice spikes as a starting point. We added ladders and put a bed on top with some red stone torches and a banner and an enchanting area. It’s inspired by the game, but you are not going to find anything exactly like it in the game unless you build it yourself. Other sets we have, like the jungle temple (21132), are things that are actually generated in the game. We just made a set that is based on that, but even when we do that we want to offer the ability to rebuild that. A lot of times when you find a jungle temple in the game, you take the stuff from it and build your own thing, because it is made of special bricks that are hard to find in the game. We wanted to bring that play to the jungle temple, so you can reconfigure it into a skull fortress or an expansive ruin or whatever you like.

HBM: You are adapting an existing game to the LEGO® system. What challenges do you find doing that?

JK: The challenge is making it easily identifiable as both MINECRAFT™ and LEGO®. For instance with the minifigures we do: we try to strike a balance between them being clearly a LEGO® minifigure and also clearly a MINECRAFT™ figure. That is indicated by the pixelated decoration and the cubic head, but it is still based on the traditional minifigure body. That is true with a lot of what we do in the sets.





Joseph Kyde - LEGO® Minecraft™ Designer

HBM: In some of the newer sets you are using modular building. Do you plan to expand on that?

JK: Where it makes sense. Like I said, it is an integral part of the game that you are building things and, for instance, with the jungle temple it is a nice feature that you can take it apart quickly and rebuild it into something else. We are always looking at opportunities where we can provide that in the physical building experience.



Elements designed by MINECRAFT team

HBM: MINECRAFT™ is one of the few themes that is still full of 2x brick (2x2, 2x3, 2x4, ...), but there is also a number of new elements. What new elements has MINECRAFT™ brought to LEGO® and have any of those elements been recycled into other themes?

JK: Actually, that is why I brought this set: 21130 The Nether Railway. While it has the MINECRAFT™ specific head, we were the ones who wanted to develop the 4x4 tile with bow (BL #27507) and the 2x2 tile with bow (BL #27925) and also this weird connector piece (plate 2x2 with design, BL #27928). These were developed for this set and for the Mountain cave set (21137) because we had done a track system before, but we thought we could do it even better. We looked at

how we could do that and we realised we could make these new elements that work very well for our purpose, but we thought they could also be useful to other people, both fans and LEGO® designers. Luckily, people responded really well to them. They started putting them in everything so we are happy we were able to expand the LEGO® vocabulary. I'm still interested in seeing if the plate gets reused in any sets, but I have already seen a couple of fan builds incorporating it. In this set Steve is on a mine cart in the nether, an area of fire and intense heat that is the most dangerous realm of MINECRAFT. There are these little creatures that hop around and they are magma cubes. Steve has built a mine cart system so he can transport certain resources and as he passes by the magma cube bounces up and down. We also have a larger version of the magma cube that is also able to bounce up and down. The track itself can be reconfigured very easily.

HBM: Regarding the palette you are using, can you request any special colours for your sets?

JK: If the set requires it... For instance, the Ocean Monument is a lot of earth green and sand green and those aren't the most common colours. So if it is necessary and it makes sense for what it is based on in the game we have to do to really capture the look and feel of it, but those are colours that exist in the current LEGO® palette and we are not requesting new colours. We haven't seen a need for that yet.

HBM: Since the MINECRAFT™ game is block based, is easier or more difficult to design sets because of that?

JK: I would say both. Parts of it make it a lot simpler in terms of knowing the vocabulary that you want to use, like we will probably use a lot of 2x2 bricks and a lot of 2x4 bricks. It also presents a lot of new challenges when you are building sets and still want to have that visual look based on a cubicle system, but you still want to make it a fun building experience and give it features. It is deceptively tricky, figuring out ways to stay true to the look of MINECRAFT™ but also to incorporate really fun elements of play and staying true to the LEGO® system of play.

HBM: What would be your perfect LEGO® MINECRAFT™ set?

JK: I think a good MINECRAFT™ LEGO® set is modular, reconfigurable and it brings to physical life the parts of the game that are most fun to experience. It perhaps gives a new dimension to the physical play experience that you can't really have in the digital play experience, or that give kids an opportunity to act out things that they may not be able to act out in their MINECRAFT™ game.

HBM: Is there any idea or way to link the sets to the real game?

JK: We built a digital version of the Mountain Cave set in MINECRAFT™ to see how it would look. That was a fun experience. I think the way it is linked is in how we design the sets and making sure there always is that aesthetic link. As for having some sort of actual link I'm not sure how that would happen, but I think it is a really good idea. Our main concern is making sure there is a fun play experience that captures both the MINECRAFT™ spirit and the LEGO® spirit. I'm not sure that you actually need a literal digital bridge between those two if you are providing a fun play experience that takes place in that same kind of world.

HBM: Do you have any feedback from gamers that have started building the LEGO® sets and how they feel about them?

JK: It is always interesting to see feedback from MINECRAFT™ fans. They can pick up on things that we didn't necessarily think were obvious, little Easter eggs we put in and hope people will notice. It is nice to see they recognise we are trying to pay attention to make sure that it is as accurate to the game as possible.

HBM: So far, the sets are LEGO® reflections of existing MINECRAFT scenarios. Have you considered going outside those scenarios and adding new elements that don't currently exist in MINECRAFT™?

JK: I think we want to stay true to the IP where it makes sense. We want to make sure that our sets come across as really good MINECRAFT™ representations, but of course kids are able to do that on their own with the sets.



Dynamic Minecraft element

HBM: The game has certain action elements. How do you transfer those elements into LEGO® action elements while keeping the set stable? There is no gravity in MINECRAFT, for instance.

JK: We can't do certain things until we figure out an anti-gravity brick that floats in mid-air. That is difficult because MINECRAFT™ has certain things that LEGO® can't do, just like LEGO® has certain things that MINECRAFT™ can't do. We try to do what we can, especially when it comes to characters, or features, or actions like being able to make traps. In 21134 The Waterfall Base we have a little lava flow that can be revealed to protect your house from zombies. And you can build similar things in the game. The same goes for the Mountain Cave that has an elevator and there is a way to build an elevator in MINECRAFT™ using complex red-stone circuitry that is in the game. We always like to be able to figure out ways to bring that kind of play. In the game when the lava magma cubes bounce they separate into different layers and it was a big challenge to try to figure out how to represent those things in play to it is fun to play with it as a toy.

A lot of the sets are based on a 6x6 grid so it is much easier to create a whole world and they are all compatible with each other. The Railway set in particular is based on being able to break it down into individual 6x6 pieces and you can reconfigure the track as you like and you can also add this to the Mountain Cave, which also has a track system, and you can easily integrate them. And you can do the same with all the sets.

HBM: Some people say that MINECRAFT™ sets are perfect parts packs to stock up on "standard LEGO®"

JK: We like seeing kids buy the sets to play out their MINECRAFT scenarios, but if people are going to buy them for parts packs that's fine too. I know that the Ocean Monument (21136) that will come out later has a whole bunch of sand-green in it, so I imagine that might be a pretty popular set for just getting sand-green pieces.



21136 - Ocean Monument

HBM: Earlier you mentioned skin packs. Is that something you think might become a trend?

JK: It could be, but I can't tell you anything about future products. We are always looking at new and exciting ways to bring the variety that you can get in MINECRAFT™ to our LEGO® products.

HBM: What is your favourite MINECRAFT™ set so far?

JK: Probably the Ocean Monument, selfishly, because that's the largest set I have ever worked on. It was a big challenge, but it was really a fun set to build. There's a fish creature in it that I particularly enjoyed building. It has all these spikes poking out of it; you turn its tail and it launches a missile out of its mouth.

HBM: How long does it take to design a set? You have some inputs from the IP and then you probably get a brief. So from that moment until the set arrives on the market, how long does it take?

JK: We usually work a few years in advance. It depends on the set and the IP, but to go from the very first idea to people being able to buy it in the shops it's a little while.

HBM: Does the IP control everything you do or do they give you some freedom?

JK: They are very open to working with us. If we have a really exciting idea we welcome having feedback about what they think of it, but they are really nice to work with. We are not really restricted or anything like that. They are quite open to our ideas.

HBM: How large is your team?

JK: We are three designers working under a design manager and then there are the building instruction designers and a graphic designer.

HBM: And do they all have a similar background to yours?

JK: Somewhat. I have a background in industrial design and quite a few years of experience in toy design. Another of my

co-workers is also a designer, but he was also a big LEGO® fan. I was too, but I think he was a bit more so. One of the other co-workers doesn't have a background in design, but he is a big fan of LEGO®. It's quite a diverse group.

HBM: And is being a MINECRAFT™ fan a prerequisite for being on the team?

JK: No, it's not a prerequisite, but it definitely helps! Because if you are not a fan you at least need to know the game and being a fan just makes it that much easier.

HBM: So does that mean that part of your work consists in playing the game to make sure you stay up to date?

JK: yes. We have to do extensive research so we have to play the game! It's a tough job, but sometimes you have to take a break from playing with LEGO® bricks and just go play a video game.

HBM: The ultimate twist would be for a company like TT games to develop the LEGO® MINECRAFT™ videogame

JK: And then we would do sets based on that! LEGO® MINECRAFT™ LEGO® MINECRAFT™ sets :D
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Joseph Kyde and Jetro de Château next to a LEGO® Minecraft store shelf