Interview: LEGO® Life

By HispaBrick Magazine®

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What is LEGO® Life and what is its purpose. When the opportunity presented itself to interview the senior director of LEGO® Life we were thrilled and not entirely sure what to ask him. Fortunately for us the conversation turned out to be fluent and we ended up leaning a lot about this new social platform that LEGO® has created.

HispaBrick® Magazine: To start of can you tell me a little about yourself?

I'm **Robert Lowe**, I'm the senior director for LEGO® Life. Prior to that I was heading up LEGO® Club, which in some ways is the predecessor to LEGO® Life. Before that I worked for the BBC and for Nintendo. I've been with LEGO® for around 3 years and I love it. I started off in London for year and then when I was asked to head up the LEGO® Life project and build a team to create the experience I was asked to move to Billund, so me and my family moved to Denmark 2 years ago. Generally that has been a very positive experience. It's a very nice place to be with kids, and when the weather is like this it is lovely (ed. On the day of the interview there was a nearly cloudless sky and the temp was in the mid 20s), but it's not always like this to be honest. But I love working for LEGO®.

HBM: Can you define what LEGO® Life is?

RL: Essentially, it is a social network for kids under 13. The core purpose is to allow them to share their creations with a much wider audience than they would ordinarily be able to, and to be inspired both by other kids and by LEGO®. When the models kids build start to break down and end up in big bins in the corner of their room, what can they do with that? How can they be inspired to build different things? Some kids can just go straight into it and build stuff, but others need a bit of help and guidance as to what to create. LEGO® Life was built to do that and to allow them to communicate with each other. They can upload something and millions of other kids can see it. Normally, if you are under 13 you can show it to your friends and family and maybe if you are really lucky it can be featured in the LEGO® Club magazine, but that is about as far as it

goes. Social networks are essentially designed for teenagers and adults, so we decided to design something that is really safe and easy to use, but also fun and interesting for kids.

Robert Lowe showing the LEGO® Life app

HBM: How do parents know that LEGO® Life is really a safe place for their kids to be?

RL: There are three main things we did. Because of who we are as a company, what our philosophy is and the values of the LEGO® brand it is extremely important that we don't leave any margin of error. It has to be kind of triple locked. That means functionality-wise we are going to make some decisions that may not be as broadly appealing, but it was a sacrifice worth making.

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First of all, we made it completely anonymous. When you sign up you create a minifigure of yourself in 3D and you are assigned a LEGO® username that is not a real name. It is actually randomly generated. At the moment you can't change that name, but we have had a lot of complaints from kids that have a name they don't like, so we are going to give them a chance to change that and look at multiple names to choose one they like. That avatar of and name then become the way you are represented on LEGO® Life, but it will also start to become the way you are represented across all of our LEGO® digital experiences. Soon we will also allow kids to unlock different outfits and elements for the minifig from different themes. The more creations you upload the more different outfits you can use for your avatar.

The second thing we do is that you are not able to upload anything that you have created yourself without moderation. We have both machine or automated moderation and human moderation. Essentially, the picture won't go up until it has been checked. There is no way to upload a picture straight away. That's very heavy from a workload perspective. Particularly at launch we had a lot of users. You can type in text comments on LEGO® created open comment, and on user generated content you can type in emoji and sticker comments. The reasons for that are that it keeps moderation workload a bit lower because you don't need to moderate the emoji and sticker comments and when it comes to kids (and sometimes adults) they can be quite sensitive when they have created something so we don't want to create somewhere where there is a lot of criticism. We want to encourage them to build more and do more things with the bricks. A lot of the emojis and stickers we have created are about positive reinforcement. The idea is that if you have nothing good to say then don't say anything, but if you do, then you have this language we have created to give feedback to the kids.

The third thing is that it is completely open. We are not allowing any private chatrooms or one-to-one chats in the experience. The equivalent of a Whatsapp experience is not in there. It is more like Instagram or Pinterest where you can see all the comments and anyone can flag anything if they see anything they think is inappropriate. Since the users are kids they also don't have that expectation. Some of them may try out social networks when they get a little older, but at the age of 9 or 10 they just think it is cool to show other kids what they have created.

We are trying to build something that is a social network but it is not built exactly like any existing social network. There are elements of Instagram in there and Pinterest, but that is just what we think is good design work rather than trying to replicate an adult social network for kids.

HBM: Do you expect adults to use the platform?

RL: Yes. We have designed it with kids in mind, but what we are going to start doing before the end of the year is giving statuses inside the experience. If you are a beginner, a builder, you can work your way up to becoming a master builder in lots of different strands; that starts to gamify the experience. We want to be able to have superusers who will probably be AFOLs and TFOLs who are able to upload their creations and building tips and have a status inside the experience that is almost like a mentor.
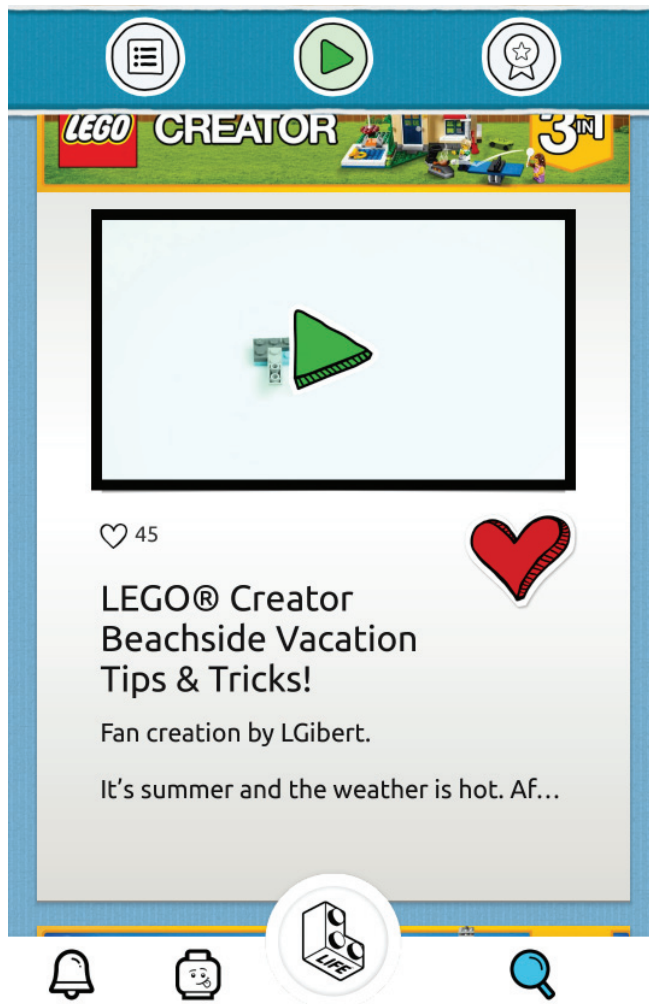
Example of AFOL collaboration

HBM: Will that status include community moderation?

RL: All of that content would still have to go through our moderation. It is quite difficult to say "this person doesn't need moderation". Even so, the system we are using can allow you to have good actors and bad actors. People who always display good behaviour can be given a lighter form of moderation than the ones who are potentially on a risk list or haven't uploaded before.

HBM: And will you use some of those users to help flag content that might have escaped the eyes of the moderators?

RL: Right now the app has a flag option and any user can use that. The new system we are putting in place means that if a really reliable person flags something it gets elevated quicker. So it scales depending on the person who is writing the content or flagging it.

LEGO.com/life

HBM: What kind of content can you upload?

RL: You can upload a picture to a gallery and then you can add stickers to that. You can also have slideshows. Soon we will be adding stop motion videos, but we have to apply a lot of constraints to that. If we allow anyone to upload a ten-minute stop-motion video with audio, we have to avoid personal information about the child. Anonymity also means you can't hear their voice or see their face. There are special parental permissions you can get to allow kids to do that, but in order to do that we need kids' parents to verify themselves in the experience. In the future we will include that feature. It will be like a parental dashboard so that parents, once they have identified themselves through some kind of ID can say "I don't mind if my child puts a picture of their face up or I don't mind if my child uses their voice inside the experience. It has to be the parent who has been approved who says that. Right now however, any videos we put up need to have the voice masked. What we try to do is turn that into a fun feature. We will probably put a couple of voice modulators in there that can make then sound like Chase McCain or another LEGO® character so that I isn't the voice of the child, but it is something fun. We are looking into a solution that uses facial recognition so that when it sees a face on the screen it automatically puts a minifigure face on it. You can be really creative when you have high constraints.

HBM: Does that mean that things like stop-motion will be something you can create inside the app?

RL: We don't want to bloat the app too much. When it comes to stop-motion we are looking at a couple of options. It might be that you can do it inside the app, but maybe there will be a separate related app to create the stop-motion in and then upload it to LEGO® Life. It's quite a common thing now to have a different apps all linked together with the same account – think of Facebook and messenger or the GoPro suite of apps – and this is what we are trying to do with LEGO® Life. There is a LEGO® TV app which is going to become much more like LEGO® Life.

It will still be video content for LEGO®, but you will be able to like and comment on it. Then we will ask users if they would like to upload pictures of their own builds and that is when we

will guide them to the main LEGO® Life app. We are also looking at a kind of story maker app and that is where the videos would come in. That would also feed into the LEGO® Life central app. The account system in all these apps would be the same, using the same name and the same minifigure avatar and the same rewards you have unlocked in the other apps. We are also looking to integrate LEGO® Worlds into this experience so you can take your LEGO® Worlds 3D creations and share it through LEGO® Life. The way that will work is that you can share digital builds and other people will be able to download the builds they really like into their LEGO® Worlds game.

HBM: LEGO® Life is a free app, but LEGO® Worlds is a paid game. Do you expect there to be a digital building experience outside of the paid game?

RL: We don't know yet. I think the guys in the digital games theme are looking at a number of different ways in which they will bring LEGO® worlds into the mobile space. That's on the roadmap. We have also been looking at what the roadmap is for digital building in relation to LEGO® Life. We are doing a lot of prototypes at the moment, using Unity around simple 3D building. The reason is that we want to keep it as close as possible to physical building. We want it to be a platform where kids can share what they have created with physical bricks, but if they don't have any bricks with them or live in a part of the world where they are not able to get LEGO® bricks or they can't afford them. We still want to give them some kind of building experience so they can share their creations, but we don't know yet what format that will take. We are taking a very non-LEGO® approach to haw we are making this. We release something that we know is not perfect and there are plenty of things that need improvement and we look at how the kids are using it and improve it all the time. If we see the kids particularly like something we will do more of it. If we see they are not using certain features at all we might take them out altogether or leave it. LEGO® is very good at making perfect boxes of bricks, with a great building experience after 3 years of development. Our motto is "only the best is good enough", but that is not necessarily the optimum way of developing in the digital space. If you look at some of the things we have created, like LEGO® Universe, that got delayed several times because they wanted it to be perfect before it came out and

then the business model it used when it eventually came out was something that the world had moved on from a bit. We are trying to really learn from those experiments and make sure that we put something out there that we know isn't quite perfect, but we know that we can improve over time. I think the company has been great at giving us the freedom and the resources to do that.

HBM: Aside from how and what users use inside the app, are you looking at any other kind of feedback to make those decisions?

RL: We have started including polling and voting functions inside the app to know what the users want. We collect a lot more data from LEGO® Life than we do from other experiences, but we have to anonymise it because we are dealing with kids. That means we can't look at specific users, but we can look at the behaviours and see the avatar builder is being used more in a certain context so we can start e.g. adding more trousers to the avatar builder. We are being much more data-led than we have been in the past.

When we get to some of the bigger decisions around what the roadmap is we will be asking for feedback from other areas where we have direct contact with people. Through the AFOL community and also through some of our brand retail shops and LEGO®LAND parks where we get people to come in a play and get the parents' opinions as well. So we are constantly testing it, both looking at data and then testing it with the people that matter the most.

HBM: Is the LEGO® Life app the beginning of the end of the LEGO® Club Magazine?

RL: No. We have actually changed the focus of the magazine a bit. We have reduced it a bit. Previously it was for age-group 4-13 and now it is for 5-10. It would be naïve to think that our 10,11, 12-year olds are spending more time on tablets than they have been reading magazines in the past. We have to be able to react to that as a company. We have to be able to know where kids are and give them the right kind of things they need from LEGO® in that space. So we are keeping the magazine. It is very much in our plans for the future for the 5-10-year-olds, but we have scaled it back slightly in terms of focus so that we can put more resources behind the digital one for some of the older kids. You can still download the digital version of the magazine in the app, no matter who you are. So if you are 25 or 30 you can get the LEGO® Club Magazine – or the LEGO® Life Magazine as it is called now – in the app and download it as a PDF.

HBM: Can you tell me a little about your partnership with UNICEF?

RL: There is a broader LEGO® partnership with UNICEF. We work with them more from a digital safety point of view.

They have looked at the app and done an audit of it. The results were very positive. They felt that we were taking a very responsible approach to what is potentially a very sensitive area: a social network for kids. They felt we had taken all the precautions we needed to and they gave us some feedback and advice on what to do in the future. They kind of gave us their stamp of approval as the right kind of experience for kids, especially those who are exploring this space for the first time. That is how we looked at this as well. If this is a kid's first social network, what should we be teaching them about and where should we be protecting them.

If you look at the experience and go into any kind of content, you will see it is tagged. We are starting to teach them around hashtags. This is a very different layout compared to LEGO®.com. The LEGO®.com website is organised by franchise, whereas here you can have multiple themes tagged in a single post. Kids can tag with whatever they wat from the list of available tags. The tags are not just theme related. We are trying to reduce the barriers between the themes rather than trying to build them up. We are trying to take a LEGO® approach. We want kids to create something that has Friends and Elves and Star Wars and Technic and then to upload it and tag it with all those things and show how they have used all the different elements to make something awesome. That's what magical about the system of play and we want to embrace that.

You can add a maximum of three tags when you upload content. After uploading you can choose to keep it private – a lot of kids just want to create their own private gallery of LEGO® builds – or you can click on share and then it goes to moderation. At the moment moderation is longer than we would like. It takes between 20-30 minutes. When the new automated version is fully operational it should be about 5 minutes. The same team that do our engagement on Facebook and Instagram are also doing moderation for LEGO® Life and they are located all around the world.

Inside the experience the characters have their own accounts. If I go to Ninjago there is Kai. He comments and likes and posts his own stuff. There is also Batman. If Batman likes something that's really cool and when he comments on it then it is amazing. We think this may be one of the coolest things we have in the experience. ¡Batman approves!
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We would like to thank Robert Lowe for taking the time to talk to us and provide some insight into what LEGO® Life is and we look forward to seeing how it develops further.
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Robert Lowe interviewed by Jetro de Château