

The Development of the Friends Minidoll

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There has been a lot of talk recently about the changes in the design of the LEGO® Friends for 2018: Olivia has darker skin and glasses, Emma has changed her eyes from green to brown, Mia has changed from green eyes and also opted for a more natural shade of lipstick, and Andrea has changed her lipstick, her eye color AND her hairstyle! Stephanie, whilst mostly unchanged, has a bigger smile.

While the update might cause a bit of a shake up, we thought it might be a good opportunity to look at the evolution of the minidoll before it was released. As has been discussed previously, the minidoll was the product of five years of prerelease work, with multiple designs presented to focus groups to see what features would make the figures something the target market would want to play with.

Now there are many issues that people have with minidolls: the altered scale (similar height, but thinner torsos and legs), legs fused together, and the lack of rotatable wrists – to say nothing of the shape of the figures' chests... But where do we see the origins of such figures?



Tucked away in the basement of the LEGO® House in Billund, there lies a collection of historical artefacts. These are readily viewed by visitors, and included amongst them are a selection of three-dimensional drafts for the minidolls.

Due to the archival nature of the environment, the lighting conditions are not ideal for capturing images, so I apologise for the picture quality.

In the display case, there were at least nine iterations of the minidoll, created before arriving at the final model. While we are unsure of the actual order of design of these prototypes, it is interesting to see that efforts were made to maintain the rotating wrist, as well as independently articulated legs. In the front row we can see some examples of three-dimensional printed versions of the final figures.

Amongst the drafts, we have some figures that are very closely based on the proportions of a mini figure, while others are more fanciful, and some are very similar to the minidolls we know today.

The figures in the back row are significantly larger – that minifigure in the corner is larger than the normal size. The figure on the right looks similar in proportions to our current minidoll, but the one next to it is very cartoonish: almost like a Nintendo amiibo, or token in a board game.

In the middle row we see three exercises in designing taller figures: we see experiments being made with the structure of the legs, arms and ratio of torso to leg length. Some limbs are of an almost blocky shape, and others appear to have had their form modelled as a scaled down form of Barbie doll.

We also see a smaller figure here, similar to a child minifigure in form, but with exaggerated facial features and hair design. This could be an appealing form for younger children, where the face is the most important aspect of representation for a character, but not as much for the slightly older demographic that Friends is aimed at.

The front row of prototypes demonstrates a number of figures similar in size and proportion to minifigures: one merely a recovered mini figure with a slightly larger head than we are used to; one with a slightly shaped torso (possibly shaped by a dress that slips over the minifigure neck), and the other of a similar height, but resembling the minidolls as we now know them – with the exception of flared cuffs at the wrist to accommodate articulated wrists. We also see that the minifigure neck has a chunky look to it, compared to the minidoll neck that we now know.

While some of the drafts feature arms of similar dimensions to our familiar minifigure, others are slightly narrower. In order to preserve the option of a rotating wrist, we see the distal arms flared by fluke of fashion, with outlandish cuffs (so very 90s), or generally chunky like those of a minifigure. As the design matured, the arms were moved out slightly and narrowed at the wrist: unfortunately, this meant that we lost the ability of this joint to rotate.

After reviewing these minidoll drafts, I can understand why some of the design choices were made. The proportion of the wrist to hand size were never going to be strong enough to allow rotation at this joint. The narrower neck, while not a standard stud, is in fact the same size as the standard 3mm bar. The legs were unlikely to be able maintain an appropriate level of strength if they maintained the requested proportions but articulated independently.

The minidoll as we know it today was the result of many years of customer research as well as trial and error. This year, we are seeing a few changes in the design of our initial five Friends. While some may seem dramatic to us today, in later years they will become standard, and unlikely to change dramatically. At least for the next five years.

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