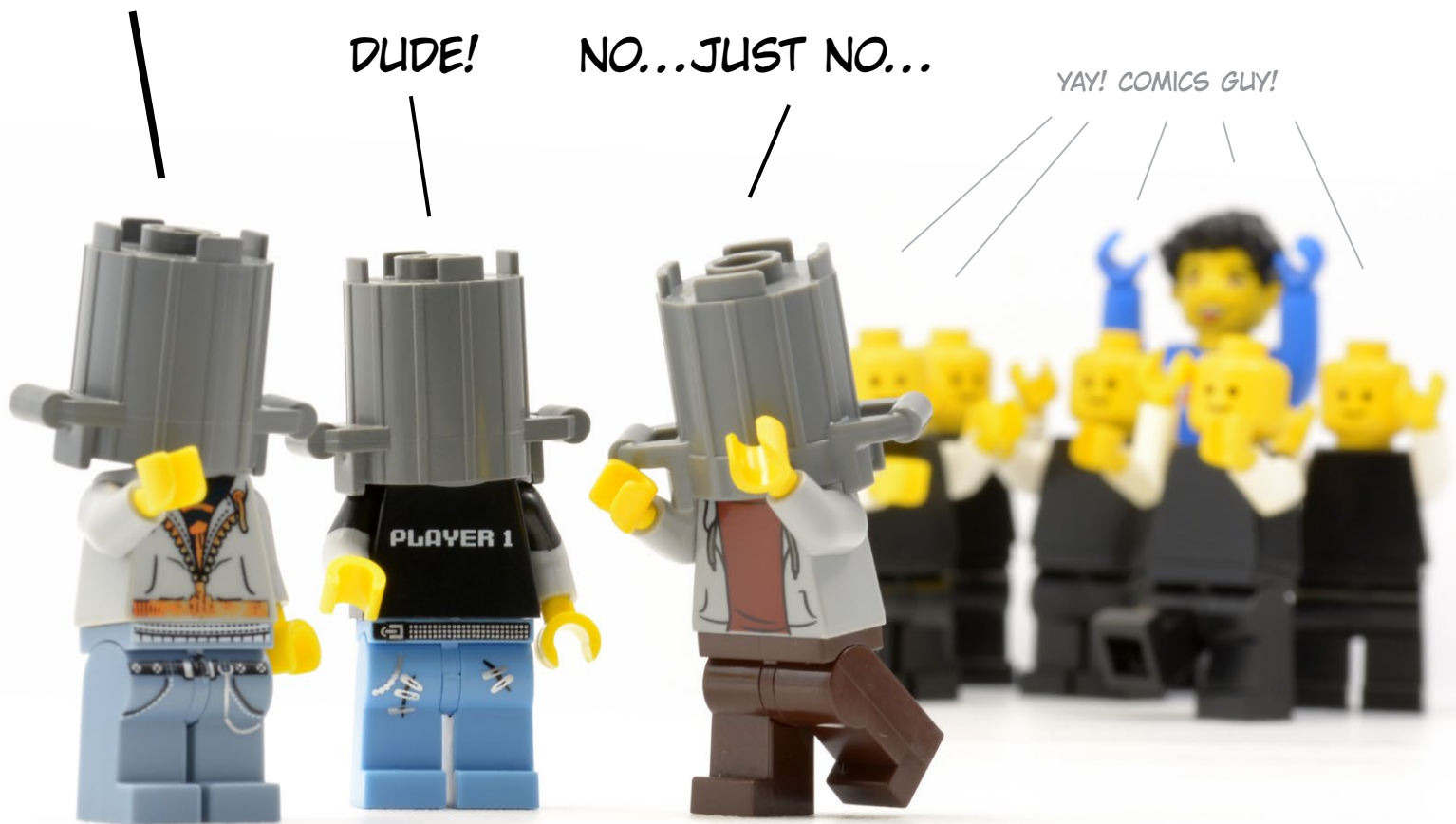# IT'S COMICS GUY!

DUDE!

NO...JUST NO...

YAY! COMICS GUY!

by Jetro de Château

One of the privileges of being an ambassador for my community is that I get to participate in the conversation on the LAN–the LEGO® Ambassador Network–where all the fan communities that are Recognised by LEGO interact with the company and each other. Anything that is big in the community is bound to also turn up in conversation there. Over the past few months BrickLink has been a hot topic for discussion. In the course of those discussions the comic strips by a specific author came up several times as a way to show how the AFOL community at large feels about things that are happening on BrickLink. Once is a coincidence (or a sign), twice makes you think, three times and you really have to go and find out who this person is and what moves them to make these comic strips. So that's what I did. You might be surprised to hear that I don't always get an answer to my emails, not even if I say I'm one of the editors of HispaBrick Magazine. After checking us out and deciding we were a legitimate entity, he consented to an interview.

The first question I ask, of course, is who are you and how did you get into LEGO?

"Who am I? That question is a little too existentialist for me at this time of the morning. It's probably a little too existentialist for me at any time of day or night, actually. How about we go with: 'I'm more inclined to Krishnamurta's philosophy than that of Sartre' and leave it at that? No? Oh! You mean what's my name. Mark Favreau. On the brickwebs I'm known as mfav. I was insufficiently clever to come up with a cool handle and succumbed to pressure and frustration when I had to come up with a user name, so mfav. You know, that and having a handle like colonel-fluffy-muff1ns-incorpor8ed is a lot to type every time you need to log in somewhere."

"How did I get into LEGO? My son, from birth practically, was interested in manipulating things with his hands. One day when he was first able to sit up, he spent literally 45 minutes swinging a door back and forth. Anyone with a baby knows that if the child can entertain themselves for 45 minutes uninterrupted, that's 45 minutes of cherished respite for a parent. So you kind of want to encourage that curiosity for a number

of reasons. As he grew, the fascination with moving and manipulating things continued. Age appropriate baby toys weren't of any interest. We had to find toys for him with moving parts and spinny bits and so on. At age four, I think, we went to a LEGO store and found Bionicles. I purchased I think two of the simpler sets, Tanma and Solek. I didn't know Bionicles from Boo. But these things looked like something the kid could manage, even if the age rating on them was something older than four. Sure enough, those worked. Then the next time it was more Bionicles. His being a little kid and the Bionicle ball-and-sockets being what they are, the sockets cracked…which led me to look for replacement parts…which led me to Peeron…which led me to BrickLink. It was all downhill from there."

Peeron was an eye-opening experience for Mark. There was a lot more going on with LEGO than he was aware of. As his son grew and developed with LEGO, so did his own interest.

"I enjoyed that it was a way that I could connect with my son. I enjoyed the nuances of the parts themselves. I enjoyed the problem-solving aspects of building. I'd see some assembly or

technique and get interested in how I might use that. For a while I was building "hidden hammer" machines where you could turn a crank and a big hammer would swing down and knock a minifig across the table. I'd get that to working, then the boy would take it and that would be about the end of my involvement with that device. Kind of how that went."
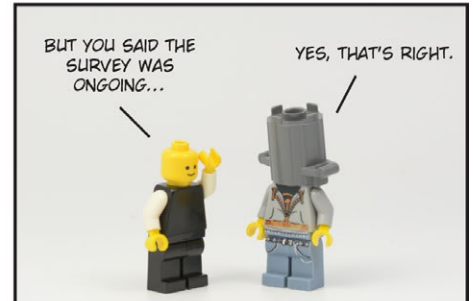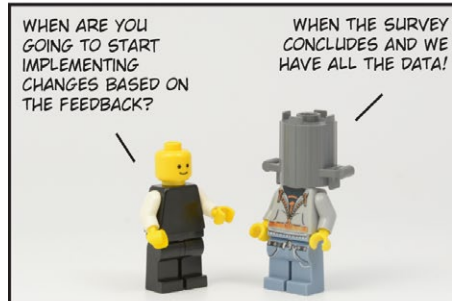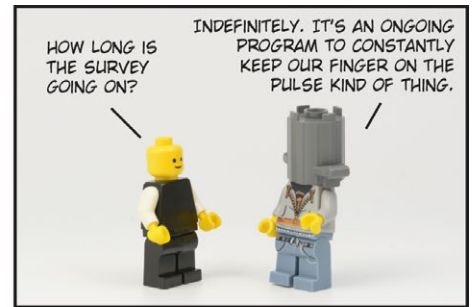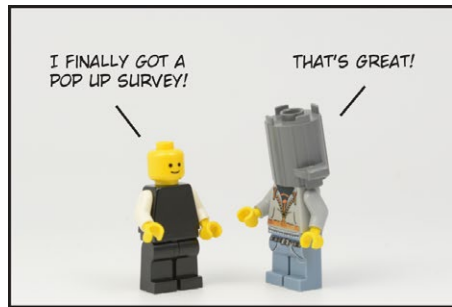
BrickLink, as most AFOLs know, is a marketplace where new and used LEGO can be bought and sold. While TLG now owns BrickLink and some aspects are changing, the catalog prior to TLG's acquisition was crowd-sourced. This included the parts images.

"Some of the parts images there on BrickLink were, well, they sucked. Now, this is not to demean anyone who submitted images, because people do the best they can with the resources available to them. But I got sick of seeing these crappy images with poor lighting and bad camera angles and I knew I could do a better job, so I decided to submit a few images just as an experiment. BrickLink is notorious for being unnecessarily complicated and complex and rife with rules and process and personalities…and I'm a noob in there trying to figure stuff out. So my involvement there started out slowly. And kind of gradually I ended up to my neck in it."
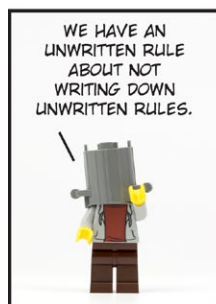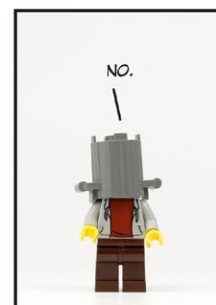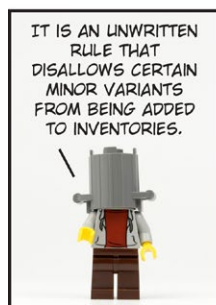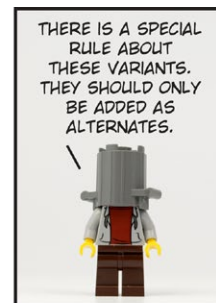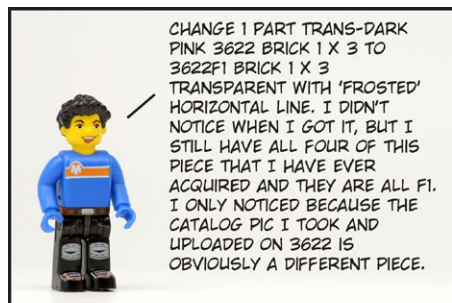
The comics came along much later, and to get the most out of the comics, one needs to be familiar with the BrickLink Forum. The inspiration for most of the strips is sourced directly from forum posts. The foundation for what would become the irreverent comics began innocently enough in April, 2019, with a MOC image posted to the BrickLink Forum entitled "Actual Forum Members" which used different minifigs as representatives for forum member's avatars. That was shortly followed by "it's more actual forum members" which used multiple identical minifigs representative of the forum's default avatar and a single 1x1 black tile, and the post listed member names left to right. The joke as he saw it was that there were many different personalities represented by a single image, and a single personality represented by a square of nothingness. Later in the thread, one forum member not mentioned as being in the image, but who used the same default avatar commented that he felt "left out".

In early June, 2019, Mark posted the first de facto strip to the BrickLink Forum. It was a commentary on BrickLink's ongoing server problems resulting in service outages. It was also commentary on the commentary on

pulse

I FINALLY GOT A POP UP SURVEY!

THAT'S GREAT!

HOW LONG IS THE SURVEY GOING ON?

INDEFINITELY. IT'S AN ONGOING PROGRAM TO CONSTANTLY KEEP OUR FINGER ON THE PULSE KIND OF THING.

WHEN ARE YOU GOING TO START IMPLEMENTING CHANGES BASED ON THE FEEDBACK?

WHEN THE SURVEY CONCLUDES AND WE HAVE ALL THE DATA!

BUT YOU SAID THE SURVEY WAS ONGOING…

YES, THAT'S RIGHT.

WHAT'S WITH THE STINKEYE? YOU'VE BEEN A MEMBER HERE FOR DECADES!

unwritten

CHANGE 1 PART TRANS-DARK PINK 3622 BRICK 1 X 3 TO 3622F1 BRICK 1 X 3 TRANSPARENT WITH 'FROSTED' HORIZONTAL LINE. I DIDN'T NOTICE WHEN I GOT IT, BUT I STILL HAVE ALL FOUR OF THIS PIECE THAT I HAVE EVER ACQUIRED AND THEY ARE ALL F1. I ONLY NOTICED BECAUSE THE CATALOG PIC I TOOK AND UPLOADED ON 3622 IS OBVIOUSLY A DIFFERENT PIECE.

THERE IS A SPECIAL RULE ABOUT THESE VARIANTS. THEY SHOULD ONLY BE ADDED AS ALTERNATES.

WHERE IS THIS RULE?

IT IS AN UNWRITTEN RULE THAT DISALLOWS CERTAIN MINOR VARIANTS FROM BEING ADDED TO INVENTORIES.

CAN WE GET THIS RULE WRITTEN DOWN?

NO.

WHY'S THAT?

WE HAVE AN UNWRITTEN RULE ABOUT NOT WRITING DOWN UNWRITTEN RULES.

OF COURSE.

BrickLink's service outages. The strip itself was untitled, and was posted in response to a thread "EVERYDAY BRICKLINK", yes, in all caps, where the original poster commented on the site's poor performance. That strip featured several members portrayed as default-avatar minifigs discussing 500 errors…a server error message page that appeared frequently to site visitors at that time… and the first appearance of two characters, ostensibly BrickLink employees, wearing garbage cans on their heads.

I asked Mark about those bucket heads.

"Yeah. Everybody asks about the garbage cans. When I first discovered BrickLink, 2008 or 2009, it was still being run by the original developer. He had created a number of thumbnail images that he used on various places throughout the site as eye candy. One page was called 'Problem Center' and that page used a picture of a minifig with a garbage can on his head. It was a sweet funny image for a page where you could report a problem and the problem usually was dealt with reasonably apace. If not, there would at least be communication about it. A short time later, the original developer dies and the site is sold to a new owner."

"New ownership publicly promises a whole bunch of improvements which are needed. New ownership doesn't necessarily deliver on those promises, goes and reskins the site with a substantially more modern look but doesn't improve site functionality. In some instances functionality is markedly worse. There is an uproar from the community about certain portions of the site—and after a substantive amount of typical unvarnished clamor on the forum—new management relents and agrees to keep some parts of the old site alive. These portions are rechristened 'classic' interface."

"Time goes on. Promised improvements never happen. What is delivered is a MOC shop, which nobody in the community wanted, and which soon fails management's expectations. Management pours untold energies into site features and updates nobody in the community wants, without thorough testing, deploys them without community input (surprise!), and typically break some previously working (and not necessarily obviously related) functionality. Communication from site management is thin to nonexistent. On the forum, members complain, management ignores, and the cycle repeats over and over for a number of years."

"Late 2018, early 2019 site performance is very bad. With increasing frequency, pages load slowly or not at all, and visitors are greeted with a stock server 500 error message page. Many
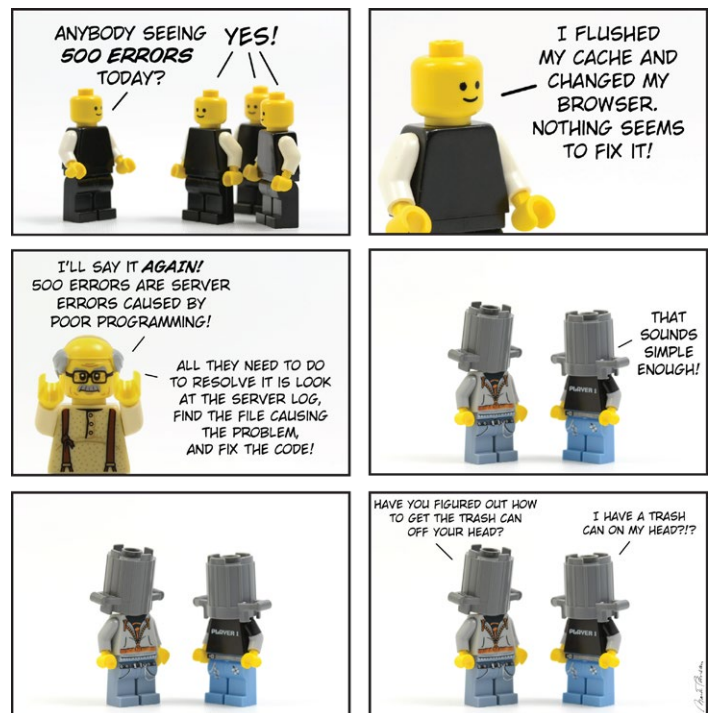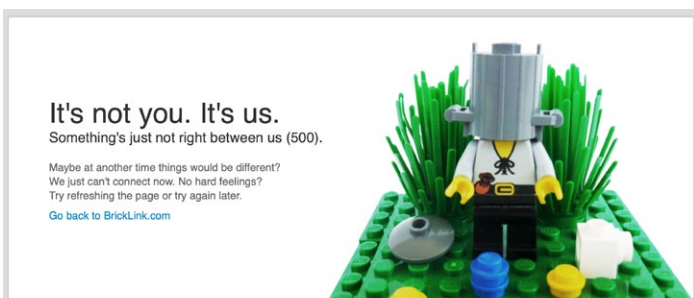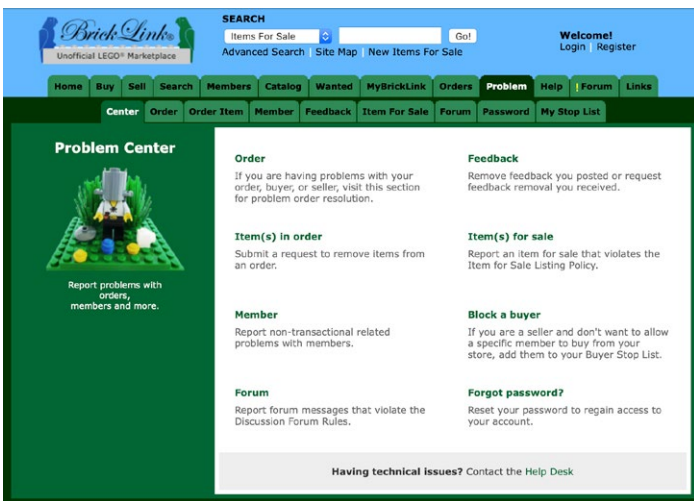
Counter-clockwise from top: More Actual Forum Members, the BrickLink Problem Center page, circa 2009 © BrickLink, the BrickLink custom 500 page circa 2019 © BrickLink, 500 Errors.

people on the site who are not tech savvy flood the forum with questions on how to fix the issue, is the problem on my end, where is the problem, and so on. In what I think was an attempt to stem the deluge of repeated questions about how to deal with the problem, BrickLink creates a custom 500 page with the message: 'It's not you. It's us.' to indicate that the problem is on BrickLink's end and that the user would just have to wait until it got resolved. That custom 500 page picked up the old trashcan head guy art, now writ large, from the early Problem Center page. This effectively repositioned trashcan head guy in my mind from being a user with a problem to being BrickLink with a problem. I thought there was amusing irony in BrickLink's selection of that particular image for that purpose."

"Now, at this point, ten years in, if you're me, you start to see 'Problem Center' as a pun. You know? The place where you're supposed to get problems resolved is the place where problems are created. And there you have the effective genesis of those characters."
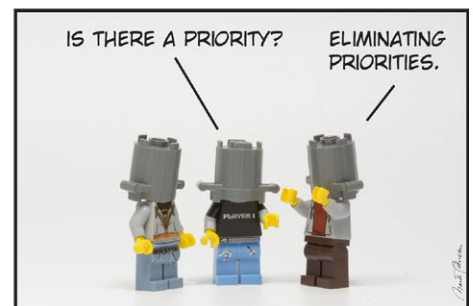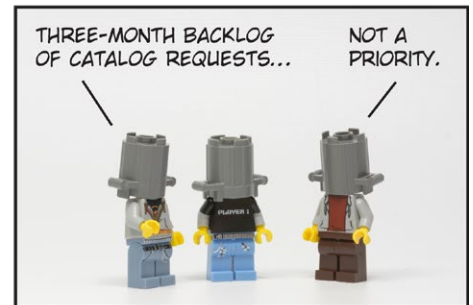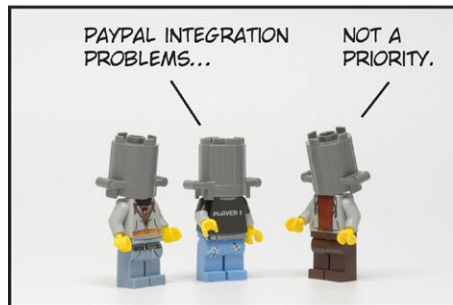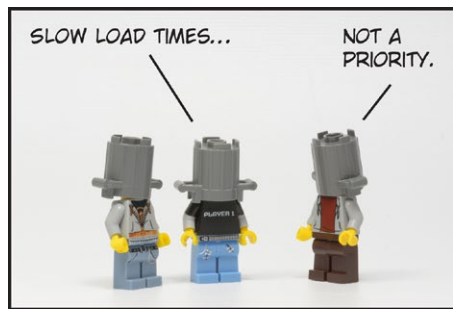
Strips appeared almost daily for the next week in the forum. At some point, subsequent to commentary by one of BrickLink's employees that they were discussing using the strips internally, Mark stopped posting strips to the site and started posting links to the strip hosted on his own site.

"I knew that anything I posted to the forum became BrickLink's property, to be used as they saw fit. I was aware of the situation being that I was a heavy contributor to the catalog's image library there. I thought to myself, ehhh, maybe I don't want to give them license to this particular content, having grumbled about my catalog images being lifted by people and used to sell on other sites, along with other image issues and how those issues were being addressed, or not addressed, by BrickLink. So I decided to post the strips to my own site as that would give me sole control over the content."
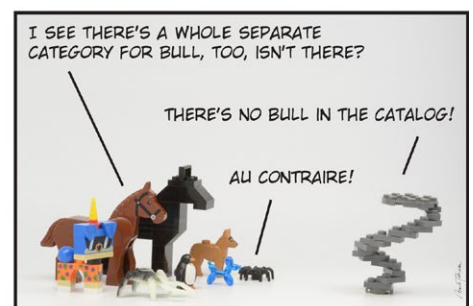
The strip as a whole has never publicly been given a title, and when questioned about that Mark says it wasn't conceived in that way. It just developed accidentally and he hadn't really given it much thought until asked about it.

"I don't know. In my mind I kind of think of it as 'The Site', and that happens to work well as a pun. In English, anyway. And it's one of those words that has multiple meanings when you say it, as aurally it can be interpreted as a location 'site' or a vision 'sight'. Writing it down as one way or the other kind of breaks the magic of what happens

priorities

sentience

caucasian

Panel 1: I THINK WE NEED TO CHANGE THE NAME OF THE COLOR FROM FLESH TO SOMETHING ELSE BECAUSE NOT EVERYBODY HAS THE SAME COLOR FLESH. IT MEANS SOMETHING DEEPLY SPIRITUAL TO ME; I JUST CAN'T EXPLAIN IT.

Panel 2: OUT OF 80,000 REGISTERED MEMBERS WITH FEWER THAN 20 RESPONDING TO THIS OBSCURE THREAD, IT'S NOT UNANIMOUS THAT WE SHOULD CHANGE THE COLOR NAME. ERGO WE HAVE TO CHANGE IT BECAUSE I HAVE A *SEVERE* AND UNCONTROLLABLE JONES FOR CHANGING THINGS.

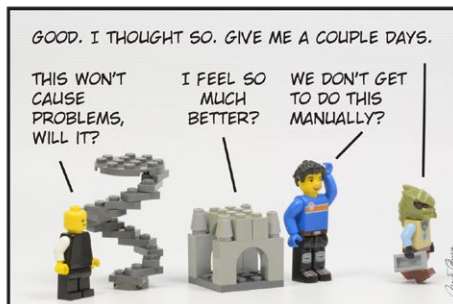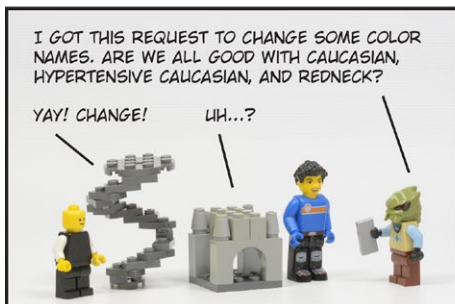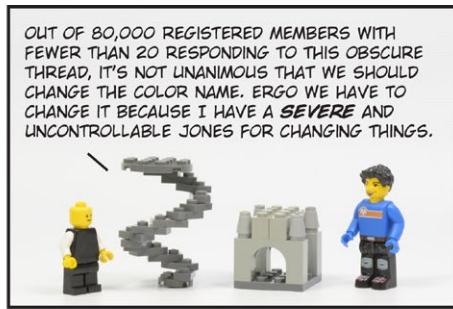**Panel 3:** HAVE YOU CONSIDERED WHAT IMPLICATIONS THIS MAY HAVE TO THE THIRD PARTY SOFTWARE NECESSARY FOR SELLERS TO FUNCTION EFFECTIVELY ON THE SITE? — CHANGE EQUALS IMPROVEMENT. LOOK IT UP! — MY FLESH ISN'T FLESH.

Panel 4: YOU'RE RIGHT ON THAT POINT! TO THE UNTRAINED EYE YOUR FLESH IS YELLOW AND BLUE PLASTIC. NO DISRESPECT INTENDED. — *THANK YOU* FOR RECOGNIZING THAT! — ...BROWN...

Panel 5: I GOT THIS REQUEST TO CHANGE SOME COLOR NAMES. ARE WE ALL GOOD WITH CAUCASIAN, HYPERTENSIVE CAUCASIAN, AND REDNECK? — YAY! CHANGE! — UH...?

Panel 6: GOOD. I THOUGHT SO. GIVE ME A COUPLE DAYS. — THIS WON'T CAUSE PROBLEMS, WILL IT? — I FEEL SO MUCH BETTER? — WE DON'T GET TO DO THIS MANUALLY?

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when the word is heard. But people usually refer to it as 'comics' or 'cartoons' and I've kind of just left it at that."

As the strip developed, some characters became regulars, others became supporting cast, and there are any number of one-off characters. The main four characters are three site employee bucketheads...who Mark refers to as Hoodie, Player, and Executive Sweet...and the ubiquitous Everyperson member represented by the default avatar minifigure. In the actual strip, though, only Executive Sweet is ever named outright. Supporting cast members are comprised largely of characters based loosely and not-so-loosely on forum regulars and are represented by minifigs similar to or evocative of those forum members' avatars. Supporting cast may be named occasionally, and if named they will have made-up names, but for the most part they are not named.

"The supporting cast has been an interesting trip creatively. A number of the forum regulars will 'recognize themselves' and see it as a complement to appear in the strip. Once in a while someone will get...how should I put this...*very concerned*...that I am misrepresenting their position on some particular topic and will let me know about it. Another person...this is a fun story...he's a forum regular who used the default avatar, but I guess decided he needed a non-default avatar or something. So he changed his avatar and wanted me to use that minifigure in the strip whenever his character appeared. I said I didn't have that figure to use—I often don't have the pieces or parts to create a completely accurate-to-the-avatar figure—so I use something close. I offered something close. That didn't fly, so he sent me the actual figure. And that led to a couple strips. A few others have changed their forum avatars. Sometimes it becomes an issue that I update their associated characters. Others, maybe they change their avatars because they no longer want to be associated with the characters."

Storylines for the strips are, for the most part, directly referential to some thread appearing in the BrickLink forum. In some instances the dialog is literally taken from a member's post and used verbatim, then followed by a punchline.

"In the instances where I quote directly, I usually try to fix the spelling and punctuation, but often not the grammar or sentence structure. I often find it funny when the language is for one reason or another mangled or a thought is incoherent. I can't really improve the comedic factor on those. Once in a while I'll edit to make the words fit in the available space in a panel. But I try to leave the essence of the original."

If you frequent the BrickLink forum, then you probably can identify the characters and situations in the comic, and as a forum regular or even semi-regular you should have context to get "the whole joke" as Mark puts it. If you're not a forum viewer, you can still get something out of the comic as the storylines are often relatable enough to everyday situations.

"But they definitely are inside jokes. And there's the added gestalt of using LEGO to tell the story of individuals interested in LEGO," Mark says. "I originally thought I'd do it as a drawing, but then that would take longer and you'd miss out on whatever charm is inherent in the limited options for posing a minifigure."

Posing the minifigs is notable. Close inspection of the strip will yield often impossible positions for figures that are not otherwise attached to another brick.

"Posing the figures became an issue pretty early on. I use a large opaque white vinyl window shade as a backdrop. I use that because it's a one-off cost, as opposed to rolls of photographer's seamless paper, it's relatively durable and easy to clean. I use a digital SLR with a macro lens mounted on a tripod so I can get sufficiently close up on the tiny figures. I would want the characters to remain in relatively the same position for each panel of a strip, but when you get multiple minifigs and a couple pieces of furniture or other elements in the shot, it becomes hellish to contend with positioning everything because the figures tip over easily and

MAGNETS!

pieces can slide out of position. You're working in a confined space under a diffuser and lights, you can't see where things are within the camera frame without moving back and forth from in front of the camera to behind the camera, and using a macro lens means the focus is tight. If a figure moves a half an inch forward or backward it can become out of focus very easily. And heaven forbid you bump the tripod. There was a lot of fussing with things. So there were some technical hurdles to overcome."

Wanting the strip to have a minimalist aesthetic meant some thinking was required. A baseplate with acres of studs would both limit the layout options and introduce a lot of visual clutter he didn't want and would further contribute to focus and perspective issues. So attaching the figures to bricks or plates was out. How could he get the figures to stand on one leg? How could he get the desks to stay fixed in place while he moved figures in chairs? He basically needed a stud to attach the parts to but couldn't use a stud. Glue would be messy and potentially melt his backdrop. The answer came in the way of magnets.

"I found some 5mm diameter 2mm tall magnets on the internet and ordered them. 5 x 2 is just a little larger than a LEGO stud. I thought: maybe close enough. I jammed a magnet into a minifig foot. It was tight, but fit. The next one I tried cracked the leg. Not wanting to crack the leg of untold minifigs meant I had to file down the magnet a little. File too much, though, and it won't clutch."

"It's an interesting thing, filing down a magnet. It's not particularly difficult, just rub it a hundred or so times back and forth on a piece of sandpaper and there you go. Thing is that it's a magnet and all that magnet you've just filed off a magnet is, of course, magnetic. So now you have this teeny tiny magnet with a small pile of magnet dust magnetically attached to the magnet by magnetism. This is really difficult to get off the magnet. Like. Really. Difficult."

With the magnets eventually in place in the bottoms of one leg of select minifigs and in whatever pieces used as table legs, he first tried a cookie sheet under the shade. It was a big enough surface to place the setup on, but the shade didn't lie flat on it and wrinkles in the shade caused problems. The bricks did stay sufficiently in position, though, so it was the right concept but the wrong piece of metal. Poking around his barn, Mark says he found some steel flashing leftover from a renovation project, just what he needed. It was perfectly flat and he cut it to a generous

not quite
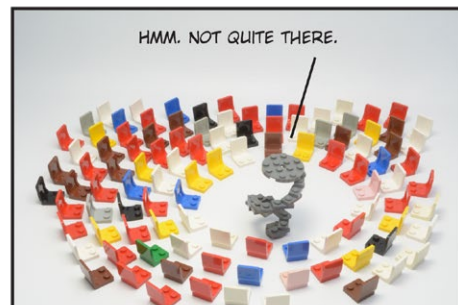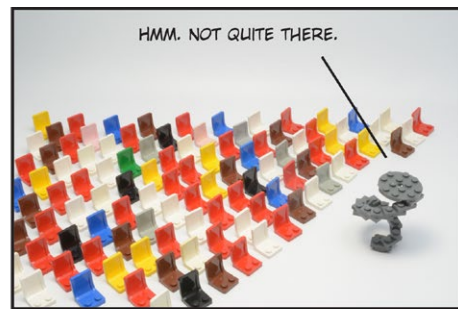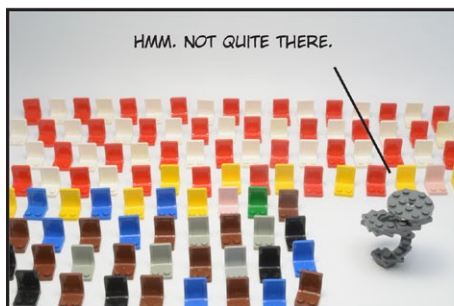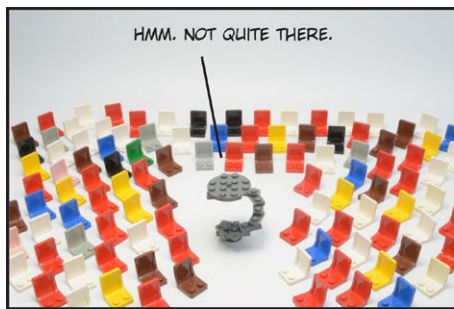
size, slipped it under the shade, and problem one was solved.

Problem two was how to see what the camera was seeing without being behind the camera. Mark needed to work in front of the camera positioning the figures. This was especially critical when creating some of the more elaborate setups containing several figures and potentially dozens of other elements. This problem was solved with a piece of technology called CamRanger.

CamRanger is a professional photographer's remote device that connects to select SLRs and will wirelessly transmit a signal to an iPad so the camera's viewfinder image can be viewed in real time on the iPad screen via a dedicated app. All the camera controls are available through the app. This meant Mark could put the iPad on the table next to the setup, position elements on the stage as he wanted, know how that looked through the lens, make adjustments, set the exposure, and capture the image. The current image he was working on could be compared to any previous images from the iPad screen. This greatly reduced the time and effort involved in the setups.

"CamRanger isn't perfect. The exposure may

look good on the iPad screen, but the iPad's screen brightness may be a bit dynamic and what may appear as white on the iPad screen may in fact be a little darker once you get that shot onto the computer, so I tend to bracket the shots, maybe four different exposures per frame of comic. I may also shoot a dozen frames where I will only use six in a strip. But it sure does make it much easier when you can see that you have a bad reflection or some glare in the shot and can easily rotate a brick a degree or two and eliminate the problem."

When asked how long it takes to create a single strip from start to finish, Mark says it varies. A strip containing a single figure, or a strip that's basically two figures talking may take only 45 minutes. He says some of it depends on the story. Sometimes story takes longer than photography and sometimes the other way around. Strips containing multiple figures can take quite a while.

"I think the longest one, easily, is the one where BrickTwister is rearranging the chairs," says Mark. That strip is called "not quite." He says it's an observation on how the volunteer BrickLink catalog associates are constantly rearranging the contents of the catalog in an attempt to arrive

at a perfect solution, while being confined to a database structure totally inadequate to the task…one of the more inside jokes.

Then, there is one comic in particular that one of the staff is asking about: the Colors comic. I can guess, but I'm not 100% certain I get it either.

"Is this pearl gold? How often has that question been put on a forum somewhere? I have a couple pages on the web site just to deal with LEGO golds. Then there is the question of whether something is old gray or new gray and this plate with a clip is a color that's right half way between old gray and new gray, so which is it? And brittle blue. And two different dark reds. And old brown and reddish brown. You're LEGO enthusiasts, so you know the drill. And after ten or twelve years' worth of 'what color is this?' and 'you need to collect one brick of every color and make yourself a color chart and label the colors' I thought I'd help everybody out with that, so I made a chart with all the colors that you can print out and use to compare. It's just as accurate as anything else out there."

I asked him if he considered using other sources of inspiration for the comics.

"Those comics are pretty BrickLink centric, or the greater BrickLink community centric, and I'm content to leave that there for now. It's a targeted message for a specific audience. If I wanted to expand or change the comics, I'd have to consider changing the frame of reference and the audience and so on."

When asked if there are any plans for the comic, Mark says not really. He will create a strip if he has downtime from his regular work or if he happens to read something inspiring in the forum. He has no fixed publishing schedule and there are sometimes pretty big gaps between strips due to being occupied with other things.

Taking a turn away from the comic line of inquiry, I asked him what he thinks is most positive and most negative about LEGO taking over BrickLink? Here's what he had to say:

"At this point, to be completely honest with you, I…I don't know.

"Early on I was of the opinion to just wait and see. And so far, I'm still waiting. From my position, I can't see any tangible influence on BrickLink by LEGO, other than to force some legal compliance stuff…which as implemented by BrickLink immediately broke the site, and which as corrected by BrickLink broke something else… So, okay, they're now presumably somewhat more in legal compliance with privacy laws, but otherwise it's the same old mess.

"To that point, I probably think the most negative thing is that LEGO didn't remove the previous management team. You know? And I don't say that because I have an axe to grind with BrickLink, but simply because they weren't effective web site builders, they weren't effective at communication, and they weren't considerate of their sellers' legitimate needs. They still aren't.

"Management's vision for the site seems to be anything other than what the membership—some of them there for twenty years, many of whom have contributed more time and knowledge to building the catalog and who effectively bred life to the platform—want and need in return. Whoever the people are at BrickLink, I understand they're people with families and lives and they may be really nice people. What they are not is in any way effective or responsive or responsible to their own clientele at large. Whether that's because of the personalities involved or whether they're good soldiers following orders from the top, I don't know. I do know that you shouldn't treat the client as the enemy."

"We're about a year into LEGO's ownership of BrickLink and I can't in any way say that there has been any improvement in the overall situation. I'd like to say there was something positive. Anything positive. But I just don't see anything positive. The membership is still treated unevenly. Site usability is different, but not better. At the moment it's more stable than in the beginning of the year, but search is broken, inventory is plagued with issues, and there are other problems. So net gain of zero with site usability."

"Anyway, that's probably way more than you wanted for an answer."

There was one final sizzling question we had for Mark. Why is there a hamburger on your web site?

"Oh, that's a visual pun. You know those three stacked lines you see for menus on mobile web sites? That's often colloquially referred to by site authors as 'the hamburger'. When I built the site, I used a hamburger for navigation. It's the thing all the cool kids are doing nowadays. You guys ought to know this, your site uses a hamburger."

Head on over to ☞ v4ei.com for a hamburger, a free-to-download color chart, and maybe a laugh or two.

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