

Interview: LEGO® Minifigures

by HispaBrick Magazine®

pictures by HispaBrick Magazine®, newelementary.com, bricklink.com and LEGO® System A/S



Austin Carlson and Tara Wike

HispaBrick Magazine®: Can you please tell us your name and position in the company?

My name is **Tara Wike** and I am a design manager. I act as creative lead for the LEGO® Minifigures project, which I have done for the last seven years, since series five, and I also work with other parts of the company, consulting on anything that has to do with the minifigure.

I'm **Austin Carlson**. I am the graphic designer for the minifigure Collectible series, but I have worked on multiple projects in the five years I have worked here. My main focus is designing the minifigures. I am also part of a bigger team that is focussed on decoration and my responsibility is looking those over and making sure that the minifigure is well protected and stays within the brand identity.

HBM: What does the minifig mean to LEGO®?

TW: To me it is our way of communicating with the world what

our brand values are. It's our personality; it is the way we bring life to our sets and the way we connect with kids. It helps start stories; it inspires them to build.

AC: The main thing is they are story starters. LEGO® can be played in multiple different ways. Sometimes you don't need minifigures and sometimes you do. To me it feels like it gives a face to the product. And it gives kids a starting point to make their own stories.

HBM: Why did LEGO® decide to make a minifig series that was completely independent of the sets?

TW: It just hadn't been done before and we saw a need. People really love the minifigure – some so much that they are interested in collecting them. It also gave us an opportunity to make some characters that might not make it into some of our normal sets. Iconic characters all the same, but that maybe wouldn't fit into the CITY universe or that wouldn't be a natural fit in some of our other play themes.

HBM: What process does a collectible minifig go through from concept to production?

TW: Of course it starts as a daydream. Usually as a post-it note.

AC: A whole series of post-it notes!

TW: Yes, a vast grid where we are trying to figure out what the whole line-up looks like. We try to make sure in a classic series that we have something for everyone, so we get a good mix. Once we feel strong about the concept, quite often it will require a new element. That's the first thing we focus on. It takes time to design an element and build the mould, so we will start there. Usually we have a sketch that Austin and I will collaborate on. That is forwarded to the element sculptors who sculpt whatever new elements need to be made. Meanwhile Austin is working on refining the graphics and the colours. We are the first people to have our hands on it, but then it goes through a million other groups doing all of the important business stuff behind the scenes: making sure we have all the parts that we need, that everything is going to get delivered to the right place so it can get packed in time to make it onto the shelves in all the stores that want it; forecasting and business models and all the stuff I am happy I don't have to deal with. But usually the process takes more than a year. Sometimes we can turn things around quicker if we wish to, but that's sort of the tradition.

HBM: You say you have been around since series five. Do you know much about the earlier series?

TW: I was an element designer and so I was involved since series two on the project, but I have been the creative lead since series five. And I am familiar with the background of series one.



LEGO® Collectable minifigures Series 1

HBM: The first series contained a mix of minifigs that for the most part fitted in with different LEGO® themes. How were those minifigs chosen?

TW: There were some that we had always wanted to make. There was a cheerleader in series one and there wasn't any set we could put her in. As far as the other ones are concerned, it was a new concept for us so we were testing the ground. We didn't have the ability to make a whole bunch of new moulds. We had to work with a lot of existing parts so we wanted to make things that made sense and probably we were hoping (and we still do) that our characters can find a role in other sets. Because even though we have our own little bubble in the universe, we hope that cactus girl can make her way into

a CITY set somehow and that that is how kids will play with it. I think we were testing the new concept to see what people would do with these characters and what we could do with what we had.

HBM: Series 1 was a big success. Did you expect it would be?

TW: Let's just say some people did and some people didn't ^_^.

HBM: After that there has been a noticeable diversification in the themes. Where do you get the ideas for each series of minifigs?

TW: For the classic series we had an initial brainstorming session back when I started as design lead and I am still drawing from that. We basically pooled a bunch of sculptors and graphic designers and other designers and had a massive brainstorm. We came up with a pool of some 500 characters that we wanted to do, some better than others of course. We also try to draw from current events and things we see happening in the world. We have a lot of insights into what kids are into so we try to make sure it is relevant for the kids. We all have pet characters we like to do: we love to do the costume characters, we like the excuse to make a new animal, so we will try to get our way with those things and add some personal touches. So it's a mix of inputs. We always go for as iconic a character as possible. We want a kid to be able to look at it and say "oh, that is a ..." in one or two words. So there are some obvious ones and there are some other ones that we find a way to fit, because we love it and we think it works really well as a minifigure.

Serie 1 (8683)		Serie 2 (8684)	

Original image credit: <http://bricks.inof.de/docs/minifig-barcodes/minifig-barcodes-compact-b.pdf>

Barcodes of Series 1 and Series 2

HBM: Series 1 and 2 had a barcode that indicated what figure was in each bag. Was that a mistake?

TW: As a company we pride ourselves on having extremely high quality, and part of that is being able to have traceability. So if something goes wrong and we discover down the line that there is an issue with one of the characters we need to have some way to go back and fix it if that is the right solution. It has always been a struggle between us and other people in the project as to how cryptic we want to be with these things, because the element of surprise is a major part of the product experience. We want the average consumer to be surprised. We know that there are sleuths out there and also at a certain point we started making elements like the Aztec headgear in series 7 where we knew everybody would be able to feel that. But it was so cool and we still wanted to make it and how big a deal is it really? And from doing market runs, where we go out and see how the product is sold in the real world, we know that there are a lot of specialty toy shops where they go ahead and open the bags and sell them pre-assembled, and so while we do try and preserve that surprise aspect we are also realistic and know that people will find a way to get the character they want. And we don't really want to prevent that either.

AC: I mean, after we stuck a dolphin in a bag, that's like the biggest and most obvious element...



Original design of the elephant costume minifigure

HBM: When you do the graphical design for a minifig how many sketches do you make?

AC: It goes back and forth. You can see here the elephant I drew out originally. Depending on if I need some clarity to describe an element to the sculptors, I might do multiple takes of hand-drawn sketches before I start turning it into a design on the computer. Sometimes I work straight from the computer if I have a very strong vision already in my head, but usually it starts out on paper.

HBM: How many designs do you prepare to choose from for each series of 16 minifigures?

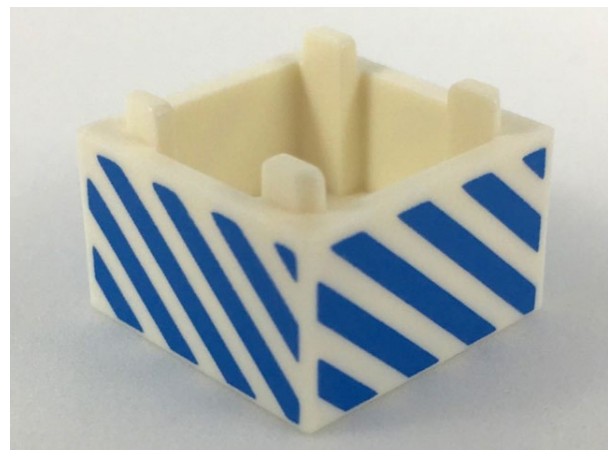
TW: Usually we are pretty confident about the 16, after we go through the post-it note grid process. For the stuff we are working on now we are actually trying a more agile approach where we are designing more than enough minifigures and then picking the winners. That's a new process for us. But usually we know what we want to make and then we go ahead and make them.

HBM: Are the ones that are not chosen discarded or saved for another series?

TW: If it's a good idea they are saved for another series. Sometimes it just doesn't make sense because we have too much of one category or we don't have enough or we don't have the ability to make the piece we need for that character, but it's not because it's a bad idea.

HBM: What capacity for new elements/moulds do you have?

TW: We can usually do about 12-16 per series. But it varies wildly and there are a lot of factors involved that are out of our control, so we work with what we get and fight for more if we really need it. We are pretty fortunate. Most projects aren't allowed to use that many new moulds. We are aware that that is the novelty we can bring with these characters so we try to really make the best of it and make elements that are super iconic and useful and will get the fans excited as well as the kids.



Gift box from Series 18

HBM: When you create a new element, do you take into account that it can be used in other sets?

TW: Yes and no. There are some that we know won't be used in other sets, like the corn-on-the-cob guy – you are not going to build that into the next Millennium Falcon – but there have been certain other elements like the gift box, which we made because it was the birthday series celebrating 40 years of the minifigure. That is a very useful element and I know other designers in the company are really excited about having this element for hidden compartments, built into walls, etc. Or this hip connector car piece that seems very special, but it was designed to work as well in System as possible, so I wouldn't be surprised if we see this popping up elsewhere too. It depends on the nature of the element. Sometimes we accept that it is going to be a specialty and novelty item, and other times we make it as universal as possible.



Car piece from Series 18

HBM: When you design a new element, do you take into account the complexity of the mould or do other people take care of that?

TW: We consider it. They know that we are going to be making some tricky elements at some point. Over the years we have been able to make more 2K, that is two-component moulds, two plastics in one shot. Those are of course a bit trickier to design, but we are so pleased with the quality we get from this that we are allowed to make a few of them. The company values design highly so they are willing to make these more complex moulds in order for us to get what we need for the right expression for the character. We use those moulds wisely, spend them wisely. We have to think about our ability to make enough parts and afford what we are putting in the bag, so we can't go totally extravagant. That will come back to us – the

engineers will come back and say “you know we can't make this, right?”. We have to be realistic, but fortunately the graphic designers are amazing at knowing how something needs to be made to be optimally decorated, the sculptors are amazing at knowing how to get things in and out of a mould in the best way, and so we always have a wide variety and complexity of moulds.

HBM: When you draw the sketches, are you aware of these complexities?

AC: Yes. The good thing is that what we call ‘the LEGO® style’ is based around all these restrictions, so when I go to draw that I am trying to draw in the LEGO® style already, so hopefully the transition isn't too big. Even with the sketch of the elephant here (see previous page), although the mould has changed with respect to the sketch, it didn't change a whole lot. We added tusks, we moved the nose up a little bit, but it was still keeping in mind the LEGO® style which would be easier for the engineers to make.

HBM: Do you usually have to modify the sketches based on the feedback you get? Or do you keep in mind what you need to do to avoid this kind of rework?

AC: What happens is that I make conceptual sketches and then the sculptors look at it and start altering these based on what the engineers need to do.

HBM: What are the most complicated elements you have created?

AC: There are quite a few.



Tara Wike and Austin Carlson during the interview

TW: The one I still have anxiety nightmares about is the bagpipe from series 7. It's got all these long skinny pipes connected with ropes, sticking out in every direction and then you play it by putting it under your arm, which the minifig can't do. So, we needed to think how we could make something the minifig can hold, and make it look like he or she is playing this crazy-looking thing. I actually bought a toy bagpipe to play with and look at and figure out how to do it. It took me about two months to figure out how we could do it, how to make it mouldable, how to make it printable, how to make it look like what it is and still look like a LEGO® piece, and for it to be obvious how to play with it. I'm not saying it is the world's best element, but I am pleased with how it came out. In the end that wasn't the most complicated mould, probably. That would probably be one of the 2K ones, but that's the engineers' job so you'd have to ask them.



Bagpipe from Series 7

AC: Sometimes the most simple thing is not easy at all!

TW: That's true. When I worked on the hockey stick, getting the appearance of the spiral wrapped tape around the handle was really complicated to mould. I designed the piece in probably one day, because I knew what I wanted it to look like. But then working together with the engineers it took months of scratching our heads and thinking how we were going to make this thing.



Mr. Gold from Series 10

HBM: What do you think of Mr. Gold?

TW: I think it was an incredibly effective marketing campaign. It still comes up internally all the time. "What's going to be our next Mister Gold?" But I have mixed feelings. It's difficult to get really high quality with the chrome effect and of course all the parts can't be chromed. From a design quality perspective, we struggled to really love that character. And then it is a trade-off: there is the thrill of the chase, but there is also a lot of disappointment. It was something we kind of had to try, and I'm not sad we did it, but I'm not saying we will ever do it again.

AC: What we did better was the chase element from the classic series. It is still a chase, but it is more available and not as hard a thing to find compared with Mr. Gold. I have seen plenty of kids posting "I got this", and the fact that it is easier for them means they can share it so much better.

TW: And we don't want it to become this super-elite exclusive thing. We just wanted to have a little fun. What was fun for me was to check the website and see where people had found it all over the world. We had a lot of fun with that.

HBM: Many minifigs include small references to the designers or 'Easter eggs'. How do you decide these references?

TW: Whoever brings me coffee... No, it's all in good fun. If we have space to do something that can have a little back story to it, for example we had a designer called Luis who really loved space marines, so when we did space marines we put his name on it, just to show him a little love and let him know we appreciate him. Others are more tongue-in-cheek, like the race car driver. We had Nick Groves on there because he was another LEGO® designer and he didn't have his driver's license at the time, so we made him the race car driver. Now we try to make them a little more generic. There was a time when we put name tags on people, but then we realised that limits the possibility to army-build with them so we scaled that back a bit. But we always try to get inspiration for facial expressions from live sources.



*Race car driver from Series 3
with N. Groves reference in the belt*

HBM: Is it easier or harder to design minifigs that are related to a licence?

TW: It really depends on the license. There are some characters that lend themselves really well to our style. We made a decision, for example, with the Simpsons, to go with sculpted heads, so we were able to be really true to the IP. But when we did the printed graphics for them it was a slightly simplified version of what we were already doing. Their characters are yellow, our characters are yellow – I don't want to say it was easy, because there were a lot of sculpted pieces that were really complex, but it wasn't too hard to get the style right. Though I remember it was a struggle to get the comic book guy to look chubby enough with a flat minifig torso. Then there are other ones, like some of the ones we did for Disney in 2016. Some of those were more of a struggle. As partners they were easy to work with, but translating the character from reference to minifigure depends a lot on the character. Pixar characters in general are very stylised, and that has a lot to do with roundness and bulbousness which we don't have a lot of in the minifig. It can be quite challenging to make that fit together.



LEGO® Collectable minifigures - The Simpsons Series 1

HBM: How did the idea for 'Fairy Batman' come about? How did DC react?

TW: I don't know if that came from us. When we do movie-related minifigures, a lot of that comes from the studio, so it is driven a lot by the story and what works well in the story. Of course, they know that people will want to get their hands on a physical copy of the characters that are in the movie. I think that one was included for laughs on-screen and then we had the parts to make him, so why not? But I think he was universally embraced.



Fairy Batman

HBM: Which is your favourite minifig?

TW: I have a lot of favourites, but I always go back to the sailor in series 4. I just love that he is monochromatic and has this basic face, but the wink is so kitschy and great and fun. It spans the styling from retro to modern really well. I love the simplicity of that character.

AC: I would have to say mine is even further back, meaning the minifigs from the 80s and 90s. They were so generic. You had one single logo and that was it, and of course there is a lot of play in that. I like putting in a lot of detail, but at the same time I love the simplicity. Other than that, I love the majority of the minifigures!

TW: This line of the birthday series – there's a lot of love in it. We put our whole heart into this. And we had so much fun with it. I can't even pick a favourite of that series.

HBM: And your least favourite one? (Please be honest and answer!)

TW: I'll limit myself to the series I have worked on. For me there was the green alien head guy with the eyeballs that look up. It just grosses me out. The sculptors and designers did a great job on it, but I have a personal reaction to that figure. I cannot even look at it. There's another one that frustrates me when I look at it. We somehow didn't think of giving our Sherlock Holmes character a cape and we didn't realise until it was too late. I love the head, the decoration and the colours, but every time I see it I think "Why didn't we add a cape?".

HBM: Do you accept ideas from fans for minifigs?

TW: We get sent stuff all the time and it's really funny because if something is a good minifigure idea it is likely going to come from more than one place. I can't recall if there was anything that came in from an external source that we hadn't already considered, but it gives reinforcement to the idea. We don't have an official channel for receiving suggestions, but we still get lots of suggestions.

#



Several parts created by the Minifigs Team