

The LEGO Internet Diaspora

By Steve Barile

One of the coolest things on the web is the way communities form. This is not about the social inept that turn to the web for companionship, but rather the far-flung fringe collectors or hobbyists that would have otherwise never met. And when they meet they exchange ideas that come in many forms other than text, trade or sell items specific to their interests via snail mail, and share research and general information like lists and resources. The following is the story of my immigrating to the LEGO internet diaspora.

Becoming a Fringe Hobbyist: It all started when I was re-introduced to LEGO building bricks as an adult. Actually it was a LEGO train set, I built it and I loved it! All this was happening about the same time that the World Wide Web was starting to gain popularity with the general public. So I decided to “try” the internet and see if anyone else was talking about the niche hobby of LEGO trains.

Discovering RTL: Sitting at the yahoo home page I typed in “LEGO trains”. To my surprise I found a list of hits! I surfed around and saw some marvelous trains and buildings and a reference to rec.toys.lego. This is the name of the internet news-group that was specifically about LEGO toys. I made my first post just to introduce myself as a ‘newbie’. It was my first news-group post and I wondered if anyone would respond...

A Real Person: A couple hours later I got a phone call from a co-worker. Is it ironic that even though we sat within a 100 yards of each other, in the same building and on the same floor, we first met in a virtual meeting place? It almost sounds like finding a needle in a haystack but really we were in a way destined to meet due to our common interests and the web merely facilitated that. We didn’t meet because we were both just hanging out in cyber-space in a virtual café.

First Contact: A couple of months later, with the LEGO monkey firmly gripped to my back, I noticed a caption under a photo on a LEGO train web site that said that Ben was from Portland. I sent mail to the only Ben on the news group, it was him and we eventually met at a safe neutral location, Wendy’s, for lunch. We soon became friends and I recall being blown away by his collection and his talent. Our common interest gave us firm ground to build a relationship. We shared childhood stories that had the thread of LEGO but revealed much more about our families and ourselves. We became very close and that is no easy task for two males in their 30’s.

Formation: Ben mentioned that he met another LEGO fan in Seattle and the 3 of us started the first LEGO train club, the Pacific Northwest LEGO Train Club, PNLTC. In this virtual world our clubhouse was made up of several components, the same components that would make up a real world clubhouse. We had a place to share ideas, a web page with a photo gallery, club roster page, and a mission statement, and a place to talk, e-mail. We used a free web page hosting service and had some god-awful domain name. After our first train show we posted photos and gained an enormous amount of credibility on the news-group. This also attracted more members. We then upgraded our e-mail capability and had our own list-serve or private e-mail address that automatically sends mail to all the club members. We were moving up in the world. The next step was to register our own domain name, www.PNLTC.org, it cost about \$75 and we raised the money from the 1st prize winning at a train show!

Although the club formed online and is heavily facilitated via the web it is very much about real people. We chat via e-mail nearly everyday and we meet about every 2 or 3 months and even more frequently as dyads for lunch or trading elements. We have formed real bonds, we trust each other, we unilaterally trade parts, watch out for each other wrt finding specialty or out of production sets...

Auczilla: At the same time a critical resource was growing in popularity called Auczilla. The name Auczilla comes from the Godzilla of auctions or something like that. Todd bought a ton of sets on sale, sorted them and created lots of like shape and colored bricks. He then created a web site that supported auction transactions. This auction would occur about 4 or 5 times a year and was the only way to get bricks in bulk or quazi-bulk quantities

LUGNET: It was right around this time that the LEGO community at large formalized. It started to get very 'noisy' on rec.toys.lego. All the various LEGO theme fans and small auctions were posting to the same place. Then Todd (of Auczilla fame) decided to create a news server with separate news groups for the themes, buying & selling, and even geographies. Since Todd started LUGNET it has been like a magnet for LEGO fans and for all the various LEGO (not LEGO proper) on-line resources. On www.lugnet.com you can find the following information either by link or it has been integrated onto the lugnet server. You can nominate and vote on the Best LEGO Site of the Week. There is a visual element reference guide. LEGO Cad resources such as privately created LEGO CAD applications and element library. www.Brickshelf.com is a photo repository with a web interface uploading mechanism that make it easy for non web site owners to show the models. The largest URL list of hundreds of LEGO web sites is maintained. www.BrickBay.com is an online virtual shopping mall for LEGO. There is even a LEGO flower shop that lets you design a LEGO flower bouquet and virtually send it via e-mail!

Train Rush: Since 1997 14 other train clubs have formed all around the world. The online network created is augmented by visiting each other. I have met a dozen or so train enthusiasts in the US and in Europe. And whenever someone comes to our hometown our club has a get together for them.

The bottom line for me and I think I can speak for many of the club members from around the world (and not just about LEGO) is that the internet has enabled me to meet real people that share the same interests as I do that I would has otherwise never met. It turned a typically solitary activity into an extremely social one.

Steve Barile
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