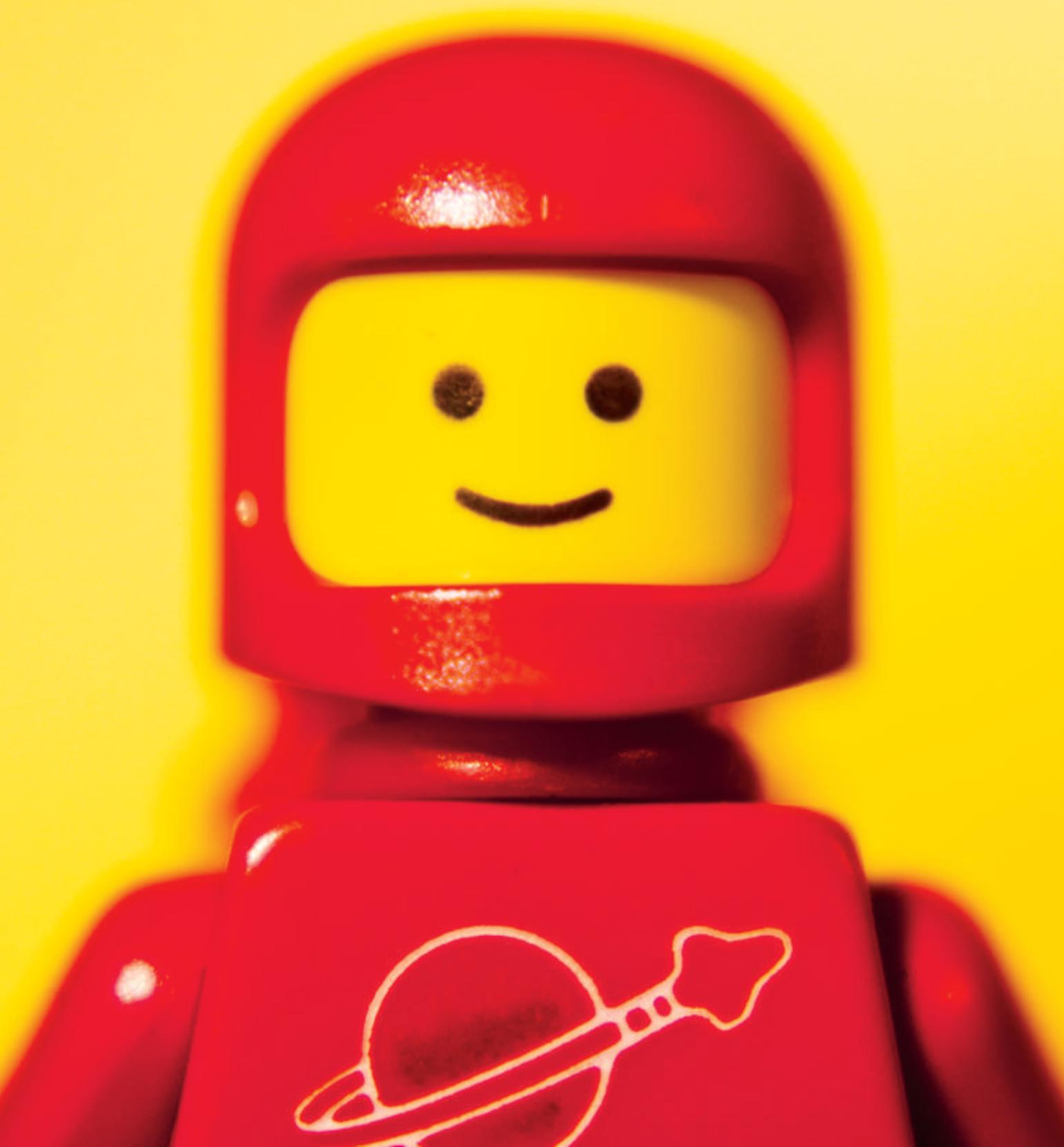


The Cult of LEGO®





Minifig Mania

52



(OPPOSITE) Andrew Becraft uses a variety of parts to make a plausible Genghis Khan.

There's something special about the LEGO minifig. At first glance, it seems to be a simple, commonsense solution to a problem: how to add the human element to a basically industrial, inorganic toy.

According to legend, a LEGO master builder was dissatisfied with his models. They were beautiful but lacked a critical *something*—they lacked *humanity*. So, he got a bunch of bricks and began tinkering until he came up with the very first LEGO person, a prototype that years later would be refined into the minifigure.

Minifigs are unusual looking, and they embody an atypical coolness. Unlike Barbie or Bratz figures, which try to evoke a stylish look, minifigs are rather goofy looking. "When standing, they

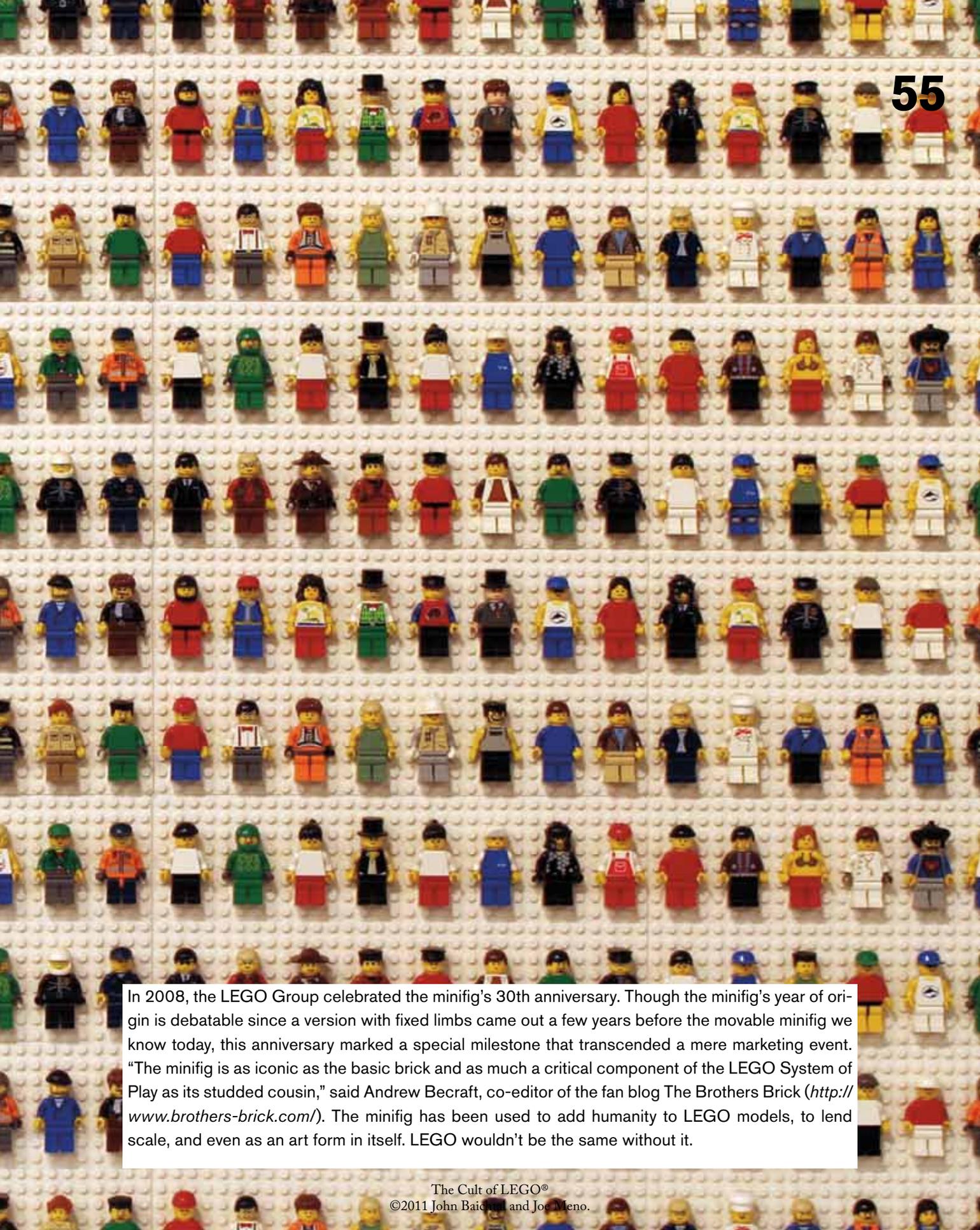
can look quite austere," said minifig fan Thom Beckett. "But when you sit them down, their feet stick up like a *Peanuts* character. It must be quite galling for them."

Regardless of what you think of minifigs, as one of the most recognizable LEGO elements, their popularity transcends their modest appearance. Fans collect thousands of them. Some build armies of minifigs to show off at conventions. Others painstakingly modify the minifigs' appearances, creating new faces and clothing designs and purchasing LEGO-compatible accessories from small specialty vendors.

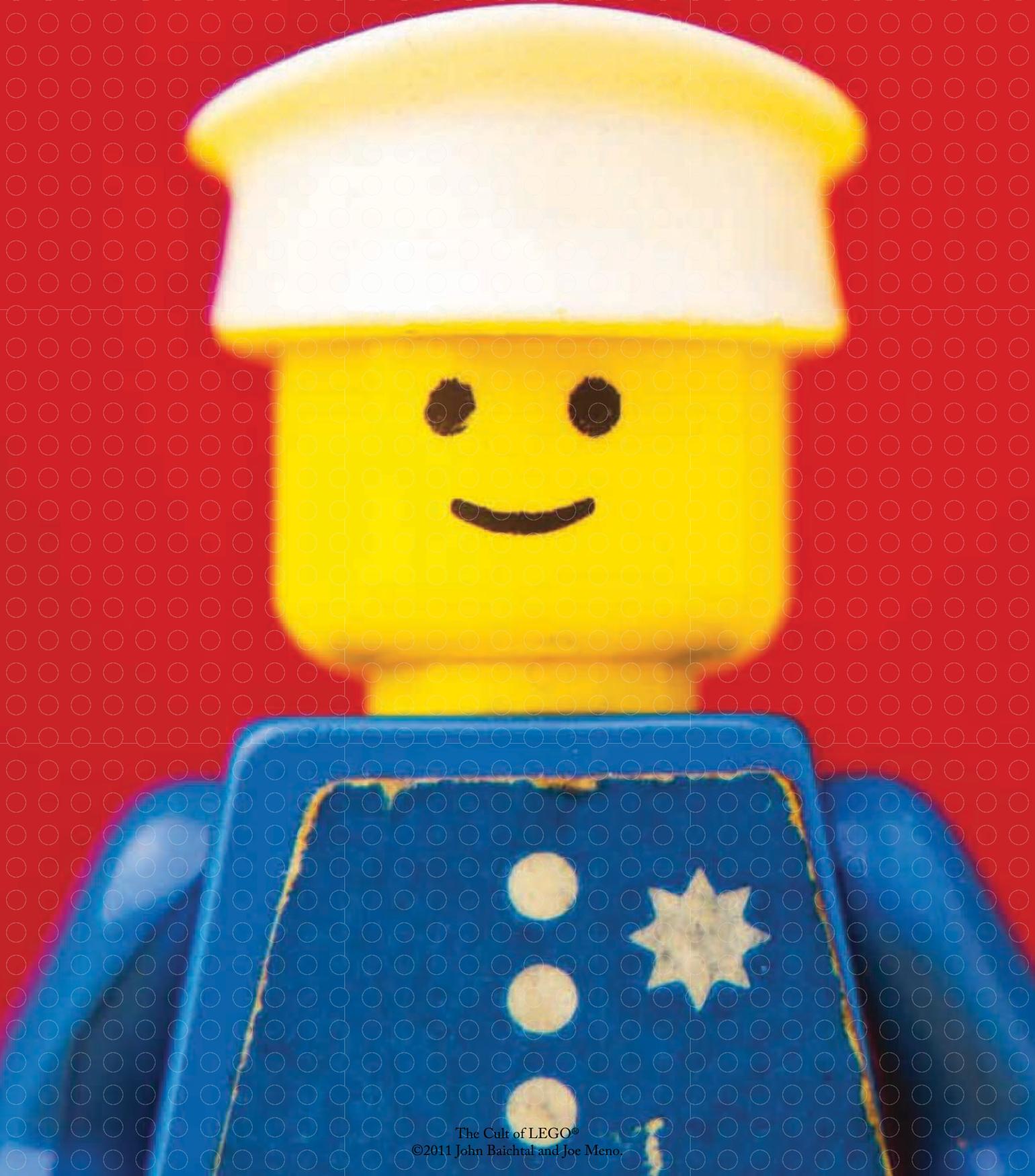
For those who love LEGO, there is no more perfect way to depict the human form than the minifig.

A sampling of the LEGO Group's vast minifig selection decorates a LEGO store in Florida.

The Minifig Turns 30



In 2008, the LEGO Group celebrated the minifig's 30th anniversary. Though the minifig's year of origin is debatable since a version with fixed limbs came out a few years before the movable minifig we know today, this anniversary marked a special milestone that transcended a mere marketing event. "The minifig is as iconic as the basic brick and as much a critical component of the LEGO System of Play as its studded cousin," said Andrew Becraft, co-editor of the fan blog The Brothers Brick (<http://www.brothers-brick.com/>). The minifig has been used to add humanity to LEGO models, to lend scale, and even as an art form in itself. LEGO wouldn't be the same without it.



Minifig Facts

With such an impressive history, it's only natural that the LEGO Group would come up with a myriad of facts and statistics that tell the story of this remarkable little creature:¹

More than 4 billion minifigs have been manufactured, with nearly 4 figures sold every second, for an average of 122 million per year.

The first minifig was a police officer. To date, 41 different cop minifigs have been enclosed in 104 sets.

More than 4,000 different minifigs have been released since 1978, including those with subtle differences in color, with 450 head designs alone. Mathematicians tell us that this means more than 8 quadrillion different combinations are possible.

The first minifigs with noses drawn on their heads were Native American figures in LEGO Wild West.

The first female minifig was a nurse. The ratio of male-to-female minifigs is 18:1.

The minifigs' trademark vacuous smile did not change until 1989, when the Pirates line introduced other facial expressions as well as such lovable deformities as eye patches and hook hands.

The year 2003 marked the first year the minifig's yellow coloration changed to a more realistic flesh coloration.

The only way to make a completely nude minifig is to use the torso and legs from a classic LEGO Space astronaut.

¹ Source: <http://parents.lego.com/en-gb/news/minifigure%2030th%20birthday.aspx/>

This minifig, originally from the LEGO Sports line, was used to re-create the character Pelé dos Santos from the 2004 movie *The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou*. Although the minifigs released by the LEGO Group have a variety of expressions, this one's Sambo-like grin raised a few hackles.

Minifig Controversy



The popular minifigs are not without controversy. Originally, the LEGO Group sought to leave racial and gender differences to the imagination of builders by using a stylized, generic face with outfits to differentiate roles. Remember that the first minifig was a cop, and the first female minifig was a nurse.

The most noticeable feature of the majority of minifigs is their ostensibly “race-neutral” yellow coloration. This paradigm lasted until 2003, when LEGO Sports’ Basketball theme was released, featuring minifigs based on real-life NBA players. The LEGO Group decided that expecting kids to appreciate figures that didn’t really resemble the stars they represented was a losing proposition. There was also a general perception that the yellow color of the minifigs actually signified a Caucasian. “I’ve always disagreed with those who say that yellow equals neutral,” Becraft said. “No, yellow equals light-skinned. I was glad when LEGO released the Ninjas and Wild West themes, because both those series had specifically ethnic minifigs.”

Beckett agrees. “I think that LEGO didn’t want to admit that the yellow minifig head was more white than black,” he said. “The flesh-tone minifigs were a bit of a fudge really. The fact is, minifigs aren’t a diverse bunch. Even amongst the film tie-ins, black people are extraordinarily rare, as are women.”

Part of the problem is that the LEGO Group decided to use only flesh-colored minifigs for licensed products. Is it the LEGO Group’s fault that no black women appear in *Star Wars*, *Batman*, or *Harry Potter*? The two themes praised by Becraft—Wild West and Ninjas—both featured yellow minifigs with

stereotypical identifiers. For instance, the Native Americans in Wild West all have war paint, and the Ninjas figs have slanted eyes, seemingly reinforcing the perception that the neutral faces are in fact meant to represent Caucasians.

As for gender, male and female minifigs do not exhibit secondary sexual characteristics, so men and women have the same body. Instead, the LEGO Group relies on hair, facial details, and printed body contours to differentiate the sexes. A female police officer looks just like a male cop, except for the lipstick and big eyelashes. In later minifigs, women had figures, but they were printed on the torso. For the most part, though, the default is asexual or male, depending on your point of view.

Some say the minifig is a product of its culture. LEGO came from Denmark, an extremely homogenous nation. In creating these figures, the original designers may have considered themselves exceedingly progressive for using yellow rather than specific flesh tones. In recent years, the LEGO Group has recruited more international talent, possibly leading to more genuine inclusiveness.

In any case, catering to political correctness is a no-win battle that could be never ending. Where’s the obese or amputee minifig? Ultimately, the LEGO Group remains consistent, making licensed figures resemble their real-life counterparts, while keeping classic core minifigs the original yellow. Still, as long as generic yellow equates to Caucasian and male to some, the debate is unlikely to subside anytime soon.



The Minifig in Pop Culture

Although LEGO fanatics have appreciated the minifig for ages, the public at large has kept the lovable plastic figure on its radar, associating it with the core LEGO product more so than any other LEGO element, except perhaps the classic System brick. Nobody should be surprised when the minifig continues to crop up in mainstream culture.

Simpsons Intro

The concept of the LEGO-animated films has been around for some time—think stop-motion flicks with minifigs instead of actors. Urmas Salu, a 14-year-old filmmaker from Estonia, filmed this ode to *The Simpsons* opening sequence using minifigs and System bricks, winning \$40 in a movie-making contest. Before he realized it, the video had “gone viral” and was featured on countless blogs and websites. See the original film on YouTube: <http://tinyurl.com/bz5e3fl>.



THE SIMPSONS





Graffiti

The iconic minifig even appears as graffiti painted on walls around the world. It's human yet inhuman. When part of social commentary, it's an icon that people can relate to, no matter what country they come from.

Egg Timer

The LEGO Group got in on the minifig craze with a product that has absolutely nothing to do with bricks. This egg timer resembles a minifig head and comes in a variety of models that evoke classic minifig visages.



Ginormous Fig

Bathers at a Netherlands beach noticed something floating ashore: an 8-foot minifig with "No Real Than You Are" written on its chest. The figure was placed in front of a nearby concession stand, and the international press responded with a flurry of articles on the event.

As it turned out, the figure was a promotion for a Dutch artist who called himself Ego Leonard and whose paintings feature LEGO minifigs. The artist, whose name suggests both *LEGO* and the Latin word for *I* (*ego*), gives interviews as if he were actually the minifig. This photo shows the figure guarding the entrance to an Amsterdam studio where Leonard's work is featured. (Read more about Ego Leonard in Chapter 6.)

Minifig Cakes

A LEGO-themed birthday is a rather common occurrence. But a LEGO-themed wedding? When two LEGO fans get married, what better way to depict the bride and groom than with a couple of minifigs?



Halloween Costumes

Minifig costumes always pop up around Halloween. Usually the costume focuses on the big round head and ignores the boxy arms and legs. Although sometimes the costumes are rather slapdash, many exhibit a clear love of minifigs, with a great deal of work put into the project. The most ingenious creators come up with imaginative solutions such as yellow socks for the featureless, grasping hands.

Red-Headed Step-Figs

If the minifig is so great, why tinker with it? Like always, the LEGO Group hasn't rested on its laurels. LEGO has never stopped exploring new avenues for depicting the human shape, experimenting several times over the years with different types of figures. However, none of these efforts has succeeded in dethroning the minifig as the ultimate way to depict a human.

Six also-ran competitors to the minifigure exist: **TECHNIC maxifigs** (bigger than minifigs), Galidor and Jack Stone maxifigs, Homemaker and Belville figs, and built creations called *miniland figures*.

TECHNIC Figures

TECHNIC models usually end up much larger than System LEGO constructions, possibly because of their large gears: If you want to use the gearboxes and MINDSTORMS electronics, you have to build to a scale that accommodates these elements. The LEGO Group developed larger figures to go with these models, but the figures never took off the way minifigs have. (One surprising omission in the TECHNIC figure line is that there are no female figures.)

Galidor, Jack Stone, and Knights' Kingdom

As orphans of failed lines, these figures have joined the list of also-rans, remembered mainly as unexceptional maxifigs often compared to the action figures sold by other toy companies. Although some builders remember them fondly and a few use them in the occasional model, for the most part these figures are remembered as failures.

Homemaker and Belville Figures

The Homemaker and Belville figure lines evoke the classic dollhouse feel: sets depicting families, homes, and neighborhood businesses. As with many less-successful lines, Belville offers some fun elements, though it mainly consists of domestic items such as sausages, turkeys, and bowls. Some people appreciated Belville's unique style so much that they wish the LEGO Group had decided to go the minifig route with the line's figures. Speculation is that the decision to take Belville to maxifig scale was made after the failure of Paradisa, pink LEGO at minifig scale.

Pink LEGO, the disparaging term for the LEGO Group's half-hearted attempts at girly themes, tends to baffle fans who love the company's effortless boy-centric lines. Similarly, the company's persistence in exploring maxifigs provokes amused shrugs.

Miniland Figures

Miniland figures are in their own category because they populate LEGOLAND's Miniland. Built from individual elements rather than from specialized figure parts, they can be incredibly challenging to create. As such, casual builders avoid them, while experts consider a deftly constructed miniland figure to be a sign of utmost skill.

Yvonne Doyle deftly uses Belville and TECHNIC figures in her hospital model, though this work is the exception rather than the norm for these underappreciated figures.





Angus McLane's loveable 'Dudes instantly spawned a trend.





CubeDudes: Cartoony Geometric Figures

One day Angus McLane, an animator for Pixar, watched an episode of the G.I. Joe TV show and decided that he wanted to build a miniland figure of one of the characters, Snake Eyes. He wanted to build small (due to a lack of space) and ended up building at a size only slightly larger than a minifig. As he played around with the bricks, he came up with the more “deformed” appearance that is the CubeDude’s signature look: a cubical head presented in such a way that one angle serves as the face. He built about a half-dozen characters before he began sharing them online, and they were an immediate hit. Since the debut of McLane’s models, dozens of LEGO fans have tried their hands at creating CubeDudes, but McLane is still considered the grandmaster. To date he has built over 100 CubeDudes, most of them recognizable figures from TV and cinema.

Sig-Figs: LEGO You



If you love LEGO and need an avatar for your online presence, it's only natural to use the LEGO Group's ubiquitous minifigs, suitably customized, to show off your personality. Not only do you get yourself an avatar, but you also tell other fans that you're one of them.

Some builders even add a fantasy element, showing themselves in costume or wielding light sabers. Others go the surreal route, with featureless unicolor models that look like statues. Of course, the standard LEGO elements are finite in number, so a lot of builders include custom, third-party, and unusual elements to make their *sig-figs* more memorable.

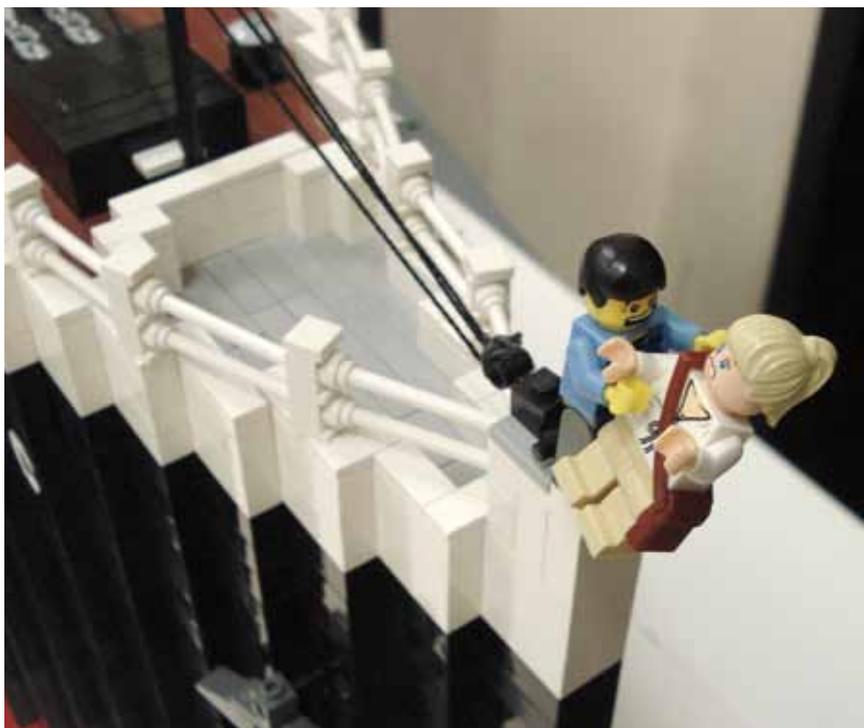
Whimsically, senior LEGO Group employees use minifigs as business cards, with the staff member's name on the front of the minifig's shirt and email address and phone number on the back. The minifigs also resemble their human counterparts as much as can be expected with matching hairstyles and beards, as appropriate.

Some builders take their sig-figs beyond the avatar role and actually tell stories with them. Heather Braaten brought her sig-fig to a fan convention and photographed it as it went on adventures over other builders' models, even tangling it in the bushy beard of fellow builder Lino Martins. "Lino is one of the most awesome artists and LEGO builders out there," Braaten wrote on her Flickr page. "He's also super cool for putting up with my strange requests."



(TOP) Andrew Becraft's sig-fig shows him doing what he loves doing best: building with LEGO.

(BOTTOM) The standard LEGO Group executive business card



(TOP) On the bow of a minifig-scale *Titanic*, Heather is the queen of the world, whether or not she wants to be.

(MIDDLE) Heather subjugates the miniature world of Shannonia—with a baseball bat.

(BOTTOM) Heather finds a kindred spirit. But did she sign up for something?

Pimp Your Fig

Minifig fans face an inevitable conundrum. At first they are content to play with standard-issue minifig accessories, but sooner or later they realize that what they want simply isn't available. Whether it's the designs printed on the fig's clothing or customized hair and equipment, builders are always looking for ways to put a unique twist on their minifig projects. And if they lack the skills to create their own gear, a plethora of third-party companies are ready to step up.

BrickForge (<http://www.brickforge.com/>) represents the elite of the minifig customizer community. The company got its start in 2002 manufacturing minifig weaponry and selling its weapons online. If you don't like the LEGO Group's standard minifig add-ons, plenty of third-party alternatives are available. In particular, BrickForge and cohorts have filled deliberate gaps in the LEGO line. For instance, there will never be a Marines in Baghdad set, but with modern weaponry from BrickArms, you can make your own.

BrickArms (<http://www.brickarms.com/>) was founded in 2006 when founder Will Chapman's son asked him for World War II weapons to equip his minifigs. Such items aren't available from the LEGO Group, so Chapman made his own. In just a few years his business has expanded to a line of 45 different weapons, weapons packs, and custom minifigs, including medieval, science-fiction, and modern weaponry.

For those lacking the means to create their own plastic castings, a simpler approach is available: making decals to apply to blank minifigs for instant customization. Of course, most people can't print actual decals, but they can print on clear plastic labeling material using a color printer. The result, although not as slick as store-bought LEGO elements, definitely suffices for many builders.

Amanda Baldwin has a how-to on her Flickr site, describing how she used the free Windows art program Paint.NET to create dozens of castle designs. She produced knights' shield emblems, princesses' dress designs, and simple medieval garb to give her court a unique flair.

But not everybody is on board for customizing figs. Many builders, accustomed to the LEGO Group's high-quality standards, harbor unrealistic expectations of amateur products. How can a person working in a garage create decals as sophisticated as the designs found in LEGO sets? Although sticklers may turn up their noses at these amateur efforts, many others willingly sacrifice quality for the ability to design their own minifig graphics.

A recent development has been to print onto the minifig itself, much like the minifigs printed for LEGO Group employees. The quality of these printed parts, which also include tiles and bricks, matches the LEGO Group's own printed bricks and are starting to show up in fan models.



(TOP) **An assortment of plastic weaponry created by BrickForge, a two-man company that sells mini-fig accessories**

(BOTTOM) **Amanda Baldwin's princess minifig shows off a unique figure design that she created herself.**

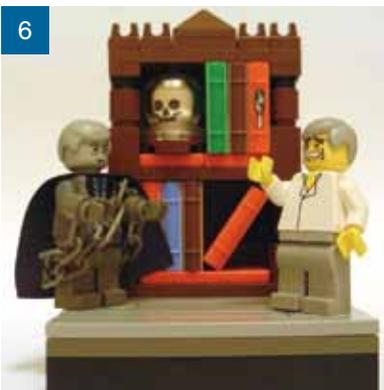
Famous People, Minisized

As the number of official and unofficial minifig elements grows, so does the temptation to use those elements to make figures look like recognizable public figures. For Beckett, the appeal involves a juxtaposition of a child's toy with the adult world. "I think it was one of the few ways I could find to connect a lot of my hobbies together," he said. "I've done political and musical minifigs, some of films, some of sci-fi characters."

Figs of Fiction

Creating an ode to a fictional character presents a special challenge. Can you give the minifig the spirit of the original without descending to mere stereotypes? How would you create a Robinson Crusoe beyond the leather umbrella?

(1) **Robinson Crusoe**, (2) **Long John Silver**, (3) **Rick Deckard** from *Blade Runner*, (4) **Pinocchio**, (5) **Jack the Ripper**, (6) **Ebenezer Scrooge**, (7) **Jack Bauer** from *TV's 24*, (8) **Captain Ahab**, (9) **Heidi**, (10) **Vincent Vega and Jules Winnfield** from *Pulp Fiction*





Leaders

Creating minifigs of politicians seems easy, but there is a hidden challenge: How do you tell an interesting story? Thom Beckett's Dick Cheney vignette lampoons the former Vice President's infamous hunting accident.





(1) Fidel Castro and Ernesto "Che" Guevara, (2) Sir Francis Drake, (3) Mao Zedong, (4) Former US Vice President Dick Cheney, (5) Saint Francis of Assisi, (6) Tenzin Gyatso, the Dalai Lama, (7) Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., (8) Rosa Parks, (9) Chief Seattle, (10) Mohandas Gandhi, (11) Native American activist Winona LaDuke, (12) George Washington, (13) Journalist and social activist Dorothy Day, (14) Norwegian explorer Erik the Red



Creators

Re-creating a writer or another creative figure in minifig form presents certain difficulties that are unlike the challenges faced when re-creating a politician or actor whose face is familiar to the public at large. What does E. E. Cummings look like, really? One solution to the problem involves creating a tiny scene called a *vignette*. In Beckett's *Socrates*, the great philosopher clutches his cup of hemlock just as he does in the famous Jacques-Louis David painting *The Death of Socrates*.



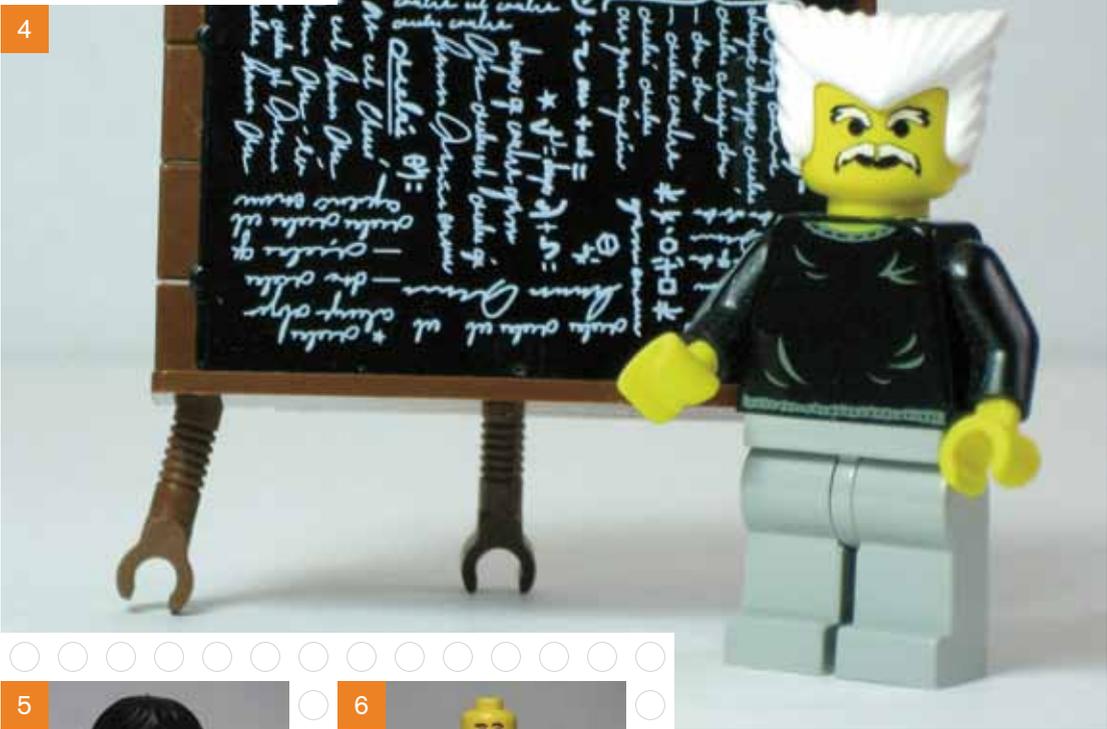
(1) Ernest Hemingway, (2) Socrates,
(3) Virginia Woolf, (4) Ansel Adams,
(5) Vincent van Gogh, (6) Geoffrey
Chaucer





Nerds

Are nerds the great thinkers of our time? It comes as no surprise that LEGO nerds like building minifig nerds.



(1) Charles Darwin, (2) Innovator Alfred Nobel, (3) Lens maker Carl Zeiss, (4) Albert Einstein, (5) Computer hacker Richard Stallman, (6) Amazon.com CEO Jeff Bezos

Performers

Actors and musicians are some of the most recognizable individuals in our society. Because of this, they often find themselves re-created by minifig fans.





(1) The White Stripes, (2) Bruce Lee, (3) Charlie Chaplin, (4) Michael Jackson, (5) Britney Spears, (6) Clint Eastwood, (7) Scott Joplin, (8) Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart, (9) Jimi Hendrix, (10) Fatboy Slim, (11) Adam Ant, (12) The Village People



Minifig Scale



The monstrous scale of the HMS Hood is apparent even without minifigs swarming the deck.



You've seen how important LEGO minifigs are to fans. It should come as no surprise, therefore, that many models are built to the minifig's scale, where the dimensions of the project are determined as if the minifig were a real person. In fact, nearly all official LEGO models are built to conform to the minifig's dimensions. The LEGO Group's classic lines, such as Space and City, are all this scale.

Minifig scale is a default that makes for fun and easy model building, but it also makes for some massive, nigh untenable, models that take over entire living rooms. Even a four-story building can become an expensive and time-consuming project when it's built to minifig scale. Just imagine the colossal breadth of a minifig-scale *Starship Enterprise* or Sears Tower. In fact, you'll have to imagine it, because as yet no one has built such giant creations in full minifig scale. Many attempts have been made to build scale re-creations of famous structures, but they usually end up truncated or abbreviated in some way. The final model evokes the *feel* of the original, but the dimensions are off.

What exactly *is* minifig scale? If you realize that the average minifig represents a human being about 5 feet 9 inches (1.8 meters) tall, then a minifig of 1.6 inches (3.8 cm) tall represents a 1:44 scale. In general, anything between 1:30 and 1:48 is considered classic minifig scale.

As with anything in LEGO, however, there is always some wiggle room. Some builders hold 1:30 to be the classic scale, while builders who assemble massive creations sometimes distort the ratio a bit. Consider, for instance, Malle Hawking's model of modern aircraft carrier *Harry S. Truman*, the world-record-holding LEGO boat model built to 1:68 scale, with minifigs that fit in the airplanes.

Some minifig-scale creations are so massive they are models of patience and planning. For example, Ed Diment's HMS *Hood*, which uses just under 100,000 bricks, cost about \$15,000 and took seven months to build. It's 20 feet (6 meters) long and breaks into sections for storage in his LEGO room. "All four turrets are motorized with Power Functions motors for rotation and elevation," Diment told The Brothers Brick. "I'll be keeping it together for at least a couple of years."

A World War II battleship is certainly a huge construction, but it's hardly the largest man-made object in history or fiction. This begs the question, how big would a 1:44 Great Wall of China or Death Star be? No one can be sure until someone tries to build it, but we can speculate.

The following are some whimsical ideas of minifig-scale colossi that will probably never be built.

Empire State Building

Dimensions: 1,470 feet (448 meters) tall, including the antenna spire

Minifig scale: 33 feet (10.2 meters)

Starship Enterprise "NCC-1701-D"

Dimensions: 203 feet (642 meters) long by 1,532 feet (467 meters) wide, with a dish of about 2,000 feet (610 meters) across

Minifig scale: 48 feet (14.6 meters) by 35 feet (10.7 meters)

Babylon 5 Space Station

Dimensions: 27,887 feet (8500 meters) long—or 5.25 miles

Minifig scale: 633 feet (193 meters)

Larry Niven's Ringworld

Dimensions: 997,000 miles wide at the *narrowest*

Minifig scale: Get serious!

How many bricks would it take to build one of these creations? If Diment's *Hood* packs 100,000 bricks for a mere battleship, how many would one of these absurdly large models use?

Regardless, good building isn't just about using a lot of LEGO bricks. The most well-known of the massive LEGO creations sport magnificent detail as well as a huge number of elements.

In the end, LEGO fans' obsessions with minifigs and minifig scale are secondary to their ultimate goal—building the best model they can.