Public Humanities (2026), 2, e174, 1–9
doi:10.1017/pub.2026.10295

CAMBRIDGE UNIVERSITY PRESS PUBLIC HUMANITIES

ARTICLE

LEGO® as Public History

Katie Carpenter

History, University of Leeds, UK
Email: k.carpenter@leeds.ac.uk

(Received 15 May 2026 UTC; revised 21 July 2026 UTC; accepted 24 July 2026 UTC)

Abstract

From the pyramids of Egypt to the *Titanic*, LEGO® produces intricate representations of the past for its adult fans. Despite their popularity, these LEGO® sets have gone unnoticed by scholars of public history. This article proposes that LEGO® for adults is a distinct genre of public history. It analyses the 2025 set "The Evolution of STEM," which "legofies" various moments in the history of STEM, including three historic scientists: George Washington Carver (1864–1943), Isaac Newton (1643–1727), and Marie Skłodowska-Curie (1867–1934). I argue that the legofication of the past offers a distinct form of participatory history infused with playfulness and nostalgia, in which consumers literally construct the past. However, legofying the past also entails simplifying complex historical realities into easily consumable and celebratory narratives. This produces a form of micro-commemoration in which consumers buy, build, and display LEGO® monuments in their homes, while also participating in the contestation and co-creation of historical meaning in public.

Keywords: co-construction; history of science; Lego; public history; stem

As a LEGO® fan and a public historian with expertise in history of science, imagine my excitement when, while scrolling through social media, I saw an advert for a new LEGO® set: "The Evolution of STEM." Finally, a LEGO® set I could buy and legitimately build for work!

Released in March 2025, this 879-piece set is from the LEGO® IDEAS range. This model was initially pitched by a fan-designer, who won the "Celebrate the Wonder of STEM" contest in 2023.[1] This model is but one of a range of historical LEGO® sets including the *Titanic*, the Great Pyramid of Giza, and a Viking Village.[2] Based on an analysis of the "The Evolution of STEM" set, this article reads LEGO® for adults as a genre of public history with distinct characteristics. I argue that the legofication of the past offers an active, participatory experience of historical engagement, but one that simplifies complex histories into easily consumable narratives. By commodifying the past into celebratory narratives that appeal to audiences, legofication produces a form of micro-commemoration that, like other types of commemoration, is contested.[3]

[1] LEGO® 2025a.
[2] LEGO® 2026c.
[3] On "Legofying," see Taylor and Ingraham 2020.

© The Author(s), 2026. Published by Cambridge University Press. This is an Open Access article, distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial licence (http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0), which permits non-commercial re-use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original article is properly cited. The written permission of Cambridge University Press or the rights holder(s) must be obtained prior to any commercial use.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. 17 Nov 2026 at 19:51:39, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use.



Figure 1. "The Evolution of STEM" model fully built. Author's own photograph.



Figure 2. The desk at the front of the model. Author's own photograph.

1. Constructing the past

The history of STEM has been translated into LEGO® bricks. Once built, the model features some of the great symbols of science in the form of plastic bricks, bursting forth from an encyclopaedia. A DNA strand emerges most prominently in the centre, with a carbon atom in front of it, and the NASA Voyager probe, a space shuttle, and a bumblebee flying around them (figure 1). A multiplicity of symbols of science and technology are crammed into the scene, including a computer, a mini plane, a microscope and a tiny chalkboard showing Fibonacci's spiral and Newton's Second Law of Motion (figure 2). Three scientists have been immortalised in LEGO® as minifigures: George Washington Carver (1864–1943), American

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. 17 Nov 2026 at 19:51:39, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use.



Figure 3. Isaac Newton holding an apple under an apple tree, at the back left of the model. Author's own photograph.

agriculturalist and inventor; Isaac Newton (1643–1727), English polymath (figure 3); and Marie Skłodowska-Curie (1876–1934), Polish-French physicist and chemist.

Legofication as public history is not just a representation of the past, but an active process of structured doing, similar to other genres of public history in popular culture, like video games.[4] Building the models is a form of tactile, playful, participatory history. Taylor and Ingraham highlight the sensory experience of building LEGO®, describing it as a "*clickable* media": "people engage first and foremost with their fingers."[5] In relation to historical models, this is a unique material interaction with the past. This sensory engagement is infused with playfulness and the nostalgia commonly associated with childhood toys, which goes some way to explain the success of LEGO® for adults, which, in 2021, accounted for 20 percent of their sales.[6] The basic brick design has not changed since 1958, and the bricks click together and snap apart in the same manner they always have.[7] LEGO® has a broad appeal across generations, and thus tactile nostalgia is a core feature of engagement with legofied pasts.

This nostalgia is paired with curiosity, which LEGO® successfully inculcates into their builds through the use of "easter eggs." "Easter eggs" are concealed clues that need to be decoded. In this model, to build the encyclopaedia base, one has to build an infrared spectrum and a secret message in Morse code, which an internet search showed to mean "STEM" (figures 4 and 5). If my own experiences can be considered representative, these details were highly effective at engaging curiosity and an appetite to know more. Indeed, invocations of curiosity have been identified as a driver of engagement with games, and the discovery and decoding of Easter eggs are intrinsically rewarding.[8] Notably, these details cannot be

[4] On the importance of interaction in historical video games, see Chapman 2016, 30–55.
[5] Emphasis in original. Taylor and Ingraham 2020, 2.
[6] Frost and Laing 2013, 124; Hancock 2021.
[7] Frost and Laing 2013, 126; Taylor and Ingraham 2020, 2.
[8] Tang and Kirman 2025; Watts and Wing 2026.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. 17 Nov 2026 at 19:51:39, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use.

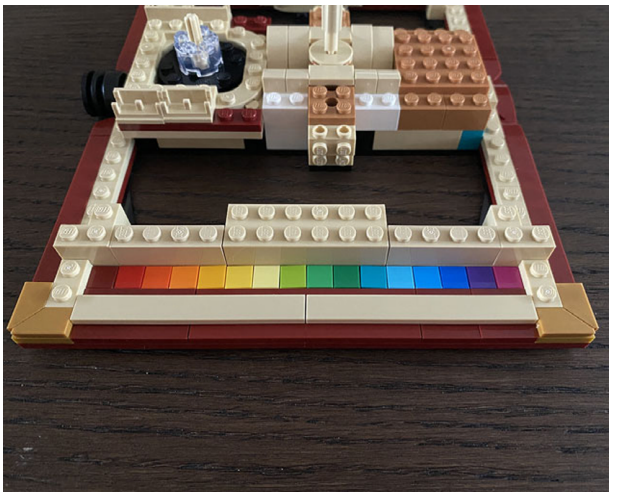


Figure 4. The infrared spectrum built into the left side of the base. Author's own photograph.

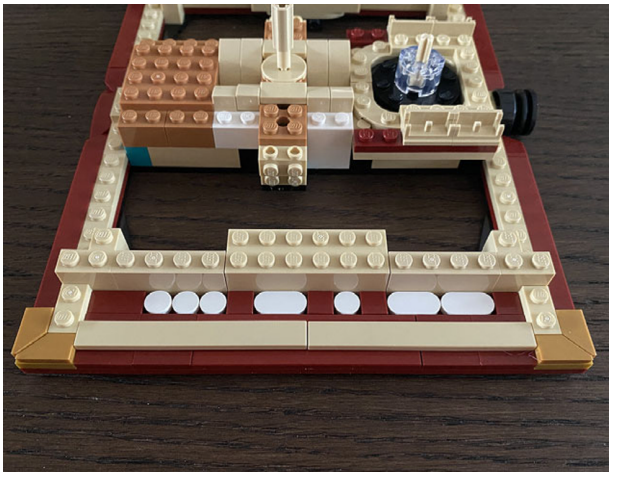


Figure 5. Morse code for STEM built into the right side of the base. Author's own photograph.

seen once the model is complete; as such, it is only through the process of building that the user experiences this injection of curiosity, stimulating the need to interpret elements of the build. This playful curiosity is a unique characteristic of LEGO® as a genre of public history. The legofication of the past is not just the completed model, but the engaging process of active building.

2. Simplifying the past

It's not all fun and games, though. In providing a playful, nostalgic experience, complex histories are simplified. In this instance, this has parallels with older

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. 17 Nov 2026 at 19:51:39, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use.

historiographic traditions of a teleological narrative, a march of progress from then to now to the future.[9]

Anna Maerker has described how a teleological narrative and a celebration of individuals in public serve to legitimise science, for professional and national reasons, and to inspire the next generation of scientists.[10] The language of inspiration and progress is evident in the instruction manual: "STEM fields have always been built on the achievements of past explorers and pioneers. Their curiosity, creativity and collective pursuit of knowledge continues to inspire and propel us towards their discoveries and technological advancements."[11] The result is a digestible narrative, and perhaps a comforting one, that presents science as leading the way to solve the world's problems.

Paired with this teleological narrative is an emphasis on individual genius, shaping and reinforcing the already iconic status of Carver, Newton and Skłodowska-Curie. The celebratory narrative is confirmed on the LEGO® website: "It's an extraordinary line-up of truly great figures in history."[12] As Maerker and Ludmilla Jordanova have shown, public histories of science often uncritically invoke the names of individual geniuses who are exalted in a manner similar to saints.[13] In this instance, each has been given a place in popular culture by the instantly recognisable form of a 3-brick minifigure. Each is clasping symbols of the work with which they are most associated. Skłodowska-Curie holds a conical flask and the square of the periodic table for Radium (which she discovered). Carver holds a petri dish with peanuts on it, referencing his agricultural work on peanuts. Newton holds the apple that was said to have fallen from the tree that led to his discovery of gravity (figure 6). An adult viewer likely can decode the meanings of these symbols—perhaps, particularly of Newton—but, if they cannot, these small details serve as further "Easter eggs." These moments connect the



Figure 6. Minifigures of Carver, Newton, and Skłodowska-Curie. Author's own photograph.

[9] For instance, see Bernal 1969.
[10] Maerker 2018.
[11] LEGO® 2025b, 7.
[12] LEGO® 2025a.
[13] Jordanova 2014; Maerker 2018.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. 17 Nov 2026 at 19:51:39, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use.

scientists to the broader simplified narrative of a teleological history of science, that moves from one great discovery to the next.[14]

LEGO® minifigures are a metaphor for celebrating individual geniuses devoid of context. When JD Bernal wrote that an emphasis on geniuses in the history of science "lessened them in stature," he did not mean compressing their histories into 3 cm of plastic. In fact, he meant that divorcing historic scientists from their social environments diminishes their accomplishments.[15] Here, Carver, Newton, and Skłodowska-Curie exist in a timeless tableau with nothing anchoring them to their own period and place. The barriers Skłodowska-Curie faced as a woman are erased, creating the impression that any woman could have been a ground-breaking scientist if she was only clever enough.[16] The broader context of systemic racism has been erased from Carver's life, who was born into slavery in c.1864 and raised in the Jim Crow South. The reduction of Carver to a symbol could be appropriated for abhorrent means if it is perceived as "an indication that slavery and segregation could not have been too bad if they produced a Carver."[17] In the imaginary world of LEGO®, racism and sexism do not exist. The medium of LEGO® does not allow for the nuance of historical reality, and instead necessarily simplifies and reduces to create more palatable historical narratives that appeal to their audience and correspond to their brand of playfulness.

3. From commodification to commemoration

Legofied pasts are first and foremost, commodified pasts. Commodification becomes commemoration as the completed sets and minifigures are displayed in the home. The particular symbols and figures immortalised have been selected because they are already recognisable and are marketable. This bears parallels with other public histories of science; Jordanova has pointed out that individual heroes attract audiences.[18] The iconic status of the historic inventions, discoveries and figures is subsequently reinforced by legofying them. In a profit-driven context, a "usable past" becomes one that can be made recognisable, collectable and marketable.[19] Brands like LEGO® are agents in the construction of historical meaning in public, reflecting and reinforcing what is worthy of being commodified and thus commemorated.

LEGO® for adults is most clearly a commemorative practice once the sets have been built. Unlike children's engagement with LEGO®, which is built and unbuilt endlessly, models for adults are pitched as décor once they are complete—in this instance, "Science-themed décor."[20] Once on display in the home, models become signifiers of identity.[21] The minifigures in particular hold parallels with commemorative statues as they are humanoid, and have the potential to be displayed.[22] However, the authority of public statues is conferred via

[14] In Geoff Cubitt's words, "Events and personalities do not establish themselves in social memory as isolated containers of symbolic meaning: much of their significance comes from the ways in which they get connected to other events and to larger narrative structures." Cubitt 2007, 214.

[15] Bernal 1969, 46.

[16] On this, see Quinn 1995.

[17] McMurry 1981, vii.

[18] Jordanova 2014.

[19] Smith 2006.

[20] LEGO® 2026b.

[21] On the relationship between home, material culture and identity, see Attfield 2020.

[22] De Groot briefly mentions the desire for the "humanoid" in museum displays: 2016, 125. Tinsley makes the point that "the human form of statues makes them appear sacrosanct": 2020, 6. LEGO® even sells minifigure display kits to facilitate their display, such as: LEGO® 2026a.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. 17 Nov 2026 at 19:51:39, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use.

careful selection of public space.[23] LEGO® sets are made and marketed in public, and have a virtual presence on the web, but the built models exist only in private spaces like the home. As a genre of public history, LEGO® for adults can be read as a micro-commemoration; consumers may identify with the legofied historical representations, and choose to purchase, build, and display them in their homes.

As a commemorative practice, legofied pasts share another characteristic with other forms of public commemoration; they have invited controversy intertwined with identity politics. Like public statues, legofied pasts impose a singular narrative that privileges some groups over others, raising questions about identity and who "owns" the past.[24] Here, LEGO® suggests the West "owns" the history of science by choosing scientists exclusively from the USA and Europe.[25] The public contestation, however, has centred on the naming of Skłodowska-Curie as "Marie Curie," with the omission of "Skłodowska." Critics argued the omission erased her Polish identity, and LEGO® responded by adding "(née Skłodowska)" after Curie.[26] This can be seen to be a form of co-creation, as consumers have shifted the official representation of Skłodowska-Curie. The participatory role of the public is evident in other forms, such as fan-designed historical models pitched on internet forums, minifigures of historical figures being sold by businesses unaffiliated with the LEGO® group, and the use of LEGO® bricks to build statues for historic anniversaries.[27] As a genre of public history, LEGO® is not just a participatory experience of building, but a contestation and co-creation of historical meaning through official and unofficial LEGO® channels.

4. From legofied pasts to legofied humanities? From legofied pasts to legofied humanities

At the time of revising this article, I found myself once again sidetracked by an advert for LEGO®. This time, it was the "University of Science," a legofied university, celebrating various fields of science. The University of Science even has its own commemorative practices—a tiny bust is on display of a bearded man (a scientist?).[28] This was a reminder that "The Evolution of STEM" is not an isolated curiosity but a reflection of a culture that exalts science as the world's intellectual heritage. I have yet to see an equivalent celebration of the humanities. Yet these are the very disciplines we need to unpack the implications of who, what, why, where, and how historical meaning is created, contested, and celebrated.

This article has introduced LEGO® for adults as a distinctive genre of public history. It is not just a translation of history into bricks, but a participatory engagement with the past through tactile construction and playful nostalgia. This rests on a simplification of the past, which can serve a celebratory narrative akin to commemoration when on display in the home, but also contested and co-created in public. If LEGO® is amongst the ways the public identify with history, it deserves the same critical attention as other forms of public history.

[23] Dickenson 2021.

[24] On the singular narratives imposed by statues, see Tinsley 2026.

[25] LEGO® has previously been critiqued for its Western bias in other contexts. See Fanning 2021.

[26] Zakrzewska 2025.

[27] Similarly, McCall 2018 has drawn attention to how video games are a participatory form of public history, as players engage in their own historical debate in internet forums. For internet forums, see LEGO® Ideas 2026 and BrickLink 2026a. For an example of businesses selling minifigures based on real historic people, see MiniFigs 2026. For an example of LEGO® being used to build statues, see BBC News 2025.

[28] BrickLink 2026b.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. 17 Nov 2026 at 19:51:39, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use.

And, perhaps, LEGO® affords other opportunities for the humanities. As we are increasingly under pressure to justify our contributions to the world, maybe we need to embrace LEGO® as a mode of communication, crack out the childhood LEGO® and start legofying the value of the humanities.

Dr Katie Carpenter is Associate Professor of Public History in the School of History at the University of Leeds. She is a historian of modern Britain, with particular interests in the history of women and the history of science.

Author contribution. Conceptualization: K.C.; Investigation: K.C.; Writing - original draft: K.C.; Writing - review & editing: K.C.

Acknowledgements. The author would like to thank Dr Carly O'Neill-Barrett and Dr Rhiannon Garth Jones for reading early drafts of this article, and the anonymous peer reviewers for their helpful suggestions.

Conflict of interests. The author declares no competing interests.

References

Attfield, Judy. 2020. Wild *Things: The Material Culture of Everyday Life*. Bloomsbury Visual Arts.

BBC News. 2025. "Lego Suffragette Marks Anniversary of Female MP." Accessed July 18, 2026. https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/articles/cqldwgd1w7lo.

Bernal, J. D. 1969. *Science in History: Volume 1: The Emergence of Science*. Penguin.

BrickLink. 2026a. "BrickLink Designer Program." Accessed July 18, 2026. https://www.bricklink.com/v3/designer-program/main.page.

BrickLink. 2026b. "University of Science." Accessed July 18, 2026. https://www.bricklink.com/v3/designer-program/series-8/2698/University-of-Science.

Chapman, Adam. 2016. *Digital Games as History: How Videogames Represent the Past and Offer Access to Historical Practice*. Routledge.

Cubitt, Geoffrey. 2007. *History and Memory*. Manchester University Press.

De Groot, Jerome. 2016. *Consuming History: Historians and Heritage in Contemporary Popular Culture*. 2nd ed. Routledge.

Dickenson, Christopher P. 2021. "Statues and Public Space: An Introduction." In *Public Statues across Time and Cultures*, edited by Christopher P. Dickenson, 1–31. Routledge.

Fanning, Colin. 2021. "Constructed Pasts: Narratives of Home, History, and Otherness in LEGO." *The Public Historian* 43 (1): 39–61. https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2021.43.1.39.

Frost, Warwick, and Jennifer Laing. 2013. *Commemorative Events: Memory, Identities, Conflict*. Routledge.

Hancock, Graham E. 2021. "LEGO Exclusive: AFOLs Taught us to Take Adults Seriously." *Brick Fanatics*. Accessed May 5, 2026. https://www.brickfanatics.com/lego-exclusive-afols-taught-us-to-take-adults-seriously/.

Jordanova, Ludmilla. 2014. "On Heroism." *Science Museum Group Journal*. https://doi.org/10.15180/140107.

LEGO®. 2025a. "Behind the Scenes of the LEGO® Ideas the Evolution of STEM Set." Accessed May 2, 2026. https://www.lego.com/en-gb/categories/adults-welcome/article/the-evolution-of-stem.

LEGO®. 2025b. Instructions for the Evolution of STEM. Accessed May 3, 2026. https://www.lego.com/en-gb/service/building-instructions/21355.

LEGO®. 2026a. "Display Case 8 – Black". Accessed 17 July, 2026. https://www.lego.com/en-gb/product/display-case-8-black-5006152.

LEGO® 2026b. "The Evolution of STEM." Accessed July 17, 2026. https://www.lego.com/en-gb/product/the-evolution-of-stem-21355.

LEGO®. 2026c. "Toys and Gifts for 18+ Year Old Adults." Accessed May 2, 2026. https://www.lego.com/en-gb/categories/age-18-plus-years.

LEGO® Ideas. 2026. "Where Fan Creations Turn into Real LEGO® Sets." Accessed July 18, 2026. https://ideas.lego.com/.

Maerker, Anna. 2018. "Hagiography and Biography: Narratives of 'Great Men of Science.'" In *History, Memory and Public Life: The Past in the Present*, edited by Anna Maerker, Simon Sleight, and Adam Sutcliffe, 159–79. Routledge.

McCall, Jeremiah. 2018. "Video Games as Participatory Public History." In *A Companion to Public History*, edited by David Dean, 405–16. Wiley.

McMurry, Linda O. 1981. *George Washington Carver: Scientist and Symbol*. Oxford University Press.

MiniFigs. 2026. "Inspiring Figures." Minifigs.me. Accessed May 5, 2026. https://minifigs.me/collections/inspiring-minifigures?page=2.

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. 17 Nov 2026 at 19:51:39, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use.

Quinn, Susan. 1995. *Marie Curie: A Life*. Simon & Schuster.
Smith, Laurajane. 2006. *Uses of Heritage*. Routledge.
Tang, Ziao, and Ben Kirman. 2025. "Exploring Curiosity in Games: A Framework and Questionnaire Study of Player Perspectives." *International Journal of Human–Computer Interaction* 41 (4): 2475–90. https://doi.org/10.1080/10447318.2024.2325171.
Taylor, Nicholas, and Chris Ingraham. 2020. "Introduction: Clickable Media in a Plastic World Legofied." In *LEGOfied: Building Blocks as Media*, edited by Nicholas Taylor and Chris Ingraham, 1–19. Bloomsbury.
Tinsley, Meghan. 2026. "Setting Empire in Stone: Commemoration and the Crisis of Historical Subjectivity." *Social Science History*: 1–19. FirstView before print. https://doi.org/10.1017/ssh.2026.10132.
Watts, Judy, and Hannah Wing. 2026. "Harvesting Easter Eggs: An Exploratory Study of Enjoying Transnarrative Media." *PLoS One* 21 (2): e0341588. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0341588.
Zakrzewska, Sandra. 2025. "Another 'Marie Curie' Slap for Poland, Courtesy of a New LEGO Set." *Worldcrunch.* Accessed May 5, 2026. https://worldcrunch.com/culture-society/marie-curie-lego-poland/.

Cite this article: Carpenter, Katie. 2026. "LEGO® as Public History." *Public Humanities,* 2, e174, 1–9. https://doi.org/10.1017/pub.2026.10295

Downloaded from https://www.cambridge.org/core. 17 Nov 2026 at 19:51:39, subject to the Cambridge Core terms of use.