

LEGO® Sonic Mania™: From Idea to Retail Set

Sam Johnson's first reaction when he saw that the LEGO Group may be designing a new set based on SEGA's® beloved Sonic the Hedgehog™ was elation, that was followed quickly by a sense of dread.

"The first game I had was Sonic the Hedgehog," said Johnson, who is the design manager on the LEGO Ideas® line. "So immediately that kind of childhood connection kicks in and you have all these nostalgic feelings of, 'I really hope this goes through and I really want to be a part of it if it does.' And then I had this dread of, 'Well, how are we going to make Sonic?'"

Earlier this month, the LEGO Group announced it was in the process of creating a Sonic the Hedgehog set based on a concept designed by 24-year-old UK LEGO® superfan Viv Grannell. Her creation was submitted through the LEGO Ideas platform where it received 10,000 votes of support from LEGO fans.



The next step was the LEGO Group reviewing her project among the many others that make it past that initial hurdle to see if it should be put into production.

Johnson said he found Grannell's build charming.

"It's so much in the vein of the actual video game itself which has this kind of colorful charm to it," he said. "And it's not over complicated, which I really loved. Sonic has this real geometric design to it where the landscape is very stripey and you have these like square patterns on it. And it was visually all there, which I was really happy about."

The submission, entitled Sonic Mania Green Hill Zone, is based on the 2017 SEGA game and the beloved Green Hill Zone level. It Also features Dr. Eggman and others from the world of Sonic.

Creator Grannell said she decided to build a Sonic set because the series is so important to her.

"It's a vibrant, earnest world that's not afraid to experiment, perhaps to dangerous degrees – but what is a life if not lived on the edge?" she said. "Coupled with the fact that SEGA's not only tolerant but encouraging regarding all kinds of fan works I grew up experimenting with, and that's got good synergy with the creative play of the LEGO system."

She added that she also felt that the LEGO Dimensions Sonic offering just scraped the surface of what could be done with the gaming franchise in LEGO bricks.

Once the LEGO Group settled on Grannell's design they had to seek permission from SEGA. Fortunately, SEGA had already heard about the project via social media and loved it.

"Viv had so many special touches and attention to detail for the set in her design: the iconic characters – Sonic and Dr. Eggman coming out there – really kind of bringing everything to life," said John Choon, director of marketing at SEGA. "We thought when we first saw that it was just such a tribute to Sonic and it was just really so classically designed that it was a great collaboration and fit for what Sonic represents."

Now that it is officially approved by both the LEGO Group and SEGA, the two are working together on deciding what the final design will look like. SEGA's licensing team is working with the LEGO Group on concepts and different versions of the product.

LEGO Group's Johnson said the two groups also try to ensure that the final product is something that fans of LEGO sets and Sonic the Hedgehog would want as well.

"We have eventually have to make some decisions on the look, the content and how we go about marketing the product and how it is released as well," he said. "We also need to allocate designers to the project."

Because the LEGO Ideas sets are one-off projects, Johnson said the team will often borrow people from other LEGO Group teams, specifically looking for people who are passionate about the particular project.

In this case, he's assigned himself because he's such a big fan of Sonic.

It's not the first time Johnson was able to do the design work on a LEGO Ideas project based on a beloved property. He was also the lead designer on the LEGO Doctor Who set

21304 that was released in 2015. In that case Johnson relied on a bit of star-power to get the job: His uncle is Paul McGann, who portrayed the eighth Doctor.

No word yet on what exactly will be included in the final Sonic LEGO set, how much it will cost, or when it will come out.

Explore more...

In order of appearance

[Sonic Mania](#) - Official website

[Sonic the Hedgehog](#) - Official website

[LEGO Ideas](#) - Official website

[Sonic Mania - Green Hill Zone](#) - LEGO Ideas

[Doctor Who](#) - LEGO Ideas

[Voltron](#) - LEGO Ideas

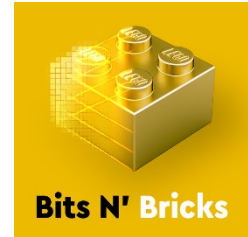
[Grand Piano](#) - LEGO Ideas

[Tree House](#) - LEGO Ideas

Transcript

Bits N' Bricks Season 1 Episode 10: LEGO® Sonic Mania™: A Conversation

February, 10 2021 · 0:44:25



Bits N' Bricks: Introduction - 00:00

(Child's voice announcing Bits N' Bricks)

Ethan Vincent

Welcome to Bits N' Bricks, a podcast about all things LEGO games. I'm Ethan Vincent-

Brian Crecente

- and I'm Brian Crecente. Together we look back at the rich 25-year history of LEGO games, chat with early developers and seasoned studios who have all tackled the creation of video games for one of the most popular and respected toy companies in the world - the LEGO Group.

Chapter 1: LEGO Sonic Mania - 00:33

(Introduction music)

Ethan Vincent

So, Brian, today we're going to be talking about some exciting news to hit the world of LEGO bricks recently. It's SEGA's® iconic blue blur, Sonic the Hedgehog™, and he's getting his very own LEGO theme set.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, I couldn't be more excited. This actually isn't the first time the diminutive speedster is getting a minifigure of his own though. He showed up as an expansion pack with LEGO Dimensions, but this time around, it's not just going to be him.

(Sonic Mania music)

Ethan Vincent

That's partially tied to the way this all came about a 24 year old super fan named Viv Grannell submitted a Sonic theme set to LEGO Ideas®, and once her project got 10,000 votes from fans, the LEGO Group assessed whether it would make a good set and after

consulting with SEGA, of course, decided it would. So they've green-lit it for official production and release.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, one of the things I really love about this set that Viv made is that it's not really based on the original Sonic the Hedgehog, instead it's based on the 2017 Sonic Mania game.

(Sonic Mania game sounds)

Brian Crecente

The cool thing about that game is that its development was actually led by this guy named Christian "Taxman" Whitehead, who is a developer who got his start creating a bunch of Sonic the Hedgehog fan games. So his work, which was so well received by not just SEGA, but a bunch of fans of Sonic the Hedgehog, ended up leading to him getting a job from SEGA who hired him to make these sort of smartphone ports. And eventually they brought him on to lead development on Sonic Mania, which was meant to be this sort of, I guess you could call it sort of a combination of a look at the classic Sonic and sort of updating him. So Sonic Mania, when it came out 2017, went on to become the highest rated Sonic game in the past 15 years.

Ethan Vincent

Wow, okay so, this is kind of meta, right? There's a LEGO brick fan creation based on a SEGA game fan creation, is that right?

Brian Crecente

Yeah. I mean, that's exactly right. And while the Sonic Mania - Greenhill Zone fan set that was made for LEGO Ideas, isn't a LEGO video game, it's so much up our alley here at Bits N' Bricks that we decided to do an episode about it. And we were lucky enough to interview folks from the LEGO Group, from SEGA, and even the fan creator Vic Grannell.

Ethan Vincent

Yes. And so we're going to dive straight into this first section, looking at the LEGO Ideas' creation process and who better to talk to than Samuel Thomas Liltorp Johnson, Samuel Johnson, who is the design manager on the LEGO Ideas' line. But I also have to add here, Brian, in addition to reviewing LEGO fan creations, Sam is an incredible designer with the LEGO Group who has helped design several LEGO themes from LEGO City, to LEGO Ninjago, LEGO Harry Potter, and LEGO Jurassic World. I mean just an immense amount of sets he's been a part of and helped design. So let's go ahead and dive into our first conversation here with Sam.

Chapter 2: Conversation with Samuel Johnson - 03:47

(Game music)

Brian Crecente

So when you first saw Viv's Ideas build, what was it that you thought? Was there any initial thoughts you had when you first saw her build for the Sonic set?

Samuel Thomas Liltorp Johnson

Yes, yeah, that one has been really exciting to me. It's the, you know, the first video games, like the first video games console that I had was the SEGA Mega Drives, which it's called in the UK, or the SEGA Genesis in the US. Yeah, I had a SEGA Mega Drive, which my dad bought for me, and the first game I had was Sonic the Hedgehog. So immediately that kind of childhood connection kicks in, right? And you have all these nostalgic feelings of I really hope this goes through and I really want to be a part of it if it does. And then I had this dread of, well, how are we going to make Sonic? How are we going to make Sonic the Hedgehog? And because we had the LEGO Dimensions that came out some years ago now, and that's also finished and gone, and I was just wondering, does the LEGO Sonic still exist? Can we still bring him to life? So that was a kind of scary feeling that I had of like, well, if we say that we can do it, then we need to have Sonic, you know? You can't do the set without him.

Brian Crecente

Right, absolutely. Was there anything in particular about her build that stood out?

Samuel Thomas Liltorp Johnson

Yeah, I really like how it's kind of charming the build. It's not very, you know, complex in it's build the same way that we sometimes get, you know, the Medieval Blacksmith that just came out - where it's this really elaborate build to create a house - it's really simplistic, and it's so much in the vein of the actual video game itself where it has this kind of colorful charm to it, and it's not over-complicated, which I really loved. You know, Sonic has this real geometric design to it where, you know, the landscape is very stripey and, you know, you have these like square patterns on it. And it was really like, visually it was all there which I was really happy about, bright colors and just really fun to look at.

Ethan Vincent

So, Sam, in looking at this set and seeing this fan creation, what would you say was there in particular about this creation that really won the team over?

Samuel Thomas Liltorp Johnson

I think something that was really winning for us was the way that Viv presented it, you know, it was really kind of naive in its way of being presented with having hand-drawn details on, where some people try really hard to replicate the exactness of, maybe a *Star Wars* spaceship or something like that. But she's really gone into this level of, I really want to get my ideas out on the page, and you can just really see her like, thoughts from her brain splashing onto the page where it's really fast and it's really, you know...but it looks exactly like how you would want Sonic to look, you know, it's simplistic and colorful. But the team was really just excited about, you know, it's a really cool gaming IP that LEGO Dimensions had back in the day and never really took advantage of how cool it really is. So we're really hoping that by taking it on, we can really give, you know, something that everyone has really been wanting for a really long time.

Brian Crecente

I think personally, I think it's so cool that this is a set that's not just based on Sonic, but specifically on Sonic Mania, which in and of itself was a fan sort of creation. Was that something that you liked or in terms of which Sonic she chose to go with? Were you happy with that decision?

Samuel Thomas Liltorp Johnson

Yeah, so as I heard her choice of Sonic Mania, it really is a bit of everything from the whole Sonic World, that game, you know, it has the fan background to it where, you know, the fans have been helping to create the game, and just have hands in nearly every aspect of it. But then it also harkens back to the origin of Sonic, where it came from and what everyone has grown up with or experienced over their life, you know, maybe you didn't start off with the original Sonic, maybe you came in as it became more 3D, and it has a bit of everything in it, this game. So I really think that it was a great choice for her to go with that. And, yeah, it really speaks to the anniversary, the huge 30th anniversary that Sonic has coming up very soon.

Brian Crecente

Right, Yeah, no, obviously that's great timing. So you, once you all have looked at a project that has received 10,000 votes, and then you accept it. What is sort of the next step? What is the process of taking this idea creation and turning it into an official LEGO Group release?

Samuel Thomas Liltorp Johnson

So what my role is, once we get the kind of go ahead and say, we've made the arguments of which project we should do, and then we have a team that's making the decision of it's going to be that one. So we say, well you're going to do Sonic Mania, and that's the one we're going to go ahead with. And so then one of the big things is contacting the people who own that IP. So in this case, it's SEGA, and we've been in dialogue with SEGA in the UK who are working directly with Sonic the Hedgehog. And, we're having a lot of discussions

about, you know, what are SEGA's plans and what are LEGO Ideas' plans for the project and how can we align and to create a product that is what they want, but also what the fans themselves who voted for this, what they're asking for. So we have eventually to make some decisions on the look, the content, and you know, and how we go about marketing the products and how it's released to the world. And then my job as the design manager is to allocate the design team to it - to that project. So whichever project it is we're always looking for the most passionate people, or, you know, also the most available people to us, because we actually borrow a lot of our designers from other teams because they really show passion in these one-off projects. So we're looking for the right people to do it, and I was able to get a graphic designer, her name's Lauren to work with me on the project, and she's real big fan of SEGA and Sonic as well. And, I was also a little bit selfish where I said, I'm going to do this, so I was able to be the designer on the set as well as leading the team as well. So I put myself back into the pool of designers, if you like.

Ethan Vincent

That's great. So you obviously look at this creation, you look at, you know, let the fans want here and what SEGA's interested in. What do you do in terms of design? I mean, do you try to stick to that original fan design or do you tend to expand upon it, or even like remove elements when you're converting it over to the official.

Samuel Thomas Liltorp Johnson

Yeah, so we're ultimately trying to respect what the fans created and also the other 10,000 fans that have voted what they actually voted for. So I really want us to be able to deliver what people have asked for. So, what our discussion with IP partner, for example, SEGA is who we're talking about now, our discussion with them would be, we really want to keep the essence of this, you know, the charm, that Viv put into this design, but we also want to offer something special that maybe people aren't expecting, or maybe something that links to a world event that's coming up.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, it's great to see these sort of relationships building between the LEGO Group and different game studios. Obviously we saw that with Nintendo, and so one can't help but wonder, is this just the first, the first creation? Personally, I would love to see something like a LEGO brick created Game Gear or Dreamcast. Do you think something like that could ever be in the works?

Samuel Thomas Liltorp Johnson

I think for LEGO Ideas, we always hoped that that one off idea may be the spark that ignites something maybe much bigger, you know, so if you think about when LEGO Ideas was quite early on, we took on the Ghostbusters IP. And Ghostbusters, there was not really a lot going on for that IP at that time, so it was very kind of risky for the LEGO Group to take on the IP and with no movie attached, no anniversary or anything. And now you look at what

happens to that IP after that, you know, LEGO Dimensions and LEGO Ideas, and then further, LEGO Ghostbusters product. You know, it really expanded into something huge for the LEGO Group. And then, I can't talk about that without mentioning LEGO Minecraft, which came from LEGO CUUSOO, which evolved into LEGO Ideas. And you think about this one tiny box that we made for, I think it was \$24.99 or \$34.99, it was really quite a small box. There's now spawned to this entire product assortment. It's really fantastic that we can open up the eyes of the LEGO Group and see like - oh look at this cool opportunities that are out there. So we always hope that by taking this leap of faith into, right now SEGA, that maybe this is just the start of something massive. I hope that for every product that we make.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, I'm sure that there are a lot of people who would love that. It's interesting you bring up Ghostbusters, and it makes us think about this idea that, you know, some of these IPS that you just talked about tend to do really well on LEGO Ideas. Do you feel that IP related builds have a better chance at winning over approval and fans when they go through the Ideas project?

Samuel Thomas Liltorp Johnson

Oh, that's a tough question because I know from...you know, it's just a fact that every IP has its fandom, right? So whether it's a vehicle IP, say Ferrari, or it could be a movie IP like the Avengers, it could be down to furniture or something like that. There's an IP for everything. So when you tap into that icon that everyone knows, or a huge group of people know, of course then maybe you have people who really love that because of that IP, which is why we choose a lot of brand new IP in LEGO Ideas because we feel like maybe it brings new people that we've never seen have an opportunity to own a LEGO set, and now they have something for them as well. So of course it has a great chance because there is this following out there that may come to the LEGO Ideas' platform. But then when you think about original ideas that someone has just come in, come up within their head and sketched down and made a cool model out of, I would say that they have an equal chance because, you know, there's just some great ideas out there, like the Tree House, which launched in 2019, you know it's a really awesome LEGO model and really been selling great and really reached a lot of people, not because we put an IP spin on it, but because it just meant something to people, you know, it has that dream of, you know, the dream tree house that everyone wanted when they were a kid, but their dad never built it in the garden for them, or something like that. And so we have a very strict process of the LEGO review...the LEGO Idea's review gate that, you know, iron things out and make it equal for everyone that reaches 10,000 votes. So we're looking at lots of different criteria. But then when you think about just on the platform itself, that there's many ideas that we have never, never even thought of ourselves like a musical piano. We've never even thought about doing that as a LEGO set, but 10,000 people showed us the way to do it. And that was really cool that people see - Oh, I really like music. And this really shows me something

special with LEGO bricks. So if you have an original idea and it has that kind of special spark to it, I would say it has as good a chance as anyone.

Brian Crecente

Do you have a favorite among the Ideas sets that you've either worked on or you've seen released?

Samuel Thomas Liltorp Johnson

Yeah. I mean, I don't want to feel...I don't want to be biased to any of them 'cause I really think LEGO Ideas has such a strong product assortment. It's just all kinds of crazy things. I'm super proud of LEGO Voltron that we launched back in, I think it was '17, 2017, where it is before I was working permanently on the LEGO Ideas' team where I was working for a team called LEGO Nexo Knights back in the day, if you can imagine 2014, when that came out, I think it was 2016 Nexo Knights was launched. And the design lead on LEGO Ideas at the time, Tara Wike actually, which I believe you've interviewed her before - she works on the minifigure's team. She was walking around my area and talking to the people who like to make LEGO robots as their hobby. And, she was showing them a picture of this LEGO Voltron model that was made by a guy called Lendy asking, like, what do you think, do you think we could do it? And everyone's like, nah, I don't think so, I mean, look how big it is. You know, it's never going to stand. It's never going to be stable. And then - Hey, it has this huge transformation where it has to split into five lions. And, I was sitting there listening to this conversation and I literally just went to her and I took the piece of paper out of her hand and said, give me that, I'll give you a LEGO Voltron. And so I made myself the designer on it right there and then I was like - I'll give this to you. And, I couldn't do it. I was not good enough (laughs) I really tried. I really tried my best, and I took it to like a forum where we talked about, would it be possible with all this weight and this structure and everything. And I showed them how I imagined it working. And I had a kind of working prototype if you like, but it just wasn't there. You know, it wasn't stable. And then I had this guy who was relatively new to the company, his name's Niek, and he was hanging around my desk like - Are you going to...is this a real product, you know, is this is going to be a real thing? And we were trying to keep it secret from everyone, but you can't really hide a 40 centimeter robot that sat on your desk, you know, you can't really hide that. So I ended up just saying to him, yeah, you know, I can't do it. I'm really struggling. And he said to me, do you mind if I try? And so we got together and we tried out some different ideas. So we had it in all different sizes and proportions to try and realize it, make it for real. And, then I went on some holiday with my kids and when I came back, Niek had nailed it, you know, he'd really done a great job and he got it to work and got it to be stable. And then it ended up on the shelf. So really proud that we managed to do that.

Ethan Vincent

Wow.

Brian Crecente

That's awesome.

Samuel Thomas Liltorp Johnson

And I think another one that I'm really happy about is LEGO Doctor Who, which is from 2015, I think it quite awhile ago now. That's the first LEGO Ideas' set that I designed. I was looking on Twitter at the time, which is like old days of Twitter, and I saw someone posting about that LEGO Idea submission before it reached to 10,000 saying, how cool would this be? And he tagged all these actors who had played the doctor in Doctor Who, and one of them actually responded to him saying, that would be awesome, but only if Sam Johnson gets to be the LEGO designer on it - that's crazy, right? So I screenshot at that statement and I sent it to the LEGO Ideas' team and I said, Hey guys, even the doctor wants me to be the designer on Doctor Who, how can you say no to this? And, you know, they had other people approach them and say, I want to be the designer. I'm a big fan. And I'd send them - the doctor wants me to do this. And so I got the gig to design the product, worked with BBC on how design it, and then it was later that I actually revealed to them, when we were writing the story for the building instruction, was that actually this actor who played doctor, the doctor in Doctor Who, his name's Paul McGann, who played the eighth doctor, he's actually my uncle.

(Laughter)

Brian Crecente

So, so you played everybody.

Samuel Thomas Liltorp Johnson

Yeah, totally.

Ethan Vincent

Total insider card. That was a good one.

(Samuel Thomas Liltorp Johnson laughs)

Brian Crecente

That's great.

Ethan Vincent

I think I just got a really good insight into the process and I'm not talking about this really fun nepotistic moment-

(Laughter)

Ethan Vincent

-but I'm talking more about like this idea of how intricate and complicated and interesting it is to first of all, have designs come in that maybe stump you, right? Where you go, huh, this is amazing. How did they do this? And immediately, I guess there's an impulse to dismiss, right? And say, this is never going to work structurally. It doesn't work. It's not really within the LEGO DNA, all this stuff. But it is interesting once the designers then go through that process and break it down and kind of maybe, for lack of a better analogy in music, like transpose it into like proper LEGO DNA, then it starts working and coming to life. I find that so fascinating, Sam.

Samuel Thomas Liltorp Johnson

Yeah. I think, you know, it's not just only LEGO Ideas where this happens, you know? I imagine all those designers working in *Star Wars*, every time they see one of the new movies, they're like - Oh no, look at that spaceship - you know, because it could be, you know, a real crazy shape or something like that. But LEGO Ideas, the platform, it gives people the right to go and make whatever they want. And if they can make it work in their own home, then they can submit it. So then it's my job to realize it in the real world, you know, working on the International Space Station, which we launched early last year, we realized very quickly that the International Space Station is not made to be built in earth gravity. So it was very difficult to make that structure, even though the model is a miniature, to make that structure it was very heavy weight, very huge solar panels on each end to make that work in earth gravity. So that was actually a huge challenge for us to stop it from snapping in half and all this kind of thing. And so there's just...the LEGO Group has very strict stability guidelines and quality guidelines, and we really want to meet those every time. So we're really trying our best to do our diligence in making great techniques for building and making it fun for everyone to build, and also in LEGO Ideas, we're just daring to make something that's a bit more off the wall and a bit different and really not just another model, but like a whole experience, you know, it should be experience from the minute that you purchase the set or even pick up the set on the shelf to opening it, to building it, to enjoying the build, to enjoying it on display in your house, and then maybe even smashing it again at the end.

Ethan Vincent

That's awesome. I wanted to ask a little bit about the creation process. I know that there was an early concept called LEGO Factory as well, which relied on LDD and, you know, individuals really... I guess maybe die-hard kind of LEGO fans to create their creations digitally and then submit those and LEGO Factory would do that. Do you find that many of those participating in LEGO Ideas are that digitally literate and submit it in that form? Or how do you normally get your submissions and how does that work maybe with the digital front?

Samuel Thomas Liltorp Johnson

Yeah, it's actually surprisingly a lot of the fans on LEGO Ideas, quite versed in using, LEGO Digital Designer, or perhaps Studio from BrickLink or maybe some other software that they have at hand. So a lot of the submissions we're receiving maybe the 3D design that goes with it, the files for that, at which we're able to...which really gives us a good kickstart on starting the design and really making those shapes that the designer has originally had in their head while sitting at home building with their own bricks or on the computer. And with this we often get a submission, like the tree house, which I mentioned before, where all we had was around 10 photographs from Kevin because he, you know, that wasn't his hobby wasn't building digitally, he just likes to have the hands-on experiences of holding LEGO bricks in his hand. And so you get, you know, LEGO Ideas it opens up for all different kinds of people with all different levels of experience in perhaps design, or presentation, or you know, it could...or maybe they just do it for fun.

Ethan Vincent

Awesome.

Brian Crecente

So, I'm curious, Sam, with this particular set with the Sonic set, was it...was that a digital creation, a physical? How did that come to you and how do you think it was crafted?

Samuel Thomas Liltorp Johnson

Yeah, so speaking with Viv she of course has the LEGO Dimensions Sonic set, which she very proudly got on her desk. But then we had been looking at her submission and you can see, you can often see from the images whether it's a render from a 3D software or if it's a photograph, just because that's what we're working with, you know, every day when we look at packaging, for example, so whether it's going to be a render or if it's going to be a photograph which some boxes have. So we can quickly see that her submission was a render. But I was wondering if she had actually built any of it for real, because there's also some things we find, like the Blacksmith, Clemens had never actually seen the model in real life. So the first time he saw it was on our end while we're holding it on webcast-

Brian Crecente

Oh wow.

Samuel Thomas Liltorp Johnson

-speaking with him. So I had to...I'd also ask, have you, have you tried to build any of it for real? And she's like, yeah. And she showed me Doctor Eggman, the model that she had on her desk there that she'd been trying out and stuff. And obviously not every brick is available in every color. So maybe requires the, you know, painting a brick if you dare, or going on to LDD and making your own colors of the bricks in the software there.

Brian Crecente

Right, right.

Samuel Thomas Liltorp Johnson

So she, so she had built her submission in the software and then drawn over it...it looked...it was perhaps, like paint or something like that. You know, Microsoft paint to draw the details on it. It was really fun to see though, it was like hand-drawn details and everything, but using three...digital software. But that...so she was able to hand over a lot of her files of, you know, I built Eggman like this, I built the landscape and the ring like this. What do you think? And that gives us a really good starting point for a conversation about how I would build it and how she would build it. And then once the kind of happy middle ground that realizes her design, but maybe through more stable building techniques, and to helping...we were basically helping each other solve the problem of getting this set out to market. It was a really great collaboration. And we really like to work with the fan in this way. So, you know, it's a back and forth discussion because originally, it came from them, the idea. So we want to respect that they have a hand in the design team, you know, they're part of the design team. So they should, of course, have as much say as anyone else.

Brian Crecente

That's very cool. Thank you so much, Sam. Very interesting. And I'm so jealous that you were able to do that Doctor...I'm actually right now, going through and watching every single episode of Doctor Who from the beginning.

Ethan Vincent

Brian's binge-watching it, right?

Brian Crecente

Yeah, I've been, binge-watching it for about six months I think. I've already re watched all the new ones. So, I think I'm on the...I'm about to get to the third doctor. No, the fourth doctor, I'm about to get to the fourth doctor. But very cool that you had a hand in that. I still look at the dimension set and I just love it, and obviously the set you built was amazing too, designed I mean.

Samuel Thomas Liltorp Johnson

Yeah, I'm really happy with how it turned out. I was recently reading an old article about that set the other day that...'cause I had done an interview for, totally forgotten about it. And I found this article online again, and I had all the pictures of all the Daleks that I'd made to try and make one that was right for the set. So that was really cool. And I remember we built this TARDIS in normal, standard LEGO blue. And then when we showed it to the BBC, they were like, 'no way, that is not the color of the TARDIS.'

(Laughter)

Samuel Thomas Liltorp Johnson

And I'm like, yeah, I know that, but if I do it in dark blue, then I have to change, I think it was 15 different LEGO bricks to dark blue, which is a real manufacturing nightmare to change so many bricks in one go, for one set in a weird color, like dark blue that not a lot people use, you know, in every LEGO set. And, so that was just like, Oh no, I'm going (laughs) someone's going to kill me when I do this (laughs) so, you know, it was, you know, you're at the [mercy of] the IP partner though, like with them and their requirements, right? So I'm really happy with how it turned out. I think it was a really special set, and maybe once in a lifetime, right?

Brian Crecente

And it's retired now. Do those ever come out of retirement? Or once they're retired that's it.

Samuel Thomas Liltorp Johnson

It's very rare that you see a LEGO set come out of retirement. There isn't like the Taj Mahal or something like that. So it could be that was my once-in-a-lifetime Doctor Who TARDIS set...

Brian Crecente

Well, Doctor Who came out of retirement so maybe the set can, too.

(Laughter)

Samuel Thomas Liltorp Johnson

It could regenerate into a new LEGO set, right?

(Laughter).

Ethan Vincent

That's awesome.

Chapter 3: LEGO Superfan Viv Grannell - 30:58

(Music)

Ethan Vincent

Well, I'm excited to see where this project goes now that it's inside the LEGO Group and in the hands of its creators.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, me too, but I bet neither of us are as excited about this as Grannell is.

Ethan Vincent

Oh man, as a fan, you know, just submitting that, seeing the votes come in and being so close to being picked. You spoke to her about the project recently via email, how did that go?

Brian Crecente

Well, Viv Grannell is amazing. You have to understand that the process of getting a LEGO idea accepted as an official release can be really arduous. It's a process that includes a lot of these meetings behind the...sort of scenes meetings between the person who created the idea and the LEGO Group. And they end up getting a lot of small updates just to kind of keep them in the loop. So Viv told me that she was expecting sort of another sort of incremental update back in 2020 when the Ideas' team invited her to a meeting. So she said, she shows up thinking that this was going to be this, you know, tiny thing. And as she put it, she was bamboozled. She said they actually told her the project was greenlit and she was beyond ecstatic. And to quote her, she said - I'd been effectively holding my breath since it became obvious 10,000 people were going to support it. So having a sense of certainty on the outcome really helped.

Ethan Vincent

That's awesome. That's cool. Did she say why she decided to do a set based on this particular video game character?

Brian Crecente

Yeah, she said that Sonic is a series near and dear to her heart, and in her words, she said - it's in a vibrant and earnest world that's not afraid to experiment, perhaps to dangerous degrees, but what is a life if not lived on the edge? Coupled with the fact that SEGA is not only tolerant, but encouraging regarding all kinds of fan works. She said she grew up experimenting with the creative play of the LEGO system. So she was a really a longtime fan of Sonic and felt like these two sort of melded together well. So she, when she started looking at what she wanted to do and decided on Sonic, one of the first decisions she

made was that she wanted to work with, what is now considered the classic Sonic, which is the green-eyed Sonic, but she also wanted to include something from the modern version of Sonic the Hedgehog and the Sonic the Hedgehog games. So that was this idea of bringing in Doctor Eggman, and of course the backdrop for the minifigure and the figure you would build, is the classic Green Hill Zone. And that was chosen she said because she feels it is the quintessential starting point of Sonic's many adventures. So working on this project, she actually started back in 2016. And then it was launched on Ideas in February, 2019.

Ethan Vincent

Wow, that's quite some time there. What's next for Viv? I mean, does she have plans for any other project ideas in particular, maybe ones based on video games, or is she going to continue that trend kind of?

Brian Crecente

Yeah, I asked her about that and she said she was actually working on a, as she put it, a low budget, Junkbot pitch, based on that classic LEGO.com game that so many people love, and I know you and I have talked about. But then she was surprised to find that Junkbot actually appeared in the official Haunted House set, and that kind of took the wind out of her sails for that set at least. So, there's some other ideas she said she's working on, but she's trying to keep those secret right now. Of course she's also a huge fan of a lot of the other LEGO Ideas' video game creations out there, including that amazing Metroid concept, that's been making the rounds recently, as well as the Legend of Zelda castle, Portal 2, and Earthbound Mother sets. And I know, Ethan, you and I have talked a lot about these. They're just amazing creations.

Chapter 4: Conversation with John Choon – 34:53

(Music)

Ethan Vincent

We also chatted with John Choon. He's the director of marketing at SEGA, and we talked to him about the company's decision to embrace this LEGO Ideas build.

Brian Crecente

So, John, how did you first hear about the LEGO Ideas Sonic build? How did you, how did that sort of first come across your desk?

John Choon

Yeah, the first time was really through our internal teams and our community team, which is really in tune with everything out there on social and the community. And we saw stuff pop

up on social media about this project. And so we heard about it and of course our licensing team thereafter as well, because they'd been working on a program with the LEGO Group, we...yeah, we just saw it and we loved it.

Brian Crecente

Did you have any sort of specific initial thoughts when you took a look at it?

John Choon

No, I thought it was amazing, you know, super cool to see, you know, the fan creation and the idea of Sonic Mania into a LEGO format, which was just really on point and everybody who saw it, not only myself thought that's cool that needs to happen.

Brian Crecente

I think I personally, I love the fact that this is...this set, the Ideas' set that was created was based on Sonic Mania, which obviously you're aware is its own sort of fantastic fan-driven game. And then you have this fan driven LEGO kit. So it's sort of like a very meta I think, was that something, when you mentioned Sonic <ania, was that something that came to mind when you were looking at it?

John Choon

Yeah, it was just a really cool concept in general, you know? We saw it and thought super unique, very much on point with what Sonic represents through LEGO format, a very imaginative attention to detail everything. So it was really cool.

Brian Crecente

So I'm sure that there are a lot of times that fans and maybe even other companies want to do something with Sonic. What was it about this particular creation that you think won over SEGA?

John Choon

I think Viv, you know, the lead designer had so many special touches and again, the attention to detail for the set in her design to that kind of characters and Sonic and Doctor Eggman coming out there, really kind of bringing everything to life. So, we thought when we first saw it, it was just such a tribute to Sonic and it was just really so classically designed that we thought it was a great collaboration and fit for what Sonic represents.

Ethan Vincent

So, John, what does this process look like on your end, on SEGA's end, you know, with LEGO Ideas? Are you just looking at a lot of different builds or how does this work?

John Choon

I think that the main thing is our licensing team is leading the charge on the design, working closely with the LEGO team. And so we see concepts, we see the product being developed, but really it's really a collaborative process where our team, as well as the LEGO Group's team, they're working hand in hand on the design from the very beginning, and of course with Viv, to really bring it to life.

Brian Crecente

So what about the LEGO Group do you think makes for a good match with SEGA when it comes to both of your brands?

John Choon

I think the LEGO Group is just such a recognizable, iconic brand with a name that, you know, everybody out there really kind of knows, but also the product is so great with the commitment to the quality over the years, and it's really about creativity and encouraging innovation. And so I think SEGA also strives to do similar things with our core values, for our products, and what we we're trying to bring from an entertainment standpoint. So I think because of those things, we make a good fit in my opinion. And I think hopefully that will, you know again, lead to more things in the future.

Brian Crecente

Kind of getting back to the design of this particular kit. They, I think like what Viv has said is that she wanted to sort of blend sort of the modern era with some of the retro sort of memorable moments of Sonic. Do you think that Green Hill Zone is sort of the classic in your mind, the classic Sonic, or are there other zones that you can think of that would have been a better match or as good a match?

John Choon

Yeah, I think Green Hill Zone is definitely one of the most recognizable and classic, you know, things that Sonic has to offer, just from the world's standpoint. So the fact that it naturally happened that way organically, I think it works great because Viv is, you know, she's a super fan and I think she, you know, did what she wanted to do in her design, which just pays tribute to, you know, classic Sonic and the past Sonic designs from the game, which is the...I think it was just a natural fit.

Brian Crecente

Do you have any sort of favorite elements of Sonic that you'd like to see, either appear in this set or some future LEGO creation?

John Choon

Yeah, I think just the characters, all the different characters, you know, from over the years where there's classic and modern. But Viv, in what the set right now has to offer is pretty cool because it does have, you know, we talked about Green Hill, it's got Eggman and a few different characters, but I think the universe is so rich with a lot of various characters that I think offering that in the future would be cool.

Brian Crecente

Excellent. Is there anything else you'd like to add about this team-up?

John Choon

No, we're just super honored to be able to participate with LEGO Group on this collaboration in celebration of the 30th anniversary for Sonic. And we're really excited to see it come out, you know, how fans respond and what the response is going to be in general. But we're just thankful for the opportunity that it's here and it's ahead of us. So thank you to everybody who made it happen.

Brian Crecente

And we're actually, I should note, we're recording this before the announcement hits. Do you have any sort of expectation for how fans, like do you think people are going to be completely surprised by this?

John Choon

I think because there's been some history with, you know, Sonic and the LEGO Group in the past, it's not going to be a complete surprise, but I think it's going to actually, yeah, it's gonna make people go a bit crazy, this brands coming together, it's going to be, I think, a great surprise.

Ethan Vincent

What are you going to do when you get to have the set and put it on your desk? Are you excited to have this LEGO iteration of Sonic the Hedgehog?

John Choon

Yeah, for sure, you know? I'm giving it a special spot. Not sure exactly how big it is, I've seen the pictures and some of the specs, but definitely got to make space for it 'cause it's-

Ethan Vincent

Yeah.

John Choon

-you know, it's going to be awesome.

Brian Crecente

Well, thank you so much, John, for joining us. I really appreciate it, and I too am very much looking forward to having a little Sonic sitting on my desk.

John Choon

Thank you guys. Appreciate it.

Ethan Vincent

Thanks, John.

(Music)

Chapter 5: Conclusions – 41:46

Ethan Vincent

One of the cool things about the LEGO Ideas' concept, Brian, is how this all goes back I think to the simple notion of building and sharing. Like these gems of ideas, like these little bubbles kind of surface to the top and take shape and the entire community votes on that idea and it gains real traction and attention....And then, the LEGO Group is willing to invest the time, the energy, the resources to allocate creative, accomplished designers on that project and help kind of fine-tune and release it to the public. It's a really cool process and I'm really glad to see the LEGO Group embracing this possibility for fans to create and publish these sets.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, and don't forget those creators also get a bit of money made off of these releases. I think it's such a wonderful symbiotic relationship that ends up helping everyone involved and delivering some of the most surprising sets of each year. I think back to some of these other amazing Idea creations; Ideas gave us things like the set based on the Friends TV show and a working grand piano and even Sesame street, and of course there's also Minecraft, which actually started on LEGO Ideas' predecessor, CUUSOO, way back in 2011.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah. We're definitely looking forward to that next great LEGO Ideas' video game set that hits its goal and gets the official green light, just to appear on the shelves. And hopefully, we'll be talking about that in the future in our podcast as well.

(Postscript Music)

Bits N' Bricks: Credits – 43:29

Ethan Vincent

Bits N' Bricks is made possible by LEGO Games. Our producer is Ronny Scherer. Your hosts are Brian Crecente and Ethan Vincent. Episode producing and editing by Ethan Vincent. Writing by Brian Crecente. Mixing and sound design by Dan Carlisle. Original music by Peter Priemer and Henrik Lindstrand from the award-winning game LEGO Builders Journey, which you can play on Apple Arcade today.

We'd like to thank our participants, Samuel Johnson and John Choon. We'd also like to acknowledge the entire LEGO Games team, as well as the LEGO Ideas team for their great support. For questions or comments, write us at bitsnbricks@LEGO.com. And as always stay tuned for more episodes of Bits N' Bricks.

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