

LEGO® Nexo Knights Proved the Power of Gaming

While LEGO Nexo Knights was a massive transmedia property that spanned television, books, magazines, toys, and even an amusement park ride, it was the video game that held the property together and helped propel it to such success.

"The video game was critically important," said Daniel Mathiasen, who was a partnerships and innovations director at the LEGO Group as the property was coming to life.



The LEGO Nexo Knights: Merlok 2.0 mobile game launched weeks before the theme set went live. The game allowed fans to scan shields found in the toys, magazines, the television show, and unlock powers for the knights. It's what gave the theme set its key ingredient: collectability.

"We wanted to see if we could introduce that baseball card play pattern that is so popular among kids in a way where it would fuel more play with the bricks, more play around the story and the universe," Mathiasen said.

The decision weave collectability into a major LEGO Group property came as the company was investigating ways to create its next "Big Bang."

Big Bangs at the LEGO Group are major, original, transmedia properties designed last for years. One of the first was LEGO BIONICLE. Perhaps the most successful has been the company's Ninjago line, which launched in 2011.

In 2013, the LEGO Group launched another Big Bang, LEGO Legends of Chima, originally intended as a replacement for Ninjago. But that theme set only lasted two years and Ninjago continues to thrive.

The LEGO Group continues to invest in Big Bangs. While digging through the extensive history of the LEGO Group, the team came up with the idea of creating a theme set based on futuristic knights. A core team of 25 began their work in late 2013 and spent about two years in deep development. Those early phases included a lot of focus testing with children as well as simply maturing the product internally.

On May 15, 2015, Nexo Knights got the official internal greenlight, and that small team slowly expanded to a massive group of more than 700.

The team also needed a writer to breathe life into the theme sets and minifigures. That's where Mark Hoffmeier comes in. He has a long history writing for television, with credits that include the Power Rangers, Spider-Man: The Animated Series, and even a couple of LEGO video games.

But when the LEGO Group contacted him in 2014, it was to discuss an upcoming television show tied to an emerging LEGO theme set still under wraps based on futuristic pirates.

Because the LEGO Group hadn't contracted Hoffmeier yet, they gave him a fake property to work on, just to see what he could do. They switched the Nexo Knights for pirates.

Hoffmeier was hired after delivering an inspired approach to those pirates, and then created the bible for the theme set, scripts for the upcoming show, and the story for the video game.

The LEGO Group flew him to Billund to work with the LEGO team. During his five-day stint, he and others on the project spitballed ideas and nailed down the basic concepts around Nexo Knights. On that Friday, they presented their story ideas to everyone involved in the project, and the approach was approved.

Over the following months, they also nailed down the title of the property, which was initially going to be called the Knights of Knighton, and the LEGO Group brought on Frima Studio in Quebec to build out the video game.

Fortunately, the LEGO Group had a growing level of expertise in incorporating digital play into physical toys. Its work on projects like Life of George, for instance, prepared them for some of the challenges they could face with Nexo Knights and the shield scanning technology.

Nexo Knights debuted with the television show first, on December 13, 2015. About a week later, the LEGO Nexo Knights; Merlok 2.0 video game hit smartphones. The first wave of theme sets followed on January 2, 2016.

Mads Prahm, who was the production director on the property, said it had a strong launch, but that in the long run it didn't deliver the level of success that the LEGO Group was hoping for.

"The LEGO Group had really big expectations for sales, and those weren't quite being met," he said. "The company had been experiencing this double-digit growth over a decade at the time, and so expectations were really that sales would just be fantastic. And when they weren't fantastic, because it was taking consumers and kids a little bit longer to discover this new IP, then everybody was disappointed."

It's hard to reconcile the feeling internally that maybe Nexo Knights wasn't doing very well with the external reception to the theme set and its longevity. In less than two years, there were 40 television episodes, more than 100 sets, a popular video game, a magazine, several books, and even a 4D film that debuted as a ride at Legoland Windsor Resort in 2016.

But held up against the likes of Ninjago, the success of Nexo Knights dims.

"Ninjago was always the bar that we're trying to raise, and with Chima the company went all in, and even with an online game and TV show and all of those things they didn't manage to make it as big as Ninjago," Prahm said. "And the same with Nexo Knights – and I would say actually, with some of the themes that came after – we're still measuring those up against Ninjago.

"I think that makes sense that, when you do something new, it has to be better than what you've done before. But I think it's just really tough to beat these ninjas."

Ultimately, Nexo Knights wound down in the fall of 2017, a decision fueled by the waning impact of traditional television and the sudden, monumental success of Pokémon Go.

Although Nexo Knights wasn't able to make the same transformative leap from successful Big Bang to thriving evergreen product, it left an impact on the LEGO Group, showing just how powerful a video game can be when tied inexorably to a theme set.

"I think what made Nexo Knights magical was the game that tied everything together," Prahm said. "And not only the core game loop of battling with the characters, but more this meta game that kind of allows you to collect all of these powers and go on a treasure hunt looking for hidden shields. All of that went into making it something bigger than just a toy and a TV show."

Explore more...

In order of appearance:

[Terry Pratchett](#) - GoodReads

[LEGO Nexo Knights](#) - Official website

[LEGO BIONICLE](#) - Myth, Maori, and a Brain Tumor: The BIONICLE Saga

[LEGO Ninjago](#) - Official website

[LEGO Atlantis](#) - Brickipedia

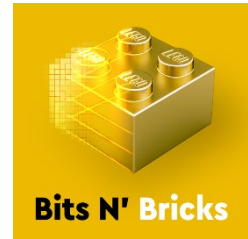
[LEGO Legends of Chima](#) - Wikipedia

[Spider-Man: The Animated Series](#) - Marvel Fandom

Transcript

Bits N' Bricks Season 3 Episode 33: Nexo Knights and the Big Bang Theory

Sept. 15, 2021 • 43:59



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.

(Season 3 theme music for Bits N' Bricks)

Brian Crecente

In the beginning, there was nothing – which exploded!

(Sound of explosion)

Ethan Vincent

Um, I'm not sure that's exactly how that goes.

Brian Crecente

What? Yeah, yeah it is. I'm quoting Terry Pratchett and his take on the Big Bang. What did you think I was talking about?

Ethan Vincent

Ah, yes, OK, I get it, the Big Bang: the swirling start of everything – well, depending on who you ask – a great TV show, and the nickname for a very specific sort of LEGO Group creation.

Brian Crecente

And that is a big part of what we're going to be talking about in today's episode: Big Bangs.

Ethan Vincent

Yes, specifically, the explosive birth of Nexo Knights, a transmedia property starring futuristic Knights who span TV shows, video games, books, magazines, and toys. But before we share the story of Nexo Knights – how it came into focus, took off with a bang and then ended with the fissile – let's explain the whole Big Bang thing.

Brian Crecente

You know, Ethan, it would have sounded so much better if I'd said that with my Texas accent: Big Bang "thang."

(Tune break)

Chapter 1: The Big Bang Theory – 1:41

Ethan Vincent

The LEGO Group created a lot of ... thangs.

Brian Crecente

Thanks, Ethan. I appreciate that.

Ethan Vincent

(Chuckles) Right, those minifigures to theme sets, video games, television shows, books, movies – the LEGO Group is involved in just a ton of stuff. And yeah, you know what? When all of that coalesces into one property, that's totally a Big Bang, and that brings us to Daniel Mathiasen, a former LEGO Group employee who, during the creation of the Nexo Knights, spent quite a bit of time working at the company as a partnerships and innovations director in the Front End Innovation team. From that position, he was involved in a few Big Bangs.

Daniel Mathiasen

A Big Bang is really an expression about how much marketing effort is put behind a given product launch. It's kind of like, what comes first? Do you have a Big Bang and therefore you have a TV show? Or do you set out to develop a TV show, and therefore, you can justify your Big Bang here? We have done this before, we know how to build a Big Bang, and we can do it again. So we set out early to actually develop that. Another way of doing it would be of course saying, "OK, so of all the play themes that we have, what is strong enough to to be carried forward?" Here we deliberately went out and said, "We want to develop this, we want to have this, and it needs to be so strong that it can carry a huge

investment of both digital experiences and digital physical experiences, a TV show, in-store experiences, the whole thing. But end of the day, it's an expression of investment willingness and in the development and the go-to-market campaign.

Brian Crecente

Big Bangs have been around for a while at the LEGO Group. One of the first was actually BIONICLE, which was talked about extensively in its own episode earlier this year in the podcast.

Ethan Vincent

Oh, that's one of my favorites.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, it really was. It's a great one. If you haven't listened to it, go have a listen. So some say that the 2000 release of that property saved the LEGO Group. Whether that's true or not, it certainly had an impact on how such original IP were viewed within the company. Today, the best-known Big Bang is probably Ninjago, which was launched in 2011 in an attempt to double the sales of an earlier Big Bang, LEGO Atlantis, which came out in 2010. Today, Ninjago remains one of the LEGO Group's longest running and most successful original brands. But that didn't stop folks on the Front End Innovation team at the LEGO Group from trying to top it.

Ethan Vincent

Wait. What?

Brian Crecente

Yeah, I know it's crazy! LEGO Legends of Chima was actually developed to replace the Ninjago theme set, but it only lasted two years after launching in 2013. Next, the team decided to look into a theme set based on futuristic knights. That's where Daniel comes back into our story.

Daniel Mathiasen

I was working in the very early development of Nexo Knights in the team responsible of coming up with new front end innovation, we call it new play themes for LEGO homegrown IPs. So that's the group where Ninjago and Chima and Nexo Knights have come out of, and I was setting up a digital physical innovation team where we, together with our colleagues, were innovating around the play for Nexo Knights. What we wanted to have was a diverse portfolio, and obviously there's some play themes around *Star Wars*™ and *Batman*™ and some of the IPs that we get in, third party IPs, coming into to the company. In the early days there was also something more nondescript, play themes like a castle. In the last 15 years, it's been more and more deeper and engaging stories, such as Ninjago and Chima or Nexo Knights. And those were fully fledged IPs that we wanted to establish out there with

the kids, and then offer our play theme around that universe, that story universe and IP. And before Nexo Knights, those Big Bangs had been Ninjago was really the first Big Bang that took off since BIONICLE, then Chima. There was another team developing LEGO Friends, which also became a Big Bang bet from the LEGO Group that turned out well. And then for the target groups on boys was Nexo Knights was really that, and then we worked our way out from that IP thinking and all out into play experiences and saying, how can we combine this?

Ethan Vincent

The initial brief for Nexo Knights was to make a play theme that would be at the top of the wishlist for boys in 2016. So the team researched its back catalogue looking for something they could use to create a new and captivating theme set. But the brief was really just a rough starting point. Creating something that could have the success, broad appeal, and longevity of a theme set like Ninjago, also required figuring out what problem they were trying to solve with the new toys. And that brings us to the biggest challenge: predicting not just what boys would be interested in in 2016, but what they would be obsessed with in two years in the future.

Daniel Mathiasen

I have two kids –

Ethan Vincent

This is Daniel Mathiasen speaking.

Daniel Mathiasen

– and we are now August, and they don't know what they wish for Christmas this year let alone in two years, right? So how do we figure out what kids want for Christmas two years down the road? There we have to tap into some of the things that are always true for kids: engaging stories, the story universe, the play triggers – what is it that go into a successful play theme? We called it that play theme puzzle. When we look at the IP and the theme, what are interesting play dynamics that we can tap into and offer the kids that link up to this universe that we are trying to create. And all of these puzzles we run ideation process, if you will, where we, with brainstorming sessions, trying to divergent saying, "Well, it could also be this, it could also be this."

Ethan Vincent

One of the first things that the partnerships and innovation groups did was dip into the deep well that is the LEGO Group's vast history. The idea of creating theme sets based on futuristic knights came up pretty early in the process. In fact, it was something that the LEGO Group had played around with in the past but never fully explored. It was important to get that thematic hook earlier on because it helps to shape the rest of the experience,

including play. The process then expands to exploring all elements of the potential new set in parallel.

Daniel Mathiasen

The formula for us was doing that in parallel, so all the way from, how are we going to communicate this? What are the hooks that we can use into the campaign, to what are the models that we are building? What is the type of roleplay that we want to tap into? Are there more action-based play in these materials? So, Ninjago you had to spinners. What would an equal play offering be with us, et cetera. So all of these things I explored in parallel, and the things that work through continuously testing with the kids, the things that worked we latch on to and try to dig deeper into what are the core motivations for the kids? Why does this work? How would it work with the direction that story is taking? How would it work with the digital experience? And that's a constant transparent development in each of these areas. So it's both like a meter creative process and then each area driving their own process.

Brian Crecente

With the Big Bang on their mind, the team also explored ways to grow Nexo Knights beyond the physical and expand to things like a video game, including ideas like tying it to a digital tower defense game, and a television show. But in the end, the team decided the best choice was to work in collectability to the theme set.

Daniel Mathiasen

It's been hard for the LEGO Group to introduce that play pattern for a number of years, but that baseball card play pattern that is so popular among kids, could we introduce that in a way where it would fuel more play with the bricks, more play around the story and the universe. It's very much about each area in the team creating that diverse exploration, and then coming back together and saying, "Where can we find commonality? What is it that hooks the kids when we test each of our own experiences and trying – where is the energy? What can we do?"

Ethan Vincent

All of this work was being driven by a relatively small team of 25. The idea was to build up steam on the concept internally, passing it through a number of check-ins and presentations, before giving the project an official greenlight and greatly expanding the team. There was also a lot of discussion about how the transmedia property could be rolled out to toys, television, and video games at essentially the same time.

Daniel Mathiasen

So the big challenge for us when doing IPs like Nexo Knights or for any of the homegrown IPs are, that they're completely new and fresh to the market – never seen before. And you have a very short amount of time to establish these IPs. And they need to compete with

some pretty, pretty strong IPs out there, right? So these playsets need to compete with LEGO *Star Wars*™, an IP that's been in the market for decades and well established and well loved by kids and parents alike. For it to become a Big Bang, you need to go out and establish this as present and top of mind in the same type of group as *Star Wars*™, and just about as strong. And that push requires an enormous effort from everybody involved. And when we start a small team driving this innovation, the materials and the concept that we are developing needs to be really, really strong when we push it out from the early phases, to what we in the LEGO Group call downstream, where the quote-unquote, normal machine takes over, and the really efficient marketing machine that the LEGO Group also is, starts pushing it out. That concept, both the play and the go-to-market strategy, and communication and everything needs to be so sharp that the entire company can get behind it and push it out. We went from a small team of 20, 25 people, to over 700 people across the company. So to get these 700 people who are mainly leads and core people around the company who will drive each of their own little area, to get them on the same page and push something new out through the machine, it needs to be extremely crisp very early on.

(Tune break)

Brian Crecente

That core team began the process in late 2013 and spent about two years in deep development. Those early phases included a lot of focus-testing with children as well as simply maturing the product internally.

Daniel Mathiasen

We wanted to be really mature, we wanted to push ourselves for that because it's heavy in investments for the LEGO Group to invest in TV shows, and computer games, et cetera. So that maturity is really pushed early. And that's fairly early on that we need to identify these key triggers with the kids. The capability that the LEGO Group had built up in those years was really you couldn't be sure that a Big Bang that we launched would get to the same level of Ninjago that became an evergreen IP. But you could make sure that whatever you brought out had a really high success rate for being a blockbuster. The ingredients for that you needed to be able to see very early on.

Ethan Vincent

Then on May 15, 2015, Nexo Knights got the official internal greenlight. That scrappy little team of 25 slowly expanded to more than 200. And now, all of those people had a lot of things to do, as Daniel told us.

Daniel Mathiasen

The parallel I used to draw for people would be whenever LEGO City needs to have a new police station, we pretty much know how to make a police station and mature a box like

that. So when an innovation project is at the same maturity level, then we can give it to the bigger organization and saying, "It's this that we need to have. It's tested well with the kids. We know what to do." Then the model builders, that's good at maturing the models, and the box designers, and everything, they take over and they now own the idea and the concept and can drive it forward through finalization. And there's still, at that point in time, there's still a lot of innovation going on. It's just the hard questions that has been tackled, hard foundational questions that have been tackled in the early innovation team.

(Tune break)

Chapter 2: Futuristic Pirates Stories – 13:44

Brian Crecente

Mark Hoffmeier has a long history writing for television. His work includes time on the Power Rangers, that '90s Spider-Man: The Animated Series, even a couple of LEGO video games, but when the LEGO Group contacted him in 2014, it was to discuss an upcoming television show tied to an emerging LEGO theme set, still under wraps, that was going to be based on futuristic – pirates?

Ethan Vincent

That's right. Because Mark hadn't signed on yet to write the show and backstory, the LEGO Group needed to give him a fake theme to show what he could come up with.

Mark Hoffmeier

They were looking for someone to help them develop a property and do the writing for the show. So I did a test for them that was not based on Nexo Knights but was based on, what they called, sort of an adjacent idea. And it happened to be sort of futuristic pirates. So I delivered – I remember delivering to them, it was basically like what we call sort of a miniature bible, so in other words, you create a bible for the show that usually lays out everything about the show. You know, it'll tell you basically, it'll encapsulate in a couple of pages what the show's concept is, then you'll have a section on the characters, you'll have a section on the setting, you'll talk about the stories and then story arcs. And the complete bible for Nexo Knights that was over 50 pages. I mean, it was very detailed. But I think for the initial test, I probably delivered them 10 or 15 pages of stuff that were just sort of shortened versions of that. Here's some characters. I think I even did a little bit of dialogue, I did a little miniature script thing (chuckles) in which I did – the Pirate Captain also has a home life and so, you know, he's got a wife and kids and it sort of put upon as a pirate king because, you know, "Hey, I got to deal with all the family problems, and also I'm out there marauding." And so, I think they kind of liked that sort of fun, tongue-in-cheek approach to it, and it felt very LEGO television show sort of, and so that was really fun. And then I also

remember, as part of that pitch, I actually even drew some pictures of what I would imagine a futuristic pirate world to look like. And so that was kind of fun, too.

Ethan Vincent

The LEGO Group loved Mark's approach to giving that pirate king a sense of identity outside of being, well, a pirate king. So they hired him on and then invited him, in early 2015, to where they were holding focus tests for a private unveiling of the real theme set he'd be working on – Nexo Knights.

Mark Hoffmeier

I didn't get to see any of what it was until I got into the focus test room. And they were like under covers, and they pull the covers off to show me what they were. (Chuckles) I was so happy. I was. I was like, as a kid who had played with LEGO toys, so happy to see these things. I was just super enamored with the Fortrex, you know, this sort of cool, rolling fortress, and it had tank tracks on it, and not only that, but they had all the other vehicles laid out, too. But I'll tell you a fun story about the Fortrex. That very first day, and I want to say it was like a Monday, they usually ran their tests from like, Monday through Wednesday, and then they had to debrief on Thursdays. But on that first Monday, I had looked through the Fortrex, and obviously I couldn't take any pictures or anything, but I was just looking it through in my mind, and one of the LEGO designers, he built a little kitchenette into the Fortrex, right? Because it was supposed to be a complete, self-contained living environment, right? It was a rolling fortress. And he had a little chef bot in there, right? He had a little mechanical chef in there. And on the first day of testing, I noticed when they would just – there was a period where they were just let the kids sort of look at the toys and explore them. And I noticed several of the boys just looking at the chef bot and like playing and commenting, you know, "Oh look, he's got a chef and there's a kitchen" and I realized, because I have two sons, and I realized that, you know, yeah, kids now are really into these cooking shows, right? They love watching like all these shows on the Food Network and stuff. And so, I then decided that we had to have that chef bot we gave him a name, Chef Eclair, and we decided that Axl on the Nexo Knights would be, you know, not only the biggest toughest guy, but he would also like to cook, and we did several episodes about the fact that he was a chef.

(Excerpt from LEGO Nexo Knights, Sir Axl the Ever-Hungry! – Webisode 5:

Aaron Fox: "Yo Axl, why are you always in your armor?"

Axl: "I like to be prepared."

Aaron Fox: "For what?"

Axl: "For – DINNER!"

Clay Moorington: "Nothing like a good meal to help prepare for kicking some Jestrol butt, right, Axl?")

Mark Hoffmeier

It was really fun that first day to me being introduced to it just sort of became an inspiration for just tons of ideas about the show and looking at it. It was really, really fun.

Brian Crecente

After winning Mark over with that unveiling, the LEGO Group flew him to Billund to work with the team. During that five-day stint, he and others on the project spitballed ideas and nailed down the basic concepts around Nexo Knights. On the Friday of that week, they presented the story ideas to everyone involved in the project, and the approach was approved. During that time they worked on the basic plotline, the backstory, and eventually they even came up with a final name for the theme set. It turns out, it wasn't always Nexo Knights.

Mark Hoffmeier

Yeah, initially, it was just Knighton, and they were like, the Knights of Knighton, and then at one point in time they were just sort of called like Future Knights. And so we were like, struggling around to find a really good name. And because, you know, it being a business, right, you have to legally clear names. And so you have to make sure that you have names that work. And, in the LEGO Group's case, around the world, right? You have everybody and their brother in every country on the face of the planet wanting to play with LEGO toys. And so, you end up having to come up with names that really, really work. And so, I think it was probably six months, and we finally, we all sort of decided we liked Nexo Knights. There were some back and forth about it and then it was, "OK, can it clear legally? Can it work?" And we liked it because it sounded futuristic, you know, which is – that was the challenge, too. Can we tag a word onto it that sounds futuristically, because Knighton, we were sort of like, "OK, it sort of works, but it's like, you know, it also sounds weird to say like, the Knights of Knighton," you know it's – "OK, there's a lot going on there, and Knighton also sounds like lighten" and so we were just going back and forth, and so, when we came up with Nexo Knights, I think we liked – everybody liked the alliteration of it, and it sounds like "nexus." And I think Nexus Knights was one of them that was proposed at one point too that, you know, let's come up with something that sounds really futuristic and stuff. So yeah, we finally ended up with Nexo Knights.

(Excerpt from LEGO Nexo Knights, Sir Axl the Ever-Hungry! – Webisode 5:
Merlok 2.0: " – Nexo Knights! Oh my.")

Ethan Vincent

Mark spent the following months building the complex and detailed story bible for the Nexo Knights and breathing life into the characters that the team created. One of the key characters for the series is Monstrox and the Book of Monsters that he is turned into.

(Excerpt from LEGO Nexo Knights, The Book of Monsters:
Monstrox/Book of Monsters: "Goody-goody, Knight. Quick, page 205.
Wave the magic staff over me and conjure a monster - ")

Ethan Vincent

The idea behind a Nexo Knights' evil talking book has a surprisingly dark inspiration.

Mark Hoffmeier

They had originally had, you know, our villainous bad guys were going to be, you know, it was Jestro, this sort of jester gone bad. And it was going to be this Book of Monsters. And we were sort of trying to figure out how to make that work out, and Tommy Andreasen is a huge collector of like toys, and lots of movie memorabilia, and his house in Denmark is fitted out like a toy museum. And I'm sure, as he says, when he dies he's gonna burden his children with having to dispose of all the stuff he's collected. But one of the things he had was a latex, life-sized version of the Necronomicon from Evil Dead. And of course, we had been working for a couple of days on the show and talking to through concepts, and he comes out with this thing. And the version he had of it, you could actually put your hand in it, had that face on it, and you could make it talk. And we were all pretty punchy, right? So I put my hand in it and I started making it talk, but I started making it talk like Stan Lee because I've worked with Stan Lee a lot, so I started just talking like this and say, "You know, here's the thing, I know I'm a book I'm really evil. I'm full of spells. Look, you're gonna be so sorry you checked me out of this library here in Knighton, OK? Just let me tell you that right now." And we sort of hit on the concept of like, "Hey, what if? What if the book of monsters is the real bad guy, and it sort of converted Jestro, and it talks and it does all of this evil stuff?" And so that's how that came about was just, sort of, intrinsically out of like, kicking stuff around and just having thinking time.

(Excerpt from LEGO Nexo Knights, The Book of Monsters:
Monstrox/Book of Monsters: "More monsters. Make more monsters!")

Brian Crecente

Mark collaborated with people working directly on the designs used for the physical sets, not just with other writers.

Mark Hoffmeier

Yeah, I mean, a lot of it, there's a lot of cross-pollination that goes there. And some of it you can say, like, "OK, well that - " you know, I can look at stuff and go like, "That came directly from the toy designer." So like I said, you know, them putting a little chef bot in the kitchen, they just sort of did that as, you know, dressing and fun, and it looked really cool, and then we were able to roll that into an actual character, right? And give him a personality and make him fun. And then we would come up with stuff that then would be translated into toy stuff. And so there was a lot of working together on all of that. And they

would come up with then, "Oh, we have a cool concept for doing this kind of vehicle for the next season" or "We have a core concept of this kind of monster for that episode." And so it was really incredibly cooperative. It was really fun because it was truly building an IP world with both the creative end of it, and then sort of the creative toy building end of it, the master builders there.

(Tune break)

Ethan Vincent

One of the big secrets for the developing show was how the team had come up with the way to achieve the early vision of making the theme set feel like a collectible. That was done with the use of shields. And there were 150 shields located throughout the Kingdom of Knighton found in sets, the website, magazines and books, and the television show. And all of this was tied to the property's game, which let players scan the shields to collect them and unlock special powers. Mark loved that idea.

Mark Hoffmeier

They showed that idea to me. They were very, you know, it was sort of a highly secretive thing that they had this shield power idea. And so when they first demoed it for me, I was like really blown away. They had explored that technology of being able to use the camera on an iPad or an iPhone to make things appear three dimensional. They had done that with a toy catalog, I want to say the year before. So they were really sure that this technology would work because it was basically taking, what would have been like the technology behind a QR code, but putting it on a shield. And so they could quite easily make those powers go into the game version, right? The game that went along with the Nexo Knights' world. And so I thought that was really cool, because then you could get more powers by, you know, each character had unique powers and each object you would then go get had unique powers, and so it was really cool because then when I wrote some of the books connected to the series, on the cover of the book, after you bought the book and unwrapped it, on the inside of the back cover, I believe it was, you had a unique power that came with the book that you would only get if you got the book, and so that to me was really, really cool that you could generate that stuff and you could add to your arsenal of unique Nexo powers, and then coming up with the whole idea that they would hold up their shields, and Merlok, this sort of like computerized wizard, would be downloaded.

Chapter 3: LEGO® Nexo Knights: Merlok 2.0 Video Game – 25:51

Brian Crecente

The video game for Nexo Knights launched weeks before the release of the theme set's first physical toys. It's actually a clever idea. They did this to ensure that once the product

started rolling out with those collectible, scannable shields, people would have the mobile game available to start collecting them. The game, LEGO Nexo Knights: Merlok 2.0, was seen as the connecting tissue that united all of the disparate elements of this wide-ranging new property together.

Daniel Mathiasen

It was critically important, and especially when we started getting to the point where we said we want to push the collectability play.

Brian Crecente

This is Daniel Mathiasen speaking.

Daniel Mathiasen

We wanted for the kids to collect powers. In the play theme that is expressed by the LEGO bricks to put into the shield. They represent the powers. In the TV show, the shield changes the surface when the knights power up. But we wanted these powers to be something that the kids could engaged with, with any touch point. If it was in the parks, if it was in the shops, if it was in a magazine, they should be able to collect these powers. The place that you then collected these powers was in the app. For that we could have chosen to simply make like a library of powers. But the next very natural step, of course is, when you have – a power is not worth anything unless you can use it. So where do you use your power? Where is it that you get to live out that power or moment? And that became a digital gaming experience.

(Excerpt from Combine 'n' play – LEGO Nexo Knights – Game Trailer:

Narrator: "The power to defeat Jestro's forbidden power is in your hands. With a new combo Nexo powers, you can choose any three you want to create your own unique attack.")

Ethan Vincent

When Mads Prahm came onto the project in 2014 as a production director, there had already been early prototype development work done on Merlok 2.0 by a studio in Copenhagen called Cape Copenhagen.

Mads Prahm

So they had been creating early prototypes of the core game loop, which was a simple kind of battle game. And they had also been doing like simple mock-ups of the meta game, which was this power collection loop. And then they had been doing a lot of play testing with kids to try to understand like, could they get this engagement loop of like, I'm going to play the game, I see what the powers do in the game. Now I'm going to go out into the real world, to a LEGO store or to my toy box to scan new powers into the game, so that I

can use them in the game. So they had kind of been working closely with the team in Billund to prove out that game loop.

Ethan Vincent

Back in 2015, when the Nexo Knights project got the greenlight, the LEGO Group set out to find a more established game developer to create the game. Three different teams sent in proposals, all based on the same fake futuristic pirate IP that the company used with Mark, and the LEGO Group chose Frima Studio in Quebec. It turned out that a lot of work that Frima did for the pirate pitch actually couldn't translate for Nexo Knights.

Mads Prahm

Even though we'd selected the best team, they basically had to go back and redo the whole pitch for Nexo Knights.

Ethan Vincent

This is Mads Prahm speaking.

Mads Prahm

And so I think that was a little bit of a surprise to us that that it didn't go as smoothly as we had hoped. Some of those standoff mechanics with the battleships, that was pretty core to their experience, so they had to start from scratch, and, you know, the timeline was very fixed because, you know, the LEGO theme was going to launch at a specific time. So there wasn't really a lot of time for early kind of like concept development, and play exploration, and so, I remember that being a lot of pressure on the team, that kind of like, they just had to succeed, there wasn't any room for – there wasn't much room at least for experimentation and failure. It kind of had to work in the first go. So that was a bit challenging. But in the end, they really succeeded, I believe. And then, of course, there was the challenge of the technology, right? Because the game needed to be able to scan these powers. And the game needed to run on all sorts of different phones from cheap Android phones to the latest iPhone and everything in between. And so we actually asked a different group of technology companies to pitch for that technology. And in the end, it was Qualcomm that won that with a custom version of their Vuforia technology, which could identify the shields that were unique, and then kind of read the hidden code in them so that you could unlock the power in the game. And so all of these things had to work together. The game team was dependent on the technology, which didn't quite exist yet. And yeah, everything needed to run on the same device. So that was also a little bit challenging.

Brian Crecente

Fortunately, the LEGO Group had a growing level of expertise in incorporating digital play into physical toys. Its work on things like Life of George, which we spoke about in an earlier

episode this season, prepared them for some of the challenges they might face with Nexo Knights and the shield scanning. Here's Daniel Mathiasen talking about that.

Daniel Mathiasen

Oh, yeah, I was sitting in the leadership teams overseeing these experiences, so that was definitely part of the roadmap and the exploration. At the time, it was a very collaborative atmosphere between the different groups on how we could do these things. It was more the type of play that we had the teams explore that was different, but there was a good collaboration between the two groups – actually so much that I was sitting in two leadership teams. I was sitting in, what was the Future Lab at the time, looking at Life of George and fluid play in that context. And then I was sitting over in the core business and in the play theme innovation as well, in that period, so we very much and very closely connected and collaborated on these experiences.

Ethan Vincent

Once Frima had the basic concepts for the game and some of the levels to play, they brought in Mark to ensure that the game would fit neatly into the broader picture of the toys, TV show, and its fictional world. Mark Hoffmeier explains.

Mark Hoffmeier

They had me actually write the script for it, so that would align with who the characters were, and the things that they would say. And then the cool thing was, we added stuff in the game that you wouldn't see in the show, because that was part of the world building of it was, we wanted to have stuff in the game that you wouldn't have in the show, we wanted to add stuff in the books that you didn't have in the games or in the show. And I wrote the actual script for the game. So I interacted with the game group, but it was after we had gotten all the – we had finished the bible for the television show, and we had started a lot of the writing on the first season. And then the game group had been developing, you know, the levels and how the game itself worked, and then they had me come in and finish that off, you know, do the actual scripting.

Brian Crecente

As the production director, Mads had a unique bird's eye view on how things fit together. From his perspective, the TV show, the toys, the books, and the video game were equal partners in the experience. Mads Prahm explains.

Mads Prahm

Yes, I think that was the new thing that they were all sort of equal partners, that it wasn't toy first, as you can say often is in the LEGO Group. All of these parts of the IP were equal. And so kids could arrive into the IP by watching the TV series, or by being gifted the toy, or by downloading the gaming app. And we kind of designed for all of those places to be starting points for the journey in the IP. And I think that also made it a very exciting project

to work on being a game developer, because often, in the LEGO Group, games can be a little bit of an afterthought, but for this development, it was very much at the center, or at least an equal player with everyone else. And it was a massive project group, right? There were people from the technology side, there were people from the gaming side, people from the toy side, people from the retail store side, and of course from the cartoon side. So all of these many, many different people had to work together to create like this coherent universe. So that was really exciting.

Chapter 4: Launch and End – 33:31

Ethan Vincent

The LEGO Group announced at New York Comic Con In 2015, that the property would be rolling out starting on January 1, 2016 with 14 building sets. The LEGO Nexo Knights Merlok 2.0 video game hit on December 19, 2015. And in February, the LEGO Group announced a partnership with Cartoon Network for the television show.

(Excerpt from LEGO Nexo Knights Season 1 – Trailer:

Narrator: "Welcome to a world of advanced technology, robots and futuristic knights.

King Halbert: "I love showing off our amazing—")

Ethan Vincent

Daniel called it a strong launch.

Daniel Mathiasen

The expectations that we in the innovation team had set up and the business case that we had presented, it lived up to that. So overall, I would call Nexo Knights a fairly good success. It was a Big Bang. It didn't become an evergreen. At a certain point in the development, it looked like we might have had the ingredients for an evergreen. The TV show seem to work fairly well. The game seemed to work really well.

Mads Prahm

What I remember most clearly about the reception of Nexo Knights in those first six months, maybe, after launch was that –

Ethan Vincent

This is Mads Prahm speaking.

Mads Prahm

– the LEGO Group had had really big expectations for sales, and those weren't quite being met. And I think that's a little bit of a returning theme within the LEGO Group that the company had been experiencing like this double-digit growth over, you know, a decade, I

think at the time, and so expectations were really that sales would just be fantastic. And when they weren't fantastic, because it was taking, you know, consumers and kids a little bit longer time to discover this new IP, then everybody was disappointed. And I think, even though you can say through the first year, you know, the team kept working on next year's updates for the game and updates for the toy line and new TV series episodes and so on, the momentum kind of slowly started to be dialed down, because the sales weren't meeting expectations. And I think later on we found out that one of the big things that we hadn't expected was that we'd really expected TV to have a very big impact on kids discovering this new IP. And at the time, in 2016, streaming was already starting to take a very big bite out of TV, and so kids weren't discovering the theme as fast as we'd hoped. And this meant that the ambition slowly they were lowered, so, you know, some of the big updates that were going to come in year two and year three of the game and of the toys, they were slowly like, you know, toned down or canceled. And then only I think in the third year of Nexo Knights, actually, it ended up being the theme that was delivering most growth in the LEGO Group, so there had really been a delayed effect. But by that time there wasn't a game development team on the product anymore, there wasn't a toy development team, and basically everyone had moved on. And internally it was, you know, it was seen a little bit as a failure that we had had to abandon. So I think that's my clearest memory of the internal interpretation of the launch. But then, you know, thinking about how, when I've anecdotally, like when I've met kids and talk to them about their LEGO sets, Nexo Knights keep coming up as one of the things that they were really excited about and, you know, where the game really brought the sets to life and added this magical layer on top of the toys that, you know, the toys weren't just a dead thing. There was this whole universe that came to life once you'd scan the toys. So I think my impression is, that out in the real world, it was really well received, but inside the LEGO Group many of us were disappointed with the sales. We were left with kind of like a little bit of a - yeah, disappointed feeling.

(Tune break)

Brian Crecente

It's hard to reconcile that feeling internally, that maybe Nexo Knights wasn't doing very well, with this external reception to the theme set and its longevity. In less than two years, there were 40 television episodes, more than 100 sets, a popular video game, a magazine, several books, and even a 4D film that debuted as a ride at Legoland Windsor Resort in 2016. But held up against the likes of Ninjago, the success of Nexo Knights, well, it sort of dims. I asked Mads Prahm about that.

Mads Prahm

Ninjago was always the bar that we're trying to raise, right? And with Chima, the company went all in and still, even with an online game and TV show and all of those things, they didn't manage to make it as big as Ninjago. And the same with Nexo Knights, and I would say actually some of the themes that came after, still we're measuring those up against

Ninjago. And I think that makes sense that when you do something new it has to be better than what you've done before. But I think it's just really tough to beat, you know, these ninjas for one thing, because it's such a strong fantasy, but also because that IP has had so many years now to be established that it's almost like a multigenerational IP now, and that's really difficult to do in six months, right? So if we measure the success of an IP after the first six months and then abandon it, if it's not a success, then it's just going to be tough, right? I think we need to be a little bit more patient when we're seeding a new IP, and maybe taking a longer, you know, yeah, have a longer time horizon than six months.

Ethan Vincent

Daniel doesn't necessarily agree that the LEGO Group stopped production on Nexo Knights too soon, or that the theme set didn't live up to its expectations.

Daniel Mathiasen

I don't know if the LEGO Group pulled the plug too early on Nexo Knights. Nexo Knights, to a large extent, delivered what was forecasted in the early days. Could it have been more if all the different touchpoints had worked to the same extent that it had previously? Who knows. You can't go out and design when you launch a movie and saying this movie is going to be a classic. And you can't go out in the toy industry and saying, "OK, so this IP that we are launching now, that's going to be an evergreen." Ninjago was unique in that sense. And that's something like if you can do that every decade you're doing extremely well. You can't do that for every Big Bang launch. So in that sense, if people had compared it with Ninjago, I would say, that's a bit naive. I know that some of our executive stakeholders did that, said, "Well, we just need to do a Ninjago," but that's naive, and without knowing what it goes into making a hit like that. You are competing with IPs such as *Star Wars*™. Being able to just do that and make a market impact is huge. Most players in the toy industry would get give their left arm to have that capability to do that in-house. So, I don't think you could find one player in the toy industry who would say that Nexo Knights didn't make an impact for that target group. It was a big launch. It did really well.

Brian Crecente

From Mark's perspective, Ninjago's ongoing jet-fueled success did have an impact on Nexo Knights, or at least the way its success was perceived internally.

Mark Hoffmeier

Sometimes when you do something that's that good and set the bar that high, people's expectations are that everything – you know, that maybe the next thing you create is going to be even better than that. And I think that's a hard standard (chuckles), that's a hard standard to hit. When you're an international industry, like the LEGO Group, you know, there's a lot of pressures to perform, you know, year after year, quarter after quarter, keep it going and to find something fresh and new.

Brian Crecente

While the show was killed with season four, Mark and the team did have concepts in mind for future seasons, like setting an episode in the Old West. There were also plenty of hand drawn concepts that were never brought to life. The team even left some fruit hanging for future episodes with plans of potentially pushing into a fifth and maybe sixth season and wrapping it up there. But that's not how it worked out.

Mark Hoffmeier

I get it, you know, this is how the business works. And sometimes you don't get to fulfill your ultimate dreams of like, "I want to wrap this up and, you know, I want to go do a bunch of more seasons." It's a huge, huge investment to make a television series, to make a LEGO toy line that is aligned with that television series, to make books that are aligned with it, to support it with video games. I mean, that's a huge, huge investment. And so sometimes it just comes down to: Are there new ways we want to push ourselves? Are there new things we want to put our time and invest our, you know, our master builders' time, and our creative group people? In rather than this: Do we think we've given it a long enough run? And I'm really proud of how far we got to take it in the four seasons we did.

(Soft music plays)

Chapter 5: Conclusion – 41:52

Ethan Vincent

Although Nexu Knights wasn't able to make the same transformative leap from successful Big Bang to thriving evergreen product, it left an impact on the LEGO Group. It showed just how powerful a video game can be when tied inexorably to a theme set. And Mads told us that without the video game, Nexu Knights would have been just another theme set with a TV show.

Mads Prahm

What made Nexu Knights magical was the game that tied everything together. And not only the core game loop of like, you know, battling with the characters, but more this meta game that kind of allowed you to collect all of these powers and go on a treasure hunt in Legoland and look for hidden shields with unique powers that you could get, or compare your collection with your friends and, you know, trade powers with your friends. So all of that went into making it something, you know, bigger than just a toy and a TV show. So for sure the game had a very big impact on the IP.

(Postscript music)

Bits N' Bricks: Credits - 42:50

Ethan Vincent

Bits N' Bricks is made possible by LEGO Games. Your hosts are Brian Crecente and Ethan Vincent. Producing by Dave Tach. Our executive producer is Ronny Scherer. Creative direction and editing by Ethan Vincent. Research and writing by Brian Crecente. Art direction by Nannan Li. Graphics and animations by Manuel Lindinger and Andreas Holzinger. Mixing and sound design by Dan Carlisle. Opening's child voice is Milo Vincent. Music by Peter Priemer, foundermusic.com, and excerpts from the Nexo Knights TV series. We'd like to thank our participants: Mark Hoffmeier, Daniel Mathiasen, and Mads Prahm. We'd also like to thank the entire LEGO Games' team. For questions and comments write us at bitsnbricks@LEGO.com. That's bits, the letter N, then bricks@LEGO.com. And as always, stay tuned for more episodes of Bits N' Bricks.

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