

The LEGO Group's Playful 90th

This month marks the 90th anniversary of the founding of the company that, two years later, would become known as LEGO® and then eventually the LEGO Group.

During its nine decades, Ole Kirk Christiansen's company would first specialize in wooden toys, then plastic playthings, and then, in 1949, the plastic interlocking blocks that would eventually become the worldwide LEGO brick phenomenon.

But the company's massive success in the world of toys wasn't assured.

"I can tell you that, throughout the time, there have been some that didn't necessarily think that we would reach 90 years," Thomas Kirk Kristiansen, great grandson of Ole Kirk Christiansen, told a gathering of employees at a recent celebration of the anniversary in Billund, Denmark. "But here we are stronger, bigger, better, reaching many more children, and more playful than ever.

"That doesn't just happen by chance. It happens because of all of you amazing employees. It's because of you, who every day relentlessly push with dedication, passion, and super hard work for creating even better, more creative play experiences to reach children all over the world."



That speech, given to about 5,000 LEGO Group employees earlier this year, wasn't just about recognizing the company's anniversary. It also kicked off another sort of celebration – something perhaps unusual for a multi-billion-dollar company.

Every year, the LEGO Group hosts Play Days, a gathering created for company employees to play together, hang out, and have fun. This year's event included games of cornhole, a

chance to check out LEGO video games and to play with bricks, with sand, with toys. It even included a massive concert. And that was just in Billund. Similar celebrations were happening at LEGO Group campuses around the world.

It's an event that, in many ways, is an inversion of LEGO DNA, a chance for the world's most known toy makers to reconnect with their inner child, to seek inspiration from their own history, to reflect on the powerful values of imagination, fun, creativity, caring, learning, and quality that have served the LEGO Group so well. To remember the promise of building joy as true partners with each other and co-creating fans, and to experience the product of a company built on the spirit of "only the best being good enough."

In the lead up to the celebration, Bits N' Bricks spoke with a number of LEGO Group teams about how their work at the company fits into creating playful experiences.

Sean McEvoy, vice president of LEGO Games, noted that the Games team is working toward a goal of helping to make digital play a cornerstone of the LEGO Group brand by 2032.

"LEGO games is one expression of digital play at the LEGO Group, and I think the expression of digital play at the LEGO Group can be even bigger and broader than games specifically," he said. "Digital play experiences don't always have to be a game. Specifically, they can be bigger and broader."

Those bigger broader experiences could include something like the company's work with Nintendo to create LEGO Super Mario™ or the recently announced partnership with Epic Games.

"There will be play experiences that will emerge from that partnership that we're incredibly excited about," he said. "But we're also equally excited about the opportunity to create kind of safe spaces for kids and families in the metaverse to come, the metaverse as it exists, and really to invent a new space on digital platforms that didn't exist previously. The last version of the internet was not necessarily built with kids and families in mind. Can we try for something different this time?"

McEvoy believes that the work the LEGO Group and Epic Games are doing on the metaverse will eventually touch all aspects of the company.

He also noted that the LEGO Group's past projects are factoring into their decision-making for future ones. That's an important element of the company's approach to design and planning. It's also a key reason why the LEGO Group has its own internal museum of sorts: the LEGO Idea House.

The Idea House sits in the original family home of Ole Kirk Christiansen, the founder of LEGO. The building attached to the home was his woodworking shop and later the first LEGO factory. But the LEGO Group didn't just preserve this house. They've turned it into a private museum used to introduce new employees and partners to both the history of the company and its important philosophy of play.

"When you work with the LEGO Group, either as an employee or as a business partner, I think it's essential that you understand what kind of company we are," said LEGO corporate historian Signe Wiese. "And understanding what kind of company we are and why we behave the way we do. A good place to start, if you want to understand that part, is to know the company history, because a lot of the things that we still do and still say all the time – our core values – all of that is rooted in the fact that we are an old, family-owned company."

Inside the Idea House is a full museum that corporate historians walk visitors through, explaining different elements of the company's history and creations. It ends with a visit to an area known as Memory Lane, which houses a cross-section of the company's products going back decades, each still in their original boxes.

The nearby LEGO Innovation House has a history of its own, but this one is found in the memories of its many talented designers who work on creating future products for the LEGO Group.

Niels Milan Pedersen is the master builder behind the Pirate theme sets, Galidor, and many, many more creations. He is among the last of a certain breed of LEGO brick designer, one who uses clay to sculpt his creations before recreating them in brick form.

"I'm the last one," he said. "I'm only sculpting with my hands. All the others are mostly using computer programs. Some of them might start with a hand sculpture and then scan it into a computer and finish it there, but I'll be the last one doing everything by hand.

"I really have to have it in my hands to feel what I'm doing."

As the 90th anniversary hits, Pedersen finds himself reflecting on what has become a surprising 40-year career as a toy-maker.

"The company has changed in many ways, because it's now so, so big and really much more ambitious," he said. "But it still has a lot of the old LEGO spirit as we call it."

That LEGO spirit is perhaps best captured in a relatively new addition to the city of Billund and the LEGO Group. The LEGO House, which sits on the site of the former town hall, is a public experiential museum that explores not just the history of the LEGO Group, but its deep connection with fans, and its own guiding principles and DNA.

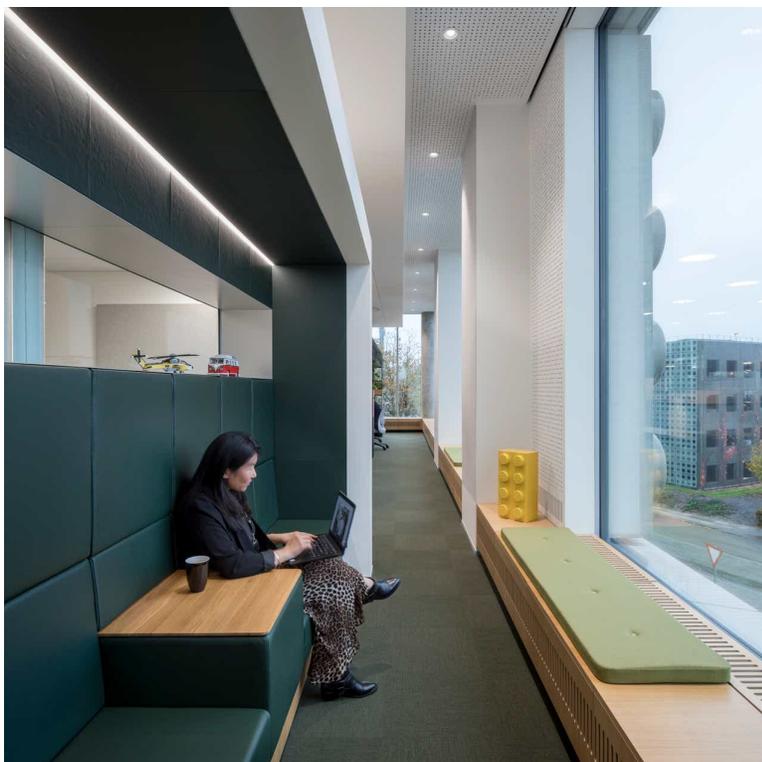
Inside, the stairs leading between the floors of the exhibit wrap around a massive LEGO brick tree.

"We knew within the house there were certain locations where we wanted some kind of iconic big model, and of course the one in the center of the main staircase was an obvious place where we wanted a big model," said LEGO House master builder Stuart Harris. "We tried lots of different ideas about what it would be in that space. But we kept coming back to the idea of doing a tree because it was so meaningful for the LEGO Group. It also was a great storytelling device."

The levels of the LEGO House are each dedicated to different themes. The top floor is known as the masterpiece gallery and is the main showcase for the LEGO fan community. From there you dive back down into the building's hands-on experiences, which are divided into four colored zones: green, red, yellow, and blue.

"Each colored zone is linked to a childhood development competence," Harris said. "We're very focused, of course, on learning through play. So that has been our thinking when we develop experience in the House, that we anchor it into a learning through play perspective."

The green zone, for instance, is about social development. The blue zone is about cognitive or problem solving. The red zone is creativity and, finally, the yellow zone is emotional development.



"There's a fifth competence, which is physical development, and that's why we have the playgrounds outside," Harris said. "So the experiences within those colored zones is tailored towards learning competence. And then in the basement, we have a history collection. This is a very popular visit for some of the fans to actually sort of relive their childhood and see those sets that maybe you got for Christmas – or maybe you never got for Christmas.

"I always think that it should be sponsored by Kleenex or somebody like that, because it can be a very emotional moment

going down into the basement and seeing the archive and seeing the timeline of the LEGO Group."

The LEGO Group's multifaceted efforts touch on exploring the past to prepare for the future, and perhaps some of the company's most interesting work is done in the LEGO Innovation House by people like Jonathan Trier Brinker, an interaction design manager, and Benjamin Lundquist Ma, a digital play design manager. Both focus on experimenting with and designing new types of play experiences. Where Ma says he works on finding the fun in those new types of play, Brinker likens himself to an animator at Pixar, working to make new LEGO experiences come alive with light and sound.

Perhaps most recently, you've seen their work in the LEGO Super Mario™ theme sets. Brinker, in fact, was responsible for creating Mario as a LEGO brick character.

"So, you have a character that has to be brought to life and somehow you have to figure out what are the tiny things that make people believe that he's a small character," Jonathan Trier Brinker said. "So, to give a really concrete example could be when you put Mario down and you put him on his back, he falls asleep. And then you think about, like, what is the sound of the little guy falling asleep? At what point does he fall asleep? What is the sound effect of that? What is the animation? All those little things that sell kids on the notion that this guy is now sleeping on your table. Everything that goes into that. That's animation, it's sound design, it's having the right little technical gestures, it's putting all those things together so that, when kids do it, it's just natural. They don't think about it."

Ma added that Mario falling asleep is just the tip of the iceberg.

"My job is sort of trying out that entire iceberg of possibilities, and when we then do come up with the things that test really well, actually making them good," he said. "Technology, of course, changes over time, so our toolbox of enabling these kinds of play experiences for kids gets easier over time. Technology is more easily embedded in toys. And as Jonathan said, you know, play is play. It's not that we're aiming to put technologies in, but when a certain play experience needs it, we have the ability to, and that's just really cool."

It's this willingness to embrace technology, while not letting go of or forgetting the past, that enables the LEGO Group to be so nimble in its approach to creating joy through playful experiences.

That the people who dedicate their lives to sparking joy and fueling fun would take a day off once a year to play together shouldn't be surprising, but it is, and it's delightful, too.

Going to Billund to witness this Play Day, walking through the halls where people design sets, seeing the places they inhabit and the world they live in, brings important context to what so many people have described as LEGO DNA.

Explore more ...

In order of appearance:

[New LEGO Campus](#) – press release

[LEGO Group x Epic Games](#) – press release

[LEGO Ideas Pirates of Barracuda Bay](#) – press release

[LEGO House](#) – official website

[LEGO Super Mario](#) – Official website

Transcript

Bits N' Bricks Season 5, Episode 48: The LEGO Group's Playful 90th
Aug. 11, 2022 • 1:12:04



Prologue – 00:00

Announcer

Please note that this episode of Bits N' Bricks contains instances of misuse of the LEGO® trademark, which must always be used as an adjective and never a noun. As a reminder, it is never appropriate to refer to the company that designs and produces LEGO brand products as LEGO. Rather, the correct name for the company overall is the LEGO Group.

(Brief music plays, and then applause)

Niels B. Christiansen

Well, I'm excited, because this is the first time as you know in three years that we've been able to actually be together in person and celebrate a Play Day. And on top of Play Day, we have a 90th anniversary coming on tonight. So this is a very, very special day. Excited? Are you ready to play and party? (applause). Are you? Yeah!

Brian Crecente

I hope everyone is ready to play and party because this is a very special episode of Bits N' Bricks.

Ethan Vincent

Actually the first of two episodes.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, you know, what we just heard was Niels B. Christiansen, the CEO of the LEGO Group, talking to more than 5,000 LEGO Group employees spread out across the acreage that lies between the newly constructed LEGO campus in Billund, Denmark, and the original LEGOLAND® amusement park nearby. He and all of those employees were there to do something pretty unique for an international billion dollar company: play.

Ethan Vincent

Play and also celebrate the company's 90th anniversary, which was on Aug. 10, 2022.

Brian Crecente

So every year with the exception of the past few years for obvious reasons, the LEGO Group sets aside a day for the company to get back to its roots and play. They try their best to include everyone, so while this massive party was going on in Denmark, there were other Play Days happening around the world.

Ethan Vincent

Billund's Play Day essentially turned the company's sprawling footprint into a sort of carnival with booths designed to celebrate the LEGO Group's history, its current work, and even its future. While the Play Days in other locations may not have been as big they were just as creative.

Brian Crecente

You know, Ethan, I have it on good authority that the London offices included a chance to book an appointment with puppies.

Ethan Vincent

Puppies?

Brian Crecente

Yeah, you could have a puppy appointment. I think I may have had to block out my entire day if I were there.

Ethan Vincent

But you weren't.

Brian Crecente

No, yes, instead, we were in Billund.

Ethan Vincent

That's right. For the first time in the nearly two-year history of Bits N' Bricks, we actually got a chance to talk in-person for this show.

Brian Crecente

And we're bringing you along, dear listener, along with us on our trip to and through Billund, Denmark, the birthplace of the LEGO brick, of LEGOLAND and home to the company's headquarters, its private archives, and museums, and the stunning public LEGO House.

Ethan Vincent

And we visited all of those places, got behind-the-scenes tours and access typically restricted to a limited few. Of course, we also chatted with some of the thousands of people who work every day to make the world a bit more joyful through LEGO bricks. We also toured the town that is home to the brick and talked with city officials about how the city and the company work hand-in-hand to move beyond the toy.

Brian Crecente

Now in this first episode, we're focused on the LEGO Group, telling the story of this special week for us and the LEGO Group that culminated on a Friday with a massive LEGO party. Sometimes we'll talk about the past, sometimes we'll talk about the present, and sometimes we'll talk about the future. Sometimes we'll talk about all three simultaneously. Why? Because the LEGO Group is a company that creates the future in the present, informed by the past. And the best way to learn how they do that is to examine all three.

(Child's voice announcing Bits N' Bricks)

Bits N' Bricks: Introduction – 4:06

(Bits N' Bricks Season 5 theme music plays)

Ethan Vincent

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

Brian Crecente

And I'm Brian Crecente. Together, we look back at the rich history of the LEGO brand and chat with designers, thought leaders, and innovators who all work for one of the most popular and respected toy companies in the world: the LEGO Group.

(Bits N' Bricks Season 5 theme music continues)

Chapter 1: Billund Trip and History – 4:37

Ethan Vincent

So all of us, you know, Brian who everyone knows.

Brian Crecente

Hi. (laughs)

Ethan Vincent

Myself, Dave our producer, and Trish, who's Brian's wife but also does all the transcription and all the things behind the scenes to help with Bits N' Bricks, we all flew into Billund in early June loaded down with recording equipment and were just excited to finally talk face-to-face with some of the people we've been emailing, you know, direct messaging and interviewing over the past two years. Right, Brian?

Brian Crecente

Yeah, that first day was a bit of a blur. We were jet lagged and spent it touring the LEGO House and LEGOLAND. And we'll get to that a bit more in our next episode, which examines the relationship the LEGO Group has with Billund and how that relationship between the two is helped both become better than the sum of its parts.

Ethan Vincent

Billund in Denmark, in many ways, is the ultimate company town. Founded in the 17th century, its history goes as far back as the 1200s. And it's deeply tied to the history of the LEGO brick. In 1916, Ole Kirk Christiansen, who would go on to form the LEGO company, bought Billund woodworking and carpentry shop.

Brian Crecente

Eventually, Ole would transition from furniture to wooden toys to plastic, and finally, the LEGO brick. He always ran the business with a sense of responsibility to both his workers and the town, for instance helping to create a new dairy and church there. That close connection continued throughout the decades with the LEGO Group building a playground north of town and a lake in the '50s. And then, in 1964, the company built an airport for its use that it later handed over to the town of Billund.

Ethan Vincent

When you fly into Billund, you get an immediate sense that you're flying into the land of the LEGO brick. You can see LEGOLAND and its affiliated hotels right near the end of the runway. And the LEGO House, which looks like a pile of LEGO bricks from the sky, stands out in the center of town, and you can even see the new corporate campus.

Brian Crecente

You know, that is unless you're looking out the windows on the other side of the plane like I was. Then you see farmland stretched out to the horizon.

Ethan Vincent

I mean, it's worth noting that Billund is not a massive city. And it's sort of plopped down in the middle of Denmark about an hour east from the North Sea, and an hour and a half or so north of the German border, actually.

Brian Crecente

What I found fascinating was that, despite being home to the second-largest airport in the country, and of course LEGOLAND, the LEGO House, and the headquarters of the LEGO Group, Billund still maintains its small-town feel. Trish and I spent the first day walking around town. It's small. I actually looked it up. The city itself is about three square miles, so you can walk everywhere. And inside that space, you have a number of LEGO Group offices, buildings, archives, one of the company's factories, but there's also other attractions like the waterpark resort Lalandia, the Teddy Bear Art Museum, and the WOW outdoor park. Despite the mix of things, ultimately, it wound up feeling a bit like a town full of LEGO buildings with a few non-LEGO things in between. Perhaps it's silly to dismiss the Danish homes, restaurants, gas stations and grocery store, but that's sort of how I remember it.

Ethan Vincent

The centerpiece of the town though, right, is definitely the LEGO House, which stands on the former grounds of the Billund City Hall. The whole area is being rebuilt and modernized. It's quite impressive.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, and you know, we'll get into that much more in our next episode where we talk to the mayor and others about the deep impact the LEGO Group has had and continues to have on the town, not least of which includes buying City Hall and tearing it down to build the LEGO House.

Ethan Vincent

But don't worry, it's not as extreme as it sounds. But for today's episode, we're focusing on the 90th anniversary, the Play Day, which happened on the Friday after we arrived, and some of the amazing people who work at the LEGO Group.

(Serene music plays)

Chapter 2: LEGO Games at the Havremarken Office – 8:29

Brian Crecente

One of our first interviews was with Sean McEvoy, Vice President of LEGO Games and a regular guest on Bits N' Bricks, but this time around we got a chance to chat in person at the LEGO Group's Havremarken office. This older office is located on the outskirts of Billund, not too far from the Billund LEGO factory.

Ethan Vincent

Like most of the LEGO Group's offices in Billund, you knew you were in a LEGO Group building the second you walk through the door. There were giant LEGO brick builds all over the foyer, including a life-sized Batman, a child-sized character from the LEGO Friends theme set, and an array of other LEGO bricks creations. It was actually quite amazing.

Brian Crecente

We sat down with Sean in a meeting room just feet from Batman's brooding statue for a wide-ranging chat about the state of LEGO video games, the metaverse and, of course, the company's landmark 90th anniversary.

Ethan Vincent

While the LEGO Group is celebrating that anniversary this year, the company has only been making video games for 26 of those years. And Sean pointed out that he started a bit more than five years ago at the company.

Sean McEvoy

When I first arrived, it was incredibly eye-opening to see how much had been achieved, how much had been endeavored, you know, what kind of innovation was brought to bear at the LEGO Group with respect to digital play and games specifically. And I think the journey that we've been on in these past years with just an awesome team who, you know, just absolutely shoot for the stars in everything they do, is to take games from that legacy and that foundation of digital play over the past 25 years and bring it closer to the core experience of the LEGO Group, all towards that 2032 aspiration of digital play as a cornerstone of the brand. So that's the mission we're on, and we could not be more excited, and games will be a big part of it.

Brian Crecente

That journey which we spent more than a year chronicling on Bits N' Bricks is most recently epitomized by LEGO *Star Wars*™: The Skywalker Saga, which Sean calls the best and fastest-selling title in the history of LEGO video games as well as the best-reviewed LEGO title of all time.

Ethan Vincent

It arrives at what Sean calls a transformative moment for LEGO video games, a time of huge opportunity ushered in by LEGO *Star Wars*™, and potentially fueled by the recent news of the company's partnership with Epic Games on a future metaverse title.

Sean McEvoy

LEGO Games is one expression of digital play at the LEGO Group. And I think the expression of digital play at the LEGO Group can be even bigger and broader than games specifically.

And, you know, digital play experiences – innovative, hands-on, deep and playful experiences in the digital space – don't always have to be a game specifically. They can be bigger and broader. So something like the Epic partnership, for example, there will be play experiences that will emerge from that partnership that we're incredibly excited about, but we're also equally excited about the opportunity to create kind of safe spaces for kids and families in the metaverse to come, the metaverse as it exists, and really to invent kind of a new space on digital platforms that didn't exist previously. The sort of last version of the internet was not necessarily built with kids and families in mind. Can we try for something different this time? That's a partnership, that really expresses that from, sort of, its core tenant and is looking to create those experiences and spaces for kids and families. And there will be play experiences related to that. Equally we can envision that there will be sort of social gathering places and entertainment experiences. So it's really, the opportunity is broad, it's all-encompassing to some degree. Games are in there for sure, but bigger and broader if we get it right.

Brian Crecente

So this is interesting, Ethan, because as I know you're aware, the metaverse is one of the big topics and not just the video game industry but all of technology these days.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, I know the LEGO Group has been exploring this evolution of the web and technology for a bit now. In fact, I think they even had you host a talk for LEGO video games on the topic not too long ago.

Brian Crecente

They did. Experts came in to talk about the importance, value, and state of what some people call the metaverse and others might refer to as Web 3.0.

Ethan Vincent

So where Web 1.0 was all about people consuming information, Web 2.0 was powered more by user-generated content and interactions. Web 3.0 is, well, what is it exactly, Brian?

Brian Crecente

Yeah, that's a billion dollar question. I think it involves everything from semantics, AI, 3D graphics, connectivity, and on and on and on. And in a lot of people's eyes, a company like Epic, creators of the Unreal Engine that powers so many games and the developers of the wildly popular Fortnite game, is in a great position to tap into that in a uniquely LEGO DNA-valued way.

Ethan Vincent

And Sean, of course, has a lot to say on the topic.

Sean McEvoy

One of the places that we're really putting a lot of focus is on the notion of how can we create spaces that are fundamentally safe, fun at their core, right? These are really two pillars we absolutely have to get right. And then also over time thinking about how is it that we can explore notions of digital play experiences that contribute to well-being? So we're actively working with our internal partners within the LEGO Group, also, within the sort of broader entities related to the LEGO Group to look at research, to look at scholarship in that space to really better understand if we're bringing these products to bear in what you just described, right? The Metaverse or Web 3, or however we want to describe it. How can we do that in the most thoughtful way that really captures the values of the LEGO Group, captures the sort of values of the partnership that we've established with Epic Games, and looks to create almost a wholly new space that hasn't existed before for kids and families? And that's a super exciting aspect of this journey that we're working on very hard in real time.

Brian Crecente

Do you feel like this moving forward, let's call it metaverse, is that something that LEGO Games is going to guide, or is that a broader topic that's going to sort of be tackled by a bunch of different groups within the LEGO Group?

Sean McEvoy

It will absolutely need to be broader. It really is all-encompassing. If we think about the way that the metaverse is being brought to bear and what the vision for the metaverse could be. My personal opinion, and I think that's shared internally, is that it will touch all aspects of our business, ultimately just as, you know, Web 2.0 does now. In its own right, Web 3.0, or the metaverse equally will do the same. So it will have to be – and already is, you know, in terms of how it's planned organizationally and how we structure ourselves to support it – much broader, yeah.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, it's interesting. Obviously, Bits N' Bricks is very much, to date, has been very much focused on the past. And I think a big part of that are the lessons that come out of it. And you look at, especially when we're talking about 3.0 or metaverse, you look at some of the big moves that the LEGO Group has made over the years in the past and how those may be applied to the future. Are you looking at things like LEGO Universe comes to mind. I mean, there was a lot of interesting ideas. Like, are you looking at any of those sort of big efforts that were 2.0, kind of 2.5, when you look at 3.0?

Sean McEvoy

Absolutely. So we've done quite a lot of sort of, you know, historiography on what came first, what were the sort of success metrics of some of those products? Where did we struggle in the past? I'll give you one example: We've looked really hard at and tried to be

incredibly transparent and kind of self-reflecting in terms of our approaches to digital building, which is, you know, it's a really tough aspect of digital play to crack and to get right and be able to sort of hand tools for creativity over to users in a way that can make sense and not be overly complex, particularly in the kid space when we're, you know, children are our audience for our products. So that's an aspect that we've really looked at in this context and tried to do all of that due diligence, understand what worked in the past and what hasn't worked in the past. Make sure that we're taking that into account as we build new products. I don't think that journey will ever end, but it is one aspect that we're – absolutely past products are factoring into our decision making.

(Tune break)

Ethan Vincent

So after that interview, all of us – you, me and Dave – had a chance to walk back to meet the rest of the LEGO video games team in their offices. They had just moved there, so they said it wasn't fully decorated yet but we found plenty to stare at like a gigantic banner for LEGO *Star Wars*™: The Skywalker Saga, the room packed with PCs for regular gaming sessions, many, many LEGO builds, and, Brian, one of the things that I loved is they had this beautiful kind of tall cardboard cutout Bits N' Bricks timeline, just kind of chronicling all the video games. It was so cool to see.

Brian Crecente

It was very beautiful. Yeah, I loved to see it in person. It was the first time I saw it not on a monitor. And so that was – it was like this big stand. You know, they also had a little cake for us, which I thought was amazing. We all sat down and ate cake and chatted. And you know, LEGO Design Master Don Meadows was there along with a bunch of other people. He came over almost immediately when we walked in to get us to try this sort of single-button game, actually two of them, that he was developing for the upcoming Play Day, which we'll talk about later, but it was basically these little games that you could play just by, you know, tapping the screen or pushing one button. And of course we got to chat with so many of the others from the team like LEGO Games Director Danny Bergmann.

Ethan Vincent

That's right, I think, you know, Sandra Andresen, Abhinav Sarangi, Ed Račinskas, Anders Holm, I mean, gosh, who else?

Brian Crecente

Yeah, it was great. It was like a coming home party, and it was so neat to be in that room with everybody just hang out and chat. I loved it.

(Tune break)

Chapter 3: LEGO Idea House – 18:24

Ethan Vincent

So it's important to understand that Havremarken where we visited the LEGO Games team stands apart from the rest of the LEGO Group buildings in Billund. So for our next stop we hopped in the car and made the short drive back to the center of town, just a block or so from the LEGO House. With Sean we spoke about the past 25 years but also the future connected to a virtual space that doesn't exist yet – the metaverse. The LEGO Group's push into this evolving technology will happen as all things at the LEGO Group happen: led by the company's strong core values, values that emanate from the LEGO Group's founder, which are both remembered and taught at the LEGO Idea House.

Brian Crecente

Now unlike the LEGO House, which is a public museum of play dedicated to all things LEGO bricks and history, the LEGO Idea House is an unassuming building with an amazing history.

Ethan Vincent

It is the original family home of Ole Kirk Christiansen, the founder of LEGO, and the attached building was the woodworking shop and later the first LEGO factory.

Brian Crecente

And you would never know that from the outside. It's a one-story red brick house with a red tiled roof and several big windows with white grills and trim across the entire front. There's this plain white front door to match the windows that's framed by these two concrete lions laying on slabs. But there's nothing about the building that would suggest it houses not just an amazing history but so much to learn.

Ethan Vincent

The LEGO Group didn't just preserve this house. They've turned it into this amazing private museum that they use to introduce new employees and partners to both the history of the company and its important philosophy of play.

Brian Crecente

We were lucky enough to spend some time with some of the folks who act as archivists and historians that the LEGO Idea House.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, and one of the LEGO Corporate historians, Signe Wiese, sat down with us to talk about the experience of working in this amazing private museum and why it remains an important facet of the company.

Brian Crecente

And let's not forget where she sat down. Signe can probably best explain that.

Signe Wiese

Well, right now we're sitting in the family house of the owner of the company. We are sitting in a room that we have chosen to call his office. So this is Ole's office. In fact, in the old days when Ole actually had his office here, the rooms were a bit different. So this was not only his room. I think they also had a living room. But the reason why we chose to call it his office is because we do have some of his original furnitures. For instance, I'm sitting next to Ole's desk. So yeah, so this is the room we call Ole's office.

Brian Crecente

I love that there is both – and this is a very LEGO DNA thing to me – but there's both a high level of respect but also you're not afraid to sit at his desk.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, and you just basically say, "Please, just don't put your coffee on it." Pretty relaxed.

Signe Wiese

I mean, yeah, I think that's just the way it is, right? I mean, things should be used. I am also, for instance, not the biggest fan of the guys – I understand the reason for buying a LEGO set and never build it, I understand that it's a way of, you know, preserving things. So I really appreciate that people are doing it. Myself, I must admit, when I buy a LEGO set, I also build it, because it's sort of what it's meant to be, right?

Brian Crecente

Signe has a degree in history, and then spent time as a journalist for six years before coming to the LEGO Group where she spends much of her time doing the same sort of thing that is done at most museums: working with archives to tell stories. But in this case, the stories are all about the LEGO Group. She says it's like working at a traditional museum, but cooler.

Signe Wiese

This Idea House Museum is an internal museum. When you work with the company, with the LEGO Group, either as an employee or as a business partner, I think it's essential that you understand what kind of company we are – and understanding what kind of company we are and why we behave the way we do. You know, a good place to start, if you want to understand that part is to know the company history, because a lot of the things that we still do and still say all the time, our core values, all of that is rooted in the fact that we are an old family-owned company. So we try to make sure that new employees and partners and so on, they get a chance to understand that by coming here and seeing the museum

and getting a tour with one of us so that we get a chance to explain to them, you know, what it is that this company is all about. I mean, because this is an internal museum we focus very much on corporate history. So we talk about business plans and we talk a lot about the family ownership and, you know, the things that had led to the LEGO Group becoming the company that it is today. If you're into more like the deeper corporate history, then you get it here.

Ethan Vincent

The work that Signe and Kristian Reimer Hauge, the other corporate historian at the LEGO Idea House, do goes far beyond simply giving tours and preserving the company's history. They also work alongside Tine Froberg Mortensen, the company's archivist, to support a wide range of company projects. You can see their efforts in everything from the LEGO Group's amazing 90 years of playsets to advertising and marketing campaigns, to papers written on a variety of topics. Signe and Kristian even host an internal podcast about the company's history.

(Excerpt from The LEGO History Podcast:

Narrator

Signe Wiese and Kristian Reimer Hauge are corporate historians in the historical department of the LEGO Group: the LEGO Idea House. In this podcast series, they take us through the history of the company all the way from the beginning, 90 years ago. This is the LEGO History podcast.)

Signe Wiese

We have so many colleagues who will never be able to get here. So we keep trying to find new ways of reaching them with tiny bits of the history. So we have this podcast project going on right now where we basically just talk about LEGO history. We're sort of starting out with the first generation and then we took a bit of a deep dive into the whole development of the LEGO system in play and the LEGO brick and so on.

(Excerpt from The LEGO History Podcast

Kristian Reimer Hauge

The first success he gets with a wooden toy is actually with some wooden yo-yos. There is a craze around 1932 around here where everybody wants to have a yo-yo to play with. So he actually sells a lot of these yo-yos up until the point where the craze sort of dies down. Everybody has the yo-yos they need, and then suddenly Ole he has a lot of unsold yo-yos on stock. And you know, times are rough. You know, he can't afford just to throw these yo-yos out. You know, he's spent time and money producing them. So he shows a little bit of creativity actually, and he cuts the yo-yos in half, and then he uses these half yo-yos as wheels!

Signe Wiese

Yo-yo wheels?

Kristian Reimer Hauge

Yo-yo wheels.
Signe Wiese
That's a good idea.
Kristian Reimer Hauge
Yeah it is. It is.)

(Tune break)

Chapter 4: LEGO Innovation House – 25:21

Brian Crecente

The LEGO Innovation House is where the company's many talented designers make the future today. It's located just down the road from the LEGO Idea House and next to the LEGO Project House. We'd already swung by there for other interviews earlier in the week, but this was the first time we had to meet someone after hours.

Ethan Vincent

And it was a bit of an adventure, wasn't it, Brian?

Brian Crecente

Yeah, you know, it helps at the person we were coming to meet was none other than Master Builder Niels Milan Pedersen. He's the guy behind the Pirates theme set beloved by '80s kids and the Galidor theme set that launched, well, a not-so-great television show. (chuckles)

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, but which you love Brian, I know (crosstalk) you're about all things Galidor. So you really have to go and listen to our episode about that if you haven't. It's a great story. Look for episode 37 of Bits N' Bricks. It's pretty tremendous.

Brian Crecente

Yeah. So when you envision Niels, you have to envision someone larger than life. I mean, this is the guy who first gave a bit more personality to the minifig and sort of snuck a minifig skeleton into a set much to the displeasure of Godtfred Kirk Christiansen.

Ethan Vincent

And his appearance didn't disappoint. He wandered up to the lobby barefoot, sporting an array of Nordic medallions and wearing a well-used leather vest, and on his head a fading fedora. Lennon glasses slightly askew and a pen in his pocket, Niels looked like the embodiment of his own legend, a beloved LEGO Master Builder, part-time archaeologist, and institution at the company itself. History, especially LEGO Group history, isn't just

something you learn from folks like Signe at the LEGO Idea House. It also comes from Master Builders like Niels who are creating that history and helping to bridge the past and the future in their daily work.

Brian Crecente

To say he has a storied history within the LEGO Group would be a massive understatement. But he likely wouldn't be at the company today if it weren't for the encouragement of his mother.

Niels Milan Pedersen

We had very, very few LEGO bricks when I was a kid. And those we had, I was not allowed to play with for my older brother because he claimed that I would make them dirty. And I probably would. So I hadn't any experience with LEGO at all. I was actually more or less a fisherman before starting here at LEGO. But I had always made my own choice when I was a kid and also made toys for the other kids. And then at some point I needed some more steady work, and my mother had seen advertising in the – in some paper that LEGO actually wanted a model builder, as they called it in those days. And she urged me to try to get that job. But I wrote a letter and put in some city drawings, because I've also always been drawing a lot. And I sent that and thought I'll never hear from them. Well, actually, one day I came back, there was a big box filled with LEGO bricks outside my door. No explanation what they expected, and that was typical of my boss-to-be because he had forgotten to put in the letter. That came a couple of days later. Then I was supposed to build some sort of space model and come with that to Billund and take some of this stuff I had made, and if I had made drawings and things, so they said I should bring that. And that was probably what brought me the job not as much the module because that was – that was sort of a LEGO space model I made.

Brian Crecente

While Niels built a space model, the LEGO Group was actually looking for someone to work on the relatively new Castle theme. Fortunately, the initial batch of drawings he had sent to the company were packed with castles. And when they called him back in for an interview he brought with him a box of knights he had cast himself.

Ethan Vincent

It turned out that Jens Nygaard Knudsen, the designer of the minifig as well as the Space, Castle, and Town themes, interviewed Niels, and he loved those little models.

Brian Crecente

So of course he got the job.

Ethan Vincent

Yes, and all that despite showing up in an ill-fitting, rain-soaked, brown velvet jacket and wandering around Billund for a while before finding the offices. He still managed to land the job. The day he started he knew he had found his calling.

Niels Milan Pedersen

Well, that was quite amazing because there was so few people so I was shown around in the – that was some buildings which where we are now sitting. So there were only 12 designers, as far as I remember, and 43 persons in the whole building. And that was with everybody. So as far as I remember, I just had an introduction to all of them. And yeah, and Jens and Daniel August Krentz, which was the other guy in the little group I was joining, was also such a friendly and nice person. I just remember that time as being really, really fantastic and fun. And actually, within the next 11 days, I made my first element and it was approved after 11 days for production, and it's actually still in production. It's the old Space camera.

Brian Crecente

As we mentioned, Niels would go on to design a number of well-known models and led the design for the LEGO Pirates theme.

Ethan Vincent

Speaking of the pirate theme, Brian, and getting back to that skeleton minifig that Godtfred Kirk Christiansen, the son of the company's founder, had to personally approve, there's actually another funny story about that. We'll let Niels tell it, though.

Niels Milan Pedersen

The difficult part was Jolly Roger, the flag. Godtfred really didn't want me to make the skull and bones on that. So I can't remember how many, but I made so many different, tried to make something look pirate-y but without skull and bones but – and in the end we again had to go to Godtfred and convince him we couldn't make a Jolly Roger without the skulls and bones and then OK, finally he said, "Yeah, OK, but you have to make him smile." And I think I actually got the skull to have a nice smile.

Brian Crecente

More recently, he helped to bring the LEGO Ideas Dinosaur Fossils set to market. Niels, of course, was the perfect pick to work with the fan-submitted creation.

Niels Milan Pedersen

The main reason was that in my spare time, I've done that for many years, I'm actually sculpting scientific, accurate copies of dinosaur skulls and skeletons. And I'm actually right

now, more or less making my own museum with a lot of dinosaur skeletons and skulls and things like that.

Ethan Vincent

Sculpting with clay, it turns out, is a big part of how Niels designs for the LEGO Group.

Niels Milan Pedersen

I'm the last one only sculpting with my hands. All the others were mostly using computer programs for that.

Brian Crecente

Niels said he sculpts with artificial clay and then bakes those pieces to make them hard. Before that, he would create his designs out of wood. It's a design process that is mostly gone at the LEGO Group these days.

Niels Milan Pedersen

Some of them might start with a hand sculpture and have that scanned and then finish it on the computer, but I'll be the last one only doing it by hand.

Brian Crecente

Do you feel – why do you do it that way still is there something –

Niels Milan Pedersen

Because I can't use a computer. (Laughter)

Ethan Vincent

Well, but also because you're an artist and that's how you've always done it, right? I mean –

Niels Milan Pedersen

Yeah, yeah, that's my way. I've been sculpting since I was seven years old or something like that, so –

Brian Crecente

Yeah, what is that like for you? It's got to be a different experience when you see yourself surrounded by people who are using a mouse and a keyboard, and you have your hands on something. Is that a very different experience, do you think?

Niels Milan Pedersen

Yes. I'm really amazed at what they can do on those computer things. But I know that I can never get to that level, and I'm really impressed how they can do that, but I really have to have it in my hands to feel what I'm doing and yeah.

Ethan Vincent

As the 90th anniversary hits, Niels finds himself reflecting on what has become a surprising 40-year career as a toymaker.

Niels Milan Pedersen

It's quite amazing, still. You don't think about it in your daily work because that's just you concentrate of making the thing and do it the best way you can, but then later then you're out in the world and suddenly see it put up on big billboards or see it in movies and hear people talk about it and especially is when you tell them, "OK, yeah I made that, and I made that" and they say, "Whoa, did you make that?" I'm still quite overwhelmed by that, also that, yeah, LEGO is so well-known as it is nowadays because it certainly wasn't that big when I was a kid, oh and when I started here. Especially nowadays when they see how, what success they have I'm so sorry that Jens and Daniel can't – isn't around to see it because they would have loved to see that it's going so well and, yeah.

(Tune break)

Chapter 5: LEGO House – 34:31

Brian Crecente

Where Signe researches and preserves LEGO Group history and Niels is still deeply invested in creating the future through lessons learned in the past, Stewart Harris is a designer focused on working with fans in the LEGO Group to present the company's history and deeply rooted values to the world right now.

Ethan Vincent

We met up with Stuart in a place that LEGO House folks call LEGO Square. It's a public space inside the LEGO House that is free for anyone to visit. That's where you'll find full-sized LEGO brick people hanging out, even a LEGO brick dog lifting his leg towards a real lamppost.

Brian Crecente

You know, Ethan, I actually snuck in a second visit to that square later that week to pick up some sets only available at its special store. And I spotted a massive LEGO brick koi pond, complete with lilies, flowers, stepping stones, and those fish, all meticulously detailed with

brick, hidden around a corner. There's also a restaurant there called the Mini Chef, and of course, plenty of opportunities to hang out and play. It's not just a lobby, it's sort of a town square setup on the old town hall.

Ethan Vincent

You and I lugged our equipment to the square a bit after Dave arrived. And then Stuart walked us back over to the LEGO Idea House for the interview. Stuart is one of the company's Master Builders – specifically, the LEGO House Master Builder, a distinction that means most of the work he does finds itself inside the company's LEGO House in the heart of Billund.

Stuart Harris

So there are several aspects to the job. One is I'm basically responsible for all the models in LEGO House. Doesn't mean to say that I build everything, but I do get to take credit for everybody else's work, which is fantastic. So it's about some art directing other model suppliers, like model shops that we have in the LEGO Group, and so on. I'm also responsible for developing the concept models for the LEGO House exclusive sets. So I get to do both the big stuff as well as sort of the normal what a LEGO designer would also work on. I'm also a, if you like, I have an ambassadorial role at LEGO fan events, so I'll go to LEGO fan events and represent the LEGO House at those kinds of events. I'm also responsible for curating the fan content in LEGO House, so when we run competitions, or when we're selecting fans to exhibit their work in LEGO House.

Brian Crecente

To understand Stuart's job, you need to understand the LEGO House. Opened in 2017, the centerpiece of the 12,000 square meter building is a roughly 50-foot tall tree made entirely of LEGO bricks. The Tree of Creativity sculpture is constructed of more than 6.3 million bricks and rises from floor to ceiling. Wrapping around the tree is a spiral staircase that delivers visitors to the museum's four color-coded experience zones spread across multiple floors. We asked Stuart to explain how the design came about.

Stuart Harris

We knew within the house there were certain locations where we wanted some kind of iconic, big model, and of course the one in the center of the main staircase was an obvious place where we wanted a big model. So that was the first model that I briefed and worked with the model shop on, and we tried lots of different ideas about what it would be in that space, but we kept coming back to the idea of doing a tree because it was so meaningful for the LEGO Group. It was a great storytelling device. And there were also practical reasons. If you do a tree, you can put branches where you want, and therefore you can fill this kind of odd space, this odd void with this tree. But it was a very unusual model in that, you know, when you see a model, you will only see it from maybe a couple of different views – from the side or from the top or whatever. This model you were experiencing in a

full 360 way. It's also 15.68 meters tall and one of the biggest models we've ever produced, and so we really needed to make it sort of really engaging as you climb the stairs. So that's why we put in all these little sort of details in the trunk and sort of carvings for the heritage in wooden toys, the generational ownership with their names and initials carved into the tree, and then the evolution of different play themes in the branches and so on. So really creating a quite an immersive and interesting journey as you climb the stairs. And then when you get to the Masterpiece Gallery, that's of course, that's the main showcase for the LEGO fan community's work. And that was very fundamental in the thought behind the house, that there was going to be a permanent home where LEGO fans could exhibit their work, and that's an annual change that we do: Every September, we change the content of the house. And then from the Masterpiece Gallery, you dive down into the sort of hands-on experience zones. That's divided into four colored zones. So we have the green, red, yellow, and blue. And each colored zone is linked to a childhood development competence. We're very focused, of course, on learning through play. So that has been our thinking when we develop experiences in the house that we anchor it into a learning-through-play perspective. For example, the green zone is about social development. The blue zone is cognitive or problem-solving skills. Red zone is creativity, and yellow zone is emotional development. Then of course there's a fifth competence, which is physical development, and that's where we have the playgrounds outside. So that's where you can go and let off the steam kind of thing. So the experiences within those, each of those colored zones, is tailored towards that learning competence. And then in the basement, we have a history collection. So this is a very popular visit for some of the fans to actually sort of relive their childhood and see those sets that maybe you got for Christmas, or maybe you never got for Christmas, and you know, I always think it should be sponsored by Kleenex or somebody like that, because it was a very emotional moment going down into the basement and seeing the archive and seeing the timeline of the LEGO Group.

Ethan Vincent

The tree was actually constructed in the LEGO Group's model offices in the Czech Republic and then transported to Denmark. Stuart said it arrived on 14 trucks in more than 30 pieces, 20 alone for the trunk, and it took around 24,000 hours to build. So that would be one person working on that model, that huge LEGO brick tree for 12 years. But of course, the people at the model shop had a team working on it in three shifts, 24 hours a day, so they were able to put it together in nine months.

Brian Crecente

Stuart said that the tree was actually never fully assembled until it arrived in the museum, which was a bit nerve-racking. Once it was done he gave it a big hug.

Ethan Vincent

So that makes Stuart a tree hugger then, right?

Brian Crecente

(Sighs) Yes, Ethan. (Laughs)

Ethan Vincent

With the tree assembled and the museum open, Stuart spends his time now helping to design the different things showcased inside the museum. So for instance, right now, the top floor is dominated by three massive LEGO brick dinosaurs.

Stuart Harris

Basically, I put the brief together of what we want in that space. We have this gallery space, and it's mostly dedicated to the work of the LEGO fan community. So these models were going to be built in our main European model shop in Kladno, just outside Prague. They build sort of models for parks and retail stores, and so on, so they're used to building all these massive, big models. But we wanted the fans involved in those. So I worked with a small online community. We created this forum, where the fans could contribute to their creative suggestions on how we should develop these models. So they did everything from written descriptions to sketches to Digital Designer files, and so on, and little prototypes and stuff. So they gave us all this input, and we fed that into the model shop in the Czech Republic, and they produced the dinosaurs based on the creative direction from the fans.

Brian Crecente

Like the tree, the dinosaurs came in large parts and then were glued together to ensure they would stand up to the tribulations of public display.

Ethan Vincent

That's right. People can get a little handsy with LEGO bricks.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, go figure. Yes, and you don't want a 20-foot-tall LEGO T. rex toppling over on someone.

Ethan Vincent

Exactly.

Brian Crecente

So in designing them, Stuart and the team also have to make sure that these mega constructions don't actually crash through the floor.

Stuart Harris

So there's a lot of people which go into, behind-the-scenes, that go into developing these models. So there's a big sort of technology team, engineering team that go into sort of

doing all the engineering calculations, static calculations about weight and all that kind of thing. And, you know, we have certain weight limits on the floor and about how we distribute that weight to make sure that it's safe and stable. So there is a lot of work that goes into the planning before you actually even start building.

Ethan Vincent

And remember: The job's not done once the models are installed.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, this is the LEGO Group, and they like to have fun.

Ethan Vincent

They sure do. And so in this case, each dino had two eggs by them. And over time, those eggs hatched, and now there are baby dinosaurs.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, and funny enough, when we visited, we noticed that each of these massive dinosaurs had an ice cream in one hand, and a little cleaning bottle in the other, which, was I think a nod to the one-year birthday party they held for the dinosaurs and the need to keep things clean.

Ethan Vincent

It's now been, or will be soon, five years since the LEGO House opened its doors.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, you know, the LEGO Group is celebrating its 90th anniversary in August, but the LEGO House is celebrating its fifth anniversary in September.

Stuart Harris

I've been with the LEGO Group for 19 years. It's amazing to show the endurance and there's still the relevance of the brand and the product. It's all about the brick but it's still as relevant today. And just what's amazing is, you know, the bricks we produce today are still compatible with the bricks, you know, the great foresight from Godtfred in the early days to make this, this system in play that work through the generations.

(Brief tune break)

Chapter 6: Fluid Play – 44:06

Brian Crecente

One could argue that Niels and Stuart represent the company's history – an icon who may be the last of his kind in his hands-on approach to LEGO element and brick design, and a master builder whose efforts center around an experiential museum of LEGO bricks. But our next two interviews are in many ways ambassadors for the company's future.

Ethan Vincent

Which is why we found ourselves back in the LEGO Innovation House. It's also where you get great Danish coffee from machines that pour into little glass LEGO-branded cups. I don't know if you still remember Brian, but Dave was so obsessed with them that he took endless pictures. It was kind of like his version of the Brian minifigure that Brian took everywhere to tell the same joke over and over again. Right Brian?

Brian Crecente

Hey! I like that joke. Wait, hold on a second. Let me – alright, sorry. I had to get mini Brian to set up his mic.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, exactly that – there it is, that running joke of the minifig.

Brian Crecente

He's here! I've got him.

Ethan Vincent

Oh, that's so great.

Brian Crecente

So it was the LEGO Innovation House where we met Jonathan Trier Brikner an interaction design manager, and Benjamin Lundquist Ma, a digital play design manager. Both focus on experimenting with and designing new types of play experiences. Where Benjamin says he works on finding the fun in those new types of play, Jonathan likens himself to an animator at Pixar working to make new LEGO brick experiences come alive with light and sound. Perhaps most recently, you've seen their work on the LEGO Super Mario™ theme sets.

Jonathan Trier Brikner

I was responsible for creating Mario as a character.

Brian Crecente

This is Jonathan.

Jonathan Trier Brikner

So you have a character that has to be brought to life. And somehow you have to figure out what are the tiny things that make people believe that he's a small character? So to give a really concrete example could be, when you put Mario down and you put him on his back, he falls asleep. And then you think about like, how, what is the sound of little guy falling asleep? At what point does he fall asleep? All those little things that sell kids on the notion that this guy is now sleeping on your table. Everything that goes into that, that's animation, it's sound design, it's having the right little technical gestures, it's putting all those things together so that, when kids do it, it's just natural. They don't think about it.

Benjamin Lundquist Ma

Well, I worked with Jonathan on LEGO Super Mario, and I guess that's actually quite a relevant experience.

Ethan Vincent

This is Benjamin speaking.

Benjamin Lundquist Ma

Where, for example, Mario falling asleep is the tip of the iceberg of a lot of features that we've explored. And my job is sort of trying out that entire iceberg of possibilities. And when we then do come up with the things that test really well with kids that people like Jonathan then work on actually making them good, where we just find the things that have potential.

(Brief tune break)

Brian Crecente

One of the important phrases here is fluid play. It's something we've talked quite a bit about in the Bits N' Bricks podcast. It's this notion of allowing the child to fluidly move between the physical and digital experiences by removing any speed bumps, smoothing out the experience so that those playing don't even think about the transitions.

Ethan Vincent

We asked Jonathan, where he thinks his work sits in relation to that concept.

Jonathan Trier Brikner

When we're designing, a lot of the times I don't think we necessarily care about the specific term. You know, we sit and play with stuff, we sit and feel it out. We're like, "Does

this feel natural to me? Do I naturally want to do something?" So I think one notion we often talk about in our team is, "How can we just support what kids naturally want to do?" So instead of saying to kids, like, "You have to do it in this way because we designed so," we look at like what do kids already do? What do kids feel like they already say and do? What are the emotions and feelings they already have? Like, how can we support what they would already want to do, so that they don't – we don't make an experience where it's like something they want to do, something they want to do something, and then, "Oh, now you have to use another thing or device" you break the flow, and then you have to go back. We try to keep that flow so that they never notice that they're changing between styles of play. They're just – to them it's just play. It's the same if you ask kids, like, about the different things kids do. If they play video games, if they play with toys, oo them, it's not like, "I play video games," or "I play with toys." To them, it's just play. And we think about in the same way. Like, we just want kids to play. And if we want the experience to change over time, it should all just feel like play. It's not a – there's no break where they have to go, "Now I have to do the other thing and then go back to play." It's all just play. So I don't think we necessarily care about the terms. We just care about making great play.

Brian Crecente

And doing that, creating experiences that transcend their form-factors, is becoming easier and easier thanks to advances in technology, according to Ben.

Benjamin Lundquist Ma

Technology of course changes over time, so our toolbox of enabling these kinds of play experiences for kids gets easier over time. Technology is more easily embedded in toys. And as Jonathan said, you know, play is play. It's not that we're aiming to put technologies in, but when a certain play experience needs it, we have the ability to, and that's just really cool. It's just become clearer that, when we integrate technology, that we keep the LEGO DNA in the experiences, that we don't try and replicate other companies or other products' experience and just put a LEGO label on top of it, but rather figure out what makes this inherently LEGO. Why is this unique to us? Why could no one else do this? And try and pull off those experiences instead and bring technology in there. And that's where I think, you know, maybe in the early days of LEGO Super Mario some people were skeptical of, "Why are you putting technology into a figure? Why not just use the bricks?" But I think bringing the technology into that play experience, we just brought the bricks out and made them more relevant or relevant in a different way that you might not inherently play usually.

Brian Crecente

And of course, when technology meets LEGO bricks, another byproduct is the LEGO video game, something both Jonathan and Benjamin think about a lot. Both see in video game creations featuring the LEGO brick something that, at its heart, is a reflection of the company's core DNA.

Benjamin Lundquist Ma

When I look at the LEGO video games, they don't feel like any other video games that are on the market, and I think that's because there are so many LEGO values in these things. And why others are not trying to replicate it while still being admired in the video game industry and the market and among players, because it has some of these LEGO DNAs that are inherently LEGO. They have mashups, they have the LEGO humor. The bricks are also there, building is part of it, but it's not just a skin type of building. You know, you can take a character from one movie or one franchise and put in another one and what happens when they come together? And that's like playing with your LEGO sets at home. So it is bringing the LEGO experience to the screen.

Jonathan Trier Brikner

The different companies making them have gotten progressively better and better at replicating the feeling of LEGO.

Brian Crecente

This is Jonathan.

Jonathan Trier Brikner

Even if it's a video game of like The LEGO Movie™ Videogame, where you're essentially running around like a Mario-esque run-and-jump-type game that isn't necessarily about building as a core thing. It's still like, even down to the sound design, like the (clicking noises) little sounds that the game makes when you build something, or the ways the brick looks like it's slightly damaged, like somebody's been playing with it, brings you back into your own fantasy of, "Oh, I wish I could build a dragon with a house on top with jet engines." Because you see something that looks like a LEGO experience. So even if it's not inherently about building, that feeling of LEGO we're getting into the digital experiences better and better.

Benjamin Lundquist Ma

I, as a kid, grew up with both LEGO and video games.

Ethan Vincent

This is Benjamin speaking.

Benjamin Lundquist Ma

And I was really inspired to make video games myself. So my entire education and background has been in video game development and design. And I always figured that my future was in video games. And then the day I got to choose between two jobs, I picked the LEGO one because I think I realized that ultimately it comes down to play, right? Video games is just a different medium or a different interaction into a play world. Just like

bricks are. So we're always as play designers going to learn from video games. Just like video games in the past has always learned from physical toys. Those things always inspire each other, and I think they're going to continue to do. Technology is moving forward, both for physical toys and sensors, like they are for video games that look nicer and feel nicer and can connect online. So that sort of constant feeding into each other, that's going to continue to happen.

(Brief tune plays)

Chapter 7: Play Day – 53:00

Brian Crecente

It's about now in the interview that I realized we're about to miss the kickoff to the annual Play Day. We're sitting in the LEGO Innovation House chatting with Benjamin and Jonathan when I notice the time.

Ethan Vincent

That's right, so I break down the equipment, and you and Dave literally run off to figure out where everything is happening.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, and it doesn't take us long to find this massive line of employees all walking toward a single field half hidden in a copse of trees. The field is squeezed between the new LEGO campus and LEGOLAND, and it's been transformed into what looks like a fairground.

Ethan Vincent

On the sides are massive tents and booths set up with different games, and at the far end is a stage where LEGO Group CEO Niels B. Christiansen is welcoming the crowd of employees and then introduces Thomas Kirk Kristiansen, the great grandson of founder Ole Kirk Christiansen, son of Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen – so many Kristiansens, Brian –

Brian Crecente

(Laughs) There are.

Ethan Vincent

– and current chairman of the board of LEGO A/S and the LEGO Foundation.

Thomas Kirk Kristiansen

I must say it is really, really fantastic to be able to see all of you together here today. We have been missing that for so long. So really fantastic, spectacular view here. Thank you

very much to my father and the rest of the family for joining us here today to celebrate Play Day and 90 years anniversary for the LEGO Group.

(Applause and cheering from crowd)

Thomas Kirk Kristiansen

I can tell you that, throughout the time, there has been a lot actually or some at least that didn't necessarily think that we would reach 90 years. But here we are. Stronger, bigger, better, reaching many more children, and more playful than ever. And that doesn't just happen by chance. It happens because of all of you, our amazing employees. It's because of you, who every day relentlessly push with dedication, passion, and super hard work for creating even better, more creative play experiences to reach children all over the world. I am truly amazed by the dedication you show. So thank you so much for that. Without you, we couldn't have done it.

(Applause from crowd)

Thomas Kirk Kristiansen

It is 90 years, so it's also a thank you to all the people who have, throughout the time, somehow participated in creating the brand and the company to what it is today. I think this is a time for celebration. So I think now we should just go out and have fun. Congratulations, happy birthday, happy Play Day, and go out and have a fantastic, playful afternoon.

(Applause and cheering from crowd)

Ethan Vincent

As the speech wraps up, all of those thousands of people start to disperse to the events spread out across the field, around the campus, and inside the new campus building.

Brian Crecente

Now in the field where we're standing, there are four different tents set up with different events and activities. There's this thing called Crash Test Time Travelers, there's a sand track rally, which is basically this waist-level sandboxes that were set up where people could build race tracks in these piles of beach sand, and then try to roll steel marbles down their creations. And then there was something called Tomorrow's Wish, which was asking employees to take a tiny piece of paper and write their own wish on it. The paper is then fold up and put in a tiny, little LEGO briefcase, which is put into the hand of a minifig and placed in a real time capsule, which was meant to be opened in 10 years. You know, it's here where we spotted Kjeld for the first time. He's at a table sitting shoulder-to-shoulder with other employees, proudly wearing a 90th anniversary badge he had made it another booth and writing out his own message to the future. Now it's funny. I was looking at some

of the photos I took of that event, and of him, and in one of the photos, he's holding up the message and I can actually make out that what he's written is "always ask questions."

Ethan Vincent

Wow. I love that. I mean, it was pretty amazing to see Kjeld, you know, he's what 74 now, out and about chatting with everyone and having just as much fun playing as everyone else at the event. So across the field, we spotted another large tent that was home to the Time Toss, and we'll let Dave explain. He was actually moderating it in real time. It's pretty cool.

Dave Tach

We're at the Time Toss, Brian.

Brian Crecente

Yeah. And you were telling me that this is basically, uh -

Dave Tach

Cornhole?

Brian Crecente

Cornhole meets Skee-Ball.

Dave Tach

You got it.

Brian Crecente

Now I know Skee-Ball.

Dave Tach

Cornhole is where you have two boards and a hole in each board, right? And we're standing, I don't know, 20 feet apart. And you toss corn.

Brian Crecente

That's not right. I don't think you're tossing.

Dave Tach

Bags of corn. Just like these people in front of us. There's dozens of people tossing.

Brian Crecente

I think these are bean bags.

Dave Tach

Well, I mean, its corn was supposed to be in the beanbags, but we're trying to paint a picture here. This is theater of the mind, Brian! The difference between this and cornhole is in part there's three holes here which I believe represent –

Brian Crecente

Past, present and future.

Dave Tach

– past, present and future.

Brian Crecente

Name two excellent Bits N' Bricks episodes.

Dave Tach

Are you – if you had to be the past, the present, or the future, which would you be?

Brian Crecente

I think I would be the future because then I would never die.

Dave Tach

Oh, OK. Wait, that doesn't make any sense. Can we see what it says on the board?

Brian Crecente

Where does it say? Oh, it just, I don't think it says anything, does it?

Dave Tach

It does. Throw two bags at once, extra turn. Extra turn, plus 10. Oh, so you get one, five, or 10 points. I think he got 10 points. See in the top left corner there, Ethan? Those are the LEGO pieces. Those are part of my era the late '80s, early '90s.

Brian Crecente

Extra turn. He got an extra turn by doing that.

Brian Crecente

Back at the new campus building there were booths spread across the front grounds where you could play Twister, board games, you could grab a cup of coffee and have this delicious LEGO brick-inspired cupcake, and of course, you could build things with LEGO bricks.

Ethan Vincent

And Brian, you know, we both sort of lost track of time building LEGO yo-yos in one tent when Kjeld walked over to compliment us on our building skills. I can't tell you how tempted I was to just press record on my recorder and fire away with some questions, but you could tell that he was all about the immediacy of the experience, you know, interacting in the festivities, and definitely not on a press tour. So I think it was wise for us both to just enjoy his fun way to critique our creations. I mean, how often do you get the grandson of the founder of the LEGO Company to look over your shoulder while you're building?

Brian Crecente

And you know, I have to point out that he walked up, and I believe he said that my yo-yo was a nice yo-yo, but that he questioned the stability of your yo-yo.

Ethan Vincent

I question your stability sometimes, Brian.

(Laughter)

Ethan Vincent

Well, I'm not sure he was really impressed with what either of us were trying to, you know, cobble together, but it was so nice to chat with him in such a laid back setting, right, Brian?

Brian Crecente

Yeah. Fortunately, he wasn't there when I tried my first yo for my yo-yo because it went down and just flew apart in like 50 pieces. But yeah, he was such a genuine, nice guy. And it was, like you said, it was so neat seeing him sort of just walking around, you know? No protective detail, no handlers, just hanging out, having fun.

Ethan Vincent

That was really great. And once we kind of put together our yo-yos, there was of course the LEGO Campus building, which was packed with fun things to do and filled this day with throngs of smiling employees walking around its perimeter enjoying the weather, the company, and the play.

(Music plays)

Chapter 8: LEGO Campus – 1:01:26

Brian Crecente

The new LEGO Campus is really a thing to behold, it shouldn't come as a surprise to anyone that this is not your typical corporate headquarters.

Ethan Vincent

Yes, anything but. The building itself took five years of construction and planning to create. It's 54,000 square meters in size and home to 2,000 employees.

Brian Crecente

And it is so playful. There are off-kilter pieces of the building that look a bit like LEGO bricks. There's this massive minifig sitting in front of the building. And inside, it's packed with a crazy assortment of neat designs and features.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, there's the massive foyer that has three huge floating LEGO bricks equipped with screens that can show different images and a LEGO brick yellow staircase spirals up around this huge open space.

Brian Crecente

There were also tons of brick displays spread throughout the space, like a life-sized lawnmower. There was also, you know, this world map made of LEGO elements, and really the most stunning thing there was a Bugatti Chiron complete with working lights, engine sounds, and even Michelin tires. I had to resist every instinct in my body to not just jump in through the open top and vroom, vroom, vroom, vroom in the front seat.

Ethan Vincent

I could see you doing that, I could see you doing that, Brian, but I love that nearby they had a mechanic's workbench, and it was just packed with these tools for the car, all made of LEGO bricks, of course.

Brian Crecente

Yes, and let's not forget the People House. This is a section of the building that was designed with the help of employees. It features a fitness center, a creative workshop, a cinema, activity zone, kitchen, health clinic, even sleeping quarters.

Ethan Vincent

Now all that's there on a normal day, but today wasn't a normal day. And that space of course was packed with more things to do on this LEGO Play Day.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, there was a place to make music. There were displays showing off past creations, a massive LEGO brick birthday cake, and a second cake-like creation made by the LEGO Group.

Ethan Vincent

That was exceptionally cool. It was the largest ever fully animated brick build zoetrope, which is basically a device that uses a collection of images to produce the illusion of motion. Each of the nine moving layers of the creation brought to life a different decade of the history of the LEGO Group. LEGO video games also had quite a footprint at Play Day, including those two amazing one-button games created by Don and the talented team at Sublab Games, LEGO *Star Wars*™: The Skywalker Saga, of course, a look at the upcoming Bricktales game, and much to our surprise, a booth dedicated to Light Brick Studio, creators of Builder's Journey.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, now keep in mind, we've talked to the folks over there a couple of times. We've done two different episodes, one on the game and one on what's to come. And while this wasn't Light Brick Studio co-founder Karsten Lund's first LEGO Play Day, it was the first one he's gone to not as an employee, but rather as a sort of outsider showing off something special to the LEGO Group – their next, still-secret game.

Brian Crecente

Now I know you can't tell us what's behind this wall, but we know it's your next thing.

Karsten Lund

Yeah, yeah.

Brian Crecente

And you're – as we've talked about in previous episodes, you play tests regularly, so this is a live play test.

Karsten Lund

This is a live play test. We test every Friday, and we don't, almost don't miss a day. So today we thought, "Hey, why not? When we're out here, just put it behind semi-closed doors, and people can stop and try it and test it out, we get sort of a very big crowd coming through, and we get some input on the game."

Brian Crecente

And there are, I think they said 5,000 people here, so that's going to be a huge play test, right?

Karsten Lund

It is, it is. And for us it's also about, you know, obviously, we're a small studio, and we're a spin-out of the LEGO Group. Not everybody knows about us, right? So this is a great opportunity for us for some internal, you know, visibility. People are actually, you know, excited about the games and have tried it before, and you know, some haven't tried it, some might not have even heard about it before, so it's really good to get that internal visibility in a big company like this.

Brian Crecente

So what does it mean, do you think, for a company to set aside a day to allow all of its employees or to encourage all of its employees to play?

Karsten Lund

It means everything. I think, they should set aside more days. I mean, we should play every day. And I think that, you know, it's what we do, it's where we come from, and if we don't do it ourselves and practice what we preach, we're not doing it right, right? So I think we should play every day, we should have, you know, a Play Day every week, if that was possible. I think it's so hugely important.

Ethan Vincent

Mads Prahm, Light Brick Studio's other co-founder, was also there reconnecting with all of his former colleagues, and just having fun being inside this wonderful new campus building and watching everyone play with this new game.

Mads Prahm

I'm mostly watching people's faces. And I see that they are smiling and they are laughing and it looks like they're having a good time. So that's what we were hoping for.

(Tune plays)

Chapter 9: Play Day Wrap Up – 1:06:23

Ethan Vincent

So Brian, I know you and Dave played this new Light Brick Studio game.

Brian Crecente

I can neither confirm nor deny that I played a really fun new game from the people behind Light Brick Studio, or that quite a long line formed behind us while we may or may not have been playing it, but I can say that memories of what I did or didn't experience are still strong, despite the amazing week we had in Billund.

Ethan Vincent

You have become a perfect politician. Thank you for that answer.

Brian Crecente

You're welcome.

Ethan Vincent

I mean, there was a lot to take in, and so much of it was memorable. Our next episode is really going to dig into some of those things, like our visit to the LEGO House and LEGOLAND, getting tours of the company's secretive, secure archives, and walking the floor of the LEGO factory.

Brian Crecente

There were so many minifig hands, so many hands!

Ethan Vincent

I know you'll never be the same, Brian. You've seen it all now. You've looked behind the curtain.

Brian Crecente

I have. Chuckles. We also got a chance to chat with the mayor of Billund about how the company and town work together and then met with Charlotte Sahl-Madsen, a former Danish Minister of Science Technology and Development who once led the LEGO Group's R&D department and now dedicates her time to the Capital of Children initiative.

Ethan Vincent

You're not going to want to miss it, but let's circle back to Play Day in this episode.

(Tune plays)

Chapter 10: Final Thoughts – 1:07:42

Ethan Vincent

So, Brian, returning to Billund was poignant for me since I felt like I was not only returning to a place filled with so many personal memories since my work with the LEGO Group beginning in 2008, but in a way, I myself had kind of changed over the years. And working alongside you, Brian, and diving into the history of digital play, and really fortifying and deepening my knowledge on all things LEGO history and LEGO DNA, made me really learn to savor every single moment on this journey we took to the heart of the LEGO brick. And

to see Billund for the first time through your eyes, through Dave's eyes, through Trish's eyes, you know, it made the experience even more enjoyable. Man, it was just really cool. It's clear to me that, you know, the LEGO Group has a purposeful and meaningful culture that is driven by creative minds and employees that are proud of their involvement and contributions. The 90th anniversary and Play Day as the expression of that was the culmination of the marvels we witnessed that week and seeing Kjeld walk around the crowds with a smile, a fist pump, you know, the occasional handshake that he offered, was really touching. And, I can't imagine what the next 10 years will bring for the LEGO Group in terms of products, sets, movies, video games, and the metaverse. But one thing for me I think is very certain: that the roots of their history and culture grow deep and wide and will continue to fortify their place in the hearts and minds of children and adults through many more generations.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, you know, we've been doing this podcast for nearly two years now, and I've been researching and interviewing folks at the LEGO Group about the LEGO Group for a bit more than three years. I feel like I've learned a lot and that I know a lot, but taking this journey, making this pilgrimage has connected so many dots for me. It isn't just about putting faces to names but putting places to ideals and values. Going to Billund, walking through the halls where people design sets, seeing the places they inhabit, the world they live in, it brings important context to what so many people have described to us as LEGO DNA. That the people who dedicate their lives to sparking joy and fueling fun, would take a day off once a year to play together shouldn't be surprising, but it is and, you know, it's delightful. In many ways, Play Day is an inversion of LEGO DNA. It's a chance for the world's most known toy makers to reconnect with their inner child, to seek inspiration from their own history, to reflect on the powerful values of imagination, fun, creativity, caring, learning, and quality that have served the LEGO Group so well. To remember the promise of building joy as true partners with each other and co-creating fans, and to experience the product of a company built on the spirit of only the best being good enough.

(serene music plays)

Bits N' Bricks: Credits – 1:10:48

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. Disclaimer voice is Ben Unguren. Opening's child voice is Milo Vincent. Music by Henrik Lindstrand, Peter Priemer and

foundermusic.com. A special thanks to the LEGO Idea House and Tine Froberg Mortensen for their help on this episode. We'd like to thank our participants: Jonathan Trier Brikner, Stuart Harris, Kristian Reimer Hauge, Karsten Lund, Benjamin Lundquist Ma, Sean McEvoy, Niels Milan Pedersen, Mads Prahm, and Signe Wiese. 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.