

LEGO® Minifigures Don't Have Knees

The LEGO® minifigure plays an enormous role in just about every LEGO video game created, but it turns out the video games have also played a bit of a role in the creation of LEGO minifigures.

Video games, and the depiction of the LEGO minifigure in motion, were one of the reasons that the LEGO Group decided to create The Complete LEGO Minifigure Guidelines in 2010.

The more than 300-page tome details how to create and represent minifigures correctly and was put together by the LEGO Group's Matthew Ashton and Tara Wike, among others.

Wike started at the LEGO Group in 2009, working on designing elements for the LEGO Minifigures collectibles product line. She took over as creative lead for the project shortly after starting.

During her time working on the regular release of minifigure collectibles, Wike helped to design the little LEGO people from concept to final production.

By 2018, she shifted over to become a senior design manager at the LEGO Group, working as the main point of contact for anyone looking to use minifigures in books, movies, television shows, theme parks, and video games.

That work includes making sure the minifigures don't bend or stretch in ways that wouldn't be possible with real minifigures – like giving the digital versions knees when they don't have them in plastic form, she said.

"There was plenty of knees happening when we put the guidelines together," she said. "So, I don't know who started breaking that rule first, but it was well broken by the time I got there. In fact, we had to kind of reel it in with the squishiness in a lot of places. They got to the point where in some areas, there were so many liberties being taken that you could barely recognize that really it was a minifigure anymore.

"The limitations of the minifigure are both part of its charm and part of its frustration as a designer. And that is true for toy designers working at the LEGO Group as much as it is for digital game designers."

Wike was also directly involved with the development of the LEGO Minifigures Online video game created and released by Funcom in 2015. These days she spends as much time working with game developers as other teams, guiding them through the ever-growing book of minifigure rules.

With billions of minifigures now in existence in hundreds of different forms, Wike still believes the diminutive, little toy has plenty of life left in it.

"I think that we see that there's obviously something timeless about the minifigure," she said. "There's just something about it. The scale. The proportions, you know? The original

designer just hit on something similar to our two by four brick. It just fits in the hand and connects in such a way that it just speaks to people. So, I don't think we're going to lose the minifigure anytime soon. Whether we'll experiment with other figure types, maybe, I wouldn't be surprised."

Explore more...

In order of appearance

[Juno Spacecraft to Carry Three Figurines to Jupiter Orbit](#) - NASA website

[LEGO Minifigures Collectible Line](#) - LEGO Minifigures Series 21

[LEGO Minifigures turn 40...](#) - Slashgear online article

[LEGO Minifigures](#) - Official LEGO website

[LEGO Minifigures Online](#) (the massively multiplayer online game) - Wikipedia

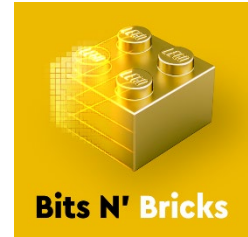
[LEGO Worlds](#) - Steam

[LEGO Dimensions](#) - Wikipedia

Transcript

Bits N' Bricks Season 1 Episode 8: LEGO® Minifigures: A Conversation

January 27, 2021 · 43:01



Bits N' Bricks: Introduction – 00:00

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, as well as 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.

(Introduction music)

Chapter 1: LEGO Minifigures – 00:32

Ethan Vincent

Today, we're going to be talking about something you find in nearly every single LEGO video game ever made. It's the LEGO minifigure.

Brian Crecente

Yes.

Ethan Vincent

Lots to talk about here, Brian, the first version of, I guess you could call it a minifigure, it was actually released back in 1975, but they lacked, you know, moveable arms, legs, and even a face.

Brian Crecente

Yikes.

Ethan Vincent

Yes, what's happening there. But before that the LEGO Group experimented even with different kinds of LEGO figures, which could be built with special pieces. And I guess the first modern minifigure came out in 1978 with the addition of things like arms, hands, legs,

and yes, those cute little smiling faces, we all know, and that have just become this iconic cultural thing.

Brian Crecente

Yes.

Ethan Vincent

And over the next two decades or so the minifigs continue to evolve, adding removable hair for guys, beards, you know, different body parts and facial expressions, glow in the dark elements, dresses, all kinds of stuff. I mean it's amazing. And finally in 1997, the minifig made the official leap to digital form in video games.

Brian Crecente

Yes, yes they did. And while the LEGO Island video game featured the very first official digital minifigure, we both saw some prior digital creations that were made a few years earlier by the LEGO Group R and D team SPU Darwin.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah.

Brian Crecente

So while the minifigs continued to grow in popularity and diversity, adding things like license figures and double faces and even micro figures, it wasn't until 2010 that the LEGO Group launched its popular Minifigures collectible's line. So I've got, Ethan a few fun facts for you that I sort of stumbled across while digging around into the history and popularity of the minifigure. So first off, did you know that there were four minifigures that were made entirely of wood, created for use in the LEGO Ninjago movie as props.

Ethan Vincent

No, I did not. Interesting.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, and there's only four of those exist in the world. So those are obviously highly collectible, highly sought-after minifigures. There are also, of course, there were if you're a fan of LEGO Star Wars, you probably know this, but there were a number of solid gold, solid silver, solid platinum, and solid bronze R2-D2 and C-3PO minifigures. I think they even had a couple of Boba Fett in there that were created as promotional items for a variety of LEGO Star Wars celebrations over the years. But this is my favorite, my very favorite fun fact, because it is crazy. And it makes me so jealous that I will never own these minifigures. A trio, three minifigures, were actually launched into space, heading to and actually arrived at Jupiter. They were launched back in 2011 as part of the payload of NASA's Juno spacecraft and these three little minifigures, I hear rumors actually that there are some

prototypes that might exist out there, but really there's only these three in space. One is of the Roman God, Jupiter, of course, one is of Jupiter's wife, Juno. And one is of Galileo Galilei, the father of science, or at least many people view him as that.

Ethan Vincent

I wish I had a mini documentary of this team putting it together and, you know, just kind of riffing over what kind of minifigs should go into outer space, you know?

Brian Crecente

So great.

Ethan Vincent

I know, and getting the green light, can you imagine like, 'yep, those are the one, boys, send them up,' you know? Crazy. All that's amazing. Let's roll back and talk a little bit about the digital version of the LEGO minifigures. There's a lot of interesting things to talk about here, especially when it comes to all of those wonderful LEGO video games. We were lucky enough to chat with LEGO Group, Senior Design Manager, Tara Wike, about all things minifigure. She started out with the company back in 2009 and within a couple of years was put in charge of the Minifigures collectible's lineup. These days she serves as sort of an in-house expert on all things minifigure, helping out teams working on everything from books and movies, to theme parks, and video games when it comes to the use of the minifigure.

Brian Crecente

That's right. And in this special sort of conversation episode that we have today, we chatted with her about the massive guidelines tome that she helped create, also about how video games have helped to evolve the portrayal of the minifigure. And of course, some of her personal favorites among the hundreds of figures.

(Music)

Chapter 2: Conversation with Tara Wike – 05:15

Tara Wike

I started, I was sculpting elements mostly for the Minifigures collectible's project. I'm pretty well-known for, you know, having strong opinions and liking to steer the direction of things. So it wasn't, it wasn't long before they put me in charge of the Minifigures collectible's project, which was an honor and a big responsibility, so I think it was maybe one or two years in that I became the creative lead. And so I was helping to choose the characters and decide what they looked like graphics-wise, lead a team of designers and sculptors to kind of create the characters. And I also had the great privilege of working

together with our now vice president, Matthew Ashton, on creating the minifigure style guide, what's called The Complete Minifigure Guidelines. And that is a nearly 300-page bible of how to create and represent minifigures correctly. And by virtue of working on that, I went from knowing very little to knowing everything there was to know about minifigures, so people throughout the company started to come to me for advice and help when it was time to put together a new character for just about anything. So it started to kind of seep beyond the boundaries of just the collectible Minifigures project, and I got involved with publishing and, you know, LEGOLAND Parks and a lot with the video game department, helping them develop stuff. So yes, large and small, I've been very involved in minifigures since my inception.

Ethan Vincent

I want to talk real quick or ask you when you think, in kind of the LEGO history, the minifig kind of broke out and became this massive hit, to the point that, you know, you can walk into any LEGO store now and grab a bucket of the various, you know, elements of a minifig and put it together randomly, stuff that I think as a kid I would have just loved and been doing for hours on end. When do you think that was, maybe at that point where it was clear that the minifig could be its own kind of LEGO creation that you could spend hours on?

Tara Wike

Well, that's a really good question. And I think it's going to depend a lot on who you ask, because you could certainly ask legal when they trademarked it, because somebody knew what was up way back when, and I work with a ton of people who were kids in the nineties and loved, like, what was his name? Red Beard-

Ethan Vincent

-yeah, Captain Red Beard.

Tara Wike

Yeah. There's like a weird love for that. Not weird, he's wonderful, don't get me wrong. But like, I don't know, there seems to be a disproportionate affection for that one. So I think even some of those lines back then really captured hearts. And, you know, when I hit the ground running, coming in here, it was pretty clear that minifigures were a success. And, I would have to credit Matthew because he was the one who...it took some convincing within the company to get them to do these blind bags because it was a different kind of offering, we'd always done boxes of bricks. And I think it was a hard sell even for some people within our four walls to think of the minifigure as a product unto itself. But I know he had a lot of belief in it and it certainly paid off, so I'm going to go ahead and say 2009, when I started, that was definitely when the minifigure took off.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, it sure blew up.

(Laughter)

Tara Wike

No, I think you could advance it further and just...I really think The LEGO Movie, again did a lot for that as well to give it a character and a personality that everyone in the world suddenly could put a name and a face to.

(Excerpt from The LEGO Movie)

Ethan Vincent

I feel like video games play a huge part in this. I look at LEGO Island and you know, you've got the Brickster and you've got Pepperoni, just these amazing minifigs. And they're really trying to bring the minifig to life. And they're, I think adhering to a lot stricter rules of movement like you talked about, I mean, you look at how the movement was back in the 1997 PC CD-ROM game, and it's very different than 2005 with LEGO Star Wars, for example, where all of a sudden you have your favorite, you know, Star Wars minifig, and they're bouncing around wielding a light saber and just all these things. And all of a sudden, this minifigure becomes an incredible play element within the LEGO system. So to me, I think video games played a huge role in allowing the minifig to come to life.

Tara Wike

Yeah, that's really true now that I think about it, and even I who, you know, I claim to be not a gamer. I did play those Star Wars LEGO games back in the day with my husband when he needed collaboration to help solve a puzzle. So...I remember...except I think that I just wanted to keep pulling the arms off of things and playing Chewbacca because you could like (popping sound) pop the arms off and I just thought that was hilarious.

Brian Crecente

Wait, did you just make that sound effect that quickly?

Tara Wike

I did, yes. Yeah.

Ethan Vincent

I need to hear that again.

Tara Wike

(Popping sound) Yeah, like that, you know, there are certain things you need to learn how to do as a toy designer. You have to prove yourself.

Brian Crecente

The Chewbacca sound effect. And I think it's a common problem people had who played that game.

(Laughter)

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, street cred right there, when you enter a meeting, you do that. And everyone's like, 'okay, she's the minifig person she's got this figured out.'

Tara Wike

Yeah. Chewbacca's here

(Commerical excerpt from LEGO Star Wars: The Video Game)

Ethan Vincent

The fun and the character and kind of how it's kind of endowing the character with this personality. I feel really did happen in LEGO Star Wars, and it was this breakout hit too, TT games I think did an amazing job of-

Tara Wike

-they did, it was huge, yes.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, and I think on the tails of that, it just kept going, right? All of a sudden, every IP was open and these very, very strong personalities in movies like Han Solo and Indiana Jones, I don't know why I'm naming all the Harrison Ford ones, but I mean, you think about that and boy put that on a minifig, and you've got the whole story figured out from running away, from rolling boulders to, you know, swinging over pits of snakes, you know, like it's all built into the story.

Tara Wike

Yeah, exactly. Yeah. No, you make a good point. And I think you're absolutely right for a huge sector of our consumer base. I think those probably had a pivotal role in yeah, defining and bringing the minifigure to life.

Brian Crecente

Do you have a sort of favorite? I think there's close to 600 out there. Was there one that really sticks out to you?

Tara Wike

Oh, well, I mean, let's see, we have a lot of stories behind the ones that we create. You know, they're all real characters to us and a lot of us make, involved in the project, like to make ones that are either ourselves or friends of ours or family. And so I, you know, some of my favorites are ones I've made to represent my husband and my son they've both appeared twice. The rocket boy who was wearing a rocket costume is my son, or it was based on my son, I should say. And the birthday boy character in the Series 18, our Party series, was also him 'cause he got glasses. So I had to make a new head that has had his little green glasses on. My husband was the astronaut in Series 15. And it really looks like him. My designer, Austin did a great job, and he has a beard, but most astronauts don't. So we had to make sure our...the fellow who wrote the biography for us worked in some storyline about, I forget, it was like he'd been out in space too long or something. He grew a beard. I was like, it has to make sense when people are going to question why this astronaut has a beard. And he was also the inspiration for the artist back in Series 4, who has a little soul patch because that was what his facial hair was back then. So those have this place in my heart. But I mean, there's other characters that I...there's a lot of them, it's hard to pick a favorite.

Brian Crecente

Does that mean that your husband's beard is now canon and he can't shave it and he's not allowed?

Tara Wike

Yeah, basically. Yeah. He has to get permission from the LEGO Group if he wants to change his facial hair. Yeah. No, I'm just joking. It just means if he shaves, I have to make another minifigure.

Brian Crecente

So, I want to talk a little bit about this sort of this LEGO minifig bible and sort of...more onto the topic of the digital aspect of the minifig. Obviously, digital LEGO minifigures have been around for a long time. They actually predate the first video game. At the minimum, we know that one appeared back in 1994, for a prototype movie pitch that was done by the group that became SPU Darwin. And then, obviously minifigs have been an enormous, enormous part of video games as long as they've been around. So I'm just curious, how involved were you in sort of figuring out how minifigures would be portrayed and act inside a video game?

Tara Wike

Well, that's a really good question because certainly minifigures were in LEGO video games before my time. And before we wrote the minifigure guidelines and it was actually one of the reasons for wanting to write those guidelines, because we could see that people who are creating content for us, both within the LEGO Group and outside, were kind of doing so without enough guidance. So there was a lot of really varied styles. If you look at a lot of the stuff that was being created: TV and video content being created, and certainly video game content, and even within our own house, the products that were coming out there was less alignment. Back then there was a lot of cool stuff going on, but we realized like, okay, this is actually, you know, the minifigure is an icon and it's a trademark of our brand and we really should probably try to tighten up what it looks like and how it acts. So we stepped in at that point, after we had made the guidelines, which was 2010, we published them. And we took a lot of inspiration from what had already actually been done and been made because in the video games were one of the major places where the characters had started to really come to life. We as product designers just make the static toy and we try to fill it with as much, you know, story inspiration and imagination as we can. And we, you know, we're very careful about the details, but we, we don't get to bring them to life and make them walk and talk and move. So a lot of that was kind of determined by what had been tried out and what had been done in previous games and previous videos, and we kind of were able to go through and say, 'Ooh, that really worked' or 'it's cool how they can do that'. And 'let's make sure they do more of that and less of this'. And we kind of honed the look and feel and behavior of the minifigs that we thought was most true to the brand and to our kind of...the sense of humor that we were trying to bring across in bringing the characters to life. So since then, we've had a lot closer interaction between, I think the product teams and the game developers. And we really tried to have a close collaboration throughout the development process to make sure that what they're making is communicating what is true to the LEGO brand, but still gives them the freedom they need to make an awesome game. You know sometimes, some of our limitations might be too much for what they need to do for gameplay, so we're able to kind of sit and find the right compromise that makes everybody happy.

Brian Crecente

Are there sort of general rules that are never broken when it comes to that? Like if someone were to come to you and say, 'you know, we're working on this game that's going to include LEGO minifigures. What are the sort of tent pole rules that you tell them?

Tara Wike

Well, you know, as soon as I say any hard and fast rule, I'm sure somebody is going to scramble to find an exception because that's how these things go, right? But I think first and foremost, we try to be as true to the toy as possible. We want whoever's interacting, you know, kid or adult, whoever's playing the game to recognize it and have the same sort of emotional connection to the character that they would, if it was a minifigure that they

were holding in their hands. So, in that sense, we try to maintain certainly the color palette, the graphic style, the overall dimensions of, not only the minifigure, but also the other LEGO pieces that are in the game. Normally there's many components built out of LEGO pieces. Everything needs to stay the same scale, sets and minifigures need to be able to interact with each other the way they would in real life, more or less. But then of course the minifigures are allowed to be animated and come to life. And depending on the game or the movie, we might try to adhere to a more stop motion style that's very true to the way the character moves in reality, or in other cases, you know, we need them to be able to kick sideways, which a minifigure can't do in reality. So we allow some sort of more flexible animation style depending on the needs of the game and the look and feel we're trying to go for.

Brian Crecente

That's interesting because I know with all the interviews we've done over the past year and a half or so with folks working at the LEGO Group and working on LEGO games, one of the things, certainly early on, one of the big things that they sort of, I think, grimaced every time they knew they had to deal with, it was the fact that you couldn't sort of distort the minifig. The minifig couldn't bend. You couldn't give them knees when they didn't have knees.

Tara Wike

Right.

Brian Crecente

Obviously, that's a rule that sort of was established prior to you starting at the LEGO Group, but was that something that was up for debate or discussion when you started putting together this sort of bible?

Tara Wike

There was plenty of knees happening when we put the guidelines together. So I don't know who started breaking that rule first, but it was well broken by the time I got there. In fact, we had to kind of reel it in with the squishiness in a lot of places. They got to the point where in some areas there were so many liberties being taken that you could barely recognize that really, it was a minifigure anymore. The limitations of the minifigure are both part of its charm and part of its frustration as a designer. And that is true for toy designers, working at the LEGO Group as much as it is for digital game designers. And it's, you know, sometimes working around those limitations are what brings out the humor that comes across. I think, you know, nothing did it, in my opinion, nothing did it better than The LEGO Movie, you know, showing Emmett doing jumping jacks, just scissoring his legs back and forth, and you know, all the humor that kind of came out of how, how stiff he had to move. But we do, we do allow for some bending, some sort of squishiness, again, if the game plan

requires it, we don't want to stand in the way of that, but ultimately, we just want to make sure it still looks like the toy.

(Excerpt from The LEGO Movie)

Ethan Vincent

It is amazing, Tara that you literally wrote the bible on the book on the minifigures, and obviously in the plastic form, there are so many very clear guidelines, like exactly mathematically where the mouth is supposed to be, exactly in which dimension, you know, the proportions are just perfectly laid out. I mean you cannot create a minifig that veers from that. And obviously the moment you go digital, there's just so many variables from the sheen, to the movement, to the mouth actually going in different places when they're talking, or when there's sadness or emotion, the mouth won't be where it's supposed to be at, right? So there's obviously a lot you have to deal with. Are there may be certain game developers or partners that you work with who are able to do that in the spirit of the LEGO DNA better than others?

Tara Wike

They all can with more or less guidance. We've had successes across the board, so it's just, actually, it's on us now. We need to update...in fact, I'm in the process of updating this guideline. It's probably going to get a hundred more pages because we, back in the day, didn't have as many 3D animated things going on. And now we really do, and that's where we need to have kind of the most guidance available. So certainly I'm...there was a developer I recently worked with and the first round of stuff they showed me was picturesque. It was beautiful. It was like better than some of the stuff that we've created in our first pass at trying to make a minifigure design. And it showed to me that they had absolutely studied our product very closely and were trying really trying their best. A lot of times the struggle comes when a developer has to interpret something that goes between our brand trademark, you know, the LEGO minifigure, and another partner that they might be working with that maybe it's a superhero or, you know, Jurassic Park or something like that. And they have to find the way, and this is a struggle for us internally as well, they have to find the way, 'okay, how do I make this thing look like both a LEGO minifigure and this character from a movie'. And that's where we all struggle. And, you know, we guide as best we can, but that's usually where we see the most loops, in design, is trying to figure out how to kind of scratch both of those itches at the same time.

Brian Crecente

So you...I know that obviously you've been working with minifigures for a very long time. It sounds like in 2015 though, you were perhaps a little more involved, or prior to that, with the development and launch of LEGO Minifigures Online, is that correct? And how did you get involved?

Tara Wike

Oh, yes. Well, I think that had been a dream for a while. People really love the characters from LEGO Minifigure collectibles, but we were kind of a small product line when you compare, when you look at City and Ninjago and some of our other bigger franchises, we didn't have any television or even TV commercials to support. So we never brought our own characters to life, but people love to use them. You know, we have the hotdog guy who just, will not die he's everywhere. And so there was, it was seen as this very ripe place that we could easily draw a big story from and create a big universe around. And so there had been a wish for a long time in our team and in the digital games' team to make a game around it. And we had this opportunity to make this massive multiplayer online game, LEGO Minifigures Online, where we could, at that point, I think we were up to 12 or 13 series, so multiply that by 16, a lot of characters that we could draw from, and bring to life. And so it was...I was very involved in that, I spent a lot of time up in Oslo with the Funcom team. It was a lot of work. It was a lot of fun.

(Excerpt from LEGO Minifigures Online)

Ethan Vincent

So let me ask, what was the hope or what were you hoping would come out of that game? You know, LEGO Minifigures Online when it launched?

Tara Wike

Well, I mean, as with anything, you kind of just hope for a little more exposure and fun and trying to just get kids to have a good time in general. I think that's our goal as designers, but for me, it was just to show some love to these characters. And the thing I feel is really nice about the Minifigure collectible's line, is that it kind of communicates to the world how the LEGO brand sees itself. That's the way I interpret it anyway, it's a way of communicating our personality to the world, which we had done that far with 2D, with the graphics and with the elements we'd been making and the character selection, but here we had this opportunity to show them in motion and doing stuff. And I think the most fun we had was kind of trying to figure out which...what each character's default and turbo moves were going to be. And we had the chicken flinging eggs, and the DJs throwing records around, and you know, as a company, the LEGO Group tries to shy away from anything representing violence, but we knew that there had to be some level of conflict in the game. And so finding the way to make that fun and humorous in a LEGO brand kind of way, that was the challenge and also the super fun part of working with those guys on that game.

Brian Crecente

I know that game shut down in 2016, but obviously there's still LEGO video games coming out and they still feature LEGO minifigures. Are there any games that have come out since

then, or are in development that you could talk about, obviously, that you feel like are the sort of best representations of the minifigures? Or like, do you have any favorites?

Tara Wike

Oh boy. Well, I mean, having watched my son play LEGO Worlds all Christmas, that was...I'm really proud of that one too. I don't want to name any names because, to be honest, I'm not entirely certain which ones are out or not out yet (laughs) so that's a tough one and I don't want to put my foot in my mouth, but I will say that there are, well I think LEGO Towers is a lot of fun and I know that one's out, but there are a lot more games coming out now that are sort of, I think of it as master branded or kind of has a little mix up of different homegrown LEGO minifigures in them. So it's not exclusive to the collectible minifigures line, but they've also got City characters and sometimes Ninjago characters in there. And they're all looking amazing and super, super fun. I like to see that there's a deviation now in the style of gameplay, that it's not so much about people just, you know, maybe having conflict and collecting rewards for that. And most games still have some kind of problem solving or, you know, ultimate goal aspect too. But there just seems to be a little bit more just about kind of community and nuance and, you know, building your little environment, your little worlds, and that appeals to me more, personally, but in general, I think everything coming out I've been really impressed with so far.

Brian Crecente

It does appear that there are...Tower's a great example and LEGO Brawls is another one where-

Tara Wike

Oh, good, that one's out.

Brian Crecente

-where it's like, it's not really tied to a specific IP, and instead it's sort of celebrating minifigures, which I'm sure you must love.

Tara Wike

I do. And it gives the sense, you know, there's a little more freedom in games like that, that we can treat it, more or less, like the kid's toy box. You know, when we're presenting a toy product in a box that you see on the shelf at the store, it kind of needs to tell cohesive story, but we know, and we design for the fact that we know a kid's going to go home and hopefully play a lot with those bricks and that they're going to end up mixed together with our other bricks. And we realize that there's a lot of joy that comes from that, that sort of interaction, and that's what we like to play up in the movies in the digital games. We like to really celebrate the 'Hey, go for it. Here's all your stuff. Do what you will.'.

Brian Crecente

I'm curious, this is sort of the, maybe even the extreme opposite of something like Brawls. I was, and a lot of people, were huge fan of LEGO Dimensions, which was just packed to the ceiling with IP and all kinds of minifigs. Was that something that you were involved in at all in terms of sort of minifig stuff?

Tara Wike

I had tangential involvement in that one. My colleague and good friend Daire McCabe was the design contact on that, and also one of the designers on the product itself that was tied to it. That was a great game and really a huge effort because to get all of those partners to, you know, play nice together and also work in a LEGO way, I think that was a huge puzzle for those guys to solve. And I think they did a brilliant job.

Brian Crecente

This makes me, gets me thinking back to you saying that there were, I think you said, it was about 300 pages in the bible and that you're adding more. What in the world is being detailed in 300...in my mind, the book is like, this is what it looks like.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, totally. Like I had the same thought too, Brian where I was like, what are they writing? What is there...isn't it clear by now that the minifig has to look a certain way?

Tara Wike

You would think, oh my goodness, I have some examples that would give you nightmares. We have pages and pages about just eyebrows.

(Laughter)

Tara Wike

And, I don't want to say it's called a guideline and not a rule book for a reason. There isn't a ton of stuff that is just like, 'absolutely only do this and never do that'. It's 'hey, this is how we draw eyebrows,' you know? And these are ways you can use them to make different expressions. And here's how, you know, the color of eyebrow should correlate to the hair color in this way, and things like that. So just providing guidance, and it's more examples that we want people to be able to draw from so that they don't have to start from scratch every time 'cause we've made so many of these things that there's no reason to have to reinvent the wheel every time you draw a minifigure. So there's, yeah there's pages upon pages about eyebrows, about posing, about...oh, we have one about belly buttons. I mean, there's-

(Laughter)

Tara Wike

-there's a lot, there's a lot in there.

Brian Crecente

Do minifigures have belly buttons?

Tara Wike

They, well, if it's appropriate, if they have an outfit or, you know, are, you know, male topless minifigures, then they are allowed to belly button, but it is a simple circle or ellipse. It is not any more detailed than that.

Brian Crecente

So no idea if they're innies or outies is what you're saying.

Tara Wike

Exactly, we leave that up to the imagination.

(Laughter)

(Music)

Brian Crecente

So I know you're not directly involved now with the minifigures, the blind packs, but I have a bunch of questions. Well, several questions. The chief one is how do you guys come up with, like, that's a lot of minifigures. There are usually three a year, I think, and you do 16 in each one. Like where are these ideas coming?

Tara Wike

Well, back in the day, this was born of, and I can't lay claim to the very first series. I started working on series when they were developing Series 2. So this came from Matthew Ashton, I mentioned him before, this was sort of his baby and a team of designers back then it was Michael Patton. I believe Laurence Dawes was involved. I just want to make sure I'm giving credit where credit is due. And it was just a wish to have some characters that didn't necessarily make sense or fit into one of the other sets that we would have been selling at the time - so a City set, or Agents, or, you know, something else like that, but we still thought should exist in the world. And so it was basically just a wish list of designers. It didn't come from, there was no big research, you know, testing done with 500 possibilities and have people, no, no, no. this was a list that we, you know, agreed upon within the team with the marketers and the project managers and the designers saying, 'okay, these are the characters we want to make.' That was how it started with the first 16 characters. And from there, we kind of hit our stride. Now, I don't want to say it's been easy to come

up with them because, you know, I was developing this for 10 years and there were certainly some years where I would hem and haw and not really be certain about it, complete lineup, but a lot of them kind of just fell into place. You know, we had a big brainstorm early on, and we got hundreds of ideas from that. And I still don't think we've done all of those characters. So once we sort of had done it for a few years, we hit upon not necessarily a formula, but our goal with this project was to, first of all, have something for everybody. So have something for the sporty kid, have something for the gamer, or have something for the grownups too, have something for people who collect medieval soldiers and these kinds of things. So we kind of hit upon, okay, we want a few everyday kind of people, we want some historical, we want some fantasy, we want some space, we want some novelty, we want some just totally silly, we want some excuse to make this new accessory, you know, all these different things. And, as long as it comes across as colorful and fun, and there's something for everybody. And ultimately, I think their big criteria was a kid needs to be able to pick up one of these characters and say, 'Oh, it's a-' and then fill in the blank with like one or two words and have everybody agree, okay, that's what that is. It's an iconic thing - it's a clown, you know, it's a firefighter. And we're still able to do it. I don't want to jinx it, but I don't want to say it hasn't gotten easier, but it hasn't gotten harder. There's just always stuff going on, or there will be some sort of new relevant, trending thing that we realize we have to... there's nowhere else we could do this. We've got to do this in minifigures.

Brian Crecente

I know that if you count the, I think the Midway set for Dimensions, there are, I believe three different LEGO video game minifigures.

(Laughter)

Brian Crecente

There's video game guy and video game champ. Were you involved at all in either of those?

Tara Wike

The first one, for sure. And I think the second one was in when I was handing over the project, so yes, absolutely, definitely the first one.

Brian Crecente

What was...there must've been a lot of discussion about how you, in a single minifigure, you sort of portray someone who's into video games.

Tara Wike

Yeah. I think we wanted to keep it kind of...generic's not the right word, we didn't want to overly stereotype. We wanted to make it so that anybody who liked games, who was a

boy could relate to it, more or less, you know, and I think we got a little more specific with the second one, I recall.

Brian Crecente

And do you think, I know that you all, occasionally in these packs will have themes based on like Harry Potter or DC Comics. Do you foresee ever there being a release of like, just to put something out there, Mario Video Game theme pack of minifigs or something like that?

Tara Wike

Never say never. And, I mean, and obviously we have a relationship with them now. I don't know where that stands or if that's been proposed, so I can't possibly leak anything here 'cause I literally don't know. But, I mean, listen, we consider any partnership that makes sense, that has characters that translate well into minifigure form and I could see how that one could potentially work. So yeah, never say never.

Brian Crecente

One of my last questions here, but what, if you were today in charge of making a minifigure game, is there something that you think you would like to see it focused on? Or what would that game do you think look like?

Tara Wike

Oh my goodness. Don't ask me. I'm not a gamer at all. In fact, I try not to make a fool of myself when we go to meet new game developers and I don't even know how to hold the controller. So, things that I would enjoy, I'd love to see like an interior design game with maybe with minifigures. I'm not sure how broad the appeal on that would be, but it would work for me.

Brian Crecente

Yeah. Oh, that's very cool.

Tara Wike

No, I think anything that...I think it would be really fun. I don't know. I'm just thinking off the cuff here, but we have so much fun designing these characters. It could be fun to have something where you could actually design, design a character, see how something from the real world gets translated into minifigure form, you know, that's where I get a lot of the joy. So I think that could be a lot of fun.

Brian Crecente

So like an Animal Crossing, LEGO minifigure crossover, I think would be amazing.

Tara Wike

Possibly.

Brian Crecente

Just putting it out there.

Tara Wike

I don't know about Animal Crossing, sorry.

(Laughter)

Brian Crecente

Oh, it's basically, imagine Nintendo's version of minifigures, but you are on an Island and you get to decorate and build your own house, and it's all about decorating basically.

Tara Wike

Ooh, I'm sold.

(Inaudible)

Ethan Vincent

Yes. Tara you would love Brian's Animal Crossing basement, he's got this room full of arcade and pinball machines-

Brian Crecente

yeah

Ethan Vincent

-just ready to play. It's pretty amazing.

Tara Wike

I love pinball, like it's funny. I just skipped over, I love pinball machines and I was like pretty into Ms. Pac-Man back in the day, but then I just sort of, I guess that was when I peaked.

(Laughter)

(Music)

Chapter 3: Conclusions – 39:56

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, talking to Tara, man what a great conversation and just really cool to hear her experience and her knowledge about all things minifigures. You know in many ways, minifigures are the embodiment of the LEGO brick and the sense of fun and creativity it empowers. And I think too, like nowhere is that more true and more apparent than in video games where LEGO minifigures are, perhaps not always, but often the character or the protagonist that a player inhabits when exploring these digital worlds. I can't imagine a video game or even a LEGO set without the minifig anymore. It's just so embedded and a part of all things LEGO play and LEGO DNA.

(Music)

Tara Wike

I think that we see that there's obviously something timeless about the minifigure. There's just something about it. The scale, the proportions, you know, original designer just hit on something similar to our two-by-four brick. It just fits in the hand and connects in such a way that it just speaks to people. So I don't think we're going to...we're not going to lose the mini figure anytime soon, that's for sure. Whether we'll experiment with other figure types? Maybe. I wouldn't be surprised.

(Music)

Brian Crecente

You know, it's nice to see how much love and care the people at the LEGO Group put into creating the minifigures and ensuring that they're represented correctly in books, on screens and theme parks, and of course, in video games. So the next time you watch a LEGO minifigure come to life on a screen, big or small, remember Tara Wike and all of those other minifigure wizards, ensuring that knees don't bend, but arms pop off - if Chewbacca is anywhere in sight.

(Sound of Chewbacca pulling an arm off of a minifig)

(Music)

Bits N' Bricks: Credits – 42:05

Ethan Vincent

Bits N' Bricks is made possible by LEGO Games. Our producer is Ronny Scherer. Your hosts are Brian Crecente and Ethan Vincent. Episode producing and editing by Ethan Vincent.

Writing by Brian Crecente. Mixing and sound designed by Dan Carlisle. Original music by Peter Priemer and Henrik Lindstrand from the award-winning game LEGO Builder's Journey, which you can play on Apple Arcade today.

We'd like to thank our participant Tara Wike. We'd also like to acknowledge the entire LEGO Games' team, as well as the great folks at the LEGO Idea House for their support. For questions or comments, write us at bitsnbricks@LEGO.com, and as always stay tuned for more episodes of Bits N' Bricks.

LEGO, the LEGO logo, DUPLO, the Brick and Knob configurations and the Minifigure are trademarks of the LEGO Group. © 2021 The LEGO Group.