

25 Years of LEGO® Game History and Lessons

As the year-long celebration of the LEGO Group's 25 years of making video games wraps up, the LEGO Bits N' Bricks podcast broke down some of the biggest lessons learned over the past quarter of a century.

Senior product lead Don Meadows said he sees the LEGO Group's digital future in its past – specifically, in creations like LEGO Loco, a LEGO brick toy train set simulator that he views as more toy than video game.



"I think the same way you can build a LEGO model, follow the instructions, remix it, rebuild it yourself – we've gone now from creating that spark in you to want to learn about how to make video games or how to make digital play or digital movies to where we are now," he said. "We're really starting to open the floodgates to what happens next. I think we're about to see the new wave of what happens when LEGO fans make LEGO experiences."

"And I love it, because it's going to be obvious things that we've thought of, but it's also going to be so many things we'd never thought of, and I can't wait to play with them."

Looking back at the history of LEGO Games, there are moments and lessons learned that have been and can be applied to both the direction and shape of Light Brick Studio, a spin-off developer that started life within the LEGO Group.

"I think in general about this whole idea of using the gaming medium in kind of a new ways or in a way that you see mostly within these more artistic angles of games, using the game medium to actually convey emotions and to put players in positions where they actually feel something," said Light Brick Studio co-founder Karsten Lund. "And I think that's something that really hadn't been done as much with LEGO games."

"I think that the most striking aspect is that there has been, for the entire history of digital play at the LEGO Group, a real spirit of experimentation and a willingness to continue to kind of push ourselves into new frontiers for digital play," said Sean McEvoy, head of LEGO Games. "From the very beginning all the way through to products like LEGO Universe and LEGO Dimensions, all the way through to something that's more of a smaller experiment, but maybe equally defining – something like LEGO Builder's Journey that offers a whole new play digitally with the LEGO brick. It sets us up for what's to come, and it gives us those really fundamental learnings that we can build on those foundations, that we can build on for the future of digital play."

"So, I'd love to say that the past 25 years have prepared us for the next 25 or 250 years of play at the LEGO Group – digital play, but also increasingly play that can help to build foundations for the future of physical play."

That spirit of experimentation, which McEvoy notes can be seen sketched out across the decades, each defined by different approaches. The '90s were defined by the work done by Strategic Product Unit Darwin in trying to replicate physical LEGO bricks and play in the digital space. The work done by TT Games defined what it meant to be a LEGO video game in the 2000s, and Fluid Play creations like LEGO Mario became one of the touchstones for the 2010s.

"I would say that is about building the foundations for the future of digital play at the LEGO Group and connecting that endeavor to what seamless play might look like," he said. "And by that I mean ... fluid play. I think the learnings from that era will define what's to come next. And that the vision for what's to come next is a truly seamless experience between physical and digital play because we know that the kids and families and LEGO fans of all ages who encounter our products don't really make a distinction between physical and digital play. It's play as play. I think that's the direction of travel, to a place where it all fits together seamlessly and really enables that play and creativity."

Explore more ...

In order of appearance:

[LEGO Bits N' Bricks](#) – Official site

[LEGO Universe](#) – The Rise and Fall of LEGO Universe: Inception

[Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen](#) – A Fabled LEGO Brick History

[SPU Darwin](#) – Inside the LEGO Group's Secretive Strategic Product Unit Darwin

Transcript

Bits N' Bricks Season 4, Episode 45: 25 Years of LEGO Lessons
Dec. 22, 2021 • 55:17



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.

Announcer

I hope that was severe enough. Was it severe enough?

Studio Engineer

Yeah, that was great, Ben. We got it.

Announcer

Alright. On with the show.

Bits N' Bricks: Introduction – 00:39

(Child's voice announcing Bits N' Bricks)

Ethan Vincent

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

Brian Crecente

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

(Bits N' Bricks Season 4 theme music)

Brian Crecente

True story, Ethan: I was listening to Frank Sinatra when I was writing this.

Ethan Vincent

(Chuckles) What? New York, New York?

Brian Crecente

No, and not Send in the Clowns either. My Way, Ethan, because this is the episode where we face the final curtain.

Ethan Vincent

It's bittersweet, man. I mean, this will be our 45th full episode since we started the podcast all the way back in, what? Dec. 2020?

Brian Crecente

Yeah, (sings following sentence to tune My Way) and there were times I'm sure you knew when I bit off more than I could chew –

Ethan Vincent

Brian.

Brian Crecente

(continues to sing) – but through it all when there was doubt, I ate it up and spit it out.

Ethan Vincent

I give up. I give up.

Brian Crecente

OK, you're going to miss me, aren't you, Ethan?

Ethan Vincent

I sure am.

(Laughter)

Brian Crecente

OK, so the thing is, of course, is that the podcast hasn't really been about my way. It's more about the collaboration between a bunch of very talented people.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, collaboration is key, and we actually talked a bit about how an episode of Bits N' Bricks is put together in one of the last episodes of Season 1.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, but this time, as we do face our final curtain, we decided to do something a bit different for the episode. Through all of the research, the interviews, the writing, and editing, we've all been steeped in some pretty deep knowledge about how the LEGO Group operates, and specifically the glories, missteps, lessons, and achievements of LEGO games.

Ethan Vincent

And that's what this episode is all about.

(Brief tune plays)

Chapter 1: Variations on Bits N' Bricks – 02:32

Ethan Vincent

So, Brian, we've heard a lot of great music in the podcast. I've been very eager to have good music in the podcast, and Peter Priemer, who has mixed a lot of our episodes, he composed our main theme, and I went back and I listened to all the variations he gave us. Anyway, I'm going to play a couple because there's actually some I haven't even played to you and I want to see what you think, but obviously I'm going to start with the classics here.

Brian Crecente

Yes.

(Brief Bits N' Bricks theme music plays)

Ethan Vincent

There it is, man.

Brian Crecente

Funky. I love it.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, so great.

(Bits N' Bricks Season 1 theme music plays)

Ethan Vincent

So everyone knows this one. That was in Season 1 that we used, and here's Season 2.

(Bits N' Bricks Season 2 theme music plays)

Brian Crecente

Yeah, I love this, too.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, it's kind of vibey. Very nice.

Brian Crecente

So nice.

Ethan Vincent

Alright, and then we had Season 3, and Peter actually sent me like, I don't know, four or five different ones and I didn't use all of them, but here's one he did and I want to get your take on it.

(Electric guitar version of Bits N' Bricks theme music)

Brian Crecente

(Laughs) Oh my God, what did you do to those cats to make them make that noise?

(Laughs)

(Music continues)

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, there you go.

Brian Crecente

I can't stop hearing the cats. It's great, but torturing cats is not a good instrument. Tortured cat.

Ethan Vincent

No, no, no cats were harmed and it's, I don't know, it's very like, I don't know, '90s, but you know, it was a good attempt and I always like that he's exploring all genres, you know, trying things out and yeah.

Brian Crecente

It was different. It was different.

Ethan Vincent

This is one that I also really liked. He called this the Eagles version. I don't know if I quite see the Eagles, but it's also really good. Check this one out.

(Soft rock version of Bits N' Bricks theme music plays)

Ethan Vincent

That kind of makes you want to go just to a beach, right, and hang out and –

Brian Crecente

I'm sorry. Sorry, I had to run and get my smoking jacket (cross laughter) so I could put it on while I was listening to that and get my pipe out (laughs).

Ethan Vincent

It's very cool. This one you'll recognize, I think.

(Bits N' Bricks season theme 3 music plays)

Brian Crecente

Now I don't remember the claps. It feels – I feel like I should be shouting "Nerds!" and chasing people.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, maybe we didn't have the claps in there, but this is definitely one version that's more like, you know, the New Order version, I think.

Brian Crecente

Nerds!

Ethan Vincent

But it's good. I like it.

Brian Crecente

It'd be great if he could layer in a little electric violin, and then we'd have that Revenge of the Nerds vibe completely nailed down.

Ethan Vincent

That's right. OK, then, obviously, we have what we have now, the last season, Season 4, which kind of is, you know, harkening back to the original but with some variations, and I liked it a lot, too.

(Bits N' Bricks Season 4 theme music)

Ethan Vincent

Actually, I don't even think I used this part, Brian.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, I love this.

Ethan Vincent

This is like the vibey intro that he did.

Brian Crecente

It's like a deconstruction of the theme song.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, and then he takes it right here.

(Main Theme emerges)

Ethan Vincent

There we go. Now we're back to the the main theme, and it's really nice how he did that.

Brian Crecente

It's like the bits and the bricks of the music are coming together before our ears.

Ethan Vincent

(Laughs) Oh my gosh, so poetic, Brian, thank you. Anyway, I just love that soundscape and everything that Peter did. Big shoutout to Peter Priemer for doing that. And one of the other things I did, in looking back at these 45 episodes, is kind of bringing back some of the amazing quotes, some of the amazing games we featured, and some of the great things that our interviewees, our participants, said. And it was really fun to go back and listen to that. So let's give that a listen.

Chapter 2: Bits N' Bricks Flashbacks – 06:53

(Brief tune)

(Excerpt from Season 1, Episode 1: Minecraft™
Dec. 2, 2020)

Paal Smith-Meyer

I think trusting the fundamental experience of the LEGO brick is something that has been a challenge for the LEGO Group in the past 25 years.

Danny Bergmann

We all felt that we should have been doing that game, right? That it was the one game we should have been doing as the LEGO Group, that's Minecraft.

Daniel Kaplan

I think Minecraft is the best LEGO digital experience you can get. There is nothing that can compete with it today, as far as I know. And I really hope there will be a LEGO digital experience, but Minecraft is the closest thing we have right now.

(Excerpt from Season 1, Episode 2: Fluid Play
Dec. 16, 2020)

Cephas Howard

We spend, what? 41% of our lives now staring at screens, and so all of that groundwork that the LEGO Group has done in spending the time and energies on these innovations, the ones that work, the ones that didn't, is going to pay off in the long run.

Sam Coates

We fundamentally changed what a LEGO experience was.

John Sakalowsky

You know, when we shut everything down and left the offices, we sent them all the prototypes, you know, the code to date and all of that. They also got a jar of pigs' feet. I don't know if they realized that (laughter, crosstalk) as well.

(Excerpt from Season 1, Episode 5: Unity
Jan. 6, 2021)

Tara Wike

You know, we used to sort of have to develop in a bubble and where we are, geographically, I mean, we couldn't be more remote, right? You know, we're like in a cow field in the middle of rural Denmark, but suddenly, it doesn't feel that way because we have access to everything. And our fans have access to us in a bigger way.

Anders Tankred Holm

Imagine that you're sitting in your living room on the carpet with just a pile of bricks in front of you, and then start building, essentially, and start making your game. So we are actually encouraging the user to build something up from their own imagination.

Ethan Vincent

That's awesome.

Anders Tankred Holm

Yeah, I will urge you two to get out there and start creating a LEGO game.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, I'll do it in my free time. How about that?

Brian Crecente

Yeah. (Laughter)

(Excerpt from Season 1, Episode 6: LEGO Builder's Journey
Jan. 13, 2021)

Karsten Lund

We're totally onto something, this is just going to be so great. And then we started testing and then we realized that we're not at all onto anything, nobody understood anything about the game. They couldn't pick up a brick, they couldn't place it, they didn't understand what it was about.

Jonas Hove Haugesen

It felt unfocused, because of it trying to be a representation of a world more than just being the LEGO bricks.

Karsten Lund

Maybe this is not a story. Maybe it's a poem. It doesn't matter if they get it. It was so weird, because it was like, it just hit me somehow. It was just like, this is exactly it, and I was like, that's got to mean something.

(Excerpt from Season 1, Episode 8: LEGO Minifigures: A Conversation
Jan. 27, 2021)

Tara Wike

I just wanted to keep pulling the arms off of things and playing Chewbacca, because you could like (popping noises).

Brian Crecente

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

Tara Wike

I did, yeah, yeah.

Ethan Vincent

I need to hear that again.

Tara Wike

(makes popping noise)

(Excerpt from Season 3, Episode 29: Junkbot: The Lovable LEGO Garbage Game
Aug. 18, 2021)

Frank Lantz

It was kind of still early days of the web, and people were kind of figuring out the idea of like, just having free games on your website. And so that was that was the idea.

Naomi Clark

I fell in love with Junkbot early on in production because he's a spunky little robot. He's a robot whose goal in life is to eat trash.

(Excerpt from Season 2, Episode 23: LEGO Loco: LEGO Games' take on SimCity
June 9, 2021)

Suzanne Maddison

Initially, it was an idea of having a little train on your Windows desktop.

Matthew Stibbe

There was little things just hidden away in the game.

Suzanne Maddison

If you added two elements next to each other, specific elements, something might happen, the graphic might change.

(Excerpt from Season 3, Episode 34: Holy Game Development, LEGO Batman™
Sept. 22, 2021)

John Hodskinson

When LEGO *Star Wars*™ came out people didn't know what LEGO bricks plus *Star Wars*™ was going to be.

(Excerpt from Season 2, Episode 20: May the 4th Be With You
May 4, 2021)

Matt Shell

Anybody that says we heard about making LEGO *Star Wars*™: The Video Game and thought, "Oh, this is going to be a huge hit, and this makes perfect sense." You know, I'd be the first to tell you they were lying.

(Excerpt from Season 3, Episode 34: Holy Game Development, LEGO Batman
Sept. 22, 2021)

Martin Tremblay

You know the first game just by itself sold 3.5 million units. Boom! And everybody was like, "Whoa, what is this thing?"

(Excerpt from Season 2, Episode 25: Myth, Maori, and a Brain Tumor: The BIONICLE® Saga
June 23, 2021)

Christian Faber

BIONICLE had a lot of energy coming from the *Star Wars*™ launch.

Jeff James

Comics and books and, you know, you name it. It was building up to be something special.

Alastrair Swinnerton

We just got the formula right. We created a world that they could inhabit as children.

(Excerpt from Season 3, Episode 34: Holy Game Development, LEGO Batman
Sept. 22, 2021)

Darryl Kelley

LEGO Batman 2, I think, was a perfect example of them trying to improve upon some of the game flow, the mechanics, the storyplay options, but adding voices really just made the game come to life in a way that you didn't think was possible, that you might not have believed it that it would actually have that type of impact.

(Excerpt from Season 2, Episode 22: LEGO Marvel and the Missing Spider-Man Song
June 2, 2021)

Arthur Parsons

But, the one thing that was meant to go in it that never went in was the Spider-Man theme. You know, the old school (sings next sentence to the tune of the Spider-Man theme song) Spider-Man, Spider-Man, does whatever a spider can, right? Well, we had Stan Lee's, and again, this never went in the game because we couldn't get the rights to the original song. We had a recording of Stanley Lee singing, "Spider-Man, Spider-Man does whatever a spider-Man can" (crosstalk of amazement) and it was just a magic that never happens.

Chapter 3: 25 Years of LEGO Games Takeaways – 11:21

(Tune break)

Brian Crecente

As we mentioned at the top of the show, this is a very collaborative effort. It takes a team to make these episodes work. It's a team we have tried to fully credit at the end of today's episode. So please listen through to hear all of the many people have helped to make this podcast what it is today.

Ethan Vincent

That's right. And of course we couldn't talk to everyone who's helped with the Bits N' Bricks podcast, and especially in this episode, so we decided to chat with the core team. Ronny Scherer, who's been both the unflinching, internal support for the podcast, as well as the visionary who helped create Bits N' Bricks, and an expert on all things LEGO games, and made sure that we didn't get anything wrong. Then there's Nannan Li, who as an associate producer ensures that everything looks right. She's also a really talented graphic designer. And she also makes sure that, you know, the podcast actually goes live when it's supposed to. And then there's Dave Tach, our producer who ensures we don't pack an episode full of mistakes and helps cut away the fat that sometimes, you know, finds its way into the episode. Oh, and he's probably edited what? I don't know, four billion words, you know, going through all of the transcripts, scripts and features. Yeah, and then of course, there's myself and you, Brian.

Brian Crecente

Hi! What we asked everyone to do was to think over the past 44 episodes, and come back to us with their thoughts on the lessons they learned about the LEGO Group and its take on making video games. Here's Ronny.

Ronny Scherer

I think reflecting back on all the episodes, there's such a rich treasure-trove of learning. And it's really hard to pick out specific ones, perhaps, but there are definitely some patterns that has been, you know, interesting to see emerge in all of this. You know, that whole notion of history rhymes is definitely something that I've appreciated in sort of being forced to reflect back on all these different titles and the learning that's come from each of them. For me, it means that there are certain things that repeat, obviously with a nuance of change in terms of context, timing, the specific teams involved. So as an example, and this is obviously near and dear to me, there was a lot of the lessons that we took out of LEGO Universe that I've sort of seen emerging in very similar ways. For example, the way that we have tended as a company to definitely not be risk averse, willing to try something new, but then perhaps maybe not follow through with it as much as we could, and thereby, we've sort of been resetting a number of times through the different eras that we've been through, where, you know, some of the lessons learned has obviously been lost. And I think for me, personally, the opportunity here has really been about not getting stuck in the past or not necessarily being all nostalgic all the time. There's obviously been a few situations where it's just been, you know, wonderful to delve into a great period of time, you know, working with great teams, hearing the voices again. It's been emotional and wonderful, but when I look at the lessons that we learned through certain projects like LEGO Universe or others, and then seeing how a new teams preceding that have had to restart because a lot of the staff has moved on and a lot of the things that we took away from that lives inside people's heads, and have had to be relearned or rediscovered, rather, you know, again, context and timing, and all of that stuff obviously does move things forward all the time. But it hasn't sort of been a smooth, linear projection, or rather trajectory that sort of just been an easy, smooth ride and, you know, ideally, you would want to like build on top of the last lesson that you learned, but for us that's been a lot of back and forth.

Brian Crecente

Ronny also points to how the family that created the LEGO brick and the LEGO Group was instrumental in the company's core push for innovation.

Ronny Scherer

And it's kind of interesting to think about the sort of entrepreneurial spirit that the owner-family has had for almost 90 years now. The company is celebrating its 90th anniversary next year. Both Kjeld's father and his grandfather were all super entrepreneurial, and not afraid of trying out new things to the point where, you know, I think all of them have put the company on the line. Like for every generation, the company has been put on the line

literally, for every single family member that's run the company. And I find that really fascinating and inspiring in the context of video games as well, although none of the owner-family members are necessarily big gamers. They're definitely not holding back in trying out new things as it relates to, you know, inspiring children, allowing children to learn through play, whether it's all digital, physical, or a mix between the two. That's been an incredible blessing that despite of, you know, change in leadership many times over the years, despite of, sort of, inconsistent support for the role of digital play and video games, in particular, for the brand, and for the company as such, has sort of had its ups and downs in terms of interest and appetite for investment level, that there's still sort of that sort of core of the company's willingness to experiment and push play to the next level that's at least been resting with some of the team members. That's been consistent throughout all these years.

Brian Crecente

Finally, Ronny points to the fortitude of good ideas and how the LEGO Group always comes back to the best ones, even if they miss their attempt the first few times.

Ronny Scherer

Yeah, I would argue that big ideas are really hard to kill. And that has sort of been helping us coming back to some of the fundamental concepts of creating, sharing, and playing. And when I think about, sort of, the technology evolution that's happened alongside, or in parallel, or supporting even, what we've been trying to do, you know, first there was the internet that enabled us to engage with kids and adult fans of LEGO bricks in new and meaningful ways of allowing people to create and share their LEGO brick creations online, later on mobile devices, made a massive impact in the reach and the way that people engage with the LEGO brand through games. And then obviously, as we look forward, the metaverse and the impact of the future of the web and other technologies that we may not even be aware of yet. That fundamental idea that allows us sort of to rhyme on history will still be there because the LEGO brand is still the LEGO brand. It's open-ended and a way to express yourself that taps really strongly into basic human needs of, you know, expressing yourself and belonging. So I think that's been a throughline through all of these different attempts that we've made on trying to create the silver bullet. But the ideas, the fundamental ideas, of the LEGO brand are still super valid in the 21st and 22nd century.

Ethan Vincent

Nannan, I'm curious: What's your perspective on all this?

Nannan Li

I think on the personal level, I didn't grow up with LEGO video games. It was a bit eye-opening for me to see the LEGO Group's digital legacy. I was really impressed by all this, and I was really impressed by the power of the creativity and also the forward thinking by that time, because yeah, I totally missed that part. But also I was pretty impressed by the

ambition this company tried to tap into the trend of technology and all this development and all the tries we did in the past. That's really impressive for me. It's a very – it's an educational thing for the current employer, and especially for our team. We are working on the daily deliveries, we're working on the current projects, and also we don't think about the past, and we don't reflect on the past we've been going through, but looking back and learning the journey of all this past is really giving us more thinking and reflection to the past. Then that's how we are going to create the future. I think our video products really deliver the same vision and the mission of inspiring the builder of tomorrow. And through all the emails and the voice response we received from the fans, the LEGO video games provided great memories and fun and inspirations for them during their childhood. We were so proud to hear that some of them by saying, "Because I played this LEGO video game, and that inspired me to be into the game development industry, and I become interested in this and actually made – the LEGO game made me where I am right now." And I think that's exactly the same vision, and we were trying to deliver through our products through our physical toys, which we really managed to really inspire, and guiding this learning through play in the same way digitally and physically.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, thanks, Nannan. I really like this idea of LEGO games and this digital realm kind of inspiring game designers and future game designers in the same way that the LEGO physical bricks has done to many generations as well. Dave, what's your take on the one big lesson from a year of examining the company's history in video games?

Dave Tach

I love this idea that, somewhere between the mid '90s and the early 2000s, where everybody is trying to figure out what it means to be in the digital realm. Like two factions appear sometimes where some people are very much like, "It has to be exactly like the physical." And some people were like, "The physical doesn't matter." And there's always this – so many of our episodes are episodes of discovery. What does it mean to take this thing that was inherently physical and move it into digital? And the question ultimately becomes like, "Can we do that?" Right? Because from the perspective of 2021, for me, everything's obvious. I know everything's obvious in hindsight always, right? But it works so well now that the process of getting there is – it never winds up being anything less than interesting to me. Does that make sense?

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, it does. It does for sure, and what would you say, you know, if you were to look across all of the episodes of the podcast, you know, at all the games we've discussed and the lessons learned, is there one particular game that you feel has a significant lesson to teach us?

Dave Tach

You asked for games and I'm going to swerve slightly on you, which is to say, like the keystone to this SPU Darwin. It comes up over and over and over again for a reason. And the sort of tragedy of that, to me is, you know, sadly, it didn't become the thing that took LEGO bricks into the digital realm, but it became the thing that inspired that particular project. And then you – like everybody who talks about making a LEGO game from that time, as far as I can remember, is thinking back on that and trying to figure out, like, how can we take the ambition, without like the \$15,000 or more SGI machines, and turn that into, I don't know, something as simple and cute as LEGO Loco, the train game? I don't think they are trying to figure out what it means to be in the physical and the digital world. I think Ronny, the last time we had a group conversation, called it phygital, which is both physical and digital, right? I don't think that they're trying to figure out what it means for the historically physical company to be digital anymore. What they're trying to figure out is, what's the best way to be digital. And at a certain point in time that was showing up on sort of PCs. After TT Games, that was action-adventure games. Then comes the rise of mobile and the LEGO Group has to figure out what's the right, ethical way to be where the people who want to use our products are? And everything, you know, every indication I have about the present, is that they're not trying to figure – they're not trying to figure out whether they need to be in the digital realm and playing games. They're figuring out what's the best way to evolve that now, do the stuff that they're already good at, and show up at the places where the players are and where the kids are because that's fundamentally changing. The pace of innovation in games is enormous. It's hard to predict, at any given time, what's going to be the new stuff, what's like, what's going to carry over from 10 years ago to today and what's going to become irrelevant? What don't we see in the future that's going to be there? And I think LEGO games is well poised to be wherever the players are going to be.

(Tune break)

Brian Crecente

So, you know, we've been hosting these shows together for a long time now, Ethan, and we both talked to some of the most important people behind the LEGO Group, LEGO toys, and LEGO games. I am very curious about what your big takeaway from all of this is.

Ethan Vincent

It's so hard, right, to summarize it. But I would say one of the great things about this podcast has been talking to so many individuals, game developers, you know, game designers, executives, many big decision-makers who've been involved creatively with the LEGO Group and LEGO Games. And, number one, they've all said, it's always been a delight to work with LEGO Games. I mean, rarely have we met anyone who, you know, said it was a pain and told us everything that went wrong. They genuinely enjoy the experience of working with the LEGO Group. And I've gained so much from learning about what it is they

did and how the things worked, so this honesty, I think the principle of honesty has been a through line in this podcast to be able to talk openly about the things that went well and didn't go so well. In one of our, kind of, later episodes here on LEGO Worlds, in talking to Cephas Howard, this kind of reminded me of the pattern we've talked about that we've seen, which is right after LEGO Universe, there was kind of this almost defeatist feeling, I think, among the LEGO Games team and within the LEGO Group, about video games while games like Minecraft were soaring. And he says one of the challenges with LEGO Worlds was that, because of the pressures of Minecraft, they were ready to try something, but they weren't ready to get behind something. And he makes that distinction between being ready to do something, but not quite being ready to go all the way. And I think that LEGO Games has found themselves in that situation, quite often – the situation of saying, "Man, we want to do something really cool, but let's see how we can do this," or "Let's make sure we don't make the same mistakes." And there's almost this kind of, you know, shyness to the approach. And I think that one of the big lessons, too, is trying to be dedicated to a project that you believe in, and go all the way with it. And one of the examples that Cephas also gave us was one of the IPs that the LEGO Group created, which was Ninjago®, and saying, like, the way Ninjago really worked is they started with, you know, minifigs and Spinjitzu and all those things, and it just evolved and evolved and evolved. And they kept putting effort, you know, incredibly talented and creative people behind it. And then it turned into kind of what it is today. And he says, you know, that consistency with a brand and with an IP is sometimes necessary – that you sink your teeth in it and go for the long haul, which is one of the learnings we obviously had with LEGO Universe and saying, "What would LEGO Universe be today, 10 years down the road?" Like how would that game have developed, for example, right? But that's my very short way of saying honesty, consistency, and kind of breaking out of the mold, too. So, those I think are three really important lessons.

Ronny Scherer

It's really interesting that you bring up Ninjago as an example. Actually, there was a time when Ninjago was almost canceled, you know, it wasn't really necessarily expected to have the longevity that it ended up having. And the only reason why Ninjago survived that was actually an uproar with consumers that sort of told us, "Don't do that." And we kind of changed our mind on it. When you talk about the games industry, and where that has moved in the 25 years, it's sort of gone from individual titles, blockbuster launches, if you will, to games as a service, and so that's obviously been a big change in the marketplace and the world around us during this time. And it feels like the approach to not necessarily, like, release something and then just leave it quickly afterwards is yeah, that the times are different now.

Ethan Vincent

Thanks, Ronny, that's cool. I hadn't heard that insight about Ninjago as a fan-fueled kind of creation. Man, wish that would have worked with LEGO Universe. I know there are a lot of fans out there too, but let me ask you, Brian, I'm just going to bounce it right back to you

because you've also have been involved in, not only you've been involved in all the interviews and everything, but you been deeply involved in the research, so oftentimes you will be the one who has the first point of contact with our interviewee, right? But also really digging for the nuggets in the story of the game, right? Because obviously, out of 180 games, how do you pick? Right? The game that you're going to highlight, and I remember those were big discussions back and forth, and which ones to do. I'd love to hear what you've learned over the course of the podcast and some of those insights, in terms of research.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, you know, it's interesting. There are, as everybody I think has said, there are so many things. 45 episodes, touching on way more than 45 games and so many interviews we've done and talked to so many people. But for me, there are two that really stand out, and they're both tied specifically to two different games. One, of course, I think, would be LEGO Universe, which I think is one of the biggest opportunities for lessons that the LEGO Group has ever had, which is a kind way maybe of saying it. And I think with LEGO Universe, the thing that really sort of encapsulates everything that happened with that game is this adage that you need to nail it before you scale it. So the idea that, even if you do decide to try something risky and not be risk averse, and even if you are committed to investing time and money into something, it's not going to help if you don't take an approach that allows for that sort of long-tail growth. So the idea that you start with this kernel of an idea, and then slowly build it out until it becomes this massive success. And it sounds like, you know, on some level, maybe that's a little bit of what Ninjago did. And I think we've seen other games that have tried to do that. LEGO Worlds, you mentioned, Ethan, you know, it came out as early access and I think that was an attempt at doing that. I don't think it quite worked out, but I think at least there was this notion, you know, "We're going to start with this little core idea and try to build it out." But I think, yeah, that is a pivotal lesson that I think the LEGO Group has to some degree, and LEGO Games specifically, has to some degree sort of absorbed and is starting to use. But more importantly, I think the biggest lesson – and this is maybe just my perspective – but if you were to look at that entire 25-year history, I think the most influential thing that happened in the course of this 25 years is Minecraft. And I say that – Minecraft is sort of the most obvious example of what really it is, which is this sort of hunt, going all the way back to Darwin, SPU Darwin, and coming all the way forward to a game like LEGO Cube, which is still sort of actively in development, you have this desire to create an experience that, on some level, perfectly replicates the idea of having access to all the LEGO bricks you want, and being able to play with them and be creative with them and do everything you can do with real LEGO bricks, but in a digital world, and that includes sharing them and, you know, putting them somewhere where you can look at them and examine them, but also having adventures with them. So it's this sort of hunt for a Holy Grail game that I think has haunted the LEGO Group and LEGO Games since they started looking at games. And we've seen that, obviously, in the discussions that they had with Mojang, the makers of Minecraft, and with Microsoft, but also with a lot of internal projects that include things like some of the

work they did with Funcom on an internal project and obviously LEGO Worlds and LEGO Universe. So I think that is a through line, not necessarily just wanting to make a game that replicates the experience of playing with LEGO bricks in a digital world, but I think more importantly, and perhaps to a fault, the desire to create sort of a silver bullet – to make that one perfect game. And I don't know if that even exists, but I think that is a problem, or an ideal that the LEGO Group and LEGO Games strives for, and I think sometimes it does that to its detriment because I think, and I do feel like some people in the company are, you know, have understood this and are working around this, but I don't know if there is such a thing as a single game. I think Minecraft was a product of its time. I think it's still a, obviously, massively influential game, but that is like lightning in a bottle. And I think trying to recreate that or recapture that is a bad idea. And I think, again, the LEGO Group has learned this lesson that you can't or you shouldn't be trying to make the perfect, ideal game, and instead you should try all these different things.

(Tune break)

Chapter 4: The Future of LEGO Games – 34:19

Ethan Vincent

It was great to spend a bit of time with the people so deeply involved in all of these episodes and hear their thoughts on the LEGO Group's 25 years of making video games.

Brian Crecente

It really was. We also thought it'd be great to go back to some of the other leaders and thinkers at LEGO Games to chat with them about the next 25 years of LEGO games. Certainly, it seems that Light Brick Studio, the makers of Builder's Journey, is one piece of that future. CEO and creative director of the studio Karsten Lund's view of the LEGO Group's gaming history is that it's cyclical.

Karsten Lund

I remember the sort of the earthquake-like change when LEGO games all of a sudden went hyper mainstream with the *Star Wars*™ game. And before that, my recollection of LEGO games was like a little bit of a, you know, a little bit of a niche and experimentation, and the sort of feeling that the LEGO Group, and Kjeld and I would believe, always had a knack for these digital things and had an interest in these things, and that, you know, this is also where the children were going, where play was happening. So they were there, like present, but all of a sudden it just took off and became this huge, huge event. And to begin with, to be honest, when I looked at them, I was like, "What is the sense in this in making a game? Why aren't we making toys or like digital play things? Why does it need to be a game?" But it was very clear what it was, right? It was just a chance, an opportunity for a very, very broad audience to interact with the LEGO brick, the minifigure, the IPs, and

everything at the same time. It was just, you know, the place to be. So in that sense, I feel that, I remember that big change, and then you could say, after, you know, there was a long, long decade almost of that, and now I think it's diversifying again a little bit, especially also with the stuff we're doing here at Light Brick and, you know, we're trying new things, and we are, we're attacking things from a different direction. And I think there's a lot more, can you say willingness to experiment at the moment without losing sight of what is also, sort of, the staple of LEGO Games with the big titles still, right? It almost feels like it's a cycle. We're sort of back into experimentation, trying new things, not being afraid. And that's super interesting, I think.

Ethan Vincent

Karsten talks about how Light Brick's formation was itself a byproduct of the LEGO Group's desire to experiment. This sense of experimentation is at the heart of Light Brick Studio.

Karsten Lund

This started out as an experiment and is still in many ways an experiment, right? In many different things. One thing is to keep things small, and to reach for a very, very high quality levels in a scope that's manageable. And I think that that can totally coexist with all the other things that's going on. Obviously, I'm not as close to the core anymore because we're focused on what's going on here. I think we can take a little bit more risk, if you will. We can sort of try things that are a little bit more far reaching, but also more, can you say, stubborn to the original core of the LEGO brick, which people may or may not think is, you know, interesting still. We believe that it is, and we can feel that our audience, that everybody resonates very well with the brick and what you can do with the brick. So I think we're sort of pointing in both directions, and I think that adds very nicely alongside all the other initiatives that's going on right now. I think there's a need to be playing and be creative in the world, and I think the LEGO brand is definitely standing for that on a hill of, "Come over here and have some fun. This is the purest form," I think. And I think we're definitely alongside there saying that we believe in it as well, and we believe it still has tons and tons of interesting opportunities.

Ethan Vincent

And in looking back at the history of LEGO games, there are moments and lessons learned that have been, and can be, applied to both the direction and shape of the company and Light Brick Studio.

Karsten Lund

I definitely think there was something about size and scope. So to actually, can you say, started so small that it doesn't really – that it doesn't have that much risk to it, which means you can explore more and you can, sort of, it's also easier to control quality, and it's easier to, sort of, decide what you want to do when you know you have a scope that's manageable, and you can, you know, you can test and you can try new things out. So that

was one thing. So starting it small and growing it slowly and constantly. You know, holding quality as a constant, and then adjusting everything else along the way was something that I, that sometimes I think, in general in the gaming industry is – I mean, I would love to play smaller, better games. That's the thing that we had a chance to experiment with here to a certain amount of success. And then I think in general about this whole idea of using the gaming medium in kind of a new way, or in an in a way that you see mostly with indies or with sort of more artistic angles of games – using the game medium to actually convey emotions and to put players in positions where they actually feel something. The gaming medium's so powerful for that. And I think that's something that really hadn't been done as much, I think, with the LEGO games. So that was also a great opportunity for us to say, "Do we have beats in the whole, like, emotional beats, in the whole idea of playing together and being, you know, a family and all these things that actually resonate, and that are very much aligned with what we stand for as a brand, but also really hits the mark of the, sort of, the human condition in this day and age?" And I think that was also a great testing ground for, can we actually reach an audience with these kinds of messages, and I think we could. They totally, totally got it.

Brian Crecente

Sean McEvoy, head of LEGO Games also sees the company's willingness to experiment as an important aspect of LEGO Group's quarter-century history in video games.

Sean McEvoy

I think that the most striking aspect is that, for the entire history of digital play at the LEGO Group, there has been a real spirit of experimentation and a willingness to continue to kind of push ourselves into new frontiers for digital play. And those really big milestones along that journey, you know, so from the very beginning all the way through to products like LEGO Universe and LEGO Dimensions, all the way through to something that's a more of a smaller experiment, but maybe equally defining, something like LEGO Builder's Journey that offers a whole new play digitally with the LEGO brick. It sets us up for what's to come and it gives us those really fundamental learnings that we can build on – those foundations that we can build on – for the future of digital play. So, I love to say that, you know, the past 25 years have prepared us for the next 25 or 250 years of play at the LEGO Group – digital play, but also increasingly play that can help to build foundations for the future of physical play. So it's an incredibly exciting time to be working in this space at the LEGO Group, and it's a huge testament to that long tenured commitment to exploration and experimentation that we're even sitting here and talking today, right? But what's to come next is the most exciting part.

(Brief tune break)

Brian Crecente

That experimentation can be seen sketched out across the decades, each defined by different approaches. The '90s was defined by the work done by Strategic Product Unit Darwin, who was trying to replicate physical LEGO bricks and play in the digital space. The work done by TT Games defined what it meant to be a LEGO video game in the 2000s. And fluid play creations like Hidden Side became one of the touchstones for the 2010s. We asked Sean how he would define the era we're in now.

Sean McEvoy

I would say that is about building the foundations for the future of digital play at the LEGO Group and connecting that endeavor to what seamless play might look like. By that I mean, you know, a type of play that we're just – you mentioned, sort of, that last era of fluid play. I think the learnings from that era will define what's to come next. And that the vision for that, what's to come next, is a truly seamless experience between physical and digital play, because we know that the kids and families and LEGO fans of all ages who encounter our products don't really make a distinction between physical and digital play. Play is play. And, you know, increasingly, I think, as you look forward, our product portfolio has that opportunity to kind of really support that kind of play across multiple platforms and with experiences that don't place a lot of requirements on the player-builder who's experiencing those products and playing in a free and open way but really encourage creativity and connect to aspects of learning through play that are really at the core of the LEGO building experience. So, I think that is the direction of travel is to a place where it all fits together seamlessly and really enables that play and creativity that's at the core experience.

Brian Crecente

Sean added that his mission, coming to the LEGO Group more than four years ago, was to ensure that the future of digital play at the LEGO Group was a key pillar moving forward.

Sean McEvoy

It is not mission accomplished, I can tell you guys, just yet, right? But I can also tell you that from my own perspective, and from the perspective of the LEGO Games team and our internal partners, as well as our external partners, I think the direction of travel is incredibly positive. And, you know, the appetite for learning from the past and the appetite for paving the path to the future here at the LEGO Group, in terms of digital play, is incredibly high, and that's hugely encouraging to me. So I think, you know, our ability to really invest in this space, and to connect our investment to the future of 21st century skills development, to the future of learning through play, to products that really incorporate those aspects of what LEGO play can deliver. That opportunity is outsize, and that really, fundamentally, that's my mission and the mission of the LEGO Games team. And we feel very supported in that mission by our leadership and by our colleagues here at the LEGO Group, so it's a really exciting time.

(Brief tune plays)

Ethan Vincent

Finally, we spoke with Don Meadows, who is Design Master at LEGO Games. He sees the LEGO Group's digital future in its past, specifically, in creations like LEGO Loco, a LEGO brick toy trainset simulator that he views as more toy than video game. We actually did a whole episode about this game in the podcast.

Don Meadows

I enjoyed all the episodes, but it's back to that thing I really hope Karsten talks to you, too, about: this is play, this is about creativity, it's about inspiring you. And I think the same way you can build a LEGO model – follow the instructions, remix it, rebuild it yourself – we've gone now from creating that spark in you to want to learn about how to make video games or how to make digital play or digital movies to where we are now. We're really starting to open the floodgates to what happens next. I think, you know, the podcast has covered that a lot, especially with the Unity collaboration. In a way, it's not handing the keys over to the creators yet. We still have a lot of systems to fix. But the podcasts, the last 25 years, so many of those products are in the vault, but the vault is heavily physical products. And I think we're about to see the new wave of what happens when LEGO brick fans make LEGO brick experiences. And I love it because it's going to be obvious things that we've thought of, but it's going to be so many things we'd never thought of, and I can't wait to play with them. There's actually a quote that comes from originally the LEGO Architecture sets, and it's about, you know, it's not just a box of bricks, it's about telling a story. And I think that's the part we're going to see the strongest is creators wanting to tell stories, and understanding this medium helps them get that out. I don't think we're going to see a proliferation or a success of one way of doing things, the same way when you go to an AFOL convention, or see the LEGO brick displays in the master gallery in LEGO House, it's so many things. And I think that's what we're going to see. I don't want to lick a stamp and send it on what the one system is that succeeds, other than that one system for us is going to be the LEGO brick connectivity. It's the System in Play.

Ethan Vincent

Don said that the history of the LEGO Group, including its history with video games, is incredibly important to the company's future.

Don Meadows

I think that's been covered in some of the podcasts before about when we have partners over, going over to Idea House, and that for us has always been a thing. We've always gone over there to do a litmus test on ourselves. How does what we do feel on the history of this company? And is it something that belongs on the walls here? Is it something that can go into the vault? And I think that is a value that has come across in the new wave of titles that you have discussed, and I think that's a value that we're going to see a lot more

moving forward of us, of not just being proud of the history of the company, but very much understanding that. And digital is a huge part of that, not just for games but, you know, I think it's 1986 was the PC and robot connection with the LEGO Group.

(Brief tune)

Chapter 5: Conclusion – 48:18

Brian Crecente

So this is it, Ethan: the end of our last episode, the long goodbye for Bits N' Bricks.

Ethan Vincent

Or is it?

Brian Crecente

(Laughs)

Ethan Vincent

We know something you don't know.

Brian Crecente

Right! So while this is indeed the end of Bits N' Bricks' one-year celebration of the first LEGO video game, it's not the end of the podcast. We're still working out the details, so stay tuned to next week's postscript for some more information. But most importantly, don't unsubscribe.

Ethan Vincent

Right. Don't unsubscribe. Keep checking in for more LEGO video games goodness. And hey, don't forget to tell your friends and rate our episodes. It helps a lot, and I'm sounding like a YouTuber. (Laughs)

Brian Crecente

(Laughs) Like and subscribe! Now to wrap things up, we hand it back to Ronny and Nannan and a great little conversation they had about the podcast and the history it worked to unearth.

Nannan Li

I think this initiative has been a really strong internal impact within the company, within the LEGO Group. And of course, we are doing this, starting from a more documentary point-of-view by looking into the past and digging into the really great achievements that our

department did in the past, but was a little bit ignored by the company history and in general. It wasn't just well archived in the past. I think we really made great contributions from the history and archiving point-of-view, but of course, it brings really strong visibility, and impact, and voice out to the current, the company structure with different teams and, yeah, cross-functional and within our own team, of course, is important learning for ourselves, but also with the anniversary, with all this legacy, and also the format of podcast, we inspired many of our colleagues, as we always do, and they really appreciate what we are doing right now, and of course, we're inspiring and learning from each other.

Ronny Scherer

For me, the celebration of the 25th anniversary of the first LEGO video game was originally twofold. It was to celebrate all the creators that we've been able to work with over many, many years. I've been fortunate to having, you know, been able to join a good 20 years of the 25 years, and I just can appreciate the number of people. We're talking about, thousands of people over the years that's been creating more than 185 titles across any device that will play a game in a meaningful way. It's just an incredible portfolio of product and experience and entertainment and learning, and just having fun that we've been able to translate the LEGO idea into something meaningful. And the second part of it has been to learn from it. As we talked about, you know, the key things that we each taking away from these many different projects, and having this incredible opportunity now to look at it sort of as a meta-reflection across many different teams, many different geographies, many different devices, many different purposes. But they all sort of seem to come back to the fundamentals of what creates a great LEGO brick experience that's fun, that sparks the imagination, offers a creative outlet for either problem-solving or actually creating something. It's always in a safe context. And it's always, you know, the high quality that LEGO brick fans and kids around the world has learned to expect from us. And I modestly think that we over-delivered on that. And I really want to thank you, all of you, and including the people who are not on the call today, yeah, it's just been an amazing two-, three-year journey that we can all be proud of, and that I think we can pass on important lessons to current LEGO employees and fans of today and tomorrow.

(Music tune)

Bits N' Bricks: Extended Credits – 52:52

Ethan Vincent

And now for an extended credit list.

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. Associate Producer and Art Direction by Nannan Li. Disclaimer voice and other voices by Ben Unguren. Opening's child voice is Milo Vincent. Graphics and Animation by Manuel Lindinger and Andreas Holzinger. Additional graphics by Milena Nieto. Additional design consulting by AoE Creative: Simmon Bennett, Markel Lee, Nabil Pervez. Transcriptions by Patricia Pascale. Mixing and audio engineering for all episodes by Peter Priemer and Dan Carlisle. Music featured tracks by Henrik Lindstrand, Peter Priemer, Brian Tyler, and foundermusic.com, as well as the many soundtracks and excerpts from LEGO video games. The LEGO.com Team: Jacob Bredvig Larsen, Anders Weien, Sara Helany Hesselund. YouTube and social media within the LEGO Group: Liam Stevenson, Kev Smyth, Sophie Gadd, and Geggys Abbott. Communications, media and public relations: Edgaras Račinskas, Alice Carter, Sarah Wind Christiansen, Ryan Greenwood, Giovanna Rossin, Sarah Schofield, Ulla Lundhus, Roar Trangbæk. Also, Mark Hamill and Tom Glover from Golin. Release management and telemetrics: Sherlock Zhao, Anders Tankred Holm, and Kristóf Lénárd. Legal support by Melanie Raubeson and Megan Langley Grainger. Procurement by Lone Koch. From the LEGO Group archives: Tine Froberg Mortensen. From the LEGO Idea House: Kristian Reimer Hauge. And finally, a big thank you to Sean McEvoy, the entire LEGO Games team, and all of our families for their undying, invaluable support. And, of course, all of our guests from season one, two, three and four. For comments and questions write us at bitsnbricks@LEGO.com. That's bits, the letter N, then bricks @LEGO.com. And, as always, well, yes: Stay tuned for more Bits N' Bricks.

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

All other trademarks and copyrights are the property of their respective owners. All rights reserved.