

How Weekly Public Playtesting is Shaping Light Brick Studio's Next Game

While work continues on expanding its award-winning game LEGO® Builder's Journey, developer Light Brick Studio is also deep into production on its next mysterious creation.

The studio folks won't say much about their new game, including its codename, which they say would likely reveal too much about the title.

What the studio can talk about is how rigorous and frequent playtesting helped pluck a game-worthy idea from a Cambrian stew of prototypes and concepts.

"We test every week, and that's a lot. It also takes a lot of effort to make that happen," said Karsten Lund, CEO and creative director at Light Brick. "It's something we insist on: That we sort of have the audience as a member of the group and see what they do with the game. We try and understand what they think it is they're getting, what they would expect from a thing like this, and how they interact with it. In general, it is very valuable to us."



That frequent testing schedule means that the studio spends a lot less time discussing whether something will work – they're going to find out in less than a week, so why bother? – and a lot more time discussing what it is the studio wants players to experience and feel.

"It's great," Lund said. "We're guided by it."

The playtesting process is hardcoded into the studio's schedule, which is currently built around a playtest every Friday, run by Simone Okholm, the studio's test manager. Each week, Okholm invites a small group of players who have applied to playtest on the studio's website to the studio to check out new creations under a non-disclosure agreement (NDA).

That includes not just playtesting LEGO Builder's Journey's upcoming additions, but also on those early prototypes.

"For the last few months, we've been kind of in this experimental phase," Okholm said. "So we were giving the testers four different prototypes. Sometimes, we will give them 20 minutes on each little prototype.

"We're hoping for the testers to surprise us, actually – to make us see some stuff we didn't see ourselves. In this experimental phase, it's always about trying to see the reactions of the players."

Simone faces some challenges when chatting with the playtesters after their experience. Among them: ensuring that they're not just telling her what they think she wants to hear. She and the rest of the team also has to be aware of what the studio refers to as the faster horses problem. That's referring to a famous quote often attributed (most likely falsely attributed) to Henry Ford: "If I had asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses."

"When we see someone being frustrated by a particular mechanic, we don't necessarily listen to their suggestions," said Light Brick Studio developer Jonas Haugeson. "We try to figure out why are they frustrated, and what is the reason for the frustration, and how we can turn that into something that's a bit more enjoyable, or get rid of it. So it's about really just finding out not what they're saying, but what they feel."

Clearly the process worked for the studio on LEGO Builder's Journey, but it seems just as instrumental in the prototyping phase, Okholm said.

"We learn a lot from them by observing them playing, and we also listen a lot to what they're saying: how they feel about the games that we give them," she said. "So we listen and we observe and we learn a lot from that. From there, we kind of merge that with our own values and our own ideas, and that's what makes a game in the end."

Perhaps the biggest challenge the studio runs into with its weekly playtests is ensuring that playtesters have something stable enough to test. Lund thinks the process is a healthy one for the studio to engage in, but he has been weighing the possibility of changing things up a bit, essentially running two streams of testing on alternating weeks to give developers a bit more time between creating builds.

While the first game for a new studio is incredibly important, the second can be – in many ways – more stressful for the team to lock in. Haugeson says that's because each new

game can have a deep impact in identifying the studio's focus and approach to development.

"The second game is how you really define yourself as a studio," he said. "There's the original game that, if successful, is coloring your studio in a certain color. But if you don't want to be stuck in that kind of space, then you have to kind of extrapolate from what went before and say, 'We are actually also this thing.' Being able to have these two points makes it easier in the future to say, 'Yeah, we expanded in this space. So we can actually also go this other place, and just constantly be elastic about what is it that we, as a studio, find meaningful.'"

While the team has settled on the core concept for their next game, Haugeson said he still feels very much like they remain in an experimental part of creation.

"I think the phase we're at right now is trying to not make decisions that will shape the future too much," he said. "To try and still be experimental and trying to figure out what is the essence of this thing that we're trying to get on its feet and being as agile as possible with the process."

While Light Brick Studio's core conceit is to explore the creative nature of the LEGO brick brand and its DNA, that doesn't mean all of its games will actually include LEGO bricks. But, Lund said, this next one will.

"It's a huge inspiration to us, and we believe it's a very, very strong medium and a beautiful design icon that has stood the test of time," he said. "There's a lot of embedded affordance in a brick. Everybody knows what it looks like and what they want to do with it. So, in that sense, we believe it's still a very strong language, but we're going to use it in a very new way."

Explore more...

In order of appearance:

[LEGO Builder's Journey](#) – Epic Game Store

[LEGO Builder's Journey RTX](#) – YouTube

[Light Brick Studio](#) – Official website

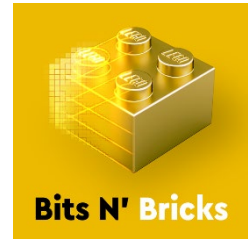
[Light Brick Studio Playtest](#) – Official website

[Apple Arcade](#) – Official website

Transcript

Bits N' Bricks Season 3 Episode 31: Prototype, Playtest, Repeat: Inside Light Brick Studio

Sept. 1, 2021 · 42:33



Bits N' Bricks Introduction – 00:00

(Child's voice announcing Bits N' Bricks)

Ethan Vincent

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

Brian Crecente

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

(Season 3 theme music for Bits' N' Bricks)

Brian Crecente

Hey, Ethan.

Ethan Vincent

Hey, Brian.

Brian Crecente

Do you remember when we first met?

Ethan Vincent

Oh, yeah. Well, I mean, not met but sort of coexisted in this kind of same place. We were at NetDevil during LEGO Universe development, and I think you came to a playtesting event with your son.

Brian Crecente

I did, you're right, and you captured video of me grabbing a soda from the work fridge. Sort of like I was Bigfoot tromping through the woods of upstate New York.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah. You felt very comfortable there to say the least. That's good.

Brian Crecente

I'm still confused why that was a thing.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah. Yeah. I mean, everyone was so excited. It was kind of a really exciting time too.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, but you know, the real reason we were there with a bunch of other kids and their dads and or moms, was to playtest this early build of LEGO Universe.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, and boy, did they do a lot of that, I mean, playtesting on LEGO Universe was everywhere. And they would have regulars that would come and play and just be engaged and watch how they would, you know, progress in the game. It was pretty involved. I remember that.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, so if people listening don't know what this is, what playtesting is, it's basically the idea here is that you bring in a bunch of people who you hope will eventually buy your game or download your game, and you have them play it early on and give you some feedback. Now, this shouldn't be confused with another thing that game developers do, which is quality assurance testing, which is, basically, they have a group of people in-house, who will play the game over and over again looking for bugs and trying to sort of fix problems that may happen during gameplay. So playtesting in the game industry actually goes back to 1976 and Atari, one of the, you know, early companies out there making video games. It's believed that what they did was they were essentially the first company to hire a person who was a user research employee, and that was Carol Kantor. These days, just about every studio does this, but I have to tell you, Ethan, I can't think of any other studio I've ever talked to who seems as invested in playtesting as Light Brick Studio.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, that's so true. And you know, in case you've forgotten, listeners, Light Brick Studio are the developers that spun off from the LEGO Group and developed the delightful LEGO Builder's Journey for Apple Arcade.

Brian Crecente

Exactly. And we did a whole episode about that earlier this year, so you should definitely, I think, have a listen. We'll wait here while you do just that.

Ethan Vincent

(Chuckles) For an hour, right? Just just an hour.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, well, OK. I mean, they can pause and pretend that we're just sort of standing around for an hour and waiting.

(Podcast pauses a moment)

Ethan Vincent

OK, and we're back! Right? Isn't that how we would come back in? That's good.

Brian Crecente

(Laughs) Yeah, exactly.

Ethan Vincent

And we're ready to dive into today's episode, which is all about Light Brick Studio and just how big a role playtesting plays in the future.

Brian Crecente

To quote Lewis Carroll, "Let's begin at the beginning."

(Tune interlude)

Chapter 1: Builder's Journey – 03:39

Ethan Vincent

LEGO Builder's Journey launched on December 19, 2019 as an Apple Arcade exclusive on iOS, and people loved it. They loved it so much that Light Brick decided they should bring it to more people and more platforms. So this summer, the studio brought the game to the Nintendo Switch, and Windows PC. But it wasn't just a straight port. Karsten Lund, CEO and creative director at Light Brick Studio, walks us through what the new versions brought with it and why.

Karsten Lund

I think one of the biggest, you could say, input we got from users across the world was that they loved the experience, but they really wanted a little bit more of it. So obviously there was a few other adjustments we wanted to make to the gameplay and to the input system and all sorts of stuff and fix some bugs, but I think the biggest thing is we wanted to make

it a little bit bigger for players to be able to enjoy it again. So we've actually roughly doubled it in size. So we simply added some levels here and there to sort of enhance the story and, you know, make it a little bit more solid and have some more fun gameplay ideas, and then we've added to it new chapters that just sit at the end of it and extend the story. The essence of the story is still there. It's just, I think, I believe it's a little bit stronger now. It actually really says what we wanted to say in a stronger way. Players who've played it before – just jump back in and you will probably remember some of it, but you also be surprised about new stuff everywhere. And for new players, this is a little bit of a more full-bodied experience of the same thing.

Brian Crecente

Updates for the game also included things like adding controller support, which Jonas Haugesen, game designer at Light Brick Studio said was one of the rerelease's biggest design challenges. And, of course, they added this stunning level of realism to the PC version of the game with the use of things like ray-traced ambient occlusion, global illumination, reflections, and shadows, which, Ethan, I know, you were an enormous fan of.

Ethan Vincent

Oh, my gosh, yeah. I mean, if you look at the bricks and the way the bricks behave when you twist them, there's just so much detail that they added. It's really beautiful – you know, minor surface scratches on some things, and the others – it's just so detailed and so beautiful. They did such a great job.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, it's funny to say that they added all of this extra visual fidelity to, essentially, LEGO bricks, but when you see it in action, you're like, wow! It really is a big difference. So, the new version is out now, and anybody can go check that out themselves, but Karsten tells us the studio is still working on that game.

Karsten Lund

I mean, this is still our baby, right? We all love this project and we all believe that it's – we're all proud of it. And we believe that there's a lot more to do with this little universe that we've created and these little characters. You know, that's the way of the world these days, right? I mean, you ship a product, and it's not done. You can still improve and update and make better while it's out there. When you actually learn how it performs and how the audience responds to it, you will even have an even more clearer sense of where it's supposed to go. I mean, that said, obviously, we want to move on as well, we want to make new things because that's where we learn a lot more. But definitely, I mean, the ray-tracing project was perfect for our, you know, our mission of very high technology. We all saw that this would be an awesome application of that technology because everybody knows what a brick looks like, and what a LEGO model looks like, so that point of reference for what reflecting shiny plastic looks like, is just so clear in people's minds. So you instantly

connect to it when you see it, you're like, "Ooh, yeah, that feels and that looks real." So for us that was a very fun experiment, and a very sort of – there was a lot of things we needed to learn and build to get there in the end. So, that's what we're driven by: to try these things, try these sort of interesting new endeavors. We're looking at ways of being a little bit more creative with Builder's Journey.

Chapter 2: Prototyping a New Game – 07:44

Brian Crecente

As the Builder's Journey team was wrapping up work on the new build of the game this spring, others at the studio, which has 14 employees, were starting work on the studio's next game. Karsten said that overlap between the old and the new is actually pretty common at game studios.

Karsten Lund

Yeah, you could say that while we were packaging up and finalizing this Builder's Journey update, some of the designers actually started working on the new stuff. So that happened as with an overlap – and as it should be, I think. That's always what you want to do, right? I always say that if you have designers actually having something to do in these very late stages of a development process, you're in deep trouble, right? Because it really needs to be stable with no changes made to the actual core design while we try and finish it up. So that's a great way of sort of segwaying into the next project having designers trying new things and experiment with new prototypes, while the big project is being closed and shipped.

(Tune interlude)

Ethan Vincent

That prototyping process started with the designers at the studio brainstorming over several weeks and playing around with small projects. Designer Haugesen said each of those little projects built off of what came before it, helping to shape new ideas and bigger experiences as they moved towards the studio's next project.

Jonas Haugesen

Yeah, it was a roundtable sort of discussion where everyone could chime in. And we'll just discussed what we liked about individual projects and how we were going to staff them going forward. I mean, we were going basically all the way back to basics, not really reusing anything for the sake of making something that smelled like Builder's Journey, but really just kind of refiguring out what is it that, we as a studio, would like to produce. So, I mean, there's also been a lot of looking at processes of how do we come up with new

ideas in the studio? I mean, I think, at the core of what I believe to be the most enjoyable thing to work with is to just look at the essence of what is the boundaries of what you're trying to create in. And we have the wonderful mandate of being able to work with the LEGO brick. But it's also good in the way that it has to smell of the LEGO system. And I think of it more as, what is LEGO system all about, rather than do we have to have LEGO bricks in it? So when I started thinking of new ideas, I thought of the LEGO bricks more as like they are connecting to each other, and how is the tactility of someone holding a LEGO brick and stuff like that. So, I mean, it's a very good paradigm to start out with being able to work with the LEGO brick.

Brian Crecente

For his part, Haugesen said he tries to ignore what's going on in the video game industry as a whole during the prototyping phase of a project. Instead, he said he looks at sources outside the game industry. You know, in some ways, Ethan, this reminds me of an approach that is famously used by Nintendo Game Designer Shigeru Miyamoto, who looks at his everyday life and hobbies for game inspiration. That's how the game industry got games like Pikmin, and Nintendogs, and Wii Fit. In fact, you're going to love this, Ethan: His hobbies are so impactful on the decisions he makes, when it comes to design, that Nintendo has actually told him not to talk about them with the public, which I think is hilarious. So, like Miyamoto, Jonas has actually found some inspiration in his garden, though I don't think it's gonna be another Pikmin game.

Jonas Haugesen

I just bought a garden this year (laughs). And I've taken a lot of inspiration from the natural processes going on in that garden. So definitely, I mean, there's so much stuff in the world that is so inspiring, not just in a gaming setting, but I mean in general. And if we can bring that into the interactive media of gaming, I think we gain a lot as people.

Ethan Vincent

Karsten describes the transitioning from a slew of small prototypes to the next project, as a fluid process.

Karsten Lund

It's hard to talk about the amount or the actual number of prototypes, it's more of a fluid process of working in different directions within the same framework. Obviously we know that everything we do to begin with is early days, and everything will change at some point. We will pivot and grab onto something new and look in a new direction with what we're doing. I always use the analogy of clay, you sort of slowly shape it and massage it into shape. You try and make an overall rough shape, and then you slowly add the detail here and there until you have something, and that's the way we're working now, both in terms of what's the kind of message we want to get across? What is the kind of gameplay we want to make? And what is actually fun? I mean, we also let the fun finding guide us.

We also sort of, "Ooh, this felt good. Let's work some more with that. What if we expand on this? Ooh, it feels even better, let's try and explore this some more." And I think we have, right now, we have a sense of that everybody who is playing the prototype at the moment is like having fun, just plain old having fun, which is sort of a good guidance.

(Musical interlude)

Ethan Vincent

Jonas Haugesen said that, eventually the team, working through the flow of new prototypes and iterating on them, settled on a single experience on which they decided to devote their time.

Jonas Haugesen

I mean, it was mostly just a discussion of whether we feel the energy is going forward. And the other projects that we worked on aren't archived or anything. They're just where they have been left, and they're still exciting, and there's still energy in some of it, but we've decided to move on in a more sort of focused way, on one of the projects. The core basic idea was something that I developed back in April.

Chapter 3: Playtesting at Light Brick Studio – 13:57

Brian Crecente

So even in the prototyping phase of the studio's next game playtesting played an enormous role. In fact, if you visit the studio's website today, you'll see that there are just four options on the front page: There's Games, there's Get Support, there's Apply for a Job, and there's Playtesting. So it's clear that playtesting is a core element of the studio's philosophy and approach to game design.

Karsten Lund

I mean, we test every week.

Brian Crecente

This is Karsten Lund speaking.

Karsten Lund

That's a lot. It also takes a lot of effort to make that happen. And it's something we insist on – that we sort of have the audience as a member of the group, and see what they do with the game and try and understand what they think it is they're getting, what they would expect from a thing like this, and how they interact with it in general is very valuable to us. We spent a lot less time discussing if things will work because we know we're only a week

away from a test where we can actually see it, which means we spend more time discussing what it is we want and what we want the players to experience and what we want them to feel because we know we're going to have some sort of validation at the end of this cycle. And I think that's great and very different from studios I've worked with before where we spent a lot of time talking about, "Will this work? Will this not work? I don't think so. What if we did this? What if we did that?" We spend more time building, testing, talking about what actually happened, what players actually did. And I think we're also guided by it, we're sort of very informed by, "They really responded well to this" or "They responded differently to this than we thought. Let's see if we can pursue that or follow that idea. That's something we didn't see to begin with, but all of a sudden this seems to be the gravitational field of interest. So let's try and work around this a little bit more." I think that helped us on Builder's Journey, and it is definitely going to help us in the future as well.

(Musical interlude)

Ethan Vincent

This playtesting process is hard-coded into the studio schedule, which is currently built around a playtest every Friday, and run by Simone Okholm, the studio's test manager. Karsten walked us through what a typical week is like at the studio.

Karsten Lund

Mondays, obviously, we meet. This is where we actually look at the Friday test results. Simone is there to sort of brief us on what she experienced from talking to the testers and from just watching them with her eyes and her knowledge of what the game was supposed to do. And then we look at the videos. We meet for a morning debrief where we just, you know, sit in the same room and discuss what it is we've been seeing and what the players have experienced. And then the individual designers and team members can go and look at these recorded videos of the actual playthroughs. And there's a lot of information there, sometimes a lot more than the actual briefing, because you can see stuff in the behavior, you can see which bricks they chose first, and you can see – generally you can get a good understanding of what it is they understand of the levels. And then we just have a quick huddle in deciding what it is we want to do next. The Monday's definitely where we make the decision for what the week is going to do, and then we work throughout the week up until Thursday where we make a build, and we meet at the very last, you know, hour of Thursday, and we all play together to test, obviously, if it works, so we're sure that the test is going to go well on Friday, but also just to get the opinion of the people on the other teams and just to see how it plays to get a feel for it. We catch some bugs there, and we – sometimes the stuff we want to fix and sometimes we will know, you know, what to focus on in the actual test. And then on Friday, Simone is welcoming the people coming in, and they start playing the prototypes. We start working a little bit with sort of a, can you say, a thesis for what it is we actually want to understand? So we can pursue that when we talk to the players afterwards, but usually it's more nonverbal and open-ended. We just have them

play around with what we've been doing and then talk to them afterwards. And that's super valuable.

Brian Crecente

Simone runs everything about testing at the studio. That means everything from recruiting the testers for each week's session to facilitating the tests, to briefing the testers to come up with insights for each session, and then creating and presenting the findings of the test every single Monday. She also spent some time doing QA work. It's a lot, especially given the unusual frequency of the playtesting.

Simone Okholm

Yes, so in the moment, we test every Friday. So we invite like, between four to eight players into our studio. So they're actually here physically and meeting us face-to-face. We welcome them into the studio, and then they have to sign a nondisclosure agreement, then we actually just get them started to play and they play our game, of the latest prototype, and then I interview them afterwards, we record video of the game interaction, then, like, I have until Monday to actually go to all the input we got on Friday. And then I send it to the rest of the team. And we all like discuss, like what happened at this test, and the game designers also get a chance to see the videos from the test, and we can all discuss like what do we see at the test and how should we go on from here.

(Energetic tune plays)

Ethan Vincent

The current playtesting process was refined during the development of Builder's Journey, Simone said. Playtesting for that game was mostly about ensuring that the title was really smooth, and felt like a full game experience. They also helped with the rerelease of the game and playtesting was also deeply involved in the prototyping phase.

Simone Okholm

As soon as we went into the launching phase with Builder's Journey, we had like, we split up the team and some people would start like experimenting with new directions for new games. And then, in the end, we also did a lot of longer tests, where they actually have to play the game from the start to the end to see how it was when they got the full experience from the first time because we had been facing this problem that, you know, the game is getting longer and longer. And we usually only have like testers for one or one-and-a-half hour. So it's like, how do you test a game when it's actually growing? And even though it's actually one of the things we've been criticized about in the Builder's Journey – that it's too short – it's actually been a problem that we're facing: That it's hard to test a game when it's getting longer. And that's something we're going to face in the future as well, because hopefully, we're going to make games, more games that is like, even longer experiences.

(Musical break)

Simone Okholm

So for the last few months, we've been kind of in this experimental phase, and we actually had the testers, because we were like, giving them four different prototypes sometimes. Like, once as they would come in, and we will give them like 20 minutes on each little prototype, and trying to evaluate all experiments in that way. I mean, we're hoping for the testers to surprise us actually, you know, to also make us see some stuff we didn't see ourselves. Of course, we have like assumptions and ideas of what we think they will say and what we think they will like, but the best tests are usually when they come up with something that we didn't see it and thought about. But I think in this experimental phase, it's also about like, actually trying to see like, the reactions of the players when they play the game. What is fun? It's all about like, finding the fun, right?

Ethan Vincent

So, Brian, back before the pandemic, I was actually able to go to Light Brick Studio. Now this was in their old offices in, you know, Copenhagen, and you came into the entrance, and then they basically had one kind of larger room they shared, and Simone would perform the the playtesting kind of out in the foyer, kind of the entrance area, which was isolated and worked very well. And the testers would come in, she would greet them warmly, and she would do a brief introduction to the game and some minor things, but then she would just kind of let them play. She would, you know, sit back quietly and watch them off in the corner, and you could just tell she's done it so many times. And when you and I both talked her, she mentioned, you know, how this weekly experience always delivered interesting insights and breakthroughs.

(Musical break)

Simone Okholm

I think one of my favorite was for this spring. We had like, we were testing the end of Builder's Journey, and it was one of our last tests before actually launching the new update to Builder's Journey where this tester, he was like starting to like getting really emotional, and he was like almost crying, and he was like, he had to stop and tell me about how this just reminded him so much about himself as a little kid playing with his dad, and how he was getting really emotional about it because his own dad died from cancer in a young age, and so it was just so beautiful for him. So it was this really emotional moment for the tester where it was like, OK, now we are getting better with this. Now we're starting to see something with the story as well.

Chapter 4: The "Faster Horse" Problem – 23:36

Brian Crecente

Among the challenges Simone faces when chatting with the playtesters after their experiences is one that I think a lot of people would run into, and that is this idea that perhaps these people who have come to, you know, to this event being put on by a studio working with a beloved toy company may just tell those people exactly what they think they want to hear. So I think it's up to her to sort of get through that and get a better sense of what they really feel. They also run into, I think, a really famous problem that the studio refers to as "the faster horses problem." And that's referring to this great quote, that is often attributed (I think it's actually misattributed) to car manufacturer Henry Ford, who in theory would have gone out asking people, you know, if they wanted a car. Like what kind of different type of transportation would they wanted. And what people say he said was, "If I'd asked people what they wanted, they would have said faster horses." Now, clearly, that conversation probably never happened, he never went around asking people that, but that's the faster horses problem that Jonas refers to when he's talking about the issues they face when asking these playtesters what it is they want.

Jonas Haugesen

Try to not listen to them that much. I mean, we have the famous Ford example coming up in the studio every few months, where if you ask the people what they want, they want a faster horse. But of course, Ford could see that they wanted a car. And that's the same thing we're trying to do where, when we see someone being frustrated of a particular mechanic, we don't necessarily listen to their suggestions. We try to figure out why are they frustrated, and what is the reason for the frustration, and how can we turn that into something that's a bit more enjoyable, or get rid of it. So it's about really finding out, not what they're saying, but what they feel.

Karsten Lund

I don't think we've ever followed them.

Brian Crecente

This is Karsten Lund speaking.

Karsten Lund

I think what happens sometimes is that we realize that we can't get them to a place where we want them to go, and we just say, "OK, fair enough. We'll leave it at that" or "We'll try something else. This doesn't work." I don't think we listen to the audience in a way of, this is not the experience we want them to have. And sometimes they ask for something, but we know that they are not sure that they really want, right? I think we talk a lot about

creativity and the blank page, and a lot of people in general talk about freedom and completely open-endedness. And I think a lot a lot of people are actually uncomfortable with total freedom and open-endedness in creativity, and they're actually more comfortable with a little bit of constraint, a little bit of guidance – not help, but a little bit of, "These are the tools you have to work with." They actually make you more creative than the notion of saying, "You are totally free. You can do whatever you want." So a lot of people ask for freedom in creativity, but when they get it, they actually don't really know what to do with it. But once they get a little bit of a constraint – you're only allowed to use this kind of material in this kind of timeframe, or within these boundaries – the creativity is set free. So sometimes the faster horse is asking for more freedom than you actually want because once you get it you're like, "I don't know what to do with it." And I think that's a super interesting discussion in general about play and learning and stuff. There are constraints, and constraints are good. Constraints help me steer in a direction and be creative, rather than freedom and openness actually confused me more sometimes, make me in doubt of what to do, and it's hard to get started with a blank piece of paper, but it's easy to get started if there's like three lines there already.

Ethan Vincent

Fortunately, Simone says that the setup they have prevents a lot of the issues one might run into with typical product testing.

Simone Okholm

I think it's not a problem we have in this setup. I think it's sometimes, it's more the opposite sometimes because I guess it's that effect you can see because we test every week. So sometimes we experienced that, you know, one week, like on Monday is like, "Oh, OK, this test didn't work, like we have to do something else. We're going to go in a new direction. And this is what the tester said they wanted." And then we go in a new direction, and then the next week, it's like completely the opposite. It's like, "Oh no, now the tester is like they want something else and then we're going to go through that direction." So sometimes we have been like, had to like step up and be like, "OK, we have to remember it's not like a quantified test we're doing" it's really just a few people, right? It's sometimes it's just four people's opinions, or feedback or their meeting with our game. So it really comes down to, in the end, that it's not about us trying to please these testers or creating the game that they say that they want. It's actually more about seeing what's happening when our game prototypes meet the real world. When that magical moment when the game meets the players something happen and we get a lot of insights from that. But that insights, these insights, we also have to be critical towards what the testers are saying. And it's always kind of like a – yeah, a discussion between our ideas and the player's ideas, and I think the right thing is probably is you find somewhere in between that. I also try to always, like, learn a little about the testers that we have that sits in front of us. I try to see like, OK, what experience do they have with LEGO bricks? What experience do they have with games in general? Like, what are their motivations to be testers in here? And how do they also understand the game? I always evaluate them based on the first 10 minutes when they play

the tutorial. I go in and see, OK do they have a hard time building, or is it easy for them? Do they understand the general like language in the game? And based on that, it's easier sometimes to see what is – how is this experience affected by the game and the player? It's shaped by both. It's shaped by how the game is designed, but it's also shaped in how each person is going to approach the game.

Ethan Vincent

Clearly, the process has worked for the studio with its work on Builder's Journey, but it seems just as instrumental in the prototyping phase.

Simone Okholm

This Monday, we went into the test for this Friday being a bit like seeking a direction. We didn't really know, like – we had something which was really loose, and we wanted to see like, where can we go with this? So we created some task, and we asked them to do different things, and we ended up seeing that one of these tasks was really, really engaging, and something magical happened when they got this task. They had to like – suddenly, they had to start creating stuff to each other, they were like two testers. And something magical happened when they had to start creating stuff with LEGO bricks with each other. So based on that, this Monday we decided to actually, for the next two weeks, trying to go and explore that direction and actually design a game around that. We learn a lot from them by observing them playing. And we also listen a lot to what they're saying, how they feel about the games that we give them. Yeah, so we listen, and we observe, and we learn a lot from that. And from there on, we kind of merge that with our own values and our own ideas, and that's what makes a game in the end.

Ethan Vincent

While it's a core part of the studio and Simone's job, she actually said she is still surprised that Light Brick remains committed to the frequent playtests.

Simone Okholm

Every week I'm a bit like, "Oh, it's the same." But then when I show up on Friday, it's always something new. Even though it's the same game that we've been testing for such a long time, I'm really, really surprised that it's always showing up new stuff in the test, and people are so different (laughs). And they come in with such different mindsets and perspectives. And it's really interesting to see how they approach the game, because it's always with a new mindset, and they always have, like, new ideas about the game.

Ethan Vincent

The designers are big fans of the testing, both because of the information they receive from the players, but also because of the motivation it provides. Jonas explains.

Jonas Haugesen

I mean, there were weeks where it was more just like, we do the test because we have to have the process, and we have to have the thing blowing down our necks, and we still gained a lot from all those early tests. I mean, you can always extract something from someone not being able to do something. If it's a chaotic, experimental mess, then you don't have a hard time figuring out why it's not working. But there's still like small little nuances that you will get from even the early stages of everything. So I mean, it's always beneficial to get someone to test your game, no matter what stage it's in.

Brian Crecente

Perhaps the biggest challenge the studio runs into with its weekly playtests is ensuring that playtesters actually have something stable enough to test. Karsten thinks that, because of that, the process is a healthy one for the studio to engage in. But he has been weighing the possibility of changing things up a bit.

Karsten Lund

It sort of means that the games we make are pretty stable, actually. They work often (laughs), right? We can't wait for a very long time where they don't work. So I think, usually we go pretty cleanly through, you can say, submissions and delivering of code to the platform holders because of our weekly test. We have to fix a lot of things to make the games playable and stable and working for the tests, so in that sense I think it's good for us. We are working with a new idea of running two projects at the same time, which means we need to stagger the tests, so we're giving ourselves two weeks, and you can say sprints, rather than one week sprints, which is going to help us a little bit to not have to race to the finish line as often. But, you know, you get two weeks to open up the whole game and then close it down again. And then you get to test it, right? That's obviously something that happens while we – when we scale, that we need to figure out a new cadence. So we have weekly tests, but they're going to be with different projects.

(Musical break)

Chapter 5: The Second Game – 34:50

Ethan Vincent

While the first game for a new studio is incredibly important, the second can be, in many ways, more stressful for the team to lock in. Jonas says that's because each new game can be deeply impactful in identifying the studio's focus and approach to development.

Jonas Haugesen

The second game is how you really define yourself as a studio. Of course there's the original game that, if successful, is coloring your studio in a certain color. But if you don't want to be stuck in that kind of space, then you have to kind of extrapolate from what went before and say we are, we are actually also this thing. And being able to have these two points makes it easier in the future to say, "Yeah, we expanded in this space so we can actually also go this other place" and just constantly be elastic about what is it that we as a studio find meaningful.

Ethan Vincent

While the team settled on the core concept for their next game, Jonas said he still feels very much like they remain in an experimental phase of the game's creation.

Jonas Haugesen

Well, I mean, if you asked me five months ago of where we were with Builder's Journey, I think I would have been able to say, "Yeah, we are kind of also still in our prototype phase." The phase we're at right now is trying to not take decisions that will shape the future too much, try and still be experimental, and trying to figure out what is the essence of this thing that we're trying to get on its legs and being as agile as possible, like trying to not lock down on certain ways of doing the workflow.

Brian Crecente

Jonas said he can't really say much about the new game because it's in such a state of flux that anything he tells us now is bound to change by the time it launches. He did tell us that the game is likely going to take longer than Builder's Journey did to develop. Karsten said that he can't even share the codename for the project because it would likely reveal too much about the game.

Karsten Lund

I cannot say a lot, obviously. I think also mostly due to the fact that we're so early and we're so much exploring that if I just say what it is right now, it's probably going to be something else in three months. But I think I can talk to what we're what we're trying to aim for. I think we're still in pursuit of a portrayal of what we call the LEGO idea, which means being creative, trying, experimenting, and seeing what happens and learning something during that process. That's going to be embedded into the game, definitely. And we want to pursue something new that we haven't done before, so I think there's a little bit of social play in there. There's a little bit of more of, you can say, LEGO model building in a new way and interaction with the game and navigating in the game in a way we haven't done before and we haven't seen before on a LEGO game, but still based on the bricks. So it's very, very exciting, and the people who see it think it's a lot of fun. So that's a good start. So it's definitely going to be very different from Builder's Journey, that's for sure. We're not done with the LEGO brick, that's for sure. It's a huge inspiration to us.

And we believe it's a very, very strong medium and a very beautiful design icon that has stood the test of time. There's a lot of embedded, can you say, affordance in a brick. Everybody knows where it is and where it goes and what it looks like and what they want to do with it. So in that sense, we believe it's still a very strong language, but we're going to use it in a very new way.

Ethan Vincent

As Jonas pointed out, some of the weight that comes with making this new game has to do with how it will help to define the identity of the studio. Karsten feels that weight acutely, not just in the new game's development, but also in how the physical studio expands with new employees and more space.

Karsten Lund

Culture does change over time in any company, I would say. And it's – so it's not a static thing that you just, you know, decide and then that's what it is. It depends on the project you're working on, the people who are there and the stages they're in. So it is something that should be allowed to change, I think, with the growth journey of each and every one of us. But it's something that we need to be very mindful of, making sure that we at least don't get the feeling of being separated while we're together. We're doing lots of things together, right? We have the, you know, we have a morning, meeting on Monday together, all of us with a breakfast. We play games together every week, new games from other companies just to see what's going on. We have, everybody can attend, you know, the design meetings or the stand-ups, so we try to be as inclusive, as we humanly can be, across these workstreams. But it's a very good question, and I think it's a question that's on a lot of people's minds with companies, big or small, is: What is our culture? How do we maintain it? Or how do we follow its change and not lose the essence of what it is we're trying to be or trying to do?

(Musical break)

Chapter 6: Conclusion – 40:06

Brian Crecente

For Karsten, ultimately, that means staying true to the studio's formative vision, a vision that means learning how to deliver the LEGO idea in new and interesting ways.

Karsten Lund

I think a lot of people connect with the core idea and understand the sort of, can you say, the message and feel that nostalgia that, you know, a lot of people feel when playing this game about, you know, are we playing enough with each other these days? And

remembering back to when we did play somehow. It's much more organic coming from the inside. I think we believe in this whole being a little bit more immediate in what we do. We don't overthink it. We work more from our gut feel and try something and try new things. We know that we need to test it. We know we need to go through lots and lots of iterations, so we may as well just get it out there so we can talk about an actual concrete thing. And I think that's what happened with this next thing we're working on right now. It just came about slowly from within somehow.

(Postscript music)

Bits N' Bricks: Credits – 41:22

Ethan Vincent

Bits N' Bricks is made possible by LEGO Games. Your hosts are Brian Crecente and Ethan Vincent. Producing by Dave Tach. Our executive producer is Ronny Scherer. Creative direction and editing by Ethan Vincent. Research and writing by Brian Crecente. Art direction by Nannan Li. Graphics and animations by Manuel Lindinger and Andreas Holzinger. Mixing and sound design by Dan Carlisle. Opening's child voice is Milo Vincent. Music by Peter Priemer, foundermusic.com, and Henrik Lindstrand from the award-winning game LEGO Builder's Journey, which you can play on Apple Arcade, Windows PC, and Nintendo Switch. We'd like to thank our participants: Jonas Haugesen, Karsten Lund, and Simone Okholm. We'd also like to thank the entire LEGO Games' team. For questions and comments, write us at bitsnbricks@LEGO.com. That's bits, the letter N, then bricks@LEGO.com. And as always, stay tuned for more episodes of Bits N' Bricks.

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