

Myth, Maori, and a Brain Tumor: The BIONICLE® Saga

For a time, LEGO® BIONICLE was a transmedia giant, standing knee-deep in an ocean of successful properties: 70 books, 50 comics and graphic novels, four films, a television show, a trading card game, and countless LEGO toys.

And threaded throughout the massive success of the theme sets were the video games – seven released, one lost to a sudden shift of fate.

To understand what happened to LEGO BIONICLE: The Legend of Mata Nui and why it was killed – despite being developed in parallel with released prequel, marketed in cereal boxes and comic books nationwide, and nearly complete – you have to understand BIONICLE.

As creation myths go, the LEGO toy has a doozy.

The LEGO theme set smash hit was inspired by a desire to one up *Star Wars*™ epic saga, out-gotta-catch-'em-all the compelling play of Pokémon, and one man's personal struggle to come to grips with a benign brain tumor.

In many ways, BIONICLE was born in fertile creative ground created by myriad factors, including the state of the world and the LEGO Group in the late '90s and early 2000s.

In 1998, the LEGO Group suffered its first loss, eventually laying off 1,000 employees. And then the following year, the company introduced sets based on licensed properties including *Star Wars*™. The success of licensed properties underscored the value of backstory for the company, so it started exploring the idea of creating its own properties, working with, among others, renowned Copenhagen advertising agency Advance and its art director Christian Faber.



There was also in the air, Faber says, a sense that perhaps the LEGO brick wasn't as untouchable as once perceived, and an accompanying desire to get LEGO bricks into school yards.

That led to a slew of new initiatives, some of which set the groundwork for LEGO BIONICLE. Released in the late '90s, the Technic-themed Slizer/Throwbot sets were Faber's first attempt at creating buildable action figures. Next came RoboRiders. The need for a follow-up to RoboRiders, combined with the success of the LEGO *Star Wars*™ sets, led to an entirely new concept.

"We were thinking, 'OK, what if we had a story that was just as big as *Star Wars*™ with just as much content?" Faber said.

A major inspiration for BIONICLE's original story came from a deeply personal part of Faber's life. Back in 1986, when he was hired to work at the agency, he also discovered he had a benign brain tumor. Faber spent the next decade or so taking medicine to treat the mass. Unfortunately, the treatment came with a lot of side effects.

"I had sort of 10 years with morning sickness," he said. "That was quite a strange period from your 20s to your 30s to have sort of nausea every morning because of this medicine."

To help deal with the medicine and its effects, Faber imagined that the pills he was taking were tiny soldiers, doing battle with the tumor in his brain.

"That was sort of the story building inside my imagination, long before BIONICLE, and when I saw the packaging from the design department, which was like a canister, it just clicked and reminded me of the of the capsules I had been eating for 10 years."

Christian's struggle with his illness played a central role in developing the story for BIONICLE.

Alastair Swinnerton built upon some of Christian's original ideas for what was called Bone Heads of Voodoo Island at the time and created BIONICLE's massive backstory.

LEGO BIONICLE had a limited launch in late 2000 and went global on July 1, 2001. Designed to be a transmedia product, the toy line was enhanced with a regularly updated interactive website, a run of comics that hit during the launch window, and plans for two video games: LEGO BIONICLE: *Quest for the Toa*, which aimed for a fall 2001 release on the Game Boy Advance, as well as LEGO BIONICLE: *The Legend of Mata Nui*, which was planned for a release shortly after *Quest for the Toa* on Windows PC and GameCube.

The games were being simultaneously developed at game studio Saffire. One launched on time, but the other was killed off – despite being designed to tell the second half of a single cohesive story.

The two games were essentially developed simultaneously by two groups inside Saffire.

Development on the Game Boy Advance game was led by Jay Ward, while development on the PC game was led by Dan Hilton. The two teams worked closely together, ensuring

that the storyline that threaded between the games remained cohesive. Both games had very aggressive release schedules, with the teams getting a bit more than a year to finish both, and that made the narrative complexity a bit more difficult to deal with.

As two teams at Saffire worked on two games, the physical BIONICLE sets were quickly becoming a cultural phenomenon. Jeff James, the producer for the games at the LEGO Group, said that as the sales increased, the expectations for the games did as well.

Both games were already making the rounds while in development. They were even shown off together at the E3 video game expo in the summer of 2001. But then the LEGO Group was seemingly blindsided by a potential lawsuit.

New Zealand-based barrister Maui Solomon, who was representing three New Zealand Maori tribes, wrote the LEGO Group saying it was inappropriate to use some of the Maori names for toys.

BIONICLE made use of names like Tohunga, which for the three Tribes that Maui represented means spiritual healer. Solomon told the LEGO Group that the tribes were prepared to allow other Maori names that weren't sacred to be used on a commercial toy.

At first, Solomon said, the LEGO Group seemed dismissive of the tribes' concerns.

"Initially, I got a letter from the legal advisors saying that there was nothing legally stopping them from using these names and also implying that perhaps we should be grateful that they were promoting Maori language by using names on LEGO toys," said Solomon, who spoke with the Bits N' Bricks podcast from the Chatham Islands in New Zealand. "My response was to write back to the LEGO Group and state that, whilst there may not be anything legally improper about this misappropriation of cultural names, it was morally and culturally offensive, and that the LEGO Group, as a company which prides itself on having a social conscience and educating the youth of the world, I expected a more ethical approach to this matter."

Solomon said the LEGO Group's next response came directly from the company's headquarters. It essentially agreed with him and asked to meet. The LEGO Group's Brian Sørensen flew to New Zealand, opening discussions with Solomon and others from the Maori groups about how to proceed.

Months later, the LEGO Group announced that it would revisit the game, the theme set, and its inspirations and reconsider the way it uses folklore.

"Future launches of BIONICLE sets will not incorporate names from any original culture," it said in a statement. "The LEGO company will seek to develop a code of conduct for cultural expressions of traditional knowledge."

To handle the name changes, the LEGO Group created an in-fiction holiday for BIONICLE called Naming Day. The event allowed the company to change the name of a number of main characters, places, and people while addressing the change within the fiction of the universe.

The decision not to incorporate specific names from the Maori culture had an immediate impact on the mostly complete games. Both Saffire teams went back into their games and removed certain words and renamed certain characters.

The first of the two games, LEGO BIONICLE: Tales of the Tohunga, was renamed to LEGO BIONICLE: Quest for the Toa. It was released globally on Oct. 2, 2001. But the story-ending sequel due out for Windows PC never was.

The decision to kill LEGO BIONICLE: The Legend of Mata Nui, which was set for a December 2001 release, surprised some involved in its development. Even externally it seemed quite sudden, in part because of the extensive marketing that the game received. The release date was announced in a BIONICLE comic, and a cutscene from the game was burned on a CD-ROM disc and loaded into packages of Cheerios cereal. There was even a call for public beta testers.

Darvell Hunt, who had been working on the game for months, said things at the studio hadn't been going well before the cancellation, with employees working long hours and pay for some starting to slow.

Then, on Oct. 10, a bit more than a week after the release of LEGO BIONICLE: Tales of the Tohunga, Hunt came into work and was told that the studio was canceling the second game and letting some people go – including him.

To this day, Hunt isn't sure why the game was shut down. But he's heard plenty of rumors, including blaming a shift in management at the LEGO Group and a sense that, in wake of the 9/11 attacks, the LEGO Group didn't have the stomach for a game featuring any violence. He also believes Saffire's financial struggles – the company would eventually shut down in 2007 – played a significant role.

Jeff James said he believes it was mostly to do with some significant shifts at the LEGO Group, specifically at LEGO Media International. Around that time, LMI was renamed LEGO Software, and new people were brought in to reassess and run things. Among them was Tom Stone, who in just a couple of years would leave the LEGO Group and lead the creation of LEGO *Star Wars*™ with Traveller's Tales.

Tom Stone said the decision to kill the game was driven by a number of issues. The game was originally designed as a first-person shooter of sorts, but that would have given it a teen rating, something that the LEGO Group wasn't comfortable with. So, the game's camera was shifted from first-person to third-person. That change, as Stone put it, "really spoiled the game experience. The BIONICLE FPS would have sold millions as it's exactly what the young gamers wanted."

It was Darvell Hunt's first official video game, and he was deeply saddened both by the cancellation and being laid off.

"I was really disappointed because I'd been working for a whole year on it," he said. "And I would never get my name in the credits. And I would never get to play it. And I'd never get

to show my kids or relatives and say, 'This is the game I worked on. How cool is this?' It was also, I think, the first time I'd ever been laid off. I called my wife, and we chatted about it, and she started to cry on the phone because she didn't know what we were going to do.

"I was not crying myself. It was kind of a shock to me."

While the BIONICLE theme set had a tremendous run that included about 70 books, more than 50 comics and graphic novels, seven released video games, four films, a television show, a trading card game and countless toys, it eventually wrapped up in 2010. Five years later, the LEGO Group made a second run at the success of BIONICLE, but the reboot didn't really work out.

While the first generation of BIONICLE toys have been discontinued for about a decade and the second generation for half that, fans of the toys continue to thrive, gathering online in a multitude of fan sites. Among them is a group that tracks down lost bits of lore and toys. They even managed to breathe new life into the once forever-lost, canceled LEGO BIONICLE: The Legend of the Mata Nui game.

BIONICLE super fan Liam Scott became obsessed with the theme set and its games around 2008, well after Mata Nui failed to launch. His entry point into that lost video game came through an introduction to the Adult Fan of LEGO (AFOL) website BioMedia Project. The site houses a massive archive of all things BIONICLE, from comics to movies and even video games.

Pretty soon after joining the group, Scott found himself falling down the rabbit hole of LEGO BIONICLE: The Legend of Mata Nui. What was – in 2001 – simply an unreleased game took on gravitas. It became a holy grail for fans of BIONICLE over the ensuing decade – an enduring mystery begging to be solved.

For Liam, the mystery was made even more enticing by his own experiences playing LEGO BIONICLE: Quest for the Toa. When he got to the end of that game, he found not a story neatly wrapped up, but a cliffhanger meant to be resolved in the unreleased sequel.

Though the main story threads were resolved in the Mata Nui Online Game, the unresolved ending, and the knowledge that the game was apparently mostly finished when it was canceled, was just too enticing to forget about.

While fans remained passionate about their quest to unearth the game, it seemed unlikely. The Legend of Mata Nui was canceled in 2001, the team who worked on it laid off, and the company that created it later shut down.

But then the seemingly impossible happened.

One day in 2018, someone at the BioMedia Project received an anonymous email with a link. Inside? An early version of the incomplete game and a single sentence: "Here you go, have fun."

Shortly after that, another early version of the game surfaced.

Armed now with two early builds of the game, the fans set to work deciphering what they had and deciding what to do with it.

One build was from July 2001 and seemed to be in the process of a complete overhaul of both the gameplay loop and the script.

So, in short order, the BioMedia Project went from having nothing of that legendary lost game to having an alpha build and a beta build.

The team put time into fixing up the alpha and beta builds of the game to make them playable and share with fans. That meant fixing bugs and doing some quality-of-life refinements.

The real focus today, though, is on a version called BIONICLE The Legend of Mata Nui Rebuilt, is a version that combines the best elements of the alpha and beta and also layers in some new features. Rebuilt is in development now at Lightstone Studio, which is run by Liam Scott.

Among the major issues the team faces in creating Rebuilt is the game's missing ending. Neither the alpha nor the beta currently has a final boss fight, though Scott says that one was clearly intended. The problem is that there is nothing to work with, so they're creating it from scratch.

The team does have a few references noted in the code and some of the concept art released by Christian Faber. It also helped that, in the world of BIONICLE, there really is only one main major bad guy: Makura.

Liam said he can't say when Rebuilt will be finished. The pandemic set things back for the team, like it has for many in the game industry. But his goal is to clean up the game as much as possible, including that boss battle, add multiple language support, and then release it to the world of BIONICLE fans.

When looking back at the birth of BIONICLE and its ability to attract fans more than a decade after its death, Alastair Swinnerton believes that its fandom is born out of its rich narrative universe, not just the toys.

"We created a world that they could inhabit as children," he said. "We created so many layers of creativity in the same way, if you like, as the *Star Wars*™ universe. We created a universe with huge levels of backstory for the different characters that just resonated in the same way as *Star Wars*™ and currently the likes of Marvel and DC.

"I think we just got the formula right. As simple as that, you know? We achieved what we set out to achieve. We created something like *Star Wars*™ and like Pokémon that wasn't either of them, but that appealed to the imagination of the audience in the same way."

Explore more...

In order of appearance:

[LEGO Slizer](#) – Brickset

[LEGO RoboRiders](#) – Wikipedia

[Christian Faber](#) – Official website

[Alastair Swinnerton](#) – Official website

[Star Wars™](#) – Official website

[Pokémon](#) – Official website

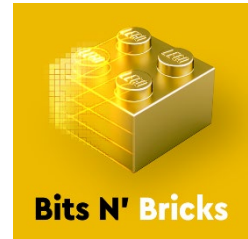
[BioMedia Project](#) – Official website

[BIONICLE The Legend Rebuilt](#) – Official website

Transcript

Bits N' Bricks Season 2 Episode 25: Myth, Maori, and a Brain Tumor: The BIONICLE® Saga

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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.

Ethan Vincent

This week's episode is a real doozy, a long one, and one that fans of the LEGO Group and its many toys have been clamoring for since we started recording these episodes, right Brian?

Brian Crecente

Yeah, that's right. This week, we tackle the fascinating, strange history of LEGO BIONICLE from its early ideation as Boneheads of Voodoo Island, which was a creation inspired by an artist's personal struggles with a brain tumor, to the eventual death and ill-fated relaunch of the incredibly popular toy. And through it all were, of course, the video games.

Ethan Vincent

Yes, the video games play an intriguing role in the history of BIONICLE. Because the toys were, you know, conceived as a transmedia product, you know, something meant to live in books, movies, websites, comics, and video games, digital play was an important aspect of the toy line. And of course, there's the mystery of the lost BIONICLE game, how it was resurrected from the dead, and why fans are now working on their own take on a BIONICLE video game. Now it's important we note here that this isn't meant to be a deep dive into all seven of the original BIONICLE video games or the two created for second-generation BIONICLE. Instead, we've decided to focus specifically on first game developed for consoles, LEGO BIONICLE: Quest for the Toa, and its never officially released sequel, LEGO BIONICLE: The Legend of Mata Nui.

Brian Crecente

Like we said: There's a lot here, so buckle up, and get ready for a heck of a ride.

(Musical interlude)

Chapter 1: Christian Faber and the Birth of BIONICLE – 02:48

Ethan Vincent

To understand LEGO BIONICLE, you need to understand the fertile creative ground from which it sprouted, the state of the world, and perhaps most importantly, the state of the LEGO Group in the late '90s and early 2000s. Signs of what would become the LEGO Group financial crisis first appeared in the early '90s when profits began to slow. The initial reaction was to retire a core group of LEGO designers and replace them with 30 innovators. That shift in designers eventually spread to a shift in designs. And by the late '90s, LEGO sets were distinctly different and one fans didn't necessarily like. In 1998, the LEGO Group had its first loss, eventually laying off 1,000 employees. The following year, the LEGO Group introduced sets based on licensed properties, including *Star Wars*™, a theme set that would go on to fuel massive growth in LEGO Group profits. The success of licensed

properties underscored the value of backstory for the company. And so it started to explore the idea of creating its own properties, working with, among others, Copenhagen advertising agency Advance, and one of its art directors, Christian Faber.

Christian Faber

The agency had been involved also with LEGO projects for years and years. And that gives you sort of a long stretch of content and a long stretch of issues. And in some way, that plays a big role in the way we solve it from challenges.

Brian Crecente

Christian said that there were a few very important moments that led to the creation of LEGO BIONICLE. A key one was the '90s and the seismic shift the LEGO Group was going through during that decade.

Christian Faber

People were starting to doubt that this was where the future was sort of heading when it comes to toys and games and everything. It was almost like there was so many threats through the '90s and the early '90s. It was a sort of emerging game market that was really difficult for the LEGO Group to get into in the beginning. Then there was the big opening of production of toys in China. And they flooded the market.

Brian Crecente

On top of that, the last of the LEGO Group's basic patents had expired in 1989, opening the door for competitors. This, of course, had a big impact on the company and its way of thinking internally, Christian said.

Christian Faber

So there was just so many things that was threatening the LEGO Group – yeah, the future. And we were feeling this in all the things we were doing. We were feeling it when we visited Billund and talked to colleagues and talked about creative stuff. So that's it. The stuff that we were looking into in the mid-'90s was sort of, the innovative things we were doing were pointing towards how do we solve this problem? We need to get the LEGO brick into the schoolyard. We need to make it cool. We need to make a lot of new suggestions or stories, also for you to play with when you bought a box of LEGO bricks, and all this came together in different initiatives. I remember one in '95. It's called Cybots. It's actually my first attempt to look at a buildable action figure. I was doing a lot of LEGO Technics at the time, building cars and planes and the mechanical stuff. And a certain idea popped up that why not build a sort of a character or human, or something that has sort of a torso and two arms and two legs and a head? But we didn't have the system to do it. We needed the connection point that would make this a simple build.

Brian Crecente

The group tested out doing a ball joint at one point, something that would become a key component of BIONICLE toys. The design was used in the Technic theme Slizer/Throbot set, which Christian said was his first attempt at creating a buildable action figure.

Christian Faber

The idea was to put it in a can or a canister so it was easy, portable. It should be cheap to buy. It should be easy buildable, almost without a building instruction. And it should be at a price where kids could buy it with their own pocket money. That was a market the LEGO Group really wanted to hit. And then the whole idea of making it sort of new and have a new sort of look, and a new design feel that would make the toy store move this display out into the front of the store, which was really an advantage because you would pick it up as you were at the register and so on.

Brian Crecente

Right, so this was like an impulse purchase idea.

Christian Faber

Yeah, exactly. And that was – it was actually working really well. It was a launch that almost sold itself that was not a big campaign.

(Commercial: Planet Slizer, seven continents, won the battle, arriving first February 1999).

Ethan Vincent

The Slizer sets which hit in early 1999 also introduced the concept of having elemental characters that would have distinct abilities, a sort of table setter for an idea that would come back in full force with the later release of BIONICLE. However, support for the Slizer/Throbot sets was shortlived, overshadowed by the sudden and tremendous success of the *Star Wars*[™]-themed LEGO sets. And around the same time the *Star Wars*[™] sets hit, the LEGO Group released another non-traditional theme set, the short-lived Technic theme RoboRiders.

Christian Faber

The next year was supposed to do another sort of craze product, as they call it. And you had this – the RoboRiders, which was sort of a bit strange because we had just nailed the one with the character, and it was really popular, and then, "OK, let's do a vehicle that's a character."

(Commercial for RoboRiders: Quick to build, action packed functions, and great shooting. They come in cans with secret codes to games on the internet. RoboRiders.)

Christian Faber

That's a big mix when you have something that's really working. So in year three of these small products, we suggested that we would have this long story. It would actually be played out as if there was a movie, like a *Star Wars*TM-like epic film, but we didn't have a film, we just did it as if there was one. And we created frames out of the film that wasn't there. (Laughs) It was really an attempt to try to use all the tricks in the book from the big movie, but actually do like a small, really active launch. You know, when we have been working with the LEGO Group for all the years, having other franchises to be part of that was actually a dream we had for many years, because imagine that we had sort of the whole story already out there and we could just do the models and so on.

(Announcer: LEGO and *Star Wars*TM join forces for the first time so you can build authentic LEGO ...)

Ethan Vincent

Christian said that the success of LEGO *Star Wars*TM and the need to come up with a successor to RoboRiders, released in 2000, led to an entirely new concept.

Christian Faber

When we were sitting with the concept of this next thing that should follow after RoboRiders, we were thinking, "OK, what if we had a story that was just as big as *Star Wars*TM with just as much content, and we were launching that, or we were launching a teaser for that maybe?" We were thinking about BIONICLE like that. And then, of course, it had a great effect that the LEGO Group saw the effect of storytelling. We actually called it at that point we call it storyselling because it's actually taking all the sort of positive things from a coherent story with all the characters, and turning it into a sales argument, but also a collecting – you get the sense that this is going to continue into next year and next year. So this really good idea in getting in early and so on. I think BIONICLE had a lot of energy coming from the *Star Wars*TM launch.

(Music)

Ethan Vincent

With the idea of creating a theme set built around a strong narrative that could last for years, the team said about coming up with what the toys would look like and what the story would be about. Here, Christian Faber again explaining.

Christian Faber

The Slizer was really different from anything the LEGO Group had done before, and then RoboRiders was really different from Slizer. And then something had to come up that was really different from RoboRiders and Slizer (chuckles), so it was almost like hunting the next big thing and so on. But actually, going back to the character builds, and actually making

them much more like a humanoid, where you could actually say, well, "There's a torso, there's legs and arms and the head," instead of trying to do creatures and so on, I think that was really, we hadn't tried that out yet, sort of in a coherent way, so that was next on the list.

(Music plays)

Brian Crecente

A major inspiration for BIONICLE's original concept came from a deeply personal part of Christian Faber's life. Back in 1986, when he was hired to work at the agency, he also discovered he had a benign brain tumor. He said he spent the next decade or so taking medication to treat the mass. Unfortunately, the treatment came with a lot of side effects.

Christian Faber

I had sort of 10 years with the morning sickness, which is really strange, when I'm mentioning it now (laughs), but that was that was quite strange period from your 20 to 30, to have sort of nausea every morning because of this medicine. But I was like, "OK, I have to fight this. I have to get this tumor to not grow and so on." But at the same time, I was thinking about this medicine I was taking as small sort of soldiers that was going into my body to locate this place that was not right, and then fighting it. So that was sort of the story building inside my imagination long before BIONICLE. And when I saw the packaging from the design department, which was like a canister, it just clicked and reminded me of the capsules I had been eating for 10 years, and sort of say, "OK, why not make these actually like heroes that need to come to this island and solve an issue for the locals there, and maybe, ooh, maybe there's connection there. Why not put something big underneath the island that nobody knows about?" I love this thing of storytelling where you are by yourself, solving the sense of scale. But just to say that that part of the story came from, you know, my life with this struggling, this illness. So that fit very well to this LEGO situation.

Brian Crecente

So it was Christian's struggle with his illness that lent itself to the central story of what would become BIONICLE. In talking to us, he also mentioned that he was inspired by the television show Survivor, which was popular at the time. It was a show that had people dropped onto an isolated island struggling to survive. Originally, the southern ocean-themed toys were going to feature heads that would pop off of the figures when they were hit in the stomach, but Christian said that the concept tested poorly, so they needed to change it. Kids, it turned out, were worried about losing the heads. So instead, the characters were given Tiki-like masks to wear, which could be collected.

(Music)

Christian Faber

So, suddenly we had this ecosystem of some heroes arriving that don't know what they have to do, but have to find out the truth about everything.

Brian Crecente

This is Christian Faber speaking.

Christian Faber

And then you have these islanders that are telling them what they know, but that's not the truth. So it becomes this sort of epic battle between what you know and what you don't know. And also between good and bad in biology, because we have always been struggling with the LEGO system, that you have to break stuff down to build something new. And when you look at biology, that's how things work. So it's actually becoming something that you can play with – that you both have a like a dark side, breaking things down, but it's actually a good side, because it's giving you stuff to build something new. And that whole notion also became the logo, you know, this almost yin and yang logo of the BIONICLE, because that's the thing, that everything is in a circle or a spiral when it comes to evolution. Also, when it comes to robots (laughs), I think that sort of fits into this sort of legend.

Ethan Vincent

While the look of the humanoid toys and the basic story were coming together, the name still hadn't been nailed down. Instead, the theme was called Boneheads of the Voodoo Island.

Christian Faber

You know, I was looking at the *Star Wars*™ logo and looking at name and saying, "Whoa, how do you make something as big as *Star Wars*™?" You have star, which is far away, and then you have war, which is the most dramatic. So I knew we had to do a word that was beyond sort of the known stuff. We were thinking of the Bioknights. That was a name that was up. We also had both Before Man and After Man, which was a bit dramatic, but also leading to the thing that the robots what will their role be in the future? Or maybe what was the role of them in the past, if something came before? So all those ideas came into how do we do this big legend that really has a lot of baggage that we could dig into? So the name needed to be something that was not ordinary. So BIONICLE came out of biological chronicle, which basically the whole thing is, it's a chronicle about biology and the way biology sort of breaks things down to build something new, and so on. So I remember suggesting the name at a meeting and having sort of drawn it on a piece of paper and not thinking, you know, I was thinking this is going to be, this is going to be a big fight, but I still believe that, that is something that we can actually make into something new because nobody knows what it is. And that's actually an advantage, I think. But the strange thing was in the meeting that everybody just liked it. It was like, "That sounds

amazing." And you know, I remember after the meeting, I went up and I bought the .com – BIONICLE.com I bought on my credit card because I thought, "I might as well lock this."
(Laughs)

Chapter 2: Alastair Swinnerton and Other Writers

Create the Story – 16:44

Brian Crecente

Once the core ideas were locked down, the idea was passed from the advertising agency to the LEGO Group, who then sent out the pitch to a bunch of writers in hopes of finding some who could help fill out the backstory, the history, and set the tone for the narratively driven toy set. Christian said his group put together a pitch deck featuring a short description breaking down the backstory, and including a lot of pencil drawings. The LEGO Group's Bob Thompson then combined them with myriad other pitches and sent them out to writers. Alastair Swinnerton said he was running a script writing company at the time, when a book of pitches came through from the LEGO Group. They were a bunch of one pagers, but BIONICLE's pitch was three pages long, so he took that book and went down to the local pub with his team of writers to look them over.

Alastair Swinnerton

We literally went down the pub and shared them out, this thing that at time was called Boneheads of Voodoo Island, a title that we had to keep secret for many years. Well it had a sort of Easter Island feel to it. It was one of my pet subjects, was Easter Island. So I was very into the whole Polynesian mythology, and I thought I could bring some of that to it. So I rewrote what had been written and sent it back. I can't remember to this day how much of Boneheads remained and how much was mine. It was that really, so we went from there. You know, it was these bunch of characters who were on an island, not quite sure why they were there. And at that time, they were called names like Hook and Claw, and what have you. I sort of Polynesianized all the names and created these heroes, initially four heroes who were the classic earth, air, fire and water, and this sort of appealed, so I developed it further and gave it the bones of a new story, and passed it backwards and forwards over a few months – about six months in the end, I think – before I actually ended up in Billund.

Ethan Vincent

That meeting in Billund happened in February of 2000. Alastair said he and his business partner, Ken Anderson, were invited to discuss how to proceed with the story. Christian Faber from the ad agency Advance was there, as well as Eric Kramer, who would later become the product manager and marketing director for BIONICLE. Alastair explains.

Alastair Swinnerton

But it turns out that they hadn't actually seen anything that I'd written, so I find myself in front of a whiteboard, re-pitching the whole thing at the room, which was a little scary to say the least, with Christian at the back with an early prototype of one of the BIONICLE figures, which I still have. And it was only when I got on to the whole Polynesian aspect of it that Eric Kramer's eyes particularly lit up. I remember him saying something about them always wanting to find something that could help them break the Southeast Asia market and he thought maybe this was it.

Ethan Vincent

Alastair ended up landing the deal, and a few months later, Christian christened the new set BIONICLE. Alastair wrote what he said was a typical story bible, like you would for a television series or a movie franchise. The LEGO Group actually told Alastair to write it as if it were a movie, even though there were no plans for one at the time.

(Music)

Alastair Swinnerton

In BIONICLE's case, we started with the world and what it was and why it was, and I came up with the idea that this island was actually the face of a crashed planetary evacuation robot. Somewhere – I don't have the original bible anymore. I wish I did – somewhere in that first bible, there is a pen drawing that I did called Al's Rubbish Sketch of this robot laying down with its head above the water on its knees above the water. We created that first and then these characters, the four heroes – Initially four heroes. It became six – and what were initially called Turaga and why they were there, what their mission was, and what the end result would be. At that point, we weren't looking beyond the first release. We didn't at that point have that 20-year endgame in mind. I mean, that came along fairly quickly afterward. As soon as it became obvious that it was going to be big, that process started in earnest.

(Commercial: In the time before time, on the mysterious island of Mata Nui, six canisters washed ashore on a golden beach, and new and powerful legends were born. They battled the darkness of evil Makuta, and the terrible menaces he unleashed ...)

Ethan Vincent

Early on, Alastair ran into a pretty major issue. The concept for BIONICLE relied on the fact that there would be an inherent battle between good and evil, but the LEGO Group just didn't do violence.

Alastair Swinnerton

Actually, Bob coined the phrase "with smart heroic thinking," which still to this day is one of the great phrases of all time.

Ethan Vincent

Alastair is talking about Bob Thompson, who helped create the story of BIONICLE.

Alastair Swinnerton

I said, "Look, this is Terminator 2, where Arnie isn't going out to kill anybody, but he can incapacitate them." So the idea was that your characters can't directly hurt another character, but they can fire at a rock that's above the character, which then drops on top of them. That was the very simplistic example, so yes, that came from Terminator 2. You have to understand the LEGO Group had not done anything like this before. So we were charting new waters, very much, and working things out as we went along. Obviously, once it did start becoming the success that it did become, then these things got easier. And we got more leeway on that front. But no, the LEGO Group's philosophical ethos was absolutely always front and center, and to be very much respected.

Brian Crecente

Alastair said the LEGO Group had a very specific target in mind when it pushed to create what would become BIONICLE – Pokémon.

Alastair Swinnerton

Well it was the biggest global toy sensation in '97, certainly in '98, and that was our goal was to be bigger than Pokémon. And in order to do that, you had to understand why Pokémon was so big – what it was that appealed to the kids who were buying this stuff. It was the whole "gotta collect them all" thing, you know, the set building, which obviously fed right into the LEGO Group ethos. We knew we had that, particularly with the masks, so we definitely fed off the success of Pokémon in order to, not replicate it, but try and do it better, and I think we did ultimately.

Chapter 3: Two Video Games by One Team – 23:52

Brian Crecente

LEGO BIONICLE had a limited launch in late 2000, and then went global on July 1, 2001. Designed to be a transmedia product, the toy line was enhanced with a regularly updated interactive website, a run of comics that hit during the launch window, and plans for two video games. LEGO BIONICLE: Quest for the Toa aimed for a fall 2001 release on the Game Boy Advance. And LEGO BIONICLE: The Legend of Mata Nui was planned for a release right after on Windows PC and potentially the GameCube. The games were being simultaneously developed by game studio Saffire. One launched on time, but the other was killed off, despite being designed to tell the second half of a single cohesive story.

Ethan Vincent

Saffire was founded in 1993 by Les Pardew and Charles Moore. In its early years, the studio worked on an eclectic mix of games from James Bond 007 for the Game Boy and StarCraft: Brood War on Windows PC to Billy Bob's Huntin'-n-Fishin' for the Game Boy Color as well as the game Animaniacs: Ten Pin Alley. Saffire President Hal Rushton said Nintendo recommended the studio to the LEGO Group in early 2000, helping them land a deal to produce not one, but two BIONICLE games. Jeff James, who was the producer on the games for the LEGO Group, said he visited with and emailed a number of potential developers as they tried to pin down who should work on the games. Among the people in the studios they chatted with were Ken Levine at Irrational Games, Human Head Studios, and Epic Games' Cliff Bleszinski and Tim Sweeney. But ultimately, they settled on Saffire because of the preexisting relationship with Nintendo and the company's recommendation.

Jeff James

I think, you know, kind of from the outset, we really wanted to share the BIONICLE story across multiple formats.

Ethan Vincent

Here, former producer Jeff James speaking.

Jeff James

The original idea for both games is that they would be connected. So the Game Boy Advance game would serve as a prequel to the PC game. And so I worked very closely with other folks within the LEGO BIONICLE team. Specifically, I worked quite a bit with Greg Farshtey, who authored a lot of BIONICLE books. I believe he was doing the BIONICLE comics at the time. And I worked closely with Greg to make sure that the PC game script, when the Toa met each other, there was some dialogue that passed between them, and we wanted to make sure that that dialogue kind of reflected the personalities of the Toa as Greg had kind of expressed them in the comic. And I think going into this, we were looking at BIONICLE as being for a bit older audience, and if you look at – I remember looking at some of the key early visuals for BIONICLE and some of the early treatments, and they were just very breathtaking. It reminded me of, I think it was the Roger Dean artwork – you know, very futuristic, very sci fi and really having a strong kind of adventurous vibe to it. And that kind of led us to, in terms of concepts when we were talking about the types of game we wanted BIONICLE to be, we settled on having a 3D action-adventure, not unlike what you'd see with the Legend of Zelda: Ocarina of Time, you know, kind of that format. That's kind of the direction we went.

Brian Crecente

The original pitch for the games was just a couple of pages, Jeff said. That pitch came with the story Bible created by Alastair and some of the other interactive pieces, like what was being done on the website and in comics.

Jeff James

The Game Boy Advance game focused on a Maturan named Takua who, through his adventures, you know, at the end of the game, he basically summons the Toa to the island. So at the start of the PC game, the Toa are kind of falling into the ocean around the island of Mata Nui, and Toa Onua washes up on shore, called by the signal that the Takua had activated at the end of the Game Boy Advance game, and that's how things kind of kicked off. So that whole integrated – going from one game to the next, we thought at the time was kind of a novel approach, and it also tied in with a lot of the other media, you know, the website and the comics and everything else. We tried to have a lot of integration there story-wise.

Brian Crecente

Christian Faber also met with the team at Saffire a couple of times to give them a sense of the big picture of the world and the depth of the narrative.

Christian Faber

We thought of the story as a big tube. You were traveling down this big tube, and if you remember – if you imagine different products or stories that were sort of traveling alongside, but they didn't have to follow exactly the same route, but they were pushing the whole story forward at sort of one level in some way. It's almost like the story creates this funnel, and then you have different sort of directions inside, or you're moving in the same direction, but you have different tracks you're following. And we always try to sort of make them meet at certain points where we could do great connections between the game and something that would happen in the campaign. We could have characters that met up at different points, and just to say this is maybe how everybody does it now, but at that time, we were sort of feeling like we need some kind of system here.

(Music)

Brian Crecente

Development on the Game Boy Advance was led by Jay Ward, while development on the PC game was led by Dan Hilton. It was key that the two teams work closely together, Jeff said, to ensure that the shared storyline which threaded between the games made sense. To make that level of narrative complexity a bit more difficult to deal with, both games also had a very aggressive release schedule, with the teams getting a bit more than a year to finish.

Jeff James

You know, that's kind of a tough schedule to operate under –

Ethan Vincent

Here, Jeff James speaking.

Jeff James

–but I know that the developer, and on our end, you know, we worked as hard as we could to try to make that a reality, and thankfully, it worked out on the Game Boy Advance side, but unfortunately, it didn't on the PC side, so.

Brian Crecente

Darvell Hunt was one of the developers working on The Legend of Mata Nui for the PC.

Darvell Hunt

Well, it was actually a fun game to work on. We had a great team. We'd come in, everybody would set up on your computer. We had two different buildings. When I started, we were kind of – it was like an old warehouse at a landscaping company. That's kind of funny, but they just set up desks in the landscaping headquarters, and it was pretty tight in there. After a while, we moved into an official building. And we were all in our cubes. And it was a little bit different in that we couldn't just like see people and talk to each other, but I think it might have helped because it didn't have as many distractions.

Chapter 4: BIONICLE Launch – 30:36

Brian Crecente

As development progressed on the first two BIONICLE video games, the push to market the unique LEGO toy was underway. Christian Faber said the ad team did something unusual for a LEGO product. They created a special video to hype the upcoming theme set for internal use only. The idea was to get the sales team excited and on board with the project.

Christian Faber

We actually did something that was really, really crucial for this whole thing. We did a selling-in video. And the selling-in video was internal. It was filmed and put on VHS, and it was delivered to the different sales people who were pitching this, and they put on the video, rolled down the blinds, and when those two or three minutes were over, I think everybody was understanding that this was something that the LEGO Group had never done before. So doing that video was really was, I think, the best move ever. And we actually did it because we didn't know how to explain this, this was– it wouldn't fit in a slideshow, it wouldn't fit in just a spreadsheet or anything. We needed to have music and sound and dramatic pictures and the right timing in there, so you really get this feel in the stomach instead of in the brain. And then there was a narrator – really, really good narrator, he also did the first materials for the whole scene – and I think his voice and the music we used, and all those things just came together to something that I had never seen before, and then I knew that the LEGO Group probably not seen that as well. So I think the whole BIONICLE thing was born there actually, the feeling of this mystery, sort of a deep story

that's not, you know, you have to do a lot of things to sort of get things out in the open and you have to dig into mystery and so on. I think that was actually shaped by that video.

(Music)

Ethan Vincent

Despite the fact that BIONICLE launched with so many different elements, Christian said the team working on it was actually very small, something that made him realize just how much a small dedicated team can pull off given the right support. To make sure everything worked well together, Christian found himself flying all over the country to brief different teams. That included a trip to New York to brief the web team about the online game and another to California to meet with DC Comics™.

Christian Faber

It was quite amazing list of collaborations around BIONICLE.

Ethan Vincent

This is Christian Faber again.

Christian Faber

But that started out with that one meeting where we sort of fleshed out what the online game could be, because we really wanted this to be sort of a – like an episodic thing where you you went in and then some time would pass and next time you come in then the next part of the island is open. So there's this anticipation and we're gonna have this talk in between where people were talking about what it was and so on. So the landing on the beach in the beginning of the game and then the whole sort of trip around the island, that was, I think, that was really the core BIONICLE.

Ethan Vincent

Christian Faber is talking about the Mata Nui Online Game, an episodic web game that was released and updated regularly on BIONICLE.com in 2001. It was so popular that, after being removed from the website in 2003, it was released as a downloadable game in 2006 for fans. Everyone involved in LEGO BIONICLE could see almost immediately what a tremendous success it would be, and they were quickly proven right. Alistair Swinnerton said the team was still a bit surprised.

Alistair Swinnerton

We had something very special. I think the key moment when I realized it was as huge as it was was when, I think Bob was in New York at Christmas, which would have been 2001 maybe, or maybe 2002. And there was a massive display of BIONICLE in Times Square. And I went, "Oh right. Yeah. OK, this is, this is big!" I think that was the moment it really sank in quite how big it had got.

(LEGO BIONICLE Commercial: BIONICLE, each set sold separately. You can enter the world of BIONICLE, where a hero will be revealed. Trust in the mask. Let it be your guide. And then adventure will come to life. BIONICLE: Mask of Light – The Movie, one of six BIONICLE Visorak, and the brand new movie BIONICLE 3: Web of Shadows).

Brian Crecente

The intertwined rollout of BIONICLE across books, comics, toys, movies, and video games turbocharged sales, making it the top theme for both 2003 and 2006. But those early days weren't without controversy, specifically one sparked by those two first video games.

Chapter 5: Launch and Cancellation of the Video Games – 35:18

Ethan Vincent

As the two teams at Saffire worked on the two games, the BIONICLE sets were blowing up, quickly becoming a cultural phenomenon. Jeff James said they knew they were going to have a hot property in the game in part because he saw the figures firsthand, working out of the LEGO Group's Enfield, Connecticut offices. And as the sales increased, the expectations for the games did as well.

Jeff James

You know early on we saw just how anticipated it was, how popular it was being received, so that the pressure and awareness kind of built up over time, but I was very excited to be part of it. This was the first, as a game producer, these are my first, you know, the two first games I'd ever been a producer of, and it was a very exciting time, you know, not only on the toy side obviously were BIONICLE had the biggest success, but on the game side and also on the web side as well, on comics and books and you know, you name it, it was building up to be something special.

(Music)

Ethan Vincent

Both games were already making the rounds while in development. They were even shown off together at the E3 video game expo in the summer of 2001. But then the LEGO Group was seemingly blindsided by a potential lawsuit. New Zealand-based barrister Maui Solomon, who was representing three New Zealand Maori tribes, wrote the LEGO Group saying it was inappropriate to use some of the Maori names for toys.

Brian Crecente

BIONICLE made use of names like Tahunga, which for the three tribes Maui represented means "spiritual healer." He added that the tribes were prepared to allow other Maori names that weren't sacred to be used on a commercial toy. We spoke with Maui Solomon, who lives on Chatham Island in New Zealand about the issue and how he thinks the LEGO group responded.

Maui Solomon

I was legal counsel for the number of Maori tribes who had taken a claim to the Waitangi Tribunal for recognition and protection of their cultural and intellectual property rights. Their claim was filed with the Waitangi Tribunal in 1988. And I was representing them from about 1991 onwards. And so we discovered that the LEGO Group had issued a number of BIONICLE toys with Maori names such as tupuna and others. And there'd been, you know, no discussion or consultation with Maori about the use of some of these names, some of which were quite tapu, meaning sacred, and to use them on, you know, plastic toys wasn't appropriate. So, the nature of the objection from the Maori tribes, to the use of the sacred names is that, one, there'd been no consultation or engagement with them, and to use these names on a plastic toy was considered to be culturally inappropriate, something like using Buddha or Muhammad or Jesus or something of that nature. I don't think the LEGO Group would be issuing a range of toys using those kind of names. And so for indigenous peoples, just using names or other cultural symbols, and icons without permission is not appropriate. So there was cultural offense that had been caused. And so, when I wrote to the company, I explained that this was the nature of the objection. But to engage with my clients, they would be prepared to discuss what other names could be used for any range of LEGO toys that they wanted to issue. So it wasn't just a blanket "No." It was "There's an appropriate process and protocols that need to be followed." So that's really some of the background to the objection to the LEGO Group using those Maori names for these BIONICLE toys.

Ethan Vincent

The initial response from the LEGO group was to say that they weren't doing anything legally wrong. And, as Maui Solomon puts it, implying that the toys were actually promoting the Maori language and use of names.

Maui Solomon

My response was to write back to the LEGO Group and state that, whilst there may not be anything legally improper about this misappropriation of cultural names, it was morally and culturally offensive, and that the LEGO Group as a company, which prides itself on having a social conscience and educating the youth of the world, I'd expected a more ethical approach to this matter, as opposed to receiving a letter from the lawyers indicating that they hadn't breached any local or international legal protocol. So I think that second letter struck a chord because I got a reply fairly smartly from one of the top dogs at the LEGO

Group, based in Denmark, and actually – I just can't recall the gentleman's name – but he was very good to deal with from that point on, and even offered to fly out to New Zealand to meet with myself and my clients and look at a way forward. So from that point on, things went more smoothly.

Ethan Vincent

News of the Maori objection came as a surprise to those working on BIONICLE. Alastair Swinnerton said his initial reaction was disbelief.

Alastair Swinnerton

Obviously, we had used not just the Maori language. We wanted to make the words that we used mean what they were supposed to mean. Tahu means fire, and so on, and so on. Absolutely wanted to respect the languages that we were using, but we didn't intentionally misappropriate the various cultures. We certainly didn't use any of their actual mythology. We invented our own mythology, but just used these names in order to give it some sort of regional authenticity.

Brian Crecente

Christain Faber said he recalled feeling, initially, astounded.

Christian Faber

The whole thing about taking inspiration from the Maori language and so on, that it felt like – it really felt like something that could inspire something new when we found this whole new language and so on. And it fit totally well with the storyline about the volcanic island that was sort of secluded, and the whole sort of mythology of these people living on that kind of island was there already. So I guess there was a lot of cross inspiration, and also the language and so on. And I think, of course, we used the location as our core point. We were on a volcanic island in the middle of an ocean with a lot of drama around that, and that was shaping the story, but that had also been shaping the religion of the Maori people. And we had this big robot lying underneath, which was the story that came out of, like, the brain tumor that I had had many years earlier. But it turned out that in the Maui story, you have these two brothers that created the islands. So the coincidence and all those things were just like, really mind boggling.

Ethan Vincent

While both Alastair and Christian seemed to be caught off guard at the time, the two also said that they never thought or considered reaching out to the Maori to see if any of those references should be treated in a specific way in BIONICLE.

Alastair Swinnerton

We didn't know. We probably should have done, to be fair.

Ethan Vincent

This is Alastair Swinnerton speaking.

Alastair Swinnerton

We were just making up words. We're looking for words, when in retrospect, obviously, we should have just made up words, that didn't mean anything. But you, (chuckles) at the time Google was a very small thing, you know, there were very few online dictionaries. I think most of the words I got initially were from an actual physical dictionary I bought in Foyles in London. So obviously, a few years later, when the internet became a much bigger thing, it would have been much easier. In later releases, a large part of my job was to make sure that the names that we chose didn't mean anything in any language, and I think we were very early adopters of the Googlewhack.

Ethan Vincent

Meanwhile, the LEGO Groups Brian Sørensen flew to New Zealand to open discussions with Maui Solomon and others from the Maori group about how to proceed. Maui Solomon said the meetings went well.

Maui Solomon

What we propose actually was quite constructive, I thought, was to develop a protocol between not just Maori, but other indigenous groups and the LEGO Group in terms of wanting to use or companies who might want to use indigenous names to promote their commercial products. And we talked about developing a protocol and guidelines and codes of conduct, and the LEGO Group were very enthusiastic about that. And so, we sort of developed an initial draft, but the LEGO Group felt that it was appropriate for toy manufacturing companies also sign up to a similar protocol. But as it turned out, no one else was interested in doing that. So what LEGO Group agreed to do was entering into an international protocol just decided to cease using those names. And I think they withdrew one of the more sensitive products from the market immediately and then didn't make any more of the other products that they had, once they had sold out.

Brian Crecente

Months later, the LEGO Group publicly announced that it would revisit the game, the theme set, and its inspirations. The company also said it would create a new code of conduct to govern the way it uses folklore in its toys. Specifically, the company said that, "Future launches of BIONICLE sets will not incorporate names from any original culture. The LEGO Company will seek to develop a code of conduct for cultural expressions of traditional knowledge." To handle the name changes, the LEGO Group created an in-fiction holiday for BIONICLE called Naming Day, an event that allowed the company to change the name of a number of main characters, places, and people while addressing the change within the fiction of the universe.

Alastair Swinnerton

Well obviously, I wasn't involved in the discussions with the Maoris. That was the LEGO Group high-ups. But, yeah, I was mostly really upset to realize that we had upset them.

Brian Crecente

Maui Solomon said that, ultimately, the LEGO Group did the right thing.

Maui Solomon

You know, indigenous peoples worldwide – especially those who have been colonized, even those who haven't – their knowledge, their language, their traditional cultural expressions, are some of the few things that remain in their possession, having lost, you know, life, land liberty in some cases. And so, you know, it would be a good thing if companies around the world, rather than seeing indigenous cultures and traditional cultures like a big grab a bag of opportunity, that they took a step back and thought, "Well, look: If we want to use any aspect of their culture to promote the sale of their commercial products, then at least make an effort to contact the cultures concerned, to engage with them, to treat with them ethically and respectfully and realize that there is an economic value to that knowledge and those cultural expressions." Because let's face it, they wouldn't be wanting to use them if they didn't think there was some economic value. But it's not just around the economic value. It's about what's more important to the knowledge holders. There's the cultural and spiritual value of those, those mahiki or those treasures. And so any toy manufacturing company, or indeed any company out there, and there's, there's a lot of them around the world, who, you know, just regard indigenous cultures as an opportunity, and grab and take and misappropriate without any care or concern for the people themselves or their culture. So it's just a, I suppose it's a plea to make an effort to engage with the knowledge holders, and the people concerned before you take any action of that nature.

Ethan Vincent

The decision to not incorporate specific names from the Maori culture had an immediate impact on the mostly complete games. Jeff James explains.

Jeff James

Well, I know that for both the PC game and the Game Boy Advance game, you know, obviously, the biggest and the most immediate change was some of the terms that we used in the game. Some of the characters in the game, if I recall, were called Tohunga, but we actually changed those to Matoran to be respectful of the culture after that controversy had arisen, and I know that most of the changes were related to text changes. And as far as development itself, I can't recall that that particular issue caused too much of a development change or headache beyond, you know, just thoroughly going through and editing scripts and making sure that we removed the terms that we needed to. That was probably the biggest, was mainly on the text side.

Brian Crecente

The first of the two games, LEGO BIONICLE: Tales of the Tohunga, was renamed to LEGO BIONICLE: Quest for the Toa and released globally on October 2, 2001. But the story-ending sequel due out for Windows PC was canceled. The decision to kill the game, which was set for a December release, came as a big surprise to everyone involved. Even externally it seemed quite sudden, in part due to the extensive marketing the game received. The release date had been announced in a BIONICLE comic and a cutscene for the game was packaged on a CD-ROM disk and put in boxes of Cheerios. There was even a call for public beta testers. Darvell Hunt, who had been working on the game for months, said things at the studio weren't going well in the lead-up to the cancellation.

Darvell Hunt

Well, we were behind the whole time. Not really that far, but starting probably around March 2001, just coming into summer, March or April, the team had been asked to come in evenings and work. So we were working probably 70-hour work weeks all that summer. They would cater food and we'd have dinner there. We would be working at least 12-hour days, sometimes more. And I did know that they were having some financial difficulties. We were actually a little bit behind in payroll as well, so it was a high stress time, 70-hour work weeks, and some points no pay for a couple of weeks. So it was definitely a stressful time.

Ethan Vincent

By that fall, game studio Saffire started giving physical paychecks to its employees, telling them when it was OK to cash them. And eventually, Darvill said, the company stopped paying employees altogether. Then on October 10, a bit more than a week after the release of the first BIONICLE game, Darvell came into work and was told that the studio was letting some people go. By this point, Darvell and his coworkers hadn't been paid in more than a month.

Darvell Hunt

And I heard from my lead, I believe it was, that they were letting some people go. And it's like, wow, that's, that's really weird, I wonder why? We were just kind of joking about it and just kind of, you know, just having a conversation about trying to figure out what's going on. And I think it was my lead's boss came to me, and he said he wanted to talk to me. So at that point, I knew something was up and I said something like, "Oh, I guess I'm one of them," and kind of laughed at it, and the friends I had there, I guess they kind of forced their laugh, but I don't think they thought it was very funny as I didn't. So they just walked me into a room and said that the game had been canceled, and that they had to let go a lot of people and I had been hired for the BIONICLE game, so at that point, they just didn't have the funds to keep me on board. So that was my last day.

Ethan Vincent

To this day, Darvell isn't sure why the game was shut down, but he's heard plenty of rumors, including blaming a shift in management at the LEGO Group, and the fact that, in the wake of the 911 attacks, the LEGO Group didn't have the stomach for a game featuring any violence. He also believes Saffire's financial struggles – the company would eventually shut down in 2007 – played a significant role. Jeff James said he believes it was mostly due to some significant shifts at the LEGO Group, specifically at LEGO Media International. Around that time, LMI was renamed LEGO Software, and new people were brought in to reassess and run things. Among them was Tom Stone, who in just a couple of years, would leave the LEGO Group and lead the creation of LEGO *Star Wars*™ with Traveller's Tales.

Jeff James

When he had joined the company started assessing games –

Ethan Vincent

This is Jeff James speaking.

Jeff James

– and kind of looking at, you know, what games are in development, and I recall that he had come out to Saffire. I believe this is after 911, so I remember, distinctly remember empty airports and, you know, meeting with Tom to fly out to see Saffire, where he could get a look at the game and take a look at its current status. And I know that we had done some kid testing. You know, Tom was keen on focusing the game on young gamers and making sure they had a quality experience, so we spent a day or two at Saffire. I think we had done some testing with kids. You know, after that, I guess it was, I can't remember exactly, but I think it was a few weeks after that is when the decision was made to cancel the game. But, from my perspective, the single biggest reason was, you know, we were under a very aggressive timeframe for development. And everyone I worked with at Saffire was, you know, they're just a great group of guys, and they really did amazing work. When you look at the time we had, and the amount of work that needed to be done and the amount of polish that needed to be done, you know, that was one aspect. The other aspect is I know we had some issues with 3D card compatibility. And this is another area where I think we were kind of pushing the envelope. And if you go back in time to 2001 or so, not many people had a PC with a decent 3D graphics card. And so, you know, I can also categorically say that at least from my experience, it had nothing to do with 9/11, it had nothing to do with the changes we had to make related to the Maori controversy, it was pretty much, you know, what I just mentioned, so—at least to what I recall.

(Music)

Brian Crecente

I reached out to Tom Stone about the game and its cancellation to see if he could recall what happened. From his recollection, the game's cancellation was driven by a number of issues. The game was originally designed to be a type of first-person shooter, but that would have given it a Teen rating, something that the LEGO Group wasn't comfortable with. So the decision was made to change the camera from first-person to third-person. That change, as Tom puts it, and I quote him here, "Really spoiled the game experience. The BIONICLE FPS would have sold millions as it's exactly what the young gamers wanted." Instead, the game was cancelled. Jeff James calls the cancellation heartbreaking.

Jeff James

You know, we all desperately wanted this to work, and Saffire worked really hard. And I know I'm not as privy to the kind of what went on at Saffire internally, obviously, but I know the team there and the company there was under a lot of stress. But, in my experience everyone there was great to work with. They worked really, really hard, and it was just disappointing for everyone involved that it turned out the way it did. So there was some discussion about, yes, we've promoted this game really heavily, fans are going to be disappointed, but, you know, one thing about the LEGO Group that's always attracted me to the company is that it absolutely does place a really high importance on quality experience for kids, and in this case, that's ultimately what it boiled down to.

(Music plays)

Brian Crecente

It was Darvell Hunt's first professional video game, and he was deeply saddened by the cancellation, perhaps even more than being laid off.

Darvell Hunt

Well I was really disappointed because I knew that I'd been working for a whole year and I would never get my name in the credits. And I would never get to play that. And I'd never get to show my kids or relatives and say, "This is the game I worked on! How cool is this?" I think it was the first time I'd ever been laid off, and I called my wife, and we chatted with it, and she started crying on the phone because she didn't know what we were going to do. It's like, I was not crying myself, it was kind of a shock to me, but I just figured, well, we'll have to figure out what to do. Find another job, it won't be that big of a deal. As it turns out, it was over a year before I found a new job. So it was a fairly stressful time, but right then I was just concerned about figuring out how to get home and support my wife and just kind of get through the beginnings of it.

(Music)

Chapter 6: Death of BIONICLE – 57:04

Ethan Vincent

While the BIONICLE theme set had a tremendous run that included about 70 books, more than 50 comics and graphic novels, seven released video games, four films, a television show, a trading card game, and countless other toys, it eventually wrapped up in 2010.

Christian Faber

We reveal the big secret –

Ethan Vincent

This is Christian Faber again.

Christian Faber

- and then we just leave it there, and people will be like, "Wow!" They started to tell their own stories about what this was and why and who and where and so on. So we felt it was a perfect story to kick off sort of the LEGO build afterwards, because people would have all those bricks and they would be able to tell their own adventures from there on. Yeah, and then we had to restart with the desert story and rerebirth of the legend and so on, on another planet. And it started already there to sort of say, well, now we are repeating ourselves in some way. And it was also the market that asked for the same thing again and again. So suddenly going from the position where we were surprising the market, then they started to ask us for stuff, which is. I think, not a good thing when you're not at the head of the ideas.

Ethan Vincent

But then just five years later, in 2015, the LEGO Group decided it wanted to try and bring BIONICLE back as a reboot of the original story. Christian Faber said he was originally involved in the reboot, but that things just didn't work out.

Christian Faber

I started out doing some of the concept work and so on, and ideas for how the logo should look, but it really became clear that what I saw was a possibility to continue this in a good way for, you know, trying to tell the story that the fans would love, didn't fit with the product intensions where the whole idea about having continuous launches or products that are continuously changing, and you continuously have to tell new stories about every character. For me, it was like, let's be much more specific and focused on one character or one arc or something in this next part. And I think there was just a general feeling that this is going to be one big battle if we don't sort of cut corners or really cut to the chase here. So I was – I pulled myself out. Let's say that I stopped. Actually, right after that I stopped at

Advance because of a lot of different things when it came to creative freedom and so on. Yeah.

(Musical interlude)

Chapter 7: Fans and Afterlife of LEGO BIONICLE: Legends of Mata Nui – 59:30

Brian Crecente

While the first generation of BIONICLE toys had been discontinued for about a decade, and the second generation for half that, fans of the toys continued to thrive, gathering online in a multitude of fan sites. Among them is a group that tracks down lost bits of lore, toys, and even managed to breathe new life into the once forever lost cancelled LEGO game, BIONICLE: The Legend of the Mata Nui.

Liam Scott

I am Vahkiti, I am the founder of Limestone Studios and the, I guess the producer of Legend of Mata Nui Rebuilt right now. My initial association was just with BioMedia project, but now I also run Mask of Destiny and all that's currently entailing. (laughs)

Ethan Vincent

This is Liam Scott, a BIONICLE superfan who became obsessed with the toys at nine when he first saw an ad inside an issue of LEGO Magazine. He said he was drawn to the toys by the story and the inherent mystery. While he played with the BIONICLE web games quite a bit, he didn't really get into video games until about 2008, well after Mata Nui failed to launch. His entry point into that lost video game came through an introduction to the adult fan of LEGO website, BioMedia Project.

Liam Scott

Like, I was well into BIONICLE and all of its digital media before that point, but it wasn't until I joined BioMedia Project that I really started hunkering down and working on, you know, various community projects. The BioMedia Project is essentially a massive archive of all kinds of BIONICLE media from comics, movies, video games, et cetera. One of the most recent acquisitions actually was the partial source code for the GBA game BIONICLE Matoran Adventures.

Ethan Vincent

Pretty soon after joining the group, Liam found himself falling down the rabbit hole of LEGO BIONICLE: The Legend of Mata Nui. And what was in 2001 simply a game that was never released, over the ensuing decade became a sort of holy grail for the fans of BIONICLE, an enduring mystery that needed to be solved.

Liam Scott

I guess I was always sort of interested in finding out more just because of the whole mystery of the series, but it wasn't until it ended in 2010, I think, that the efforts really started to begin to collect everything that there was in the interest of, you know, bringing it forward to potential future fans. Like, I've lost count now how many times I've referenced BioMedia Project or Wall of History, Biological Chronicle, if I want to get somebody who's completely unaware of BIONICLE into the series, and I can just send them these links.

Brian Crecente

For Liam, the mystery was made all the more enticing by his own experiences playing LEGO BIONICLE: Quest for the Toa. When he got to the end of that game, he found not a story neatly wrapped up, but a cliffhanger meant to be resolved in the unreleased sequel. Though the main story threads were resolved in Mata Nui Online Game, the unresolved ending and the knowledge that the game was apparently mostly finished when it was cancelled was just too enticing to forget about.

Liam Scott

Legend of Mata Nui was essentially the holy grail of lost media. Everyone wanted to know more about it. Everyone wanted a copy. The developers, from what I gather, were harassed by people like every other day at some points. Yeah, it was just something that everyone wanted and didn't really think would ever actually come out.

Ethan Vincent

While the desire to see the game was there, it seemed unlikely that the game would ever be released. The game was canceled in 2001, the team who worked on it laid off, and the company later shut down. But then, the seemingly impossible happened. One day, in 2018, someone at the BioMedia Project received an anonymous email with a link. Inside, an early version of the incomplete game, and a single sentence, "Here you go, have fun."

Liam Scott

It was one of those things where it was just dropped into our laps with, you know, no kind of searching or anything. It wasn't until after that, that we were producing that video for Liam Robertson and Did You Know Gaming?, that he was doing a lot of behind-the-scenes research and ended up getting in contact with Darvell Hunt, who happened to have a copy of the final build still available in his archives and passed that on to us. And, I guess considering everything that had gone before, and how many people have been like, "Hey, I have this thing," and then they vanish off the face of the earth or just be like a Rickroll or something, I didn't really believe that it would be anything. And then finding out that not only it was, but it was a previously never-before-seen build of the game with content that would be cut even from the builds that we did know, that were also canceled, was very interesting, and ended up being the catalyst for why Rebuilt exists today.

(Musical interlude)

Ethan Vincent

Armed now with two early builds of the game, an alpha and a beta, the fans set to work deciphering what they had and what to do with it. One build was from July 2001 and seemed to be from a time when the gameplay and the script were in the middle of a complete overhaul.

Liam Scott

I mean, aside from being a lot less finished in the final build, it was a lot, a lot less linear in progression, but most notably, the dialogue and the character interactions were a lot more in-depth. And it used a lot of words like Tohunga, which were completely scrubbed from the final build. The final build, which most people know as the beta, this was from October 2001, which was I believe the last build of the code made by the developers before Saffire was shut down. The intent had always been there, just due to our nature at BioMedia Project of just like, if something is broken, and we want people to be able to play it nicely, we work on fixing it. So we had already been in the process of doing that with the alpha for a couple of months when we got ahold of the beta because there was about a two-, three-month period between the two builds being acquired, while Liam was working on that video – the other Liam (laughs) – and I guess it wasn't until we got a hold of the beta and realized how much had changed, some of it not necessarily for the better in our eyes that we thought, "Why don't we just use the tools that we've created so far to take the best parts of these two builds and make them into a completely new one?"

Brian Crecente

So in short order, the BioMedia Project went from having nothing from that legendary lost game to having an alpha build and a beta build. The team put time into fixing up the alpha and beta builds of the game to make them playable and share with fans. That meant fixing bugs and doing some quality of life refinements. The real focus today though, is on a version called Rebuilt, which combines the best elements of the alpha and the beta, and then layers in some new features. Rebuilt is in development now by Limestone Studio, which is run by Liam Scott. He said he formed the studio while trying to get the word out about the project on his YouTube channel, The Beaverhouse. Once word spread of the project, the Discord channel for the site jumped from 30 users to 900.

Liam Scott

So from that primordial soup of hundreds upon hundreds of people, some of the more talented individuals from places like Rock Raiders United came on board and decided to start brainstorming with others on how we can reverse engineer this build of the game and see what we can actually do with it. And from there, our little team was formed, which was initially just another subset of The Beaverhouse, but eventually did get a name as Limestone,

splitting from the Beaverhouse server last year, and now we have our own, and that's where things stand right now.

Ethan Vincent

Among the major issues the team faces and creating Rebuilt is a missing ending to the game. Neither the alpha nor the beta currently have a final boss fight, something that Liam says was clearly intended.

Liam Scott

Well the ultimate goal for the game is to just finish as much of it as we possibly can. I would like to include the Makuta boss fight in that, but it's hard to say how long that's going to take, especially with the pandemic and how much that has, you know, hurt morale sometimes. But as far as the studio goes, I would like to make original games after we're done with this, and we do have some that I can't really talk about on the idea board. But other than that, it's kind of up in the air at the moment really.

Brian Crecente

Liam Scott and Limestone Studios aren't the only people giving modern fans of BIONICLE something to look forward to. BIONICLE: Quest for Mata Nui, not to be confused with the never released LEGO BIONICLE: The Legend of the Mata Nui, is a fan created game and development by CrainyCreations. The open world, action role-playing mod of StarCraft II is meant to retell the original story of BIONICLE. The first trailer for the game hit in 2020, wowing fans of the franchise and gamers alike. Subsequent videos shows a beautifully crafted game played from a third-person perspective with the deep level of BIONICLE aesthetic. LEGO Games has been speaking with CrainyCreations about the title and say they see it as an exciting opportunity to add new ways to engage with the LEGO brick.

Chapter 8: Conclusions – 01:09:40

Ethan Vincent

Born of a desire to create its own sort of *Star Wars*TM, LEGO BIONICLE went on to become a huge success. And that was in large part thanks to the interactive nature of how the toys were rolled out and the story that was explored, said Christian Faber.

Christian Faber

You know, I'm thinking of this as my first really big story, world building project. And I've tried to do world building afterwards for different projects, and so on. And I think you have to think of all the different parts of this as bricks in a puzzle: Some are big, some are small, but there's a lot of air in between them for your own storytelling as a fan. And of course a game tends to be its own media almost that contains the whole thing. It's almost like a game you're entering when you're entering the product, because you have to figure out

what fits there and how do I tell the story, so the whole campaign was a game and then the game inside the game (laughs). I always feel that the people who really understood BIONICLE were almost taking the journey (laughs) alongside the Toa inside this world, which was something you had to investigate, you had to figure things out. It's almost like a puzzle game, and then you had this flex between action and construction, action construction, which is actually it's a LEGO Group term, which is called flow, where you are in a constant positive move, creative move from constructing something and then throwing it into action, seeing how it works and learning stuff, and then going back into construction. And I think BIONICLE is so perfect for this because you might discover something when you're playing with it, or you might discover that you don't want to play. You just want to build. And you know, this toy doesn't limit you in any way. You can have almost big battles with the epic scale sort of morale, and good versus evil.

Alastair Swinnerton

We created a world that they could inhabit as children.

Ethan Vincent

Here, Alastair Swinnerton speaking.

Alastair Swinnerton

We did create a universe with huge levels of backstory for the different characters that just resonated in the same way as *Star Wars*[™] and currently the likes of Marvel and DC. It's the level of complexity, I think, that we invested into it that made it cool for them, and continues to be. And there's still, I regularly get people messaging me on Twitter or emailing or whatever, asking about very minute details of things that I may or may not have written 20 years ago. I think we just got the formula right, as simple as that. We achieved what we set out to achieve. We created something like *Star Wars*[™] and like Pokémon that wasn't either of them and appealed to the imagination of the audience in the same way.

(Postscript music)

Bits N' Bricks: Credits – 01:12:44

Ethan Vincent

Bits N' Bricks is made possible by LEGO Games. Your hosts are Brian Crecente and Ethan Vincent. Producing by Dave Tach. Our executive producer is Ronny Scherer. Creative direction and editing by Ethan Vincent. Research and writing by Brian Crecente. Art direction by Nannan Li. Graphics and animations by Manuel Lindinger and Andreas Holzinger. Mixing and sound design by Dan Carlisle. Disclaimer voice is Ben Unguren. Opening's child voice is Milo Vincent. Music by Peter Priemer, FounderMusic.com, excerpts from various BIONICLE video games, 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: Christian Faber, Darvell Hunt, Jeff James, Liam Scott, Maui Solomon, and Alastair Swinnerton. 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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