Alligators, Buckaroo Banzai, and LEGO® Backlot

The LEGO Studios theme set kicked off with a bang – and a camera you could use to record it.

The theme launched in 2000 with the release of the LEGO & Steven Spielberg MovieMaker Set and a little help from a game found on the LEGO website.

LEGO Studios Backlot was designed by the developers at Templar Games in the hopes of helping to promote the movie-making theme sets.

Templar had a recent history working with the LEGO Group on previous titles for the website, including the surprisingly successful Mata Nui Online Game, based on the BIONICLE® theme.

MY HAT!!! IT'S GONE! MY PISTOL AND BINOCULARS ARE NICKED, TOO!

press CONTROL to continue

"Due to the success of BIONICLE, at that point, at least in terms of hits or clicks or eyeballs or whatever, they came to us to do this," said studio founder Peter Mack. "We were just creating the look and feel and romance and excitement of a Hollywood studio environment for players to explore."

The game's story had players controlling a minifig who visits a movie lot in hopes of landing a job as a director. Players must work their way up the ladder by doing several jobs during the making of the movie Johnny Thunder Versus the World Crime League.

Despite being a video game that was played on a website, the 2002 title was in 3D and even offered a bit of an open world for players to explore. As a small team of creatives with backgrounds in filmmaking, everyone working on the game loved the concept for the theme set it was designed to market.

Work on LEGO Studios Backlot took about six to eight months, a relatively short amount of time for the traditional, on-disc games of the day, but not unusual for a web-based game.

Mack said the game evolved over time and that the process for making the game involved creating a pitch document and then growing it and adding things like mood boards.

"It was the early days of online video games, so a lot of stuff was pretty fast and loose, and everyone was learning as they go," he said. "And everyone knew that they were doing something that hadn't been done before. So, it was really developed and produced with the care and attention and organization that we could best bring to it as any software product."

Ultimately, the game experience was boiled down to three levels, a much shorter experience than a game like Mata Nui Online Game. While the experience was relatively short, it made up for that with a surprising amount of fidelity built into a game that ran in a browser.

The first job in the game was for the player to find some things that the star of the movie, Johnny Thunder, lost around the backlot. Do that, and the player becomes a member of the crew who helps with production by doing things like retrieving a radio, waking up some sleeping crew, and fetching coffee.

Finally, the player has to do some stunts – including, infamously, crossing a tank of alligators, and cheering up a sad actor.

LEGO Studios Backlot also has some fun little Easter eggs, including Takua from BIONICLE hanging out in the coffee shop.

Because the entire game revolved around a fictional movie being created on the set, Mack decided to write an actual script for the movie: Johnny Thunder Versus the World Crime League.

Mack said the title is a reference to movie The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai Across the 8th Dimension. That Peter Weller and Jeff Goldblum flick ends with the promise of a never-made sequel called Buckaroo Banzai Versus the World Crime League.

Despite being a free game built into a website in the early 2000s, despite only having three levels, and – by today's standards – not a whole lot of visual panache, LEGO Studios: Backlot remains a fan favorite to this day.

Justin Lutcher, who was Templar Studios' entire music and sound department at the time, points out that the release of LEGO Studios Backlot happened in the relative early days of the internet. And he thinks that is why so many people remember the game so fondly.

A lot of the feedback that I've heard from people who played the early online LEGO games is that it was a really exciting time," he said. "Like, they would just wait for the downloads. They'd wait through that half an hour Flash loading screen, and they could really go into a virtual world. And this was kind of new. And I think regardless of the gameplay mechanics, or the intention of, you know, like the overall metagame, I think a lot of kids had fun just going into a virtual world and just running and jumping around.

"And I think that there's a lot of nostalgia surrounding that. You know, like things we did when we were kids."

Explore more ...

In order of appearance:

LEGO & Steven Spielberg MovieMaker Set – Internet Archive Wayback Machine
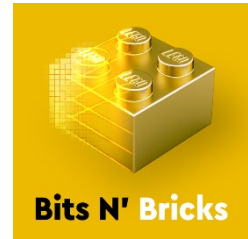
LEGO Backlot – Brickipedia

Studios theme – Brickipedia

Templar Games – Official website

The Lost World: Jurassic Park – Wikipedia

Transcript

Bits N' Bricks Season 4, Episode 40: Alligators, Buckaroo Banzai, and LEGO® Studios Backlot

Nov. 17, 2021 • 46:59

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.

(Child's voice announcing Bits N' Bricks)

Bits N' Bricks: Introduction – 00:39

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 in season 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 by fan request.

Brian Crecente

That's right. We actually do read the tweets, the comments, and the emails you send to us, and sometimes we use them to help decide what sort of topics or video games we should be covering for the podcast.

Ethan Vincent

In this case, the request – or rather, the requests – were pretty straightforward. They wanted an episode about Backlot, or more specifically, LEGO Studios Backlot.

Brian Crecente

Before we get into the game, we really do need to talk about the absolutely fascinating theme set that the game was meant to promote.

Chapter 1: LEGO Studios – 01:42

(**LEGO Studios Commercial:** It's the world premiere of LEGO Studios. Hook up the digital video camera to your PC, and you're ready to roll.)

Ethan Vincent

This particular theme was designed to get people interested in creating movies. The first of these sets was the LEGO & Steven Spielberg MovieMaker Set.

(Commercial: "Ready for my close-up!")

Released in 2000, it came with two dinosaurs, a cat, a mechanical dinosaur foot, a vehicle, fan, two studio lights, two mini buildings, earthquake base plates, 10 flames, and seven minifigures – including one based on Steven Spielberg – an assistant cameraman, grip, stuntman, a rescue fire man, and an actress. But most importantly, it came with a real video camera and video editing software. It even had a camera track to keep your shots nice and smooth.

Brian Crecente

You know, it's pretty incredible when you look at how all of this was put together. You could see that all of these bits and bobs let you do things like simulate an earthquake, with the road breaking apart and showing magma underneath. You can make it look like the dinosaurs are toppling the buildings. The setup was actually designed to let you tilt the

camera forward and back, or rotate it side-to-side, or even shift it so you could get different angles. The software came with some video clips and sound clips to help you complete your own stop-motion animation movies. The whole thing allows you to create this sort of parody of the San Diego scene from Jurassic Park: The Lost World.

Ethan Vincent

This was only the second time Spielberg lent his name to a piece of merchandise, and what I find remarkable is that all of his proceeds were donated to the Starbright Foundation, and the Survivors of the Shoah Visual History Foundation.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, you know, Ethan, you're right, that is pretty incredible. Now, while this was the first and most important set for the Studios theme, plenty more followed.

Ethan Vincent

That's right. There were sets like the Explosion Studio, the Backdrop Studio, the Car Stunt Studio, there was also Temple of Gloom, the Spider-Man Action Studio, Werewolf Ambush, and the Curse of the Pharaoh. It was quite a list. And in the midst of all of this, the LEGO Group decided it wanted a game to help promote these moving-making theme sets.

(Dramatic tune plays)

Narrator:
Act I: The Heist. Rudo Villano is an evil secret agent working with an international bad guy ring called ARGH, Association of Racketeers, Grifters and Highwaymen. ARGH has been on the streak of bank robberies in the USA, and by chance, hits a bank owned by WAG, Worldwide Agent Group, an international worldwide secrets protection group.
– Excerpt from Johnny Thunder Versus The World Crime League

(Tune break)

Chapter 2: Templar Games – 04:22

Brian Crecente

Templar Studios, now known as Templar Games, got its start in the '90s in New York. We talked a bit about this time and place in our episode about LEGO Junkbot a little earlier in the year. It was a time when ad agencies were just starting to look into the impact that video games might have on marketing. It was also a time when software like Flash allowed full-blown games to run inside a website. Peter Mack, who co founded Templar in 1997, said that the LEGO Group was the studio's first client.

Peter Mack

We originally developed a site for the MINDSTORMS® group of products. It was the first online presence that they had, and it was sort of a community site, and it had a lot of content related to robotics and engineering and stuff like that. And from there, our ambition at the time was to do games. And we worked with them originally on that product line to develop the first games that we made for MINDSTORMS, and from there we went on to do games for a bunch of other LEGO Group products.

Ethan Vincent

The group would go on to create at least eight more titles for the LEGO Group. But one of its early LEGO.com creations both solidified the relationship and won the LEGO Group over to the idea of placing full-blown games on its website. After creating three titles for MINDSTORM products, Templar created a Mata Nui adventure game. It was thanks to the tremendous response to BIONICLE®'s Mata Nui Online Game that LEGO.com got titles like Gamelab's Junkbot and LEGO Studios Backlot.

Peter Mack

Due to the success of Bionicle at that point –

Ethan Vincent

This is Peter Mack speaking.

Peter Mack

– at least in terms of, you know, hits or clicks or eyeballs or whatever, they came to us to do this. And I'm pretty sure that the producer – well, the document I have says that the client is LEGO Direct, which I think was the New York office that was overseeing that – and I'm pretty sure the producer was Naomi Clark, and I think she had point on it. I remember talking to Naomi about it a lot. So I guess that was her product that she was producing at the time. And yeah, and we developed it with them around then.

Brian Crecente

Peter said the objective for the game was to build awareness around the relatively new Steven Spielberg association with the LEGO Studios theme.

Peter Mack

I think the sort of focus of that product was a digital camera, which the LEGO Group partnered with Spielberg to encourage kids to make their own stop-motion films using LEGO minifigs and sets and all kinds of stuff to create a little, you know, sort of movie set for them. So the camera was the central focus, but for our game, the camera I don't think, played as big a role. I think we were just creating the look and feel and romance and excitement of a Hollywood studio environment for players to explore. And that was, that

was the idea. So, I can tell you the summary that appears at the top of this document says, "Welcome to LEGO Studios Backlot. Now's your chance to break into the movie business and join the exciting world of the film production company. If you're lucky, you might even be able to work your way up the ladder of success and become LEGO Studios' hottest new director." It says, "LEGO Studios is currently shooting" and then in italics, "Johnny Thunder Versus The World Crime League, and the movie is facing all kinds of production problems. If you can help out and save the film, you'll be elected to shoot the next big blockbuster." And that, that was the idea.

(Dramatic tune plays)

Narrator:
ARGH discovers through confidential documents that WAG has been raising a dinosaur on a South Pacific Island and has embedded a microchip in the dinosaur's foot containing all the combinations to every government safe in the world.
– Excerpt from Johnny Thunder Versus the World Crime League

Ethan Vincent

Peter said that the idea for the game was driven by a bunch of people at Templar who came from a film background. They also worked to pack the creation with little hidden Easter eggs.

Peter Mack

Oh, man. Well, I mean, I guess ironically, or not so ironically, you know, there were no such things as video game schools, when (laughs) back then, and myself and most of the people I was working with, were all graduates of film school. So this was weirdly in our wheelhouse, kind of. It sort of connected with us in a lot of ways, and we were super comfortable imagining what the possible gameplay could be for this because many of us had, not too many years previously, been spending our time on movie sets in school. So, you know, you'll see a lot of the stuff that you see in the game like electrocuting the gaffer (laughs) and stuff like that is all, you know, based off of the experiences and stuff we learned at movie school in New York. So where did the ideas come from? I think it was really the guys working at the studio that brought a lot of their – the world that they'd pretty much occupied up until we started Templar and doing games was this world, was the world of making movies, so we knew a lot about it. It was a snap to just load this thing up with references to movies and all the stuff that we loved, we were crazy about. And now I'm remembering back. Johnny Thunder, was obviously, it was clearly a sort of Indiana Jones knockoff-type character. And, you know, and that didn't come from us that came from the LEGO Group, and of course, all the Spielberg content was being referenced as well. So, you know, the Jurassic Park stuff was going on at the time, and those things were all really important parts of the content to the game. For us personally, you know, you have our own sort of personal take on things. There's kind of a sleazy looking like agent-type guy that you encounter at one point who really doesn't care about you because you're not

important enough for him to talk to, stuff like that. A lot of it is, you know, kind of Hollywood stereotype stuff.

Chapter 3: Development – 10:37

Brian Crecente

As a small team of creatives with backgrounds in filmmaking, everyone working on the game loved the concept for the theme set it was designed to market.

Peter Mack

And now my kids play with LEGO bricks and I – we haven't engaged in any of the more elaborate sets, but I think certainly at that time, they were really good at connecting with kids in positive ways. And not just around the fact that the brand traditionally was a golden brand and it was – it's regarded as educational and stuff like that, but even the new initiatives that they were engaging in – introducing technologies, like I said, teaching kids robotics, teaching kids photography, teaching kids how to make movies – you know, I think that the team there, and the LEGO Group at the time and their philosophy really kept the ideologies and the vision of the company up where it should be, which was, yes, they need to make money, yes, they need to sell products, but these weren't really gimmicks. They were really – I always found it to be really quite sweet and nice, how they were able to balance their commerce with really, truly beneficial practices and intentions for their products. So in that regard, you know, introducing kids to stuff that wasn't just, you know, a toy to play with, but that could introduce them to skills and art and new ways of looking at the world. We were big fans.

(Dramatic tune plays)

Narrator:
ARGH, realizing this is the heist of the century sends Rudo Villano to the South Pacific Island, where the secret WAG laboratory cave that is home to the dinosaur is located.
– Excerpt from Johnny Thunder Versus The World Crime League

(Tune break)

Ethan Vincent

Work on LEGO Studios Backlot took about six to eight months, a relatively short time for the traditional on-disk games of the day, but not unusual for a web-based game. Peter said the game evolved over time and that the process for making the game involve creating a pitch document and then growing it and adding things like mood boards.

Peter Mack

I'm looking at it, and version one is a lot shorter. Well, we've even got – no actually the first one's got some references to real movie studios and a lot of photography. It's more sort of mood boards that showed up in the first version. And then as it goes on, we have all the dialogue being added, the stuff added in. But I would say the whole timeline for development on this was not tiny, but it wasn't, I'm gonna say it wasn't more than six months. It was the early days of online video games, so a lot of stuff was pretty fast and loose, and everyone was learning as they go, and everyone knew that they were doing something that hadn't been done before, so it was really developed and produced with the care and attention and organization that we could best bring to it, as any software product. But given that it was a game and nonlinear, and it was an open world, you could say, these were all things that were new then and needed to be explored, so there was a lot of license given. And there was a lot of reliance on us to propose things. So I would think that, for this product, it was probably a conversation along the lines of, "We're thinking it could be a, you know, a movie set and you go around and have adventures in it. Alright, go." And we'd go back and scratch our heads and make some sketches and doodles and then go back to the LEGO Group with it.

Brian Crecente

Ultimately, the game experience was boiled down to three levels, a much shorter experience in a game like Mata Nui Online.

Peter Mack

It's funny. When a client of this kind were to ask for a project, the language of video games was so early even then, there were very few words to describe – for a client to describe what they wanted, but one of those words is, "How many levels?" Now, as we now know, a level could be very small, and it can be very big. But, at the time, it was one of the only words that you could use to describe scope. So, if a client was going to give you a certain amount of money, they'd say, it should be X number of levels, because their vocabulary, and ours, really didn't extend far – very far beyond that, in terms of defining what those levels actually were and how big they were. So, my guess is, at some point, the LEGO Group said, "We want it to be three levels." And then we had to go back and figure out what that meant. And to do that, it took every fiber of our being to guesstimate, if we've got six or nine months to make a game, and it's got to be three levels, we had to fill in the blank somehow and figure out how big that was going to be.

Ethan Vincent

While the experience was relatively short, it made up for that with a surprising amount of fidelity built into a game that ran in a browser, something Peter and the team remain proud of to this day.

Peter Mack

This was a 3D game in 2001 playing in a browser, so I probably don't need to say much more than that, in terms of bumps (chuckles) in the road. That was, you know, you've got every conceivable browser platform that you're aiming for that could run this thing. Players, I guess, had to download Shockwave in order to play it, and so you had to go through Macromedia, there wasn't even Adobe yet, I think, and get a hold of the plug-in and install it. So you're asking a lot of the player to go through just to get the game loaded. And so that's always a bit of a threshold they've got to cross. I gotta tell you, I never looked back on Backlot as a pinnacle of achievement for our gameplay development, but that was purely a consequence of building a game with a technology that was still very, very early stages. I do know that we had what has got to be up there as one of the worst winning cutscenes from any game (laughs), because I think we were probably so up against the wall, I don't even know if there was sound. Basically, we had worked our hands to the bone up until the last possible minute. And if it had to be out for Christmas, it had to be out for Christmas. And I think it was right up toward the deadline when we suddenly realized that we didn't have anything for the player for when they win, at which point, Hong, our 3D artist, whipped out a quick animation of a dinosaur crashing through something, and that was the end of the game (laughs). It is hands-down one of the silliest endings to a video game that I've ever seen. But, you know, you gotta to do what you gotta do. And it could have been worse. It did the job. But yeah, that was – if you're talking about, you know, bumps in the road, pushing this thing through and getting everything working and getting the physics, the physics for a 3D game in a browser at that time was a challenge.

Chapter 4: Programming – 17:33

Brian Crecente

Lucas Meijer, who started at Templar shortly after the studio was founded, was the programmer for Backlot. But before working on the game, he cut his teeth on several other LEGO games for the company, including Robohunter 2.

Lucas Meijer

The Robohunter 2 was a 3D game, but this one was more challenging for us, at least from a technical perspective, because we integrated this physics engine that makes, like, the ideas that, you know, you can have 3D objects move around in a very natural way, like a bunch of bricks that fall over, and we use that in many places. But since like I came from the technical side, like, my focus and worries were mostly on the like, "Oh dear, how are we going to make all that stuff work?" And since Peter is a pretty talented writer, I actually – I didn't worry about the writing or the game being fun. My biggest worries were actually on the technical side. There was a challenge that the technology that we use, like the Shockwave 3D, it was very new. And it didn't have great tools to actually make the games with. And when you decide to make a game in a certain way, like, until the game is done,

you're never really quite sure if it's gonna work out. So from a technical perspective, it was kind of tricky, but also from a – from sort of like a game design and gameplay perspective, from all the LEGO games we've done, it was definitely the most sort of story-rich. So like, I don't remember how many different levels and environments we had, but even the fast speed runners, like it takes them like four or five, six minutes to like chase through the whole thing, which doesn't sound like a lot if you compare it to, I don't know, like a $60 game that you buy in the store. But if you look at these games from the concept of that they were kind of smallish web games in the – what was it? in the year 2002, where that wasn't super common, like for our development team, it was just a lot of content. It's not like, if you look at a game like Drome Duel, the Racers game, that's just very repetitive. And you can spend many hours having lots of fun in it, but there's not a lot of unique content. Whereas in the Backlot game, all the contents was kind of unique and scripted, like you had to get coffee for the director, and then you have to find his girlfriend, and she's missing her glasses or, yeah like, it was very sort of story-driven, script-heavy for what we were used to at least.

Brian Crecente

Lucas said that he also had to make sure the game provided some challenge to players, but also wasn't too hard to play, a balancing act that required a bit of back and forth with Peter, who was the game designer, and also some early playtesting.

Lucas Meijer

Like, sometimes you had a great idea that looks great on paper, and you see it in the game, and it just totally doesn't work. Sometimes it's just too long-winded, like I'm not sure like – I don't know if you played Robohunter 2, but I would say that game was pretty long-winded, like you had to chase spies through a town, but it could take like 40 minutes. And, you know, like, I was kind of bored after 10. So sometimes you have to sort of like, yeah, sometimes a plan just doesn't work, and you need to either change it or cut it. And we did that with a combination of our own intuition and just playing the game ourselves and bouncing ideas back and forth, and having other people play it and just seeing if they could figure it out, or if they couldn't even like get through the gate. I remember when we playtested Backlot, the first thing you do in the game is you arrive at the outside of this movie studio. You have to talk to this guy, and he opens the gate for you. And, not in the final version of the game, but one of the versions that we had mid-release, when we playtested it with some actual kids, it turned out like most of them just were unable to ever get into the gate. So we had, like, all this content in the game, but people were stuck at the gates because we didn't make it clear enough that, I don't know, maybe you had to hit Shift or something to start the dialogue, and we didn't explain that well. There's nothing more painful for a game developer than watching someone who's never played your game, do it for the first time, because you just like, yeah, it is just super painful. It's never what you expect. I'm sure we didn't do enough playtesting, like, these games weren't made on incredible budget either, but the playtesting that we did do, like, I haven't done a single

playtesting session for a game where it's super obvious, painful stuff like that didn't stick out like a sore thumb.

Ethan Vincent

The gate was just one example of some of the issues Lucas ran into as he worked to balance the fun of the game with the need to get it to run inside a browser, and of course, hit the game's approaching deadline.

Lucas Meijer

I think in this in between version, we didn't have this person standing outside of the gate that was trying to help you. And so I think we added her or him after that. And I think we also had, like they're short – there's, I believe it was Shift, that lets you continue through dialog boxes, and control maybe to get you to your inventory. And I think we just had both, like a text explanation to do that, but we also had something in the very beginning that sort of forced you to do it once. So that as a player you realize like, "Oh, OK, OK, so this is the button I need to click to make sure that these LEGO brick dudes continue talking." So sometimes it's a mix of like gameplay things or just really horrible mistakes in my programming. I remember when my girlfriend was playtesting the game. You have this sort of LEGO car that's driving around the backlot, and it's going like, it's going forward, forward, forward, and then it takes a right turn, and then it takes a left turn. And apparently, like, I messed up the animation code somehow and instead of taking left turns and right turns, it took like a turn up and it just drove straight to the sun. And then it just started driving horizontally on that plane again. So there's – it's funny how – because game development is such a visual thing, like the kind of small, funny mistakes that you can make often result in really, sort of like hilarious results in the game where you're like, "What like what is going on here?" I'm sure that the game that we finally shipped, like, I'm sure it still had a few funny mistakes like that left in.

(Dramatic tune plays)

Narrator:
WAG, fearing the worst, deploys an army of guards to protect the South Pacific laboratory cave and the dinosaur. They also send along Johnny Thunder, an internationally recognized Secret Agent and honorary WAG member. He has been hired to protect both the dinosaur and its scientist caretaker: Pippin.
– Excerpt from Johnny Thunder Versus The World Crime League

(Tune break)

Chapter 5: Sound – 24:29

Brian Crecente

Another major component of the game was the need to provide some sound effects and a soundtrack for the game. Justin Luchter was Templar Studios' entire music and sound department at the time, so it was his responsibility to create the acoustic vision for the project.

Justin Luchter

So my background is really in the recording realm. So I came to, I came to Templar with a recording background. I was working in a big studio that had just closed. And I'd actually recorded some things for games, but just more musical things like Sonic the Hedgehog. I was involved in one of the soundtracks for that. And PaRappa The Rapper was a project that came to another studio I was working in. And I'd also done some work for Peter himself. He had some school projects that I'd done some music and sound for because I was, sort of just as a hobby, I was doing my own music and sound, but professionally, I was doing recording. And when Peter started Templar, he invited me to come along as the sound person. So that was really my background. It was more, you know, the music and the sound were sort of a hobby, you know, I had some technical expertise in the audio realm as well, so that's really why he brought me aboard.

Ethan Vincent

While Justin created the soundscape for all the games that Templar made back then, he ran into some problems finding a solid soundtrack for LEGO Studios Backlot.

Justin Luchter

We did some demos for the client, and the client didn't like anything, as I remember (chuckles). And there isn't very much music in the game for that reason, because I, as I recall, you know, I did a demo, and they didn't like it. So I did a different demo, and they didn't like it, but it was one of the kind of things where they kind of couldn't really explain what they didn't like, or what they would like. So the amount of music in the game is very small. So it's just I – as I recall it, like you just like hit a switch, there's switches throughout the game on lampposts or something. And you can go and press those, and if those are activated, a music loop will start to play. (sound effects/tune from game plays) Yeah, but other than that, it's pretty much sound effects.

Brian Crecente

While Backlot didn't have much music to speak of, it did have sound effects. So Justin had to figure out how to create and capture those sounds for the player's character.

Justin Luchter

He had a bag, you know, his things – his inventory was stored in a bag. So I had to do, you know, different rustlings of the bag, and, you know, Rustle A, and Rustle B, and, you know, different things would pop out of the bag, and each little thing had a sound. You know, I remember pushing the blocks, because there was something about pushing blocks around so you could jump up and reach different things, there's pushing blocks. There were some cars that would sort of putter, you know, (police siren wailing in the background) like sort of golf carts that would putter around the studio.

Brian Crecente

I'm sorry, could we hold on one sec while that –

Justin Luchter

– Yeah, let the siren go by.

Brian Crecente

Ironically, as you're talking about sound effects (laughs).

Justin Luchter

(Chuckles) I have plenty of sound effects here.

Brian Crecente

Is it your soundboard? Are you doing this on purpose? (laughs)

Justin Luchter

(Laughs) So I remember there was like boxes, you know, there was some electricity in the first level, you know, there was a key. And I remember there was jumping. OK, so I spent a lot of time with the jumping sound (sound effects) because they spend a lot of time walking and jumping. And, you know, from what I've read, you know, in some internet forums, you know, a lot of kids – if the game was really, you know, too difficult, they would, you know, they would get like a half hour Flash loading screen, because this is also remember the time of a 14.4k modems. (modem sound) So, it was difficult to download a game of this magnitude. It was really kind of pushing the technology at the time. So I read online that a lot of kids would go and, you know, they'd wait for half an hour, and then they would kind of just like run around and jump around. So I wanted to create an auditory world where there was sort of like in between a cartoon. So, you know, I sort of approached it by using some organic sounds that were run through, you know, sampled and then run through, you know, filters or, you know, pitch-shifted. It was a very bespoke project, you know, it wasn't a lot of off the shelf sound effects.

Ethan Vincent

Justin said the project as a whole was quite a challenge for Templar because the studio was still just a fledgling company. In fact, he said that he only worked on the first level because he used the game's entire audio budget by then.

Justin Luchter

You know, one of the challenges was, not for me necessarily to create the sounds, but then the next step of somehow communicating to the programmer how these sounds should work or how they should behave in gameplay, because that was another level beyond just creating the sounds. And there was no, as far as I know, like middleware or third-party things that I could really program, because I wasn't a programmer. I'm still not a programmer. So I had to specify to the programmers, you know, how I wanted the sounds to loop, you know, push the block and, you know, fades up and then loops, and then, you know, when you stop it fades out over a certain amount of time. And that was a challenge because just conveying in plain English language to coders, that was something new for me. And it was also, I think, a challenge for some of them too to, you know, on their end to take, you know, English language of what should happen and translate that into, you know, whatever it is that they do.

(Dramatic tune plays)

Narrator:
Act II: The Island. Johnny and Pippin meet, and instantly hit it off. They explore the island together, talk about their respective histories, and they start to fall in love.
– Excerpt from Johnny Thunder Versus The World Crime League

(Tune break)

Justin Luchter

You know, when something is implemented by the programmer, I will, you know, go in and, you know, do some quality assurance, make sure it's all functioning right. But I never played the game end-to-end. I think I did play through the first level. But I was actually not involved in the subsequent levels, because I think I used up the entire audio budget on Level 1. Well, there's a choreographer, I believe it's Bill T. Jones, who said, "We don't ever complete our projects. We merely abandon them." And so for the scope of what this project was, which was huge, it was a really big project, and we did like to really think big and deliver a lot in those days.

Chapter 6: Backlot – 30:58

Brian Crecente

Ultimately, when the game launched in 2002, it featured the story of a minifig who lands a job in the backlot of a LEGO studio. His goal is to help the production of the current movie in hopes of working his way up through the ranks and eventually becoming a director. I know, Ethan, you do a lot of film work. That's exactly how it works, right?

Ethan Vincent

Exactly. Yeah, you just get your director's job handed to you. It's that simple, Brian, of course. No, I mean, the first job is for the player to find some things that the star of the movie, Johnny Thunder, lost around the backlot. Do that, and the player becomes a member of the crew who helps with production by doing things like, you know, retrieving a radio, waking up some sleeping crew, and fetching coffee. Finally, the player has to do some stunts, including infamously crossing a tank of alligators, cheering up a sad actor, and lovestruck script writer. The game also has some fun little Easter eggs, including Takua from BIONICLE, hanging out in the coffee shop.

Brian Crecente

Speaking of Easter eggs, here's a funny side story: Peter Mack actually went through the trouble of writing an entire script for the movie that is being directed inside the game. How's that for meta?

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, that's good.

Brian Crecente

The best part of this is the fake movie's title which is Johnny Thunder Versus The World Crime League. Now for fans of The Adventures of Buckaroo Banzai Across the 8th Dimension, this is of course, a reference to the never-made sequel to that wonderful Peter Weller and Jeff Goldblum flick, which was going to be called the Buckaroo Banzai Versus The World Crime League.

Peter Mack

In Buckaroo Banzai, which is a fantastic film, the very last shot of the movie after the credits it says, "Buckaroo Banzai will be back in Buckaroo Banzai Versus The World Crime League." That's the closing title of that movie. I really cannot tell you why we would have needed to write a script for that film. Maybe it was to guide or inspire what some of the puzzles or scenes that you encountered in the game are, but I really don't know. It may be we just needed a bunch of copy to go on the back of some geometry.

(Dramatic tune plays)

Narrator:
Act III: The Laboratory Cave. Rudo Villano arrives at the cave and tricks the guards with his false credentials. The WAG guards discover their mistake when Rudo Villano forces the guards outside and he rushes inside the laboratory cave with a bunch of ARGH agents, who knock out the WAG guards and masquerade as them.
– Excerpt from Johnny Thunder Versus The World Crime League

(Tune break)

Chapter 7: Launch – 33:42

Ethan Vincent

Unfortunately, the script is never really used in the game, and you certainly can't make out any of the words, which appear in the game on the script pages, because of the graphics of the day. And getting back to the game, you know, as Peter mentioned earlier, the game doesn't really have an ending, which is likely a byproduct of deadline and budget.

Brian Crecente

Despite being a free game built into a website in the early 2000s, despite only having three levels, and by today's standards, not a whole lot of visual panache, LEGO Studios Backlot remains a fan favorite to this day.

Ethan Vincent

And don't forget: You can't really play this game anymore. Not only is it not on LEGO.com, but the Shockwave player, which you need to run the game, isn't even supported anymore. So, if you want to play this game, you have to find it and then figure out a way to get it running.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, you're right, and despite all of that, it gets a lot of love. Peter was actually a little surprised to hear of its popularity when we spoke with him for this episode.

Peter Mack

I've got to tell you, that is news to me. Because it's not one of the ones, I mean, I know a lot of – there's a lot of fans of BIONICLE out there, and there's a lot of, you know, there's even, you know, fans of some of the early Robohunter stuff. Backlot, you know, I think just we very much had a right place at the right time, and right people in the right place at the right time equation going on where this new technology had arrived, and we had very creative, artistic people who were in love with it, and technical people as well. Lucas is a

genius, and he really was able to do a lot at that time with technology that doesn't really let you do a lot. And I think a lot of things just happened to come together, no small part of which was the fact that the audience at the time, which was, you know, I'd say kids age, you know, 8 to 12, they didn't have a lot of access to video games yet. Now, we don't even think about it. It's everywhere. It's ubiquitous. Any device. You could probably play games on your refrigerator at this point. But back then, kids that were hungry for this kind of stuff and, you know, didn't have a Nintendo at home or had played their Nintendo to death, there weren't a lot of places to turn. So I think we have a generation of guys – and I think this is one of the reasons we're talking right now – who are now adults and have a lot of nostalgia for a time when you could go to the library and play a 3D LEGO game with physics. That was pretty cool. And that formed a big part of your childhood. So, I would love to point at the game being a great landmark (chuckles), or a milestone in video game history. I'm not sure I'd go that far. I think that it did hit a generation of kids, just before phones, and just before, you know, Xboxes and stuff that had access to it that, had we not been there then at that time, maybe we wouldn't have had the opportunity to make something like this.

Ethan Vincent

Lucas said that, when the game hit, it was really hard to get a sense of how Backlot was received. Back then, you know, there wasn't any Facebook or Twitter where people could talk about it.

Lucas Meijer

Back then, you put it on the website, and maybe, you know, like, every blue moon, if you asked for it you get some statistics data from the LEGO Group on how much it was played. But at least I wasn't aware of, like, where to find all these players, like the – to the best of my knowledge there weren't like internet forums where people that play games on the LEGO.com website would hang out and praise the games or complain about the games. I knew it was getting played, but it was very hard to get to – yeah, to know what people felt about it. Actually, I only sort of realized later on when like when YouTube came along. Like by now you can see that LEGO Backlot has made a big impression on many people, much more show than the other games we did, for instance, like it's hard to find YouTube content for LEGO Drome Duel, the racing game that we did before. But at the time where we were making these games, it wasn't actually so clear that one was a much bigger success than the other.

Brian Crecente

And today, as we pointed out, it's quite hard to both track down the game and get it to work on a modern machine, something Lucas calls a big challenge for the entire video game industry.

Lucas Meijer

Like, it's super sad that the games we worked on which were far from perfect, but you know, valuable in their own self, that you can't really play them anymore, right? Like the closest you can get is, or at least the easiest you can get is like with the YouTube stream. And if you really want to play it yourself, you have to find some old virtual machine and some ancient Shockwave player, and you need to hope that we didn't implement it in a way where it wouldn't run if the LEGO server wasn't up. Back then we had a very common problem in the web game space that web games would get stolen. So, people would just grab the Shockwave game from your website, and put it on their website, and surround it with a whole bunch of ads. And it was very difficult to stop that sort of squatting. Now, maybe the LEGO Group wouldn't have had such a problem with it, I'm not sure, because it's just more eyeballs on their kids. But the common thing that we actually did back in those days is actually prevent, actively prevent the games from running, if they suspect that they're not running on the LEGO server. And of course, by now the LEGO server looks completely different than it looked 20 years ago. So, if we actually implemented then in that in that way, it doesn't work. And it's something that the game industry, as a large, doesn't really have a good solution for now. Like after making these LEGO games, I joined a small company called Unity, which makes a game engine, which by now is a big company. So when, like, after the LEGO games, when I joined, it was maybe 15 people or something. And we had a similar technology like Shockwave 3D. We had the Unity Web Player, which was sort of like the next decade's way of bringing 3D games to the web. But I'm, like, I'm sad to say that it has suffered the same fate in that, like there were some really excellent games published to the Unity Web Player, but finding a way to play them now is like it's excruciatingly hard. And in a way, we lost many of that decade's web games, which is a shame, because it was a – it's a part of history of games, and it would be great if it wasn't lost, but I'm not sure how we could still save it.

Ethan Vincent

Unlike Peter, Lucas said he had a growing sense of the fan base that exists today for Backlot, who seem to have quite fond memories of playing the Shockwave game.

Lucas Meijer

Only up until recently, I didn't know that Backlots was so popular. But that's not 100% true, because from time-to-time we got emails. Like, I got emails from like, I don't know, some dude asking like, "Hey, how can I play Backlot?" And so apparently, they found the name from Templar Studios, and somehow they managed to figure out that I did the programming and they found my email address. Like, I didn't know there were people were still looking for it. I look back at it with lots of pride, actually. It's – I think it's by far the best game that I made together with Templar Studios. It was a lot of fun to make. I also remembered fondly because I, like them, it's a part of my, you know, it was the early part of my career, and I moved to New York, and that was all exciting, and making this game was exciting, and doing it for the LEGO Group was exciting. So yeah, no, like, I look back at

the game with lots of fun memories. And also, like, I realized now that I saw like some YouTube videos and I look at all the dialogue again, I realized that when I did the original work, my English probably wasn't good enough to sort of get all of Peter's jokes. So now that I looked at it again, I was like, "Oh, haha, that's, you know, I didn't realize that was a joke." Yeah, I'm not sure if I would categorize this humor as dad jokes, but at least there were a lot of, sort of, more subtle jokes in there, that at the time, like, I didn't even realize were jokes. And, I was happy about it also because of the challenges with the physics engine, and just from a technical perspective it was a very non-trivial game to make. And even though the realization that it was popular has arrived to me rather late, it feels great to have made something that a lot of people enjoyed, and that the people that enjoyed it, they are now also 20 years further in their life, and they look back at the game with fond memories as well. So that feels pretty cool.

(Dramatic tune plays)

Narrator:
Pippin screeches in her car onto the scene, runs over to the dinosaur and mutters some strange words. The dinosaur becomes placid and the WAG agents put him into a waiting van. Johnny and Pippin kiss.
– Excerpt from Johnny Thunder Versus The World Crime League

(Tune)

Brian Crecente

Justin points out that the 2001 release of LEGO Studios Backlot was in the relatively early days of the internet, and he thinks that's why so many people remember the game so fondly.

Justin Luchter

A lot of the feedback that I've heard from people who played the early online LEGO games is that it was a really exciting time. Like, they would just wait for the downloads. They'd wait through that half an hour Flash loading screen, and they could really go into a virtual world. And this was kind of new. And I think regardless of the gameplay mechanics, or the intention of, you know, like the overall metagame, I think a lot of kids had fun just going into a virtual world and just running and jumping around. And I think that there's a lot of nostalgia surrounding that. You know, like things we did when we were kids, and we went into the LEGO Studios world and gave Johnny Thunder his hat. You know, in a way I'm surprised that people remember it, but in a way I'm not because, you know, I think of it very finely too. And if you actually go back and look at the video, or if you find some way to play the game again, it really is, you know, a charming place to have spent some time, especially, I think, as a child. You know, just trying to quickly re familiarize myself with the game, you know, I just – I went to YouTube and I tried to find a video and I just thought, "Yeah, that was fun." I remember, too, like trying to just jump on a car that was moving and

just see if I could like land on the car and have it ride me around (chuckles). So there were things like, I don't remember what the actual specific name for doing that is, like playing your own sort of game within the game or making things up to do within the game. But I think there was a lot of that.

Peter Mack

It was certainly ambitious.

Ethan Vincent

This is Peter Mack speaking.

Peter Mack

Thinking back, we were probably pretty crazy for trying to do something (laughs) like that at the time, but it made it out so I guess it was OK. We always trusted very much in the curiosity and fascination and intelligence of the kids playing LEGO games because they're LEGO kids – that they want to explore and find their own solutions to things, so to me personally, those are the best – some of the best feature of that kind of gameplay.

(Postscript music)

Bits N' Bricks: Credits – 45:47

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, and excerpts from the game LEGO Studios Backlot. We'd like to thank our participants: Justin Luchter, Peter Mack, and Lucas Meijer. 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.