

# How LEGO® City Undercover Changed the Face of LEGO Games

Before it was a hidden gem packed with pop culture referential humor, hundreds of unique drivable vehicles, and a living open world, LEGO® City Undercover was a dream: a wish made by a game studio specializing in portable games to create something bigger, better, different.

TT Fusion was perhaps best known for bringing excellent ports of TT Games' masterful creations to handheld platforms. It delivered LEGO Star Wars™, LEGO Indiana Jones, and LEGO Batman games to Nintendo DS without sacrificing quality.

But a chance to create something different – both for the studio and TT Games as a whole – with LEGO Rock Band fueled the studio's desire to think outside the LEGO brick box.



With development on the rhythm game wrapping up, the folks at TT Fusion were being asked to work on more console titles and were trying to decide what they wanted to do next.

"It was an interesting, exciting time," said Matt Palmer, who is now the studio's animation director. "We were in discussions about the next project. There were many ideas being bandied around. But an open-world game was something that we hadn't actually done at that point. And it became more and more exciting the more we talked about it."

As enthusiasm grew for creating a LEGO game that broke free of TT Games' adventure formula, the team at TT Fusion began prototyping ideas.

"We started to put a team together to say, 'If we were to do an open world, how would we do it?'" Palmer said. "What would we need? What technologies would we need? How many animators would we need?"

The team was working on generic LEGO brick prototypes when another idea entered the mix. The LEGO Group, it turned out, had long wanted to create an original title using the company's immensely popular LEGO City theme sets.

Soon, the TT Fusion team was roughing out ideas for an open-world game built around the LEGO City theme set. And that ended up raising a lot of early questions. Specifically, the team settled on leaning into the LEGO City theme set's police range, which meant figuring out how to do things like violence and weapons.

"What can we do with that sort of range?" Palmer said. "Are we allowed to use weapons? Are we allowed to use any sort of comedy violence? Or do we have to just scale all that sort of side back? So, it was kind of a really exploratory phase.

"It seemed like that went on for years and years and years, but it was probably only about eight or nine months, where we actually had some fun and just said, 'What things could we do if we have these characters?'"

Then, in 2011, Nintendo came to the LEGO Group with a surprising offer: It wanted the company to co-develop a title for the soon-to-be-released Wii U console, an offer that energized the team at TT Fusion.

Now the team was developing an open-world LEGO game set in one of the company's most important themes for a console that hadn't yet launched. The hope was that the game could deliver a new experience, using a popular LEGO Group franchise, and help establish a strong relationship with Nintendo, something that the LEGO Group had been working to achieve for years.

Because of the game's importance to both the LEGO Group and Nintendo, there was a lot of direct involvement between the two companies and developer TT Fusion.

"They were very, very involved," said Darryl Kelley, who was the LEGO Group producer on the game. "Everything from, obviously, the development side, right down through the marketing piece, and the plans to actually go to market with the title, was handled by key stakeholders.

"We worked hand-in-hand with Nintendo of America. We would talk about the game development, we would review builds, and at the same time, provide our feedback and help to QA. So they were very, very involved in terms of not only the development but also

trying to make sure it lived up to the quality that we would all expect from both Nintendo and the LEGO Group. We actually had to give our CEO at the time, Jørgen Vig Knudstorp, a private demo of the game."

LEGO City Undercover featured an expansive, explorable city that blended bits of places like San Francisco, New York, and London into one cohesive world. It also included more than 200 unique vehicles, each designed to have a different feel and look.

TT Fusion tapped comedian Graham Goring to write the game's story, which helped to smooth out the rough edges of the game's core conceit and inject an enormous amount of humor.

"They had the jokes for the mums and dads; they had the jokes for the kids," Palmer said. "It felt like a nice, well-rounded, fun game to sit down to with even grandma and granddad all the way down to five, 6-year-olds. There was an element in that writing that just sat with everyone. It really bonded players, especially family players. Graham was the starting point of it all. He was so involved in it, he almost lived and breathed it. There're probably hundreds of thousands of ideas that never made the game. But yeah, we kind of all played off what Graham wrote, so it kind of helped grow the game."

While LEGO City Undercover included references and parodies to countless television shows and movies, what it didn't include, but almost did, was a zombie horde.

Early on, the studio was working to build out the game with a wide selection of LEGO minifigs. Among them was a zombie.

"We were tinkering around with some settings to try and get something else working and managed to spawn in a crowd of zombies," Palmer said. "And everybody just went, 'That'd be brilliant!' but then straight away went, 'But we don't think the LEGO Group would go for that.'"

The idea of LEGO minifig zombies wandering the brick-filled streets of LEGO City is one of the few pushbacks that the LEGO Group's producer Kelley remembers from development.

"I remember looking at a couple of builds, where maybe some bonus levels or situations were actually created that definitely went too far," he said. "I remember one specific example, where you could actually have the citizens of LEGO City Undercover become zombies. They wouldn't eat you, but they would just walk around and look like zombies. It was hysterical and amazing to see, but there was some concern about whether it was going a little too far. Is that going to scare children?"

Unlike the zombie horde, other ideas that started as mistakes did make their way into the game, like the ability to enlarge a LEGO minifig to five times its initial size, sit on vehicles, and ride them like a skateboard.

Although conceived as a launch title for the Wii U, LEGO City Undercover hit stores not on the new console's November launch date but within the launch window of the system, on March 18, 2013.

LEGO City Undercover was well received, with Eurogamer lauding the great writing and "twinkling level design" that had players coming back for more. The solid reviews, positive general reception, and fun use of the Wii U's extra features did more than move nearly 2 million copies of the game. They also nourished the blossoming relationship between Nintendo and the LEGO Group, Darryl noted. Ultimately, that relationship would result in the development and release of the LEGO Super Mario toy building sets.

While the studio was happy with the game's reception, the internal support it received, and just how much the developers were able to pack into LEGO City Undercover, some were a bit disappointed that the game was available on just one system.

Unfortunately, the Wii U also wasn't doing very well. By the time that LEGO City Undercover was released – about four months after the console's launch – just 3.5 million or so Wii U systems had been sold. By comparison, Nintendo's preceding console, the Wii, sold more than 3 million systems in its first month. And the Wii U's successor, the Nintendo Switch, sold just under 3 million in its first month.

But then, in November 2016, publisher Warner Bros. Interactive announced that a remastered version of the game was headed to Nintendo Switch, PlayStation 4, Windows PC, and Xbox One. The new version was released in April 2017, a bit more than four years after the original Wii U exclusive.

For many who worked on the game and the players who explored their way through the packed city of play, LEGO City Undercover remains a masterpiece. It's a title that highlights TT Fusion's shift from handheld development to beefy LEGO play on consoles and PC, and it's one of TT Game's expansive, non-linear creations.

"I always say that LEGO City Undercover is the greatest game," Kelley said. "There were so many amazing people at TT Games and Nintendo who just came together as a team to really produce what, in my mind, is that great advancement of our games.

"It helped to open the doors, I think, for a lot of other games that would include a kind of open sandbox type environments within our games, like what you would see in a LEGO Marvel game. And, yeah, it was a long time coming."

TT Fusion's Matt Palmer said that, of all the games he's worked on, LEGO City Undercover remains his favorite.

"Without a doubt, and without hesitation," he said. "It's one of those games that I think everybody that worked on it enjoyed so much and had such a good time. And the team

behind it, we all just kind of gelled together as a group. I hope that shows in the game. I really do because I think it's fantastic."

Explore more...

In order of appearance:

[TT Fusion](#) - Wikipedia

[TT Games](#) - Official website

[LEGO Rock Band](#) - Wikipedia

[LEGO City theme sets](#) - Official website

[Nintendo](#) - Official website

[Wii U](#) - Wikipedia

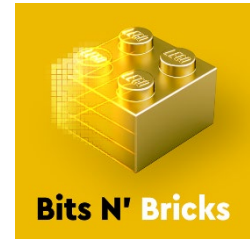
[LEGO City Undercover review](#) - Eurogamer

[LEGO Super Mario toy building sets](#) - Official website

# Transcript

Bits N' Bricks Season 2 Episode 24 • Inside LEGO® City Undercover:  
From Segway® to Zombie Hordes

June 16, 2021 • 49:26



## Bits N' Bricks: Introduction – 00:00

(Child's voice: "And now the podcast 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 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.

(Bits N' Bricks Season 2 theme music)

## Chapter 1: LEGO City Undercover and TT Fusion – 00:36

**Brian Crecente**

For TT Games, the idea of an open world LEGO video game goes back as far as the company does. The developers behind all those immensely popular movie and book-themed LEGO video games, had been wanting to make an original LEGO-themed game that lets players explore an expansive world since they started working on the original *LEGO Star Wars™* video game. But they weren't able to break away from their string of massive hits to work on something completely their own for about half a decade. First, there was 2005's *LEGO Star Wars™: The Video Game*, then the original trilogy and complete saga, then came *LEGO Indiana Jones*, *Batman*, and the *Indy* sequel. It wasn't until 2010 that the TT Games subsidiary TT Fusion wrapped up work on *LEGO Rock Band* that they finally got a chance to start playing around with ideas. Ultimately, their work would become the Wii U exclusive *LEGO City Undercover*, a temporarily lost treasure in the annals of TT Games' collection of gaming gems. The journey from dreaming of an open world game to crafting a Nintendo exclusive included a number of surprise twists and turns.

## Ethan Vincent

Before being acquired by TT Games in 2007, TT Fusion was known as Embryonic Studios, a studio started by the former founders of Warthog and Digital Anvil. The studio's initial focus was creating licensed portable video games. Once they were acquired by TT and renamed, their focus was on bringing some of TT's biggest titles to portable platforms. It was TT Fusion that delivered *LEGO Star Wars™: The Complete Saga*, *LEGO Indiana Jones: The Original Adventures*, and *LEGO Batman: The Videogame* to the Nintendo DS. But in 2009, TT Fusion shifted gears to working on a home console title that was very different from the usual TT Games' LEGO fare: *LEGO Rock Band*. Where most LEGO video games from TT Games at the time were adventure titles tied to popular existing worlds given life and comics and movies, *LEGO Rock Band* was a reinterpretation of Harmonix's monster hit music rhythm video game, *Rock Band*.

(Commercial for *LEGO Rock Band*: "Build your band, rock to your favorite songs, and roll all over the universe. *LEGO Rock Band*.")

## Ethan Vincent

The game pushed TT Fusion outside the comfort of creating adventure games for portable systems and into development that required out-of-the-box thinking. Matt Palmer was the lead animator in the project.

## Matt Palmer

The biggest challenge with *LEGO Rock Band*, when we actually started it, it was, how does a LEGO minifigure, if you were to make him a full size human, how does he hold a guitar? It was great fun to be able to look at how the *Rock Band* game genre worked and translate it to LEGO characters. It was really good fun, really hard work, but really good fun to be getting all the different tempos and beats and rhythms and using the knowledge that we had, and how we make games and the style of games that we made, and mashing it up with with the *Rock Band*-style games. So we still got the humor in there, still got the LEGO fun that we're kind of known for, but then also getting kids playing guitars and actually enjoying the musical side with the LEGO Group at the time.

## Chapter 2: Post LEGO Rock Band, Pre LEGO City – 03:53

## Brian Crecente

Development on *LEGO Rock Band* started in 2008, and the game launched in the fall of 2009 to mostly positive reviews. As the game was wrapping up, the folks at TT Fusion were being asked to work on more console titles and were trying to decide what they wanted to do next, Palmer said.

### **Matt Palmer**

There were many ideas being bandied around, but an open-world game was something that we hadn't actually done at that point. And it actually became more and more exciting the more we talked about it. And we started to put the team together to say, actually, if we were to do an open world, how would we do it? What would we need? What technologies would we need? How many animators would we need? Which was probably one of the biggest teams that I worked with.

### **Ethan Vincent**

Another thing TT Games, as a group, had long wanted to do was create an original title using the LEGO Group's immensely popular LEGO City theme sets. Both co-founders Jonathan Smith and Tom Stone had been discussing the idea with the LEGO Group for years, and with so many hits under their belts the time seemed right, so the LEGO Group handed TT Games the keys to their LEGO City.

### **Matt Palmer**

The LEGO Group were keen for us to do a title based on that LEGO City range.

### **Ethan Vincent**

Here, Matt Palmer, the lead animator of the project.

### **Matt Palmer**

And ideas just started being thrown around and what could we do? And as time progressed, especially from the animation side, we were able to have a play, and it was a time period of real discovery of what we could do with the LEGO City franchise.

### **Brian Crecente**

The team spent nearly a year working on prototypes set in a LEGO City open world, a process that involved not just experimenting with different sorts of play, but also what parts of LEGO City to use. And that's a big theme set to pull from.

(Commercial: "We've just heard that a 300-foot monster is heading for LEGOLAND Town. Over to our correspondent." "Here at police headquarters work is underway to prevent a disaster. Residence and the roadworks division are turning houses into a wall to keep out the intruder. Ambulance and fire services are on standby. Every vehicle has been mobilized." "The monster's coming!" "But mercifully, it has bypassed the town. There'll be celebrations in the street tonight!" "Collect LEGOLAND. It's like living in your own town." )

### **Brian Crecente**

LEGO City grew out of the concept of giving children the ability to build and play with their own LEGO brick towns, an idea first brought to life in 1955 with Town-Plan. In 1978, the



LEGO Group introduced LEGOLAND Town, which was inspired by the LEGO System in Play sets first introduced back in the '50s. The first town introduced base plates with studs on them, allowing builders to create their own houses and cities on the plates. It also introduced the first minifigures. In 1991, the LEGOLAND name was dropped, and the theme became simply LEGO Town, which expanded to include numerous town sub themes like Outback, Spaceport, and Arctic. LEGO Town became LEGO World City in 2003, and then LEGO City in 2005.

(Commercial: "In LEGO City, the great cargo ship is sailing in to make a delivery at the harbor.")

#### **Brian Crecente**

Since the renaming, a wide range of new cities sub-themes have been released, including everything from airports, space stations, and a jungle, to a volcano, trains, and fire and police sets.

(Commercial: "The new police collection from LEGO City. Base plates and background models not included.")

#### **Brian Crecente**

As TT Fusion continued to play around with the ideas of game mechanics and which themes to use, Nintendo showed up with a surprising offer.

(Music plays)

## **Chapter 3: Nintendo, the Wii U Console, and Early Ideas – 07:26**

#### **Ethan Vincent**

In 2011, Nintendo approached the LEGO Group about potentially co-developing a title with Nintendo for the soon-to-be released Wii U console. Nintendo had a lot to live up to with the Wii U console. Its predecessor, the Wii, had shattered records for Nintendo during its seven-year run. The Wii U was a hybrid system that featured a home console that plugged into the television, and a chunky controller that featured its own screen. This tablet-like second screen was meant to be used to help augment gameplay and provide players with another way to interact with games. Matt Palmer said the team was excited to hear that Nintendo had specifically asked TT Games for an early Wii U title.

#### **Matt Palmer**

There was a buzz of excitement around the studio. With that buzz of excitement comes all the challenges of what can this new console do? We know what the new console is

supposed to be able to do. How do we change the game to work for that console? Having the dual screen brought its challenges but also brought its fun – and those extra elements that we could add into the story and into the gameplay. It felt like we'd been specifically sought out as actually, that's a team that we want to work with, which for me is really flattering having grown up with Nintendo consoles.

#### **Brian Crecente**

Working on a launch title for a new console comes with its own added level of stress for any developer. That's because, during the development of a new console, the power and features of a system can shift, having a major impact on what a developer can eke out of the system for its games. On top of that, there was a sense that LEGO City Undercover, if it did well, could help establish a strong relationship between Nintendo and the LEGO Group, something that the LEGO Group had been working to achieve for years. Darryl Kelley, who was the LEGO Group producer on the game, said on top of that, the LEGO City theme set is considered the crown jewel of the LEGO Group, so there was a lot of pressure.

#### **Darryl Kelley**

So you know, TT Games was, you know, we were talking about creating this game for years. And the opportunity kind of came forward to the LEGO Group that Nintendo definitely had an interest, potentially making this an exclusive title for their new console, which was in development at that point, and that was the Wii U. So yes, after that consideration of what that meant to be exclusive with Nintendo and to really be treated as a first-party title on their console, it was a great opportunity for the LEGO Group, and something I think that we had to jump at and grasp that opportunity. I think there had been conversations about working with Nintendo, but more maybe on the physical brick side, so potentially having, you know, whether it be a licensed deal or looking at some of the different properties that Nintendo has and actually producing physical LEGO sets, but never to a degree of creating and working really jointly together to create a title, that in this case, again, would be treated as really a first-party title on their platform.

#### **Brian Crecente**

Because of the importance of the title for both the LEGO Group and Nintendo, there was a lot of direct involvement between the two companies and developer TT Fusion.

#### **Darryl Kelley**

They were very, very involved. So I think everything from, obviously the development side, even right down through the marketing piece and the plans to actually go to market with the title, which was handled by a couple of my colleagues and even some key stakeholders in the U.S. being our primary market for games. But we would meet with them hand-in-hand, work very closely by a gentleman named Tim Bechtel over in Nintendo of America. We would talk about the game development. We would review builds at the same time, provide our feedback and input test, help the QA. So they were very, very involved in

terms of not only just the development ensuring it lives up to the quality that we would all expect from both Nintendo and the LEGO Group, and the high standards I think that we all have, but then also the go-to-market strategy, too, was something that was very deeply integrated across the LEGO Group and Nintendo.

**Ethan Vincent**

With Nintendo on board and the LEGO Group handing the LEGO City theme to TT Fusion, the pieces were in place for development to start. But first, the team had to decide what of the many elements of the theme sets they'd focus on.

**Matt Palmer**

The route we took with LEGO City was to go the LEGO City Police kind of range.

**Ethan Vincent**

This is Matt Palmer speaking.

**Matt Palmer**

What can we do with that sort of range? Are we allowed to use weapons? Are we allowed to use any sort of comedy violence? Are we allowed to – do we have to just scale that sort of side back? So it was kind of a really exploratory phase, and I think it seemed like it went on for years and years and years, but it was probably only about eight or nine months where we we actually had some fun and just said, "What things could we do? If we have got these characters, what could we do with the LEGO humor that we like to add? What can we do with the LEGO bricks that we know that the LEGO Group would like to have us use? What could we do with the sets that they have got out, they are planning to release?" And it was myself and the lead animator on the project, Phil Chapman. We spent many, many hours drinking coffee, having cups of tea, chatting through things and kind of, what could we do? It almost got to a point as, we were looking back and going, "Actually, rather what can't we do or what could we do?" The "what could we do?" folder was looking extremely large.

(Music plays)

## **Chapter 4: Developing LEGO City Undercover – 13:23**

**Ethan Vincent**

As the team dove into the notion of bringing an open-world game to life set in a LEGO City with police, it was inevitable that another sort of open-world game of crime and cops would bubble up: the mature rated, Grand Theft Auto.

**Matt Palmer**

One thing we were keen to try and avoid –

**Brian Crecente**

This is Matt Palmer.

**Matt Palmer**

– was it becoming a Grand Theft Auto game. It could very easily turn into, "Actually, this is far too violent for what the LEGO Group would like their IP related to." So we constantly stepped back from things and just made sure that we were looking at the fun and the funny element of what we could do. It was a really, really interesting phase, actually, because there were certain things that you kind of go, here's a character who's holding this great big gun, and straight away it's going to make you go, we can't do that. What we did do was go actually this gun is the grapple gun. In one case, we made all sorts of test pieces of that using goo guns. So you were capturing the criminal element in the game with glue and goop, so you kind of make them stick to the floor. The grapple gun actually became one that you could actually tie people up with, so you could shoot it. There's an early section in the game with the clowns where you shoot the gun at the clowns and actually tie them up in rope. Sit them on the floor. So it was the fun side of playing with all that goop is absolutely fantastic.

(Excerpt from LEGO City Undercover: "You OK? "Yeah, fine. Do you have a grapple gun with you?" "Well, I sure do, you're welcome to one of those useless pieces of junk."  
"Anyway, I'd better go. I got to go arrest some robbers." "Sure. Good luck with that grapple gun. These things can be tricky to use! Whoaaaa...")

**Brian Crecente**

One of the key challenges TT Fusion faced in creating this open-world game – on top of the fact that they were creating a new play experience for TT Games – was that the team was trying to walk the line between delivering an experience that would feel familiar to the children and families who had played so many other of TT Games, but also one that could make use of all the new sorts of technology and features of the Wii U.

**Matt Palmer**

I think probably one of the biggest challenges was thinking about how our regular game mechanics would work.

**Ethan Vincent**

This is Matt Palmer speaking.

### **Matt Palmer**

One of the things that children find so familiar about our games is we will take a mechanic from one game into another game, so that when they play a TT Games LEGO game, there are certain things that are familiar to them, so they're not having to start from scratch. However, the console itself was so unfamiliar, but it was making sure that we used some of the things that Nintendo wanted the console to be about and put that into our mechanics. The one that springs to mind straight away is the scanning device. So you can actually use the handheld screen as a scanner and kind of scan it around in a kind of augmented reality sort of a way.

(Excerpt from LEGO City Undercover: "I should get them a car." "What do you think of this one?" "Hm. You know how they say a picture paints 1000 words?" "Yes." "Well they're going to have to invent about 999 new ones for 'rubbish' for that thing.")

### **Matt Palmer**

So it was all those technical challenges that I hold my hand up and go, "I'm so glad I'm on the animation side, because there was probably so much head scratching from coding and programming of how we're going to do this."

(Music plays)

### **Brian Crecente**

As part of the team worked on striking that gameplay balance, the animators and artists were busy building out the city, something that the team wanted to be an every city. Matt Palmer explains.

### **Matt Palmer**

I think we've seen this in a lot of superhero-style films and TV shows. We wanted to make it an every city. So it took elements from the big cities around the world, especially around America, and just had elements in there, not as a - this is, for example, San Francisco and the Golden Gate Bridge, but this is a big red bridge that links this area to this area, so it has that familiar side to it. I think Big Hero 6 did it with Disney, so yeah, it's taking all those elements of landmarks that people know, and putting it in and kind of going, "Well, you know what? This feels a bit like it should be, but actually it's not." Business District feels a bit like areas of New York, but it also feels a bit like areas of the business district in London. Yeah, to all those elements, just kind of melding them together to kind of make it feel like one cohesive place that feels like you know it, but you don't actually know it.

### **Ethan Vincent**

And then the team brought in a writer to pull the entire thing together working with former stand-up comedian Graham Goring, who not only smoothed out the rough edges of the game's core conceit and storyline, but also injected an enormous amount of humor.

**Matt Palmer**

I think Graham was the starting point of it all. He'd write something, and you'd hear it or you'd see it, and it would trigger something else that you personally thought, "Ohh, what about that?" He was so involved in it, and he almost lived and breathed it. It took what we were doing as games to a slightly different level. And it had the jokes for the mums and dads. It had the jokes for the kids. It felt like a nice all-rounded, fun game to sit down with even grandmas and granddads and sit down with the grandparents all the way down to 5-, 6-year-olds. And there was an element in that writing that just sat with everyone. And whether it be mom and dad having to explain a joke to a 12-year-old, or a 12-year-old having to explain a joke to a grandparent, I think it really bonded players, but we enjoyed it as well making it because of those little elements that you didn't really notice. Playtesting the game as you've put a new thing in, the line of dialogue had been written or recorded, and it's just a throwaway line as you're driving past something, but it brought a smile to your face and it made you want to do more. Yeah, it was – it's an extremely funny game. I think probably the best one we've done.

(Excerpt from LEGO City Undercover: "All right, Let's see where you guys are hiding. Got them! Time to get those lowlifes off the highrise. Huh, I should probably steer clear of cheesy one-liners.")

(Music plays)

## **Chapter 5: Accidental Zombie Hordes and GIANT LEGO Minifigures – 20:28**

**Brian Crecente**

By the time the game's story was flushed out, it included call-outs and parodies of countless television shows and movies. What it didn't include, but almost did, was a zombie horde.

**Matt Palmer**

(Laughs) It was almost an accidental inclusion.

**Ethan Vincent**

This is Matt Palmer speaking.

**Matt Palmer**

So the LEGO Group around that time started producing, I think it was the first few seasons of the LEGO collectible minifigures. So you go and get your blind packs from your local supermarket or your newsagents and you kind of go, "What have I got in it?" And they had produced a range, as I recall, that had a zombie in it. And the decision had been made to,

as they release these, because they're great little one-off characters, why don't we start adding them into LEGO City? A lot of them just would suit being in that kind of environment. And one of the characters just happened to be a zombie. And we would tinker around with some settings to try and get something else working and managed to spawn in a crowd of zombies. (Chuckles) Because it was purely by accident that somebody loaded up the game, somebody committed something, I think, and somebody loaded up the game, and there was a whole swarm of zombies kind of coming toward. And everybody just went, "That'd be brilliant!" but then straightaway went, "But we don't think the LEGO Group would go for that." So it was just that. I think the zombie is still in there. I have seen a YouTube clip of loads of the characters that I know the zombie was in collectable sets, but unfortunately, there wasn't the whole swarm of them.

### **Ethan Vincent**

The LEGO Group's Darryl Kelley said the idea of LEGO minifig zombies wandering the brick-filled streets of LEGO City is one of the few push backs he remembers from working with TT Games on their titles.

### **Darryl Kelley**

I remember looking at a couple builds, where some bonus levels or situations were actually created that went too far. I remember one specific example within the LEGO City Undercover development, we had talked about a bonus activity or just an unlock, where you could actually have the citizens of LEGO City Undercover become zombies. And they wouldn't eat you, but they would just walk around and look like zombies. And it was hysterical and amazing to see, but yes, there was some concern about, you know, is that just going a little too far, is that going to scare children? Even though we would have like a zombie, or LEGO minifigure blind packs or things of that nature, but bringing a whole city to life of zombies maybe was too far. But amazing! I mean, the ideas that TT Games will come up with for these types of, you know, kind of unlock or side missions were never short of fun. That's for sure.

### **Ethan Vincent**

While that accidental horde of zombies didn't make the cut for LEGO City, another happier accident did. Matt Palmer explains.

### **Matt Palmer**

Just saying about zombies, that actually triggered another accident that happened, which is actually in the game, which I think is the final red brick where you can – you grow five times bigger than a normal minifigure. So right at the end of the game, if you've collected everything, you can be this giant minifigure, which it was around the same time as the zombie swarm because it was originally a zombie that we'd make five times bigger, purely by accident. And suddenly it was like, "Hang on. Why is this character just enormous?" So we were tinkering around with some of the settings, and the design team saw it and it was

kind of, "Oh, we like that. How did you do that?" Worked our way backwards and worked out how we'd done it. And then it kind of went on the back burner. And we started talking later on about red brick rewards and if you collect these, you get this, and if you collect this, you'll get this. And somebody remembered that we'd made this enormous minifigure and they came back to the animation team said, "Can you remember how you did that? We'd like to try." And it's one of my favorite things in the whole game. You can actually – if you get that character, you can actually then get into a car, but because you're five times bigger, you actually sit on the car like it's a tiny little skateboard underneath your bottom. So you just kind of driving around the city as a huge minifigure on this tiny little skateboard. So yes, that was an accident initially that ended up a part of the game.

## Chapter 6: Three Years of Developing an Open World – 25:26

### Brian Crecente

As the team continued its work on the game, it involved a level of scrutiny not typically seen during development. Darryl said the team even gave a private demo of the game to the LEGO Group CEO.

### Darryl Kelley

We actually had to give our CEO, Jørgen Vig at the time, a private demo of the game. So we walked him through the game because it was so – from the leadership, it was so important that we got this right. Doing something with LEGO City is just, it's so important, and when I say it's the crown jewel of the LEGO Group, I am not pulling anybody's leg there. It's so important that we get this right: You know, the quality, the view of it, the tone of voice within the game, – everything has to be spot on, and if it's not, if it's not representative in that respect, then it was not going to happen. So I just think it goes without saying how many filters we had to pass. So the challenges and why it took three years to develop is just something I don't think we've experienced with any other game. I mean, we go through challenges with with IP partners and their approvals on gameplay, but for this, it was the first time we have ever had city characters talk.

(Excerpt from LEGO City Undercover: "It's been two years since I was sent away, but it made me a better cop. A smarter, faster cop." "Argh, so what brings you back here, Chase McCain?" "An old acquaintance. A promise to keep.")

### Darryl Kelley

So making Chase McCain, that's not something we've ever done. So there were all these kind of gates and challenges to get past, and to convince internal LEGO folks that this is the right thing to do. It was just meeting after meeting after meeting between our P&D colleagues, between leadership, between even Nintendo and TT, it was just – in the end,



again, it was all worth every moment of it when you see that game come to life and really being one of the, in my mind, again, one of the greatest games we've ever produced.

(Music plays)

### **Ethan Vincent**

Let's take a moment here and consider what it takes to build an entire city out of digital LEGO bricks. We're talking streets, people, weapons, buildings – I mean, there are more than 200 vehicles in LEGO City Undercover. And all of these were designed by top model artists at TT Fusion under the direction of Ste Bate, who, during his dozen years at the studio, has worked on more than 20 titles. He tells us he came to his job in an unusual way.

### **Ste Bate**

I did a degree in architecture and spent 12-and-a-half-years in the building environment. I have three brothers, I'm one of four, and my older brother was already in the games industry, and he actually presented me with an opportunity to work at one of his studios. And 12 years in, I thought to myself, "Actually, this sounds like the right time in my life to transition from the real world to the digital world," and took that opportunity and history has been set. (Laughs) So it was it was the perfect transition for me really, because I was already involved in buildings, how buildings were put together, how they look, or their aesthetics, that side of things. Even in my architectural days, I used to do virtual visualization, so doing renders of proposed apartment blocks or buildings that we were going to do, so I was already in that world. So it was an easy transition for me to become an environment artist, because the actual company that I went to work for was called Juice Games, and they did, like, car racing games, so it was like you were driving through city environments. So it seemed like the easiest transition for me to go from doing visuals for real buildings to doing visuals for computer games.

### **Brian Crecente**

And it turned out going from creating something for the real world to creating something for the LEGO brick world wasn't really that hard. That's because in the world of LEGO bricks, everything has a set size. In the real world, things tend to be built around the size of a person. In the world of the LEGO brick, they're designed around the size of, well, a brick. In fact, Ste said having the built-in constraints of needing to use existing LEGO pieces made things a bit easier for him. For LEGO City, his team had to take a very different approach to populating the world with vehicles, items, and builds because it was a sandbox game, one without the requirements of building along a linear storyline with a dozen or so levels.

### **Ste Bate**

It was a different type of game, and it required different thought patterns of what was actually required. So I would say it was actually – there was more freedom to do stuff because it was more like, there was more realm for experimentation and more realm for

expressing yourself in different areas. Lots of Easter eggs can be dropped in an open world, whereas when you're following story-driven aspects, it's that you following a dialogue, or a script, and you're trying to hit the beats at the right time. So this was a very, very different approach to making video games that we'd done before. The brief was, we're making a sandbox LEGO video game, where you can – it's a living, breathing city, with aspects of whichever part of the world that we're going to base it on, and for us, we based it on the U.S. and iconic places in the U.S. After that, then the story was then the next driving force, so with Chase McCain being the main character, and him being an undercover cop and having different disguises, that's what sort of drove the story: You know, which disguise is going to be the thing that he takes on next and the mechanics that go with that, so whether it's a robber, or a miner, or a farmer. So that then started unfolding the story. Now, it wasn't me that wrote the story. You know, Graham Goring wrote the story, and it's an incredible story that he wrote. And so that sort of led the kind of the 15 story levels which unlocked the world as we we're doing it. So the constraints of the the open world wasn't there, but the constraints of the story were. You know, the story became LEGO City.

#### **Ethan Vincent**

Ste was on the game from its start, back in those early prototyping days when they were coming up with ideas for an open city game. And once Nintendo got involved, his team was able to start working within the constraints of the Wii U and building out the world.

#### **Ste Bate**

You know, so we did have environmental cities and buildings that were built, not out of LEGO bricks, but environment art that we could still reuse. And we'd already built most of the stuff to the LEGO grid anyway so that our cars and interactables would look the right scale. So for instance, if you look at a LEGO grid, we'd say four studs was equated to a meter, like a house door would be eight studs by four studs, which in the real world was approximately about right, one meter by two meters, that kind of thing. So, on the block out, we hadn't wasted any work, but how the city was going to be used, how we were going to stream the levels, how we were going to make sure the, you know, the speed of the vehicles. All that kind of stuff.

#### **Ethan Vincent**

Ste said the biggest challenge his team faced was nailing the handling of all the vehicles in the game. This was a game that had a massive, eclectic mix of vehicles to play with. There were helicopters, trains, wheelchairs, skateboards, remote controlled vehicles, a bunch of different sort of cars, trucks, and vans, motorcycle, fire and police vehicles, even a licensed Segway.

#### **Ste Bate**

I think mainly is when it comes to the vehicles, it was the handling of vehicles. You know, we had to – these aren't, even though they are toys, they're based on real world physics.

So that's probably the constraints that, you know, it's probably the part that I enjoyed the most to say the truth because it's one thing designing a vehicle to make it look good and look right, then there's this other side of it is bringing it to life, and I think that's the part that I enjoyed more than anything else it's giving its real-world physics in the handling, and though we had like, 200 vehicles in game, every single vehicle handled slightly differently. We had certain categories, so we had sports cars and muscle cars, and then we had trains and tractors and things, but everything, even though we, say had two, 10 sport's cars, each sports car had its own handling, so they had their own attributes, their own drive train, the suspension was all different. Even like the animation of the engines, every engine was animated different so that it was unique in its own right, and I know that because I animated them all (chuckles). So I think that was the challenge really. The challenge was that you've got 200 vehicles driving around the city, and every time you jump in a vehicle it had that slightly different feel which made it unique. And I think that's something that we're very proud of, that you can have cars that you think, well that doesn't handle very good. Well, that's the point! They're not all supposed to be the same car. They're all supposed to be very, very different. Because prior to then it was more – vehicles in games were more like controlled by how you visually saw it on the screen, so if you wanted to go up the screen you press up, if you wanted to drive down the screen you press down, similar to where character runs around. Whereas this was, you know, you've got like a follow cam, so the camera's following the vehicle, and you're doing left and right and using triggers to accelerate, and things like that. So it was different from that point of view, and we did try lots of different systems. So we tried like doing a axonometric camera view so you were actually looking down on the city in a 45-degree angle. We tried lots of different aspects, but it felt, you know, the sandbox, Chase-cam kind of camera was the way forward, and it actually held up on its own. When it comes to actually constructing the vehicles, one of the major parts for us was making sure that kids could see how these were built. So we deliberately, when we were doing like the smashables, as you smash the vehicle layers come off, and you could actually see what the bricks were built from, you know, what these vehicles were. So that was important for us so that kids, once they finish playing the game, they can go and make it themselves.

**Brian Crecente**

The inclusion of the Segway is a bit unusual. It turns out that it's the only licensed vehicle in the game.

**Ethan Vincent**

And, Brian, before we continue, don't you have a connection to Segway?

**Brian Crecente**

Yeah, you know, it turns out that my uncle was a chemist at Michelin, and he helped to design the tires – very special tires for the Segway.

## **Ethan Vincent**

That's cool, Brian. Yeah, I mean, even in the game the Segway is this vehicle that offers a very quiet riding experience in LEGO City Undercover, so you get to hear the environment of the game around you a lot more than some of the other vehicles. But let's get back and listen to an excerpt from our interview with Ste Bate on how the vehicles were created in LEGO City Undercover.

## **Ste Bate**

We had to be really careful about our licensing and making sure that we didn't breach licensing rules. So as a concept, what we would do, we wouldn't just like pick a car off the shelf and say, "Right, make that." What we used to do is we used to put a mood board together, so if we were doing like a hatchback, a GT hatchback, well we know there's plenty of GT hatchbacks in the world. We do a mood board, which would have a collection of images of what kind of feel we'd want, and then we would design sporadically from that. All our vehicles then had to go through legal who would check whether there was too many similarities to a certain brand – and if there were, we had to adjust the build to suit. So even though you might look in game and say, "Oh, that's definitely a type of vehicle," it's so far removed enough that you can sort of tell but can't tell, but it's elements from lots of different vehicles. So we had to be really careful, to tell you the truth, of how we did it.

## **Brian Crecente**

Yeah, so I'm actually looking at some art, showing the specifications of the LEGO brick Segway, which is really, it's a very cool little thing. And like, it's minimalist, but it totally captures the look of a Segway.

## **Ste Bate**

That's right. And what we had to do is, those sheets that you're looking at at the moment, we actually sent them to the CEO of Segway and actually made two little sets for him. For City Undercover on the Wii U, we were allowed to have the license to actually call it Segway in the game, just for that one, so that was cool. And believe it or not, it's actually a little bit of a cheat. It's not really a two-wheeled vehicle. It's actually a six-wheeled vehicle, but there's two little stabilizer wheels at the front and back, so it's a little bit of a cheat really, but it handles so well. So there you go, there's a bit of a sneaky peek preview of how we did that one.

## **Brian Crecente**

Like everyone we talked to about LEGO City Undercover, Ste said it's one of his favorites, a title loaded with hours of play and seemingly an endless array of Easter eggs and surprises.

## **Ste Bate**

It's one of those games that – I've played it with my son, so you know, when it came out in March 2013, my son was 11 at the time, and we hundred percented it. We spent like 130

hours in that city. Thoroughly enjoyed it. And there's so many Easter eggs. And there's certain things that we didn't actually document. So for instance, there's a pickup truck in there, and if you actually reverse up to a small or medium-sized vehicle, it will pick it up and you can tow it around, but we didn't document it anywhere, it was just there for kids to find for themselves. So it's a living, breathing city. It's a place that's dear to my heart. I've thoroughly enjoyed working on it. It's, even when now when you jump in there and you just have a little run around in it, it's got a lovely feel to it. It's something that I don't think it's ever gonna die. It's one of those games that I think anybody can pick up at any time and it's got longevity in it.

(Music plays)

## Chapter 7: Launch, Relaunch, and Impact – 39:28

### Ethan Vincent

While conceived as a launch title for the Wii U, the game hit stores not on the November launch day of the new console, but within the launch window of the system, landing on March 18, 2013. The game was received well on the system, with Eurogamer lauding the great writing and twinkling level design that had players coming back for more. And Nintendo was very happy with the game as well, Darryl said.

### Darryl Kelley

I think, and from what I recall, this game was one of the best performing titles on the platform, which I think Nintendo really needed. I think that they were, unfortunately, you know, the console did very well out of the gate, and then I think that it kind of struggled a little bit. But this game, I think, definitely helped to make it, the console, worth playing, worth experiencing this title to help them in the long run. I think it was a win for both sides to have this title exclusive on their platform.

### Brian Crecente

The solid reviews, positive general reception and fun use of Wii U's extra features, did more than move nearly 2 million copies of the game. It also nourished the blossoming relationship between Nintendo and the LEGO Group, Darryl noted.

### Darryl Kelley

Again, it was one of the first times that we have found that opportunity to work together. There was always conversations that would take place about getting the LEGO Group and Nintendo to work together somehow. And we always saw that we had the same values: We care about quality, we care about the consumer experience, I mean, all those things really line up. It was just never – we never really had the opportunity to figure out how we could actually work together. What is it that's going to put us over the edge to finally dip

our toes in the water and try something? And this was that real opportunity, and it did open up a great relationship, an ongoing dialogue. There's definitely been conversations with Nintendo coming to us or wanting to, say, put a certain IP in front that we might consider producing, but it just never – either the timing wasn't right, or kind of the opportunity wasn't right at the time, and this was really kind of, again, that jumping off point where we had a great opportunity to work closely together. And yeah, it definitely opened doors for that collaboration.

(Excerpt from LEGO Super Mario: "LEGO Mario time. Here we go!")

### **Brian Crecente**

Ultimately, that relationship would result in the development and release of the LEGO Mario playset, but that's something for another episode of Bits N' Bricks.

### **Ethan Vincent**

While the studio was happy with the reception the game received, the internal support and just how much they were able to pack into LEGO City Undercover, some were a bit disappointed it was available on just one system. Unfortunately, the Wii U also wasn't doing very well. By the time the game hit, about four months after the console's launch, just 3.5 million or so systems had been sold. By comparison, the preceding Wii sold more than 3 million systems in its first month of sales, while the Switch, which came out after the Wii U, sold just under 3 million in its first month.

### **Matt Palmer**

It was an element of some people won't be able to play this –

### **Ethan Vincent**

This is Matt Palmer speaking.

### **Matt Palmer**

– and we've made a really lovely game, and we've all really enjoyed making it, and we all really enjoy playing it. But it's only on Nintendo, and for me, I never had a Wii U and I had to wait to be able to play it.

### **Brian Crecente**

But then in November 2016, publisher Warner Brothers Interactive announced that a remastered version of the game would be released for the Nintendo Switch, Windows PC, PlayStation 4, and Xbox One. The new version hit in April 2017, almost four years after the original Wii U exclusive.

**Matt Palmer**

I was really excited –

**Brian Crecente**

Here's Matt Palmer.

**Matt Palmer**

– because part of the disappointment of it only being on Nintendo Wii U, we knew that there would be a limited audience, not everybody will play or buy the Wii U, but then three, four years later, we're actually going to be releasing it to all those players on the PS4 and the Xbox who never got to play it, so they get to experience all that blood, sweat, and tears that we put in and fun that we had. It was really exciting actually to know that we could give it to a wider audience again.

(Music)

**Ethan Vincent**

For many who worked on the game, and the players who worked their way through the packed city of play, LEGO City Undercover remains a nearly lost masterpiece, a title that highlights TT Fusion's shift from handheld development to beefy LEGO play on consoles and PC, and one of TT Games' nonlinear creations.

**Darryl Kelley**

I always say the LEGO City Undercover is the greatest game –

**Brian Crecente**

This is Darryl Kelley.

**Darryl Kelley**

– and that's not putting a feather on my cap because I was not – there was so many people that were involved in this and I'd had my point, and there were so many amazing people at TT Games and Nintendo. Everybody just came together as a team to really produce, what in my mind, is that great advancement of our games that we haven't had before. Where everything in the past, if you look at our games, it's very linear, very A to B, but this game really kind of opened up and pushed our opportunity for engagement in gameplay. And it helped to open the doors, I think, for a lot of other games that would include, let's say, kind of open sandbox-type environments within our games, like you might see in a LEGO Marvel game and their hub or et cetera. And, yeah, it was a long time coming. I mean, we're talking about a game that was in development for really almost three years from the time it was greenlit to the time it came out, which goes well beyond what we would expect from a normal game development, at least historically, with our LEGO games. And I think the

results definitely was amazing, and it definitely hit the target in terms of what we had expected for quality within the game, making sure that LEGO City represented in the right way, the story was the way it should be. And it really felt like a huge positive, not only to the LEGO Group, but had an impact on LEGO City itself.

**Matt Palmer**

I was in conversation with an ex colleague, who's still a friend –

**Ethan Vincent**

This is Matt Palmer speaking.

**Matt Palmer**

– and we were talking about what we do for a living. And it actually came up. Somebody said, "What's the best game you've ever worked on? What's your favorite game you've ever worked on?" And without a doubt and without hesitation, I said LEGO City Undercover. And my colleague, ex-colleague, turned around and said, "I said exactly the same thing." And it's one of those, I think everybody that worked on it had done, I said this a few minutes ago, everyone that worked on it enjoyed it so much and had such a good time. And the team behind it, we all just kind of gelled together as a group, no matter what department it was. Yeah, I hope it shows in the game. I really do because I think it's fantastic.

**Ste Bate**

You know, you have to accept that this is hard work –

**Ethan Vincent**

This is Ste Bate speaking.

**Ste Bate**

– you know, it's fun but it's hard work. There's a lot of hours and a lot of people involved to get these things on the shelf. But it's worth it because the differences with a building is that I can't take the building home and show my family. I can take a picture. But with a video game, it's in people's homes, and I think that's the difference. And from going from like the architectural world, and you can imagine all my friends from school, "Ste Bate, he works for TT making LEGO games." It's like a dream come true. And, you know, I'm their kids' hero in that sense, and I don't know why it didn't really make sense to me, but for them, it's like, "Oh, wow! You know, he's a LEGO brick designer! He's working for TT!" Kids love our games. And there's no money that can pay for that. That's what we're here for: We're here to make kids happy. That's what this is about and that's our goal, and if we can't do that we're doing something wrong. And I'd say since 2005 when we started making LEGO games, I think that's what we've achieved. We've achieved lots of happy children, lots of happy memories.



(Excerpt from LEGO City Undercover: "Congratulations. You've done it again, Chase." "I, uh, I thought you should get the arrest this time." "You know what? You can have it, Chief. Some things are more important than work." "Ohh.")

(Postscript music)

## **Bits N' Bricks: Credits – 48:10**

Ethan Vincent

Bits N' Bricks is made possible by LEGO Games. Your hosts are Brian Crecente and Ethan Vincent. Producing by Dave Tach. Our executive producer is Ronny Scherer. Creative direction and editing by Ethan Vincent. Research and writing by Brian Crecente. Art direction by Nannan Li. Graphics and animations by Manuel Lindinger and Andreas Holzinger. Mixing and sound design by Dan Carlisle. Opening's child voice is Milo Vincent. Music by Peter Priemer, Founder Music, excerpts from LEGO City Undercover, 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 also like to thank our participants: Ste Bate, Darryl Kelley, and Matt Palmer. We'd also like to thank the entire LEGO Games team. For questions and comments, write us at [bitsnbricks@LEGO.com](mailto:bitsnbricks@LEGO.com). That's bits, the letter N, then [bricks@LEGO.com](mailto:bricks@LEGO.com). And as always, stay tuned for more episodes of Bits N' Bricks.