

The Builders' Journeys

A personal journey of discovery and family values underlies the power and poignancy of LEGO® Builder's Journey.

Released on Apple Arcade in 2019 to near-uniform praise, mobile game LEGO Builder's Journey breathes life into LEGO play without the use of minifigs. Instead, it uses the LEGO Group's dense palette of bricks to create everything from the landscape and challenges to the title's key figures. The game also tells an evocative story of a father and son, their relationship, and the importance of play.



Underneath the title, and in some ways empowering it alongside the deft work of a team of creatives, is studio co-founder Karsten Lund's own story. The result was a brilliant game, a new studio, and – for the LEGO Group – an experiment in game creation.

A Calling

Before working at the LEGO Group, Lund spent time at major game studios, including IO Interactive and Square Enix. It was at Square that he helped oversee the creation of Hitman Go. The pocket-sized mobile game managed to deconstruct the massive settings, intricate strategy, and lush graphics of the Hitman video game series. Boiling away the fat, it delivered a slimmed-down version of the franchise based on the game's core conceits and presented as table-top vignettes for gamers to solve. It quickly won fans and critics over.

In 2014, Lund joined the LEGO Group as a creative director and spent the next three years immersing himself in the LEGO brand. But he had this idea sort of ticking away in the back of his head the whole time.

Then in 2017, Lund and his family decided it was time to go back home, to return to Copenhagen from Billund, where he was currently working. It was a time when he was also starting to miss the feeling of hands-on development. Fortunately, LEGO Games had something they called an innovation funnel, which hunted for unique gaming experiences. So Lund pitched several ideas, and one of them stuck: Path of Creation, which would eventually grow into LEGO Builder's Journey.

Lund was given the opportunity to move to Copenhagen and open a satellite LEGO Games studio. The initial idea was that he would commute the two to three hours each way between his new home and the studio, and LEGO headquarters in Billund, Denmark. But he quickly realized that wasn't going to work, so he asked if he could work remotely, alongside his growing team.

Mistakes

LEGO Games approved the idea, and with a small budget, Lund started to set up Light Brick Studio with the help of a small staff and a lot of freelancers. The group prototyped constantly, creating a new prototype a month in the hopes of discovering important facets of what would eventually become a cohesive game. As the game slowly came together, they received a lot of positive feedback from the team back at LEGO Games.

Unfortunately, they also chased some bad ideas. One, Lund said, had the team working on a prototype for a month before realizing it was a bad design and having to start over.

Once they realized their mistake, they retooled the game and narrowed the levels from these massive, traditional maps to small, focused dioramas made from LEGO bricks.

The next big stumbling block came as the studio worked to inject a meaningful story into the game.

The game was broken into chapters and was meant to tell a sort of story built around the relationship between a father and his son. They decided to write an "epic" overarching narrative that would unpack over the course of four to five hours of gameplay.

The problem, though, was that players not only didn't seem to understand the story, some of them didn't even realize there was a story.

Frustrated, and frankly more than a little worried about this surprising hurdle hitting less than six months from the game's launch, the team decided to take a summer break. During the break, the team seemed to have an epiphany and realized that maybe the game wasn't really telling a traditional story and that it should be viewed more as poetry than prose.

They loosened their grip on the story-telling, and it wasn't long before playtesters started to connect with the experience.

New Game, New Studio

The talented team at the studio managed to get the game done in time to launch alongside Apple Arcade, and people seemed to get what it was saying. But that wasn't the end of the journey of LEGO Builder's Journey and the team that made it.

Light Brick Studio was created as a sort of experimental off-shoot of LEGO Games, but it was still very much a part of the LEGO Group. That changed in late 2020 when LEGO Ventures – the venture capital arm for the LEGO brand – invested in the studio, and it was spun out as its own entity.

That investment from LEGO Ventures means that Light Brick Studio has the funding and the freedom to do whatever it wants in the realm of exploring the concept of LEGO play.

Currently, that means expanding LEGO Builder's Journey into a bigger game and releasing it to platforms outside of both Apple Arcade and smartphones.

And while the studio doesn't have to work on LEGO brick video games, it sounds likely that the next project will still fall in that realm. They have a lot of ideas for future LEGO video games, Lund said.

"I think this is very important," said documentarian and co-host of Bits N' Bricks Ethan Vincent. "This game being developed with this kind of philosophical, art house, boutique game approach, all with the blessing of the LEGO Group. It highlights the importance of bringing the LEGO play experience to the digital in such a charming and wonderful way."

Timing has not always been a friend to the LEGO Group, but this time it was, said journalist and Bits N' Bricks co-host Brian Crecente.

"It happens that in the case of Light Brick Studio and LEGO Builder's Journey, it was," he said. "This is a case where not just timing but funding, the right game, the right group of people all seem to come together to create something sort of magical and open the path that would lead to not just the formation of Light Brick Studio, but that studio then spinning away from the LEGO Group to become its own unique thing."

Explore more...

In order of appearance

[LEGO Games](#) – Official website

[LEGO Builder's Journey](#) (2019) Official website

[Apple Arcade](#) – Official website

[Hitman Go](#) (2014) Wikipedia

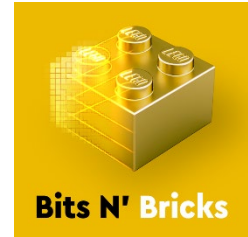
[LEGO Ventures](#) – Official website

[LEGO Builder's Journey soundtrack](#) (2020) Spotify

Transcript

Bits N' Bricks Season 1 Episode 6: LEGO® Builder's Journey

January 13, 2021 · 1:11:38



Prologue – 00:00

Karsten Lund

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

Jonas Hove Haugesen

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

Mads Prahm

And for that reason, it's hard for the LEGO Group to prioritize something that it isn't very strong at doing yet.

Karsten Lund

Maybe this is not a story. Maybe it's a poem. Doesn't matter if they get it. It was so weird because it was like, Ugh, it just hit me somehow. It was just like, this is exactly it. And I was, I was like, that's, that's got to mean something. And I actually remember listening to it on my way to the office and crossing the big bridge. And I cried.

Bits N' Bricks: Introduction – 00:51

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, as well as seasoned studios who have all tackled the creation of video games for one of the most popular and respected toy companies in the world – The LEGO Group.

(Introduction music)

Ethan Vincent

This week we look at the journey of Builder's Journey and the builders who made it. We're going to take a look at Light Brick Studio and how they went from an experimental offshoot of LEGO games to a venture-funded independent studio focused on creating video games, that's basically been able to capture the essence of LEGO play. It's a pretty cool story. I'm excited.

Brian Crecente

Yeah. I love the story of Light Brick Studio...this sort of foundling LEGO Group game studio that has now spun off to become its own thing, standing on its own two little minifig feet. Their very first game was Builder's Journey, which launched just this last winter when Apple Arcade hit the scene. I love the game. It's an artistic, evocative creation that really, I think, encapsulates both a sense of building with LEGO bricks, as well as sort of underscoring the importance of family play. So it launched, it went on to garner all of this praise from press and from players. It even won an award, which I think may not be its final award - we're just entering the award season. So it's a game that I think has had a big impact.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, totally. And the thing that is interesting with any creation of any video game, right, Brian, there are these journeys, you know, just like Builder's Journey. It was a journey unto itself. This one had all the usual ingredients it takes to make a game: the spitballing of ideas; the experiments; the drama; the near misses; surprise solutions; just a stew of emotions and personal efforts to move the game forward. You know, it's never easy to make a good video game and even harder to make a great one, but a lot of the accomplishments of the Light Brick Studio team - and it took a talented team to create this game - a lot of the accomplishments in this core idea for the game and the studio can be traced back to one person here - Karsten Lund, right, Brian?

Brian Crecente

Right. Karsten Lund has this decade-long history in game development, that includes work at major studios like IO Interactive and Square Enix Montreal. He joined the LEGO Group in 2014 as a creative director and then spent the next three years or so deeply immersed in essentially the LEGO brand and learning the company's history and its play systems and building this really, I think, what would become an important rapport with the rest of the LEGO Games team, but the story of Builder's Journey actually starts as part of Lund's own personal journey.

Chapter 1: The Builder's Journey – 03:56

Karsten Lund

Actually thinking about making games has been part of my life as long as I can remember. So I'm always trying to sort of talk to partners and project the ideas and say, Hey, what about this? And could we do something like that? And you know, so it's been in me for a long time. I think the real sort of spark of the idea came when for personal reasons I had to move to Copenhagen. I think we, as a family, were ready to sort of go back to what we called home after a very long journey, both in Canada and in Billund, and that sort of brought the opportunity of trying to do something new out of sort of a satellite, if you will. And there was a few ideas that have been simmered for a while, and I think at some of the meetings with partners I've been sitting there secretly thinking, I just want to be you rather than...because I've really felt this sort of the need to go back to hands-on development again, but also sort of, Ahh, I had some ideas of what if we just did something simple, something that was a very core to the LEGO idea. Something that really just celebrated what it actually is rather than sort of go towards them all role play, IP-driven side of the thing, which is also beautiful and interesting, but we just do that a lot. So there was this idea of saying, Hey, let's go to the pure, let's go to the source, let's go to what it was all about, where it came from this idea of a brick and the connection and a start and something that goes together. How can we get there? So that's where it started, I think. And I had the opportunity because we had a sort, in the mobile team, we had an innovation funnel where we wanted to start some new experiences. And I pitched three ideas into that funnel and one of them was chosen and that was called Path of Creation, I think it was called back then, but that was eventually what turned into Builder's Journey.

Brian Crecente

So it's interesting just going back a little bit prior to your time at the LEGO Group, I know that you worked on, obviously as you mentioned, you worked on games before you went to the LEGO Group. One of the games that you worked on was actually one that I really, really enjoyed. And when I look at it, I actually see some similarities between it and Builder's Journey and that's Hitman Go, which was the iPhone game. And to me, the similarities are that just like with Builder's Journey, it seems like what Hitman Go does is it takes this really complex idea of what the Hitman games are and boils it down to its essence and then presents it in a sort of diorama sort of perspective. Do you feel like there's similarities there?

Karsten Lund

Yeah, definitely. I think if, I mean, I was also creative director at that point, so I can't take the full credit for that game at all, rather than actually protecting it from some of the designers who actually pitched this idea into our innovation funnel at Square Enix, Montreal, the guy was called Daniel Lutz, and I'm a huge fan of his work. He's such a beautiful designer. And I think we were all in sort of, we went to Canada to do sort of big

AAA titles and we did a change of direction into this sort of high-end mobile games, small sort of coffee table experiences, the coolness of what a game can be. And I think it opened my eyes, that whole world to new, interesting experiences with the medium. So in that sense, that kind of sort of sparked slowly that you can actually do something simple. You can constrain yourself creatively enough to set you free to do something new. And I think that was a huge inspiration, no doubt about it. And obviously the LEGO brick lends itself so very well to this sense of models and sense of smallness if you will, right? So in that sense, that's definitely an inspiration. And, you know, I had a shout out from that set designer about the Builder's Journey and he said he really liked it and he could really see some great things about it, and that was huge, huge for me, a very proud moment right there.

(Music)

Brian Crecente

That is, it's so cool. And I love that there is this sort of connection between those games and that the creative director reached out to him. So about the same time that all of this is going on what Lund is talking about here around 2017. The LEGO Games team was undergoing some significant changes under Sean McEvoy's leadership. The group had reconfigured to allow it to focus on several different distinct priorities, among them, of course, was a new push for mobile games. So the group came up with this sort of funnel process to try and whittle down the potential games, genres, and partners that they would work with on these new games. It was this new process which then started in 2018 with a lot of guidance from the entire LEGO team that led to Lund's big opportunity at the company.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, and maybe to jump in, just to clarify, right, when you say big opportunity, this really started small in the sense that Karsten was supported by the entire LEGO Games team to explore potential ideas while residing in Copenhagen. He was still trying to figure it out and trying to make it work in coordination with the LEGO Group headquarters in the countryside out there in Billund, Denmark, right?

Brian Crecente

Right, and initially he was thinking that he was going to essentially do this two to three hour drive between Billund and Copenhagen. So I can't even imagine frankly, wanting to do that on a regular basis. But then after setting up house and getting his family adjusted to back to life in Copenhagen, he realizes this is not going to work for him. And it's certainly not going to work for his family. So he goes back to the LEGO Group and he says, Look, can I work in Copenhagen and build up a team of local contractors to work on this game.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah. And it was a new way he thought to work with LEGO games where he would be sitting alongside his team daily, you know, talking, adjusting, testing instead of kind of how he's been operating before, which was handling it through these traditional monthly check-ins. I mean, we're all very familiar with remote working, but he saw this as a very important experiment, you know, one aimed at delivering highly polished LEGO games, despite having a very small team, and LEGO Games, at that time, was looking at a lot of different projects, you know, 60 different opportunities. And it used a narrowing down process to finally select three. And among them was the project dreamed up by Lund's team. LEGO Games approved the pitch and gave him the green light to open this experimental studio in Copenhagen. And next Lund had to figure out what it was that the team was actually going to create, right? Fortunately he had a lot of ideas and Lund talks to us about that. And those eventually led to something that internally the team called the Art House Project.

Karsten Lund

One idea was the notion of a toy, of a sort of a digital experience that wasn't even a game. So it's a sense of just give me the figures and the bricks and the sort of material in general and the fantasy in the universe, but really no interaction enhancements. I need to play with it myself. I need to pick up the characters. I need to run around with them. I need to build something in the background. I need to role play with a digital toy. That was one of the experiences. And the other one was a more of a *##sin##*-like experience of sort of building by numbers kind of thing, where you just have to sort of snap bricks together and slowly build something bigger. And, I guess we got some of that essence actually into *Builder's Journey* as well as during the course of the development. But the one that came through was sort of pitching this indie Art House style game that celebrates the medium in a sort of artistic non-verbal way. And in every single aspect of the craft of making games like music, sound, visual effects, game design. Everything had to sort of speak with that voice of the new age, you can say artistic games.

Brian Crecente

When you did the original pitch. What was the elevator pitch for this game?

Karsten Lund

It was this whole...trying to sort of look at a different genre, the puzzle genre, as sort of a representation of the LEGO idea, which means that every decision you make, when you play with LEGO bricks, it's like, where does it sit? Which color, what color is it? How does it fit right here? All those decisions that you actually make when you play, we wanted to sort of mimic those in a game and we felt the puzzles genre was a good place to do it. And then we wanted to have a sort of a narrative inside of that puzzle. So we needed to tell a story about play and about sort of maybe the problems that we have that we're not playing enough. And then the whole sort of, can you say non-verbal and artistic, poetic angle as well? Those were the kind of the three pillars as far as I remember.

Brian Crecente

So Lund tells us that he was given what he calls a bag of money. I wish I'd gotten a bag of money sometime in my life. It's pretty awesome.

Ethan Vincent

Just hand it to you. There you go.

Brian Crecente

Yes. He takes his bag of money. He goes back to Copenhagen and he starts hiring some contractors. So the idea was that he was going to come up with these sort of high-level concepts and then work with this team of contractors to have them sort of do the coding for the concepts. And then he would take this and then go to a visual concept studio in the area and have them kind of create the art for it. And then once they settled on this sort of singular experience that they liked through this process, he would then take that prototype, which is what he ended up doing. He ends up taking this final prototype back to the LEGO Group in Billund, and presents it to them during one of the LEGO Group's regular LEGO games play days.

Karsten Lund

I remember showing that prototype and actually just, it had that vibe of you can do this. It is a LEGO brick, you know how it works. So I just gave the tablet to people and have them try it themselves and everybody, not everybody, but a lot of people was like, I don't know what to do here. I can't, I don't play games, but actually they did know what to do. And they did understand it just out of the box. So that was the first little proof. And I think then everybody saw that. I remember `##Paul scope##` coming down and I gave him the tablet and he said, I don't know how to play these kinds of games. And I said, just try. And he actually did it. And he actually snapped some bricks together. And he was like, Wow, that's amazing. So that's all for the first proof. And then I got sort of the green light there to go ahead with a little bit bigger bag of money and hire some more people over that summer, '18, and ramp up prototyping development for what would become Builder's Journey.

Ethan Vincent

Once the concept was nailed down, Lund and that small group of contractors began to do more detailed prototype concepting. Jonas Hove Haugesen was the first hire at Light Brick Studio and is now the studio's game designer. He said work on those prototypes started in August, 2018.

Jonas Hove Haugesen

We started with some very abstract puzzles with LEGO bricks, and just to see what does the brick itself entail and what can you do with just creating a row of a simple one-by-one bricks and then the leading one of them and giving that one to the player, see what happens. That's a lot of magic. I think a customer would use the word magic, but a lot of

magic year comes from just looking at it as building blocks and the potential, rather than representing anything.

Karsten Lund

To begin with we had this cadence of saying, we will make a prototype a month, which is going to be a full game.

Ethan Vincent

This is Karsten Lund speaking.

Karsten Lund

And the first one was sort of very abstract and very, just build with bricks, and we tried to sort of present people with some bricks and then they would choose them and put them together in what would seem like a good, say... set up. And then they would get a correct answer or a wrong answer. If it didn't work, they had to rebuild it and stuff like that. It was very abstract. The next one we did was sort of a little bit of a narrative of a kid and a dad on a trekking trip. And the kid fell into a waterfall and he ended in a weird, robotic world. And then he came back after that trial and met with his dad again. And they end up standing together, on what we call the hugging brick, which is sort of the double jump of where these two characters can stand really close and it looks like they're hugging. And that was the full game. And I remember we had this thing where after a successful milestone and a successful deadline reached, we went out so had sushi with a very small team. And we just, we shipped the build to some LEGO Group people like Danny and Don. And while we were sitting there eating sushi, they played the game and they sent screenshots of their progress and they sort of wrote comments while they played. And they played sort of, you know almost like a little competition between the two who got the furthest. And it was just such a beautiful moment because they sort of said, Wow, this is great, I can't put it down. And they played and played and played, and they commented on the little moments and they thought it was beautiful. And it was really a good sort of memory from...a feeling that we're onto something here. It actually, it actually works.

Ethan Vincent

I love hearing Karsten talk about that. I mean, just his, his enthusiasm, it's so infectious, but hearing how people in his team, you know, even in the LEGO Group reacted to these early prototypes, I think that excitement over the gameplay that was already possible at that level really gave Karsten and his team a boost, you know?

Brian Crecente

Yeah, It is lovely I think to hear this group, this idea that this group created this sort of almost ephemeral thing, you know, it's this moment where the idea that Lund had, this sort of spark turning into this tiny little flame that they are sort of shielding and they don't want to go out. And then during this dinner, hearing already people are reacting to it and saying

how much they love it. And then Lund talks to us about how they took this sort of tiny concept that is this sort of beautiful creation and slowly fed into it, these other ideas to try to build it out and make it into a bigger thing.

Karsten Lund

Yeah, then we started new prototypes with new mechanics. We had sort of traversal driving mechanics. We had enemies. We had, you know, we just examined all sorts of aspects without even actually thinking about product and a deadline.

Ethan Vincent

Here Karsten Lund speaking again.

Karsten Lund

This is kind of the mandate to say let's make something that feels right before we decide what it is. I think everything about starting a new game studio for me was about trying to say, can we do, can we sort of execute on all the little truths that we've heard or talked about or told each other during the course of our careers? Can we just do it? I mean, what would happen if we actually just did what we always tell each other to do? I think there's always these, you know, catch in every single craft, there's always these phrases that everybody talks about, right? Like an architect, you have to build a building from the ground up. And, you know, like in games you have to sort of, you have to nail and find the fun before you step into the big production, because you cannot produce something that isn't fun. And you have to sort of really do things in order, you have to test things very thoroughly and understand how the audience engages with your game. And you have to make games that don't have tutorials and they should be able to teach you how they work themselves without actually telling you anything. That's a good game. All these little truths and wisdoms we try to solve, let's just do it all. Let's just implement that in this game. Stop only, and you know, like old men saying, this is what a good game is. Let's just do it. So we had to experiment with all these things before we could actually start saying, okay, now we're making the game.

(Music)

Ethan Vincent

Those prototypes eventually led to an idea that the team thought could become the final game. Unfortunately, it turned into a month's long dead end, according to Haugesen. And the launch date tied to the launch of Apple Arcade in December, 2019, was getting closer and closer. And here's Jonas Hove Haugesen talking about that.

Jonas Hove Haugesen

If you played LEGO Builder's Journey, you experience all levels as sort of micro dioramas right now. That wasn't how we started. We started with great big landscapes, built out

completely 100% out of LEGO bricks with the landscape spanning from left to right on your screen. I don't think, I mean, it sounds like what stopped us was the workload, but it actually wasn't that it was mostly just, it felt unfocused and it felt not LEGO Group, because of it trying to be a representation of a world more than just being the LEGO bricks.

Ethan Vincent

Haugesen said this design also meant that there was a different perspective, which added a level of complexity and also sort of watered down the gameplay focus. You know, there was some benefits that came along with this grandeur experience, like more impactful visuals, but Haugesen said it felt more like a Tomb Raider game that didn't really celebrate the LEGO brick like the studio wanted to, right Brian?

Brian Crecente

Yeah, and you know, and it's tough, frankly, they realize at some point that they're actually making the wrong game. And they realize this three to four months into development according to Haugesen. So, Lund says that one of the things that really helped them make this realization was the fact that they had this regular user-testing going on. And that's what really underscored the fact that they were on the wrong path. So they come to this realization, they realize now they need to re-scope the entire project. And that's because they had spent essentially 2018 prototyping, and then 2019 investing in all this development, but now have this failed start that has cut deep into their progress. So the only way they're going to hit their deadline is to sort of change what they're aiming to do.

Karsten Lund

I think we had a very strong idea to begin with when we were only the small little team sending stuff to the LEGO Group and LEGO Games and Danny and Don looking at it saying, Wow, this is great. This is great. You're onto something. And then we decided to ramp up and decided to actually make the game. And we had the whole Apple thing and everything. And then we also decided to start testing a lot. So we tested the game every single week. So we went into that development phase thinking we're totally onto something. This is just going to be so great. And then we started testing and then we realized that we're not at all onto anything. Nobody understood anything about the game. They couldn't pick up a brick, they couldn't place it. They didn't understand what it was about. They...there was no words. They didn't know what to do. So we would totally...it was a tough moment at that point because we were so, we had so much momentum and then we just realized it doesn't work actually.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah. That sounds to me like the hula hoop moment and the Hudsucker Proxy where he's showing them the circle and saying, it's fun. You can play with it. And no one gets the fact that it's a hula hoop and you're kind of like, wait, what don't you understand?

Karsten Lund

Yeah. We have several of those moments actually, but this was the first one was like, Oh yeah, it doesn't work. And at that point we've made sort of the only really big mistake we made. I mean, we've made lots of mistakes obviously, but the one about saying, I think there's a true saying: don't set the deadline before you know what you're making. But we actually did that because, you know, we needed to have a product and we needed to have a platform for the product. And we sort of...so everything pointed towards the fact that if we could deliver this for late '19, it would be a very good idea for the Apple Arcade platform. So we actually had put a deadline against this. And so we knew we had a year to do it and we knew it didn't work. And then we decided, okay, let's do a little bit of a three-word tutorial, just tap to pick up the brick or hold to place and stuff like that. And just...if people know how to do it, just remove it, but just have a light, little bit of a show-them-how to play, not what to play, not what to do, but how, and the instant we did that, everybody liked it. It was just five out of five, four and half out of five in the ratings. And everybody just loved it. And the theory was that you cannot not tell them what to do and not tell them how to do it at the same time. You have to tell them something, right? So we have a little bit of a brief text experience, text tutorial in the beginning until you get it. And then it's a way, and then people started getting into the idea that they actually have to figure things out for themselves in this game. We're not going to tell them the solution. We're not going to hint it. They have to figure it out. And it's so rewarding to figure things out, to actually try experimenting, putting things together new ways, and then getting a different result. So after that point, we started believing in it again. And then we have the second big hurdle was then actually telling a story that was understood, which was equally tough.

Brian Crecente

Do you recall when that first aha moment was when you realized, okay, we have this big problem and now you've come up with a solution for it.

Karsten Lund

Yeah, I think it's when we saw, I mean, we cloud tested a little bit in the beginning when we started seeing good reviews coming in from those little tests and we started seeing players in-house testers just breezing through the first 10 minutes. We were like, phew, okay, now it works.

Brian Crecente

When was that would you say? Was that still in 2018 or was that in 2019?

Karsten Lund

That was in '19. I mean, that was around March, April or something very late. Frighteningly late. And we had this....yeah, it was scary. We had a notion of a story we would tell. We had some different chapters. I think we spent sort of the better part of, I don't know,

around Christmas, December on writing a big epic, overarching narrative for what was going to become a three to five hour video game, because we wanted to sort of compete with those sort of indie-style titles. So we had a lot of work to do, but we decided to sort of hold onto fixing that before. So at that point, we also needed to look at scope again and say, okay guys, uh, if we want to reach this deadline, we kind of need to revisit the whole idea of this game being, being this epic.

(Music)

Ethan Vincent

While re scoping the project helped, the team still had a major problem. The inherent structure in gameplay, of what was now called Builder's Journey, was in place. But the players didn't seem to understand, or sometimes even notice the story. The team set a goal for itself to have people understand and be able to summarize the game story back to the developers before their summer break in August.

Brian Crecente

And so you get over that hurdle. And then you mentioned that the other big hurdle, it sounds like, was how you take that play experience, that game play loop, and then layer in some meaningful storytelling. So how did you recognize that was going to be a problem and what was the solution?

Karsten Lund

Yeah, I think coming off, this sort of, okay, the first time the user experience works, usability is happening, people understand it and they get it. Now we need to tell the story of play. We decided that come summer holiday, just before we break for summer holiday. We want a positive test in terms of...we want the audience to actually to be able to tell us the story back. If they could just say what happens in this game. We didn't have the full story, we only have the first few beats, which is sort of kid and dad on a hiking trip. They end up home. They play together. Dad gets interrupted by something. He needs to go to work, do a mundane task, come back. He gets interrupted again, go to work, do a mundane task, come back. That was all we had at that point. We just wanted players to understand that. And so we really made some moments. We made this whole, Oh, there's an alarm going off, dad has to go off and he has to go and build with these little pyramids and he comes back and then we play a little bit more, but then he gets interrupted again. It was all a metaphor for the whole being a parent, having to work all the time and, you know kids, Dad let's play, oh okay, I'll play. But I was just having a half, you know, one eye on my cell phone kind of thing. We wanted to try and show that there is this thing in the world of not having time to play. We showed it to the players and they didn't get it at all. So we asked them, So what do you think of the story in the game? And he was like, Story? So they didn't even understand that there was a story. And they were like, It's it's...and I think that they

had a hard time retelling things. And so we actually ended up going on summer break and thinking, okay, that didn't work. That's...we didn't succeed there.

(Music)

Chapter 2: Summer Break – 29:33

Ethan Vincent

So Karsten and his team take a summer break. And this is where it's kind of cool, Brian, because in the summer of 2019, I was actually at the LEGO headquarters in Billund, Denmark on assignment with the camera crew, and was able to follow the Light Brick Studio team around for an entire day. Now, of course, I knew that Karsten and his team were working on a game at this point, but I really wasn't aware of where they were with the game development and what this break from their work really meant for them. Their first stop that morning was the LEGO Idea House. It's this unassuming red brick building in the heart of Billund, and actually combines the original family home of founder, Ole Kirk Christiansen with his original wooden toy workshop. But now it's a private museum that visually tells the rich history of the LEGO idea from its humble beginnings clear up until today. Access to the LEGO Idea House is only for internal visitors or by corporate invitation only. But one of the real treats of this place is hearing the stories. And that day, our guide was the historian and host Kristian Hauge. And it wasn't long before the Light Brick Studio team was standing right in front of the, you know, infamous LEGO brand motto.

Kristian Reimer Hauge

Only the best is good enough as we say in English. But, us Danes here, we know that the Danish is a little bit different than that. You know, it doesn't quite say the same thing. And you have to be careful not to misinterpret the English version, because I think "only" is a dangerous word because only the best is good enough. It could sort of be, you know, Oh, so I'm not allowed to celebrate along the way? You know, I know I'm not there yet, but I did a good job today, you know, but if it's only the best that's good enough, then can I celebrate that I really made progress today? And of course you can, and I think that's what's the problem with with that translation that it doesn't give you the room to say, you know, Yeah, we did good today. But the understanding as you should view it is that that only the best is good enough for children. So the end result has to be as good as it can be, but of course you are allowed to celebrate along the way.

(Fading indiscernible talking)

Ethan Vincent

We then continue our little journey through the history of the LEGO brick from the first plastic injection molding machine, to the first LEGO brick play system and sets. And then Christian decides to take the team downstairs to one of the vaults.

Kristian Reimer Hauge

Let's take a look it's in here. So, follow me.

Ethan Vincent

We follow him down the stairs through a secure door. And then we are in a little space, right in front of this row of archiving shelves.

Kristian Reimer Hauge

Welcome to the vault or memory lane as we call it. There is a reason for that you will see. So what we have down here is seven and a half thousand LEGO sets. So it's more or less all retail LEGO sets from the mid sixties and until today. So this is really browsing through your childhood. So, just take your, yeah, take your time, take a look. If I were you, I would start at the very end and work your way up. So, otherwise just go crazy. And I'm here for questions.

Ethan Vincent

So the group disperses and heads towards the first rows, and I have a chance to ask Christian about his experience showing guests the vaults and being a part of their reactions.

Kristian Reimer Hauge

I never get tired of showing people this place because there's so much emotion involved in this because it's all your memories and and maybe you think, you know, Yeah, you know, it's just a set. But then suddenly when you have the box in your hand and you remember, you know, and you look at the alternate models at the back. And then, Oh I remember, and I build it for that Christmas and I desperately wanted it, you know. And all of those things. So it's the memories, and actually I have seen grown men cry down here. I have. It will do that to you.

Ethan Vincent

As they head down to one of the first rows, I actually caught a glimpse of one such touching moment as one of the members of the Light Brick Studio team came across an old set that they had built as a young kid. He had actually never seen the box and was moved to tears remembering how he would build that set just as bricks over and over again.

(Indiscernible talking)

Ethan Vincent

On the next aisle up, Karsten Lund located the 1979 released Galaxy Explorer set that he had built with his father, and actually showed me a picture on his phone of his younger self with his dad and that same setting that they recreated later on with an updated LEGO set.

Karsten Lund

So this is a photo I have of me and my dad from seventies, I guess it's '78 or something, where we're sitting, it's around Christmas and I just got the Space Explorers set. There it is. This is the Space Explorers set. So it brings back memories. Part of you is just going right back, (background chatting) and part of you feels little bit old.

Ethan Vincent

In the afternoon, the day continued with a very long stop at the LEGO House, also known as the Home of the Brick. It's basically 12,000 square meter building filled with 25 million LEGO bricks. And I spent the rest of the day there just filming the team, you know, laughing, building, playing, discussing, and assembling. So all in all, it was this very packed, but very memorable day for me to see the Light Brick Studio kind of refuel on all things LEGO DNA.

(Peaceful, soft music)

Brian Crecente

I love to hear that story. It's so great that you were there to sort of capture that moment. And more importantly, I think it really shows how taking a break, sort of walking away from your problem and sort of giving yourself a chance to clear your head, can really reinvigorate you. And I think that's the exact impact that this trip had for Lund and his team.

Karsten Lund

We came back and I just thought, okay, maybe, I mean, if we want to reach this step, maybe this is not a story, maybe it's a poem. Maybe we can just tell the story we want to tell and doesn't matter if they get it. As long as they have a great experience, we will get our message across and they will get what they get and they'll interpret, and they'll just play it and have fun. So let's focus on the great experience. Let's tell the story the way we want to play it and not ask them anymore. I don't want to ask them what the story is anymore, because you know, they can't tell us back. So I'm just, let's not ask them, just make the game to see if they can play it and if they like it. And I think it took very few weeks before all of a sudden the players started telling the story back to us, unprompted and getting it exactly. And it almost felt like asking them about a story in a game that you experience that you don't actually have told, is a very hard thing for players to retell, but they can feel it, right? So their feeling is that, that maybe it was wrong to actually imply the idea of a story, or actually just ask for the story, but just tell it and just let it hang there in

the air. And all of a sudden they came back with ideas of saying, Ooh, dad tries to come back, but he doesn't have the time, he's back in his lunch break. And we were like all of a sudden getting ideas back from the players of what they expected of this experience and what they would feel if this and this happened. And actually even trying to implement some of these things back into the game. So it almost, all of a sudden, it became sort of a dialog in this development phase. And so that was actually a great experience that just almost like giving up actually was the best course of action in terms of narrative, because we simply just implied the story, more of a poet poet, kind of poetry kind of thing.

Ethan Vincent

Your desire to even make this studio, Karsten, comes from this personal desire to be reunited with your family. And obviously the parallel here is pretty obvious to me, the sense of like the son and the boy, and I can see you going to work and saying goodbye to your kids, and then you drive to Billund. Did that ever hit you where the story was kind of your story?

Karsten Lund

Actually, not really. I think it didn't hit me in that sense, but I think one of the other sort of deep inner truths is if you do something that you feel, if you do something that you feel is true, I think that people talk a lot about that. Is it true? Are you sort of true to yourself or true to what you're doing? So I think it was about not having to leap too much for these themes. It was about trying to sort of dive inside for these emotions that made it so fairly sort of easy to come up with, if you will, and to verify somehow. So, obviously afterwards it was like, am I the builder? Is this the builder's journey? Or is this my journey or something. And maybe it is, it's a much longer journey than just these two years for me. So, yes, obviously after it came up, but I think it was just a natural thing of saying, does it feel true what we're doing? And I think we were working with developers that are a lot younger, you know, and working with some of my own age. We have some great conversations about this topic, which is actually a really interesting topic about how do you sort of relate to the whole distribution of your time, what do you spend your time on? I mean, are you working hard for someone? What are you doing it for? What does it make sense to? You need to spend more time playing in general, also at work and everywhere, just to sort of give yourself that opportunity. And I think that maybe that for me was sort of also a wake up call for myself to say, Hey, have some fun once in awhile.

(Peaceful tune plays)

Chapter 3: The Music – 40:02

Ethan Vincent

It would be a big oversight, Brian, in this episode, not to talk about the music of Builder's Journey. It's this incredible soundtrack composed and played by the talented Henrik Lindstrand. So I talked to Henrik and he told me about how he started playing piano as a young child, basically as a three-year-old. And then with a tutor at the age of five, he continues studying piano and plays music throughout his youth. And in his twenties, early twenties, he's accepted into the conservatory of music in Copenhagen. After that he joins a band, he joins the band Kashmir and he tours around the world with them from 1999 to 2014. After that he kind of settles down and he writes his own music and his solo album. And there's these really simple, beautiful kind of melodic, melancholy piano tracks.

(Piano tune)

Ethan Vincent

It was kind of around this time too, that Karsten Lund was looking for music, looking for the right tone, looking for something he can add to Builder's Journey to tell the story and a colleague of his recommended Henrik Lindstrand's album, and Karsten told me a little bit about that was like when he heard that track.

Karsten Lund

And I remember listening to it on my way to the office and crossing the big bridge from, I live in Amager, which is sort of the Island you have to cross a bridge to go to the mainland part of city, and I cried. It was so weird because it was like, Ugh, it just hit me somehow. It was just like, this is exactly it. And I was like, that's gotta mean something.

Ethan Vincent

So, Henrik, did Karsten tell you about his experience with your music on the bridge?

Henrik Lindstrand

Yes, he actually did, but not at our first meeting, but he did that later on when we got to know each other better. But that is of course amazing for me as a composer to hear that. And to know that I'm not just hired because they need a composer and they need to try different things out, but he actually felt that I was the right person to do this work. And I must say I was very, very optimistic after our first meeting because I also felt connected with the initial ideas that he explained to me about the game and the meaning of the game. And I felt a strong connection to this project, so to speak.

Ethan Vincent

That strong connection to the game continues. And Henrik's early involvement during the many iterations of the game really helped both, Karsten and Henrik, find the music and the voice of Builder's Journey.

Henrik Lindstrand

We knew that it was going to be very simple and simplistic in that sense that we wanted the player to become involved in the game and experience the game as a poetic and emotional journey. I don't know if at that point, if it was set in stone, but I remember he said something about no dialog and that was also key to my work because I knew, okay, the music needs to also have like a narrative role and help telling the story.

(Sounds from LEGO Builder's Journey)

Henrik Lindstrand

I wanted for sure to continue with this collaboration because I think it has been one of the best creative collaborations I've had so far. You know, we feel that we are onto something and we just want to make it better and take it to the next level. I think it's a lot about creativity and also, you know, a picture of the world we're living in and people are having, you know, a tough time with their lives. They're putting their children in daycare and work so many hours each day. And at some point I hope that perhaps when you play the game, you will stop for a moment and think, okay, do I need to work this much? Is it worth it?

(Music and sounds from LEGO Builder's Journey)

Chapter 4: The Venture – 44:33

Brian Crecente

Everything about Builder's Journey and its creation was an experiment on some level. The LEGO Group's decision to reconfigure the way it approached the game was new, its decision to fund internal projects in the way it did for Light Brick was new. And while the LEGO Group had over the years purchased or established game studios in different ways, this approach to building something from the inside out was sort of an important experiment. About a year into development, in the fall of 2019, another unusual thing happened. LEGO Ventures started showing interest in the studio. While the idea of an innovation team inside the LEGO Group had been around for a while, the idea of creating a venture capital arm for the brand, not the company didn't bubble up until 2017. A year later, LEGO Ventures was formed. The group makes investments and what it sees as the future of learning, creativity, and play. That includes working with entrepreneurs, ideas, and startups in a slew of different industries, including VR, adaptive education, and even gaming. While LEGO Ventures has invested in video game developers in the past, like

Klang, Ventures in particular had never done something like investing in an internal LEGO game studio according to Michael Stahl, who heads up the incubation studio at LEGO Ventures.

Michael Stahl

So, obviously kind of when Karsten initiated what became Light Brick Studio, it started out as an internal project in the games team within the LEGO Group, and I know Karsten from way back, we used to work together when I worked with the LEGO Group and we've kind of been following the project for some time. And I think in effect Builder's Journey, which was the first title it developed, was developed in a way that was kind of resembling kind of a model, basically an external kind of startup, right? But still within that LEGO idea. And so the conversation started fairly early on and say like, you know, if we're going to have to take this project further, like how could we...how can we kind of potentially support Light Brick Studio? And that kind of ultimately led to the fact that we were spinning it out and now kind of invested into that as a separate group.

Brian Crecente

And in terms of structure, how is it different than it being just a LEGO Group studio? What's the sort of differential between it being an external studio that the LEGO Group owns and an external studio that is invested in by LEGO Ventures?

Michael Stahl

So I think the biggest difference is that they obviously now have a remit to go above and beyond kind of a new LEGO brick-based kind of IP in terms of development rights. So they can develop, you know, stand alone titles that is still within the kind of LEGO idea of learning through play and systematic creativity, but above and beyond kind of the LEGO brick...brick-based kind of system. So I think that's the biggest difference. And I think another difference is that by spinning it out and kind of feeling it, the premise of being a game studio versus being a game studio in a kind of more physical structure of like manufacturing physical items, I think hopefully it brings some freedom and kind of more, a better foundation for Light Brick to be successful in kind of a digital space. So it's a fairly straightforward in the sense that it's a separate company, LEGO Ventures invested money into that company. So we are majority shareholders of the company. Light Brick Studio will have business agreements with the LEGO Group. So basically it's a business relationship. Obviously the team is the former LEGO Group employees so they know the internal team fairly well. And then LEGO Ventures and a member of the LEGO Group have representation on the board. So there's a link between, but it is an independent company that is invested in by LEGO Ventures.

Ethan Vincent

Mads Prahm joined light brick studio in August, 2020 as the director of operations, but prior to that, it's important to understand that he worked at the LEGO Group for more than six

years in a number of roles, most recently as the director of LEGO Toy Enhanced Games, and more importantly, he spent his early career in some of the same massive studios as Lund, that included nine years at IO Interactive and another two or so at Square Enix, Montreal. And it was at Square that Prahm's created an incubation process for prototyping new games rapidly, which ultimately led to the success of the mobile game Hitman Go. It also provided a strong history and deep knowledge of a process that would later be used to spin out Light Brick Studio with his help, and Mads Prahm said he decided to join the studio because he feels strongly that the investment by LEGO Ventures in Light Brick Studio, which was finalized in late 2020, is also important for the LEGO Group as a company.

Mads Prahm

I would say that the LEGO Company is looking to diversify in LEGO play, but also in really coming closer to the goal of realizing, learning through play, right? This is our mission for the long-term. And of course you can do plenty of learning to play with the minifigure , but the LEGO brick itself also has some quite unique properties in that you can build and experiment and try out things by building a combining. So I think that the LEGO brick deserves some special attention. We've been quite successful, our TT games, you know, on our behalf have been quite successful with minifigure play and with action play within the LEGO universe. But brick play, I think is something that we're still pursuing.

Brian Crecente

Do feel that having Light Brick stand apart as its own company is going to make it easier for it to sort of explore these ideas than it would have been had it remained a part of the LEGO Group internally?

Mads Prahm

Yes. I think having Light Brick Studio as a separate entity, a separate company with its own goals, definitely makes it easier for us to pursue those goals and pursue the idea of the digital LEGO brick play and digital LEGO play in general. Without having to think about how does this fit into the, you know, how does this support the physical LEGO brick portfolio? How does this support physical LEGO play? The LEGO Group is already super strong at making those physical and digital physical play experiences, and for that reason, it's hard for the LEGO Group to prioritize something that it isn't very strong at doing yet. And that's why we need something like Light Brick Studio, and maybe we need more experiments like Light Brick Studio to focus on those things that could be, you know, part of the LEGO brand in the future.

Brian Crecente

So while the conversations with LEGO Ventures had been going on for a while, the actual deal didn't come about until after the game Builders Journey had launched, Karsten Lund

told us. And it seems it was a by-product of essentially trying to figure out what it was that Light Brick Studio wanted to do next.

Karsten Lund

How do we continue this? How can we actually turn this into something that is more sustainable? Right? Obviously we couldn't, it was tough to sort of run it like that, like with multiple freelancers in one setup, we wanted to have something where we could actually hire people, where we could actually sort of give them a longer sort of commitment to actually recruiting a new talent into the branches, say how can we turn this into a more lasting thing? And that was a little hard to do within the LEGO Group, because then you have to sort of deal with the whole resource management and, you know, funding internally, and there's a lot of different things where it's a little tougher to sort of get these things flying, right? So that's when sort of LEGO Ventures was slowly growing into becoming this thing that actually had these abilities, it started small as well, and slowly came into fruition and they actually got the ability to build studios and to find studios. It started to become a thing we could say, Hey, what if we did it this way? Wouldn't it be? Wouldn't that actually be a good idea?

Mads Prahm

It's a very exciting time for us, for sure. This idea of taking something that was kind of born inside the LEGO Group, but now spitting it out as a separate company.

Ethan Vincent

This is Mads Prahm speaking.

Mads Prahm

It's not something that we've done, at least not in recent times, in the LEGO Group, so it's been difficult and it's been exciting, and it's a beginning of a journey that I think hopefully will enable the LEGO Group to be much more innovative in the future and try things out by enabling teams to experiment, and in a sense to experiment and play and learn by making new products and making new companies.

Ethan Vincent

This financial investment in the studio means it can now start work on what's next. Currently the big push is expanding Builder's Journey to something beyond an iPhone, Apple Arcade-exclusive and Lund explains to us what that could mean.

Karsten Lund

We're expanding it, we've added a lot of new levels in the game. And then we are sort of just to sort of some of the stuff that we always wanted to do, some interesting new twists on the same mechanics and stuff, trying to keep that no-filler mentality. And then we're sort of putting a new ending to the game that kind of hammers home the point that we

already made, but a lot more clearer, and maybe a little...hopefully a lot more heartwarming.

Brian Crecente

And so when you say that, will you then...there obviously different approaches. You could go with something where people have different paths to get to the same end point, or you could extend the game, or you could have different endings. Are those one of those things, the thing you're doing to sort of build out the game?

Karsten Lund

We're still running with the same format, so it is more or less going to be a linear experience, but we're sort of introducing...we need to introduce new mechanics all the time. So we're doing that because that's what the game does. It's still with a core of a brick building at its center, but we're going for...we're trying to explain play in a new way I think, so we're going for a new creative angle, so the game a little bit more open-ended. It's about expanding the game without breaking it. It needs to retain its sense of smallness. It's still...if you understand, if you understand what I'm saying.

Brian Crecente

Right.

Mads Prahm

So in the long-term, it's definitely, you can say part of our mission is to work with the LEGO play in general and not necessarily be bound by the LEGO brick.

Ethan Vincent

Again, Mads Prahm is speaking.

Mads Prahm

We just think that the LEGO brick is such a good representation of the LEGO idea. The idea that you can build things, you can take them apart, you can experiment and you can learn, in a really in an open-ended and fun way. So for now we are definitely not done exploring what the LEGO brick can do.

Brian Crecente

Moving forward I guess two questions: One, will you be solely working on this or will you have other projects? And in terms of other projects, my understanding is what you do as a studio may not always include LEGO bricks. So what will you be looking at after you move past Builders Journey?

Karsten Lund

We're still fully occupied with this game, but obviously we have so many more ideas, especially for the LEGO brick. I think we're not done with that topic at all. We have so many new things we want to say and so many different scales to play with and different kinds of characters and different ways of conveying these ideas. So we are eager to try new things. We know we need to get this out the way, it's very important, as a studio, to be able to deliver to more platforms and to have all that infrastructure in place, and to actually really try and top ourselves has proven to be tough, but it's doable. We also need to prove that we can do that. We need to learn. I think one of the mantras for the studio is that, if you're not working on something that you don't have the answers to yet, or working on learning something new, then we're not doing it right. So we're constantly pushing ourselves. And then we want to dive into some new experiences. Obviously we have a sweet spot for the brick and for what we can do with it. But there's so many different ways of expressing that in terms of how open and creative can we get, it's how sort of player driven, you know, do we want to work with more than one player playing together? How do we sort of make a language of play between players and stuff like that? There's so many interesting things. We have so many ideas.

Brian Crecente

So do you, and just to be clear, I want to make sure that people understand - because you're backed by LEGO Ventures, my understanding is that it doesn't necessarily mean that every game has to feature the LEGO brick. Is that correct?

Karsten Lund

Yep. No, that's true. Yes, that's correct. We have a mandate to sort of do other things. I think as long as we express the LEGO idea, which is sort of learning through play, the whole systemic creativity and all these things that are interesting, it's still interesting to us, we can do all sorts of other things. We can make our own fun little systems, or we can make a game that expresses creativity in a new way, or we can make playful experiences that maybe they're not even games, maybe they're just play. And I think we definitely keep a sort of an inventive and explorative side to us where we will try things without knowing where we're going. And I think that's definitely in our DNA that we just jump into stuff and see, Hey, what if I do this? What happens? We, definitely...we make so many things. I mean, in the process of actually nailing what it is we want to ship, we throw, I mean, 90% of what we do we throw out - but it isn't thrown out - it's just not shipped. So we have stuff lying around saying, Ooh, that was interesting this thing, it can't be used for this game, but it is interesting as a standalone thing. So we have a lot of those things as well, sort of little bits and pieces of interactions or game modes or play loops of levels and stuff that we can go back and revisit. And I think there's a lot of the stuff that we made very early on in the face of development, where we were more free and more sort of direct in our approach, that we gravitate back to because it was done in a sort of an atmosphere of

more, can you say freedom and no goals? That then we can take back and look at and say, Wow, this is something new. Let's try and see what we can make out of this.

(Music)

Chapter 5: Conclusions – 58:38

Ethan Vincent

In many ways, the journey of Builder's Journey is the tale of Lund's own personal journey and the lessons he and the team at Light Brick Studio have learned along the way. And we continue our conversation with Lund about that.

Brian Crecente

You've gone over the course of several years from working at the LEGO Group with this sort of dream in your head, to producing a game, launching a standalone studio, and even winning, one of what I'm sure will be multiple awards for that game. What does that feel like? That is its own sort of Builder's Journey, I think.

Karsten Lund

It sure is. It feels great. I still have to sort of pinch my arm sometimes. I mean, we've been so focused and it's been so tough in many ways, that we're slowly, at least I am, sort of feeling I'm slowly waking up again saying, What just happened here? I also think that while it was maybe that one of the toughest things I've ever done, it was also one of the easiest things at the same time. It's a weird thing to say. I don't know if it makes sense, but it was just like, it felt so true. And it felt like a combination of everything that I've learned. There's a huge focus on what is actually important. And I think if there's one takeaway from this whole thing, is that it is about focus on this - trying to spend a little bit more time focusing on what is actually the most important thing in your life right now. Right? And I think...so we did that with this game, everything we did was the most important thing we needed to fix and the studio choice and people choice and culture that's brought out of this, has this vibe of essence somehow, right? We want to make games. We are celebrating the craft of making games, but we also realize that it's tough work. It's hard to do it. So we give each other lots of space and lots of time to sort of come back and to get the ideas. We've realized that we can't pressure these things into existence. So there's a very sort of family vibe, it's cool. We're also tough on each other. We also call each other out on stuff. We'll say, Hey, this isn't fun. This isn't working. How do we fix it? What do we do? Sometimes it is that the uncomfortability of not being there yet, sitting together in a room and having to carry that thing is tough. But then when it works, we're like, Yeah, that's great, let's make some more - ok. It's very much the craft that is the core. And I think so this studio is going to be about the craft. It's going to be about how do we continuously become better at this craft and everything we do needs to point in that direction.

(Music)

Mads Prahm

This could be the birth of a whole new, you can say, a whole new family member, in the LEGO family of companies, right? So if we're successful, then the same way that we have, let's say, the LEGOLAND parks, which is a totally different way of, you can entertaining kids and families and engaging them in LEGO play. Then Light Brick Studio can become a new, like tiny little sister to the bigger LEGO Group, a sister company that will focus on its own special type of LEGO play, which is the digital LEGO play based on the LEGO idea and rooted in the LEGO brick. So that's what's super exciting for me about this journey, is that it's not just one game, it's a ten-year journey to develop. You can say a new company and a new type of LEGO play.

(Music)

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, I love playing LEGO Builder's Journey. And for me personally, it was a real privilege to meet Karsten, Mads and most everyone in the Light Brick Studio team. Karsten is - what should I say - like super inspirational guy, visionary with LEGO play, and also understanding I think the magic of the LEGO brick, like only a few I've ever met. He's just has this very infectious way of talking about the importance of play, and Light Brick Studio, same thing, the team there - just these passionate game makers who, you know, don't put themselves under these pointless deadlines or pressures, but also want to create an experience that is rich and poetic that's different and new. It was really cool to be there. And they're all kind of in this small little, little space working together. Karsten plays multiple roles as the producer and creative director. He has, you know, he started with this very ambitious scope and then he narrowed it down. And I thought this was very important when he says, you know, if you can't make the game great, you know, you have to make it smaller until you make it great. And this idea that you can be ambitious about a game and you can think, you know, in terms of these lofty ideas you want to do, but if it's not a great gameplay experience, you know, what's the point. And I remember when the game was released, I downloaded it immediately. And yes, I also admit when I played it, it was little short and it left me a little hungry, wanting more. But, I also remember completing the game and having a little bit of kind of this residue and this emotional response to the music, the images, the design, and just this kind of soothing, beautiful effect the game has in this very aesthetic way. And it's all LEGO bricks. So you are kind of engaging with the physicality of the LEGO experience on a digital front, and looking back at the history of LEGO games, I think this is a very important experience. You think of some of the most ambitious efforts of LEGO Games, LEGO Universe, and some of these others really, really big ambitious MMO type games. And then you contrast that with LEGO Builders Journey, this kind of small on your device, you know, Apple Arcade kind of puzzle game. And, wow. It's remarkable to see what a journey that is, and also how important it is that this is taking place with this

kind of philosophical, art house, you know, boutique game studio experience, that is taking place with the blessing of the LEGO Group. So I am just delighted with this game and I learned a lot about what it means to make a game and the importance of bringing the LEGO play experience to the digital in such a charming and wonderful way.

(Music from LEGO Builder's Journey)

Brian Crecente

Yeah, I am so envious of you that you were able to be there for some of those moments in person and you watch this game unfold and this journey sort of unfold in person with Karsten Lund and his team. What I think is really fascinating about this story is that in many ways, like we sort of talked about in the interviews, how the game, in some ways, reflects Karsten Lund's own personal journey. I think all of this sort of is a reflection of what the LEGO Group is hoping to do as a company at large. I think what we see is in the development of the game and the creation of this studio, we see Karsten Lund and a small group of people identifying these problems and then finding interesting solutions. So in the case of Karsten, we have him wanting to move his family back to what he considers to be his home, and figuring out a way to make that work and still work at the LEGO Group. And then taking that one step further and sort of winning over LEGO Group's approval so that they can develop, not in Billund, but in Copenhagen. And he can actually be there by their side - the developers, and sort of really throw himself entirely into this project. But we also see, when you step back, this whole development cycle and the idea of identifying problems, and then coming up with interesting solutions, is also reflected back on the LEGO Group, and even on LEGO Ventures. So they look at what he does is sort of an examination of what the LEGO Group has been struggling with for a long time, which is this idea of...it's this massive company that sometimes can maybe get a little stuck in its ways, or that sometimes struggles to find or identify innovation in time. And so, this is a company that, if you look at some of the issues that I think Karsten Lund's efforts have sort of exposed, it's a company that is sometimes risk adverse, and sometimes can get lost in its own sort of bubble of influence. And so by creating this new spinoff studio that is being backed by LEGO Ventures, and by being given the capacity to step outside that bubble and create their own works, I think what we're going to find is that Karsten Lund and his team are going to be able to create entirely new experiences, things that aren't a reflection of what has been successful in the past, or sort of weighed down by things that weren't successful in the past. So he can go on his own path, his own journey to use the sort of language of this episode, and hopefully arrive at a place that will bring with him a new and interesting future for LEGO games. And I think it's also really important to keep in mind, the issue of timing - where timing has not always been a friend to the LEGO Groups many ventures. It happens that in the case of Light Brick Studio and Builder's Journey - it was. This was a case where not just timing, but funding the right game, the right group of people - all seem to come together to create something sort of magical and open the path that would lead to the, not just the formation of Light Brick Studio, but that studio then spinning away from the LEGO Group to become its own unique thing.

Bits N' Bricks: Credits – 01:10:39

Ethan Vincent

Bits N' Bricks is made possible by LEGO Games. Our producer is Ronny Scherer. Your hosts are Brian Crecente and Ethan Vincent. Episode producing and editing by Ethan Vincent. Writing by Brian Crecente. Mixing and sound design by Dan Carlisle. Original music by Peter Priemer and foundermusic.com. Additional music provided by Henrik Lindstrand from his solo album Leken and the soundtrack of the award-winning game LEGO Builder's Journey, which you can play on Apple Arcade today.

We'd like to thank our participants: Kristian Reimer Hauge, Jonas Haugesen, Henrik Lindstrand, Karsten Lund, Mads Prahm and Michael Stahl. We'd also like to acknowledge the entire LEGO Games team, as well as the great folks at the LEGO Idea House for their support. For questions or comments, write us at bitsnbricks@LEGO.com and as always stay tuned for more episodes of Bits N' Bricks.

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