

Video Games, Digital Play, and the Future of the LEGO Group

Video games and the LEGO Group's many other digital efforts are among the company's chief focuses for the year, LEGO Group CEO Niels B. Christiansen said in a recent episode of the LEGO® Bits N' Bricks podcast.

"It's clearly either the one – or one of the very few – topics on top of my agenda, and something that will never be done in one year," Christiansen said. "It is a bit of an inflection point right now, in the sense that we're driving from it being fragmented, not such a big part of the totality, to really trying to make it integrated and mainstream, on product and ecosystem and on the entire architecture of our setup of the company."

Christiansen, along with LEGO Group chief product and marketing officer Julia Goldin, and vice president of LEGO Games Sean McEvoy, discussed the current state of the company's involvement with digital efforts and video games and its path forward in an increasingly digital world.



The LEGO Group's 25-year history with video games started with LEGO® Fun to Build, an educational project created by SEGA® for the "Kids Computer Pico" to appeal to young children, fostering their natural creativity.

Since that game's release in 1995, the company has released more than 180 video games.

Christiansen said that a number of very big milestones for the company have happened since that first game, including the launch of LEGO MINDSTORMS®, which layered coding onto the LEGO bricks system of play. In his tenure leading the company, Christiansen said he has worked to better integrate digital efforts and video games into the bigger LEGO Group picture and ensure that the company remains relevant – all while properly tracking the ever-changing passion points of children.

"Of course," he said, "that has meant quite a bit of investment into the area, building on top of all the good learning that we've done with the experiments, if you want, that we've done over time."

Goldin noted that tracing the constant evolution of digital play and video games will remain very important to the LEGO Group because it gives the company an opportunity to reach children and engage with them in a variety of ways. More importantly, it supports the LEGO Group's efforts to inspire and empower creativity in children.

"If you look at digital play, and LEGO video games, we try to actually bring that to life. We try to ensure that these experiences are immersive and super-engaging, but also that they're able to bring advanced building challenges and engage kids in some level of educational exploration," Goldin said. "So, it's basically providing different spaces in which they can actually immerse themselves in something that, for them, is a lot of fun, and it's super-engaging, but at the same time we know we will enable them to learn and acquire skills."

Putting those ideas and interests into execution meant that the company in 2017 reorganized the way it handled the development of video games, something McEvoy views as more of a philosophical than a structural change. That kicked off an interest in exploring new genres and new types of play beyond just those that were created by TT Games for the company for so long, such as *LEGO Star Wars: The Video Game*.

"It's not an exaggeration to say that I wouldn't be sitting here and talking to you guys, if it weren't for TT Games and their visionary products," McEvoy said. "But in 2017, in addition to that partnership with TT, we decided that we would explore new genres and new types of digital play, because we had a hunch that LEGO digital play could appeal to broader and more inclusive audiences. And that includes more adults, a more diverse and inclusive kids audience, and more preschoolers. And I think award-winning titles like *LEGO Builder's Journey* and *LEGO DUPLO® World* are starting to prove out that we were really onto something.

"It feels really rewarding to know that our games are beginning to reach a larger and more diverse audience of players globally."

While McEvoy is happy with those recent wins and the launch of new products in the past year, like *LEGO Super Mario*, he said the company and his group are still on the journey to mastery.

"That is a huge aspect of our mission at LEGO Games," he said. "I think right now we are just beginning to see the indications of the impact that a really diverse portfolio of LEGO digital and fluid play products can have on our brand, and the enormous opportunity they represent to reach millions of kids and families and LEGO fans of all ages worldwide. But at the same time, I also believe that we're developing capabilities, we're building partnerships, we are truly beginning to dream big in a way that's going to position us for even greater long-term success."

The interviews were part one of a two-part series that examines the past, present, and future of the LEGO Group's 25-year history with digital creations and video games. In the second episode, which hits next week, former CEO of the LEGO Group and executive chairman of LEGO Brand Group Jørgen Vig Knudstorp and Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen, grandson of the founder of the LEGO Group and former president and CEO of the LEGO Group, will discuss the company's storied past with video games and digital play and provide a bird's-eye view of the company's innovative efforts in the field.

Explore more...

In order of appearance

[LEGO Fun to Build](#) — YouTube

[SEGA Pico](#) — Wikipedia

[LEGO Island](#) — LEGO Island: Birth of a LEGO Video Game

[History of LEGO Video Games](#) — Official website

[LEGO fluid play](#) — How the LEGO Group Blends the Physical and Digital to Create New Forms of Play

[The LEGO brand and 21st Century Skills](#) — LEGO CMO Says Playing Can Prepare the Next Generation of Workers

[LEGO Super Mario](#) — Official website

[TT Games](#) — How Harry Potter and an amazing demo led to LEGO Star Wars: The Video Game

[LEGO Builder's Journey](#) — The Builders' Journeys

[Light Brick Studio](#) — Official website

[LEGO DUPLO World](#) — Official website

[LEGO Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga](#) — Official website

[Minecraft](#) — Official website

[Roblox](#) — Official website

[Fortnite](#) — Official website

[LEGO Unity Microgames](#) — Rise of the LEGO Digital Creator

[LEGO Brand Group](#) — New structure for active family ownership of the LEGO® brand

Transcript

Bits N' Bricks Season 1 Episode 17: LEGO® Video Games and Digital Play

March 31, 2021 · 46:35



Bits N' Bricks: Introduction – 00:00

(Child's voice announcing Bits N' Bricks)

Ethan Vincent

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

Brian Crecente

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

(Music)

Chapter 1: LEGO Video Games and Digital Play – 00:33

Ethan Vincent

So, Brian, it seems like to me that the very first official LEGO video game ever made is kind of like this afterthought. It's a weird anomaly, this game. Tell me a little bit about this first LEGO video game.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, it's funny because we've been doing this podcast to celebrate 25 years of LEGO video games, but we've almost never talked about LEGO Fun to Build.

(Sounds from LEGO Fun to Build)

Brian Crecente

So LEGO Fun to Build was designed for three-to-six-year-olds. It was developed by SEGA for its Pico system. Pico, if you've never heard of it, was sort of an educational console. It was designed to look a little bit like a book, so that instead of having a game cartridge, you had this thing that you sort of slotted into it and you'd connect it to your television or monitor, and then you would turn the pages. And then there were like buttons you could

use to interact with. So it was sort of a book and was based on the concept of being able to learn as you play, which obviously works really well with the LEGO system of play and their sort of ideology. So the software was designed as a picture book, so that small children could essentially play with it very easily. And so every time they would flip this page, the television screen would change and give them a new sort of play space. I was fortunate enough to track down Akemi Kamata, who was in charge of the game's production at the time. And she said that LEGO bricks seemed like a really natural fit for the Pico because they naturally foster creativity. And one thing she told me this is a quote is, "I thought that if I could make my favorite LEGO bricks that could be played with interactively through a TV, children's dreams would spread."

Ethan Vincent

Nice, nice. You know, it's funny, because it's a tablet before the tablet, right? It's this really interesting thing. And this was what 1995? When is this?

Brian Crecente

Yeah, yeah, that is right. And it's 1995. And then the next, the very next LEGO video game, the one probably most people remember and some may even think was the first, which obviously it wasn't, was LEGO Island, which came out in 1997. And we've talked about that at great length in a previous episode of the podcast, so you definitely want to go check that out. But even though we've been exploring and discussing LEGO video games for months now in this podcast, there is still so much we haven't touched on yet.

Ethan Vincent

That's true. And you know, I think in large part that has to do with the fact that there's been over 180 LEGO video games since 1995. And really, we've just scratched the surface with our podcast, particularly in this season. And there's definitely a lot more to talk about. To wrap things up so far, we have a special treat today. Instead of looking at a particular game, or even theme, we were given the opportunity to chat with some of the LEGO Group's core leadership.

Brian Crecente

That's true. And we were given so much access that we've decided to break this up into two different episodes. The first focuses on the current state of the LEGO Group – its efforts in the realm of the digital and LEGO video games. The second, which will run next week, will be about the company's fabled past and the perspective of the owner family.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, that's right. In that episode, you'll be hearing from Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen, grandson of the founder of the LEGO Group, and its former president and CEO, as well as Jørgen Vig Knudstorp, former CEO of the LEGO Group who currently serves as the executive chairman of the LEGO Brand Group. But in this episode, we'll be speaking with Julia Goldin, the

company's chief product and marketing officer; Sean McEvoy, who is the vice president in charge of LEGO Games inside the company; and of course, Niels B. Christiansen, who took over as CEO of the LEGO Group in October 2017.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, it's an astounding lineup. And I think that listeners are in for a real treat here.

Chapter 2: Conversation with Niels B. Christiansen – 04:30

Brian Crecente

Through Niels' guidance at the LEGO Group, the company's making sure it meets children where their interests are both in terms of physical play, and the digital play of video games.

(Music)

Brian Crecente

I'm curious in terms of this sort of push into digital, which I know, obviously, the history of LEGO video games goes back 25 years now. How has the LEGO Group expanded its approach to digital experiences and technology and products during your tenure? And could you walk us through a little bit of that sort of digital transformational journey?

Niels B. Christiansen

Yeah, absolutely. As you say, I think it's not new at all in the sense of digital play. One of in my mind, very big milestones, that actually happened quite a while ago, and I think at the point in time was very, very visionary and innovative, was MINDSTORMS. So the ability to have a LEGO play-system-based construction system that you actually had intelligence and coding ability into that. So you could actually build things and you could then code their behavior. I think that was a major milestone. And at the point in time when it happened, it was outstanding. There was basically nothing like it. But I do think we can talk to different milestones through the last 25 years, as you said, where we've actually been doing new things, and moving forward on this digital path. So it is not new at all. But I also think that if we go a few years back also, one of the things I realized, when I joined was really that it was, all our different initiatives could come across being a little bit fragmented. With a very large number of apps, considering different apps and video games and all of them not very well integrated into the System in Play, that is the brick-based modular system that we know works so well, and also not very mainstream, in the sense that it was very sizeable, or was a big part of our universe, if you want, from an experience point of view from the kids. So it was still fragmented, it was still relatively small. And at the same time, we were, as we always actually, challenged by the challenges that a brand like ours always have – that we need to be cool, we need to be relevant to kids, and what kids' passion points are, we need to be fresh, we need to be the high quality and all the things that follow, but really

this relevance meant that we've been pushing forward on also using fluid play, or the ability to enhance the play experience and make it bigger and better, and even more relevant with a digital layer to it. That has been really important. And we pushed forward on making it more integrated, so less fragmented, and making it more mainstream. So bringing it much closer to the core of the business instead of being something on the side. So I think those are the two big directions we've been pushing behind. That, of course, has meant quite a bit of investment into the area, building on top of all the good learning that we've done with the experiments, if you want, that we've done over time, so when Hidden Side was launched, it was launched on the back of a lot of good learning around augmented reality or different technology versions. And with the one we got there, we suddenly thought, now the AR technology had moved to a level of sophistication that we could actually bring it into a mainstream product. So Hidden Side became super important for us to actually dive into this... I mean, you know, you had to build whatever, the castle or the bus, or whatever it was, and then you brought that to life via augmented reality on your tablet or mobile phone. And then it allowed you a gaming ability on top of that, to catch ghosts and stuff like that.

Brian Crecente

You now have, with the LEGO Group, this amazing sort of rich history of the company exploring and creating LEGO video games for 25 years now. Where do you see the company pushing digital play and video games over the next 25 years?

Niels B. Christiansen

That's a big question, of course, because who can imagine what happens 25 years out? But the way we do think about it is really, I mean, several elements. If I can just take one step back and look at one of the real strengths of the LEGO Group, of course, apart from the brand and everything around, is really the System in Play, this modular system that allows us to actually create this systematic creativity that we can come out with a lot of products of a very, very modular, it's almost the definition of modularity, or platformized things. That will need to be brought further into digital. When we've had, I think if we look backwards 25 years, then digital video games in the beginning started being kind of very much separate, very much a game on its own. And our journey will be one of integrating those, making it one ecosystem that you can seamlessly actually jump around, and that takes, of course, digitally enabling the entire company. That takes putting in the architecture that allows all the things to be integrated, but also allows us to crank out these also digital innovations at a higher rate. Because that will be a bigger part of our universe if we go forward. There will be many more of our products that will have some kind of digital element to it.

Brian Crecente

So when you talk about adding some sort of digital element to the creations of the LEGO Group, how would you go about doing that?

Niels B. Christiansen

Either, the way we know it from LEGO Super Mario or Hidden Side or VIDIYO, or in different ways where they link into the ecosystem or they link into a more traditional video game, or all the more social platform type things like on LEGO Life where you can share, where you connect, you can actually have a different [experience] around that, that would be much more. And a big, big chunk of what we will have to do is totally digitally enabling the company to be able to do that in the future. That has a 5 or 10 or 20 year horizon to it. And that's a lot where I'm thinking about. How do we actually do that? How do we, by doing that, make sure that we are just as relevant for children 10 and 20 years out, as we are today? And there's no doubt in my mind that the digital element and the depth of the fluid play will be higher 10 and 20 years out, and it's just a matter for us, how do we become or stay the leaders in driving that in the toy category? That's really the ambition.

Brian Crecente

You know, when people hear the LEGO Group or hear about LEGO bricks, I think – well, about the group itself, the company – the first thing they think about are the bricks. And I'm just curious, is that something that you think will always be the case? Or do you think there'll be a time when it becomes something, the company becomes something, that's more known for its System in Play or known for its video games or digital efforts?

Niels B. Christiansen

I actually think the brick would always be at the heart of it. So I think that would be very key to what people know us for. But I think it's around the brick, there are a lot – the brand is really, really strong. And just in 2020, we got some really exciting awards around the brands showing that people understand the brand in the broader sense. But it's always related to the brick, and I think that System in Play – that physical element – is so unique, and stand out in a way, that I think, that will be there 10 and 20 years out. But I think the extent to which we can reach more and more children around the globe, with all our play experiences, will depend on our ability to build this digital layer on top. Because I think that's so needed to stay relevant, and really be there with the type of play experiences that children really, really like to go into. And I think the brick will be super relevant. We had this discussion, like four years ago. I often got the question, "Is this brick still going to be relevant, and will everything move away from that?" And I think the last year has just confirmed to me that the brick is more relevant than ever. And by being successful in creating also a digital layer, and some even more exciting play experiences, that just makes the brick even more relevant and even more loved. So in that sense, I'm sure the brick will be around and will be loved for many, many years to come.

Brian Crecente

You know, it's interesting, I was just reading somewhere that families building LEGO sets together, that the people who do that, has increased drastically during the coronavirus lockdown. And I think that probably touches on what you're saying here. Do you feel like

there will be a time in the future where maybe families get together and play LEGO video games as much as they are building LEGO sets today during the lockdown?

Niels B. Christiansen

Yeah, it's a super good question. I guess the short answer is yes, I think it's there. It's also up to us, of course, to make sure that the family friendliness that we have really progressed on the physical side, that that also goes on digital. And there are many different ways of linking products together, but also linking different elements of the ecosystem together. And that's where we have pretty great ambitions for – how can we create family hubs that would allow for this? Maybe just one example that goes towards what you're saying here is our introduction of the digital building instructions. So taking more like a digital perspective on that, by making building instructions digital. We can first of all, if we can actually, we can make links into video games around what is actually happening: Where is this relevant? How would it actually be? But we can also, on the other hand, allow for family builds or multiplayer builds, in the sense that, if we were three around the table, we could build it together. We could each be there with a digital building instruction, building our part and see how it actually would come together, instead of everything having to be sequential out of one manual that you could only be at one page at the same time. And then the next step of that, I think, would be to use that to create even more meaningful, also family- building together activities where you could build things where maybe some builders are not as well as well-practiced as other builders. So there would be some, you could actually maybe choose how difficult your build would be. You could build different capabilities together, and that's where I would think there would be some super exciting opportunities of linking into to also more traditional digital video games and making a connection and making the building experience then even more exciting, and making the roleplay afterwards then maybe happen more digital, so the options are just so many.

Brian Crecente

The LEGO Group's digital transformation agenda seems to touch on everything within the company, including product development, manufacturing, brand stores, e-commerce, digital play, and of course, video games. How important is that agenda to the company?

Niels B. Christiansen

It's clearly either the one – or one of the very few – topics on top of my agenda and something that will never be done in one year. And we've talked about it, we have like 25 years of experience and experimentation and testing and investments behind us. And I'm sure we'll have 25 more, and we'll be wiser as we go. But it is a bit of an inflection point right now in the sense that we're driving from it being fragmented, not such a big part of the totality, to really trying to make it integrated and mainstream, both on product and ecosystem and on the entire architecture of our setup of the company. And it is just so exciting to be able to make the investments and build the capabilities that it takes to really transform the company on this. So super exciting times.

(Music)

Brian Crecente

That investment that Niels is talking about here is one that has been going on for nearly two decades now. A significant investment, not just in the digital products of the LEGO Group, but in the company's very infrastructure and process. This evolution led to a decision to seamlessly combine the physical and digital in the way the brand thinks about everything. And in many ways, it empowers much of the company's deep efforts in pursuing innovative physical, digital, and fluid play experiences. In fact, Niels just announced that the company is expanding its digital and technology teams this year.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, and I don't think you can overemphasize the importance that digital plays in the company today. In a recent interview with the BBC, Niels said that every 2.77 seconds, someone uploads a LEGO creation to the company's digital platform that they want to share.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, that underlines the fact that not only is the LEGO Group interested in digital experiences, they're delivering the same sort of play to the digital world that made them a leader in the physical one.

Chapter 3: Conversation with Julia Goldin – 17:50

Ethan Vincent

And we've discussed a lot of this in previous episodes, including diving into what role fluid play serves at the LEGO Group, and how the company's latest effort, LEGO VIDIYO, fits into that. One of the people we spoke to at the time was Julia Goldin, the company's chief product and marketing officer, and she speaks and writes regularly about the deeper impact of LEGO creations on children. We had a fascinating talk for this week's episode about her approach to communicating the LEGO Group's expansion into the world of the digital and how video games play a pivotal role at the LEGO company.

(Tune)

Brian Crecente

How do you define digital play? How has it evolved in your mind over the years and why do you think it is important to the LEGO Group?

Julia Goldin

Yeah, I think digital play is something that continues to evolve. I think it's going to continue to be very important to us because it gives us an opportunity to reach kids and engage with them in so many different ways. And importantly, engage with them in the world that they are growing up in, and the world that is also very interesting to them. And undoubtedly, one of the key things that is going to continue to be very important to us is the kind of integrated, let's say play, where digital connects with the physical, because the LEGO brick will continue to be at the center stage of our experiences. We see it at the center stage of our physical experience, but also experiences that then connect physical and digital.

Brian Crecente

I know that you you've spoken quite a bit about, and written about, how the LEGO Group goes to such great lengths to inspire and empower creativity in children and how that's such an integral element of everything that the LEGO Group does. I am just curious, how do you think the LEGO video game creations tap into that mission, and how is it that you pass on that message to consumers, so they realize that that mission is being realized within a game?

Julia Goldin

What we know from all of the work that we do with LEGO Foundation is kids learn when they play. And when they are really engaged and immersed in activities that they do, that's when they're really able to enjoy what they're doing. But as they do that also, experiences that help them to problem solve, to stimulate their imagination, their creativity, and their critical thinking and ability to kind of overcome challenges – those are all the kinds of things that help kids to develop, and help them to develop very important, what we call 21st century skills, such as problem solving, and creative resilience, and cooperation, and skills that they will need in order to be successful. So we believe that this is really, really important. And then if you look at digital play and LEGO video games, we try to actually bring that to life. We try to ensure that these experiences are immersive, and are super engaging, but also that they're able to bring advanced building challenges and engage kids in some level of educational exploration. So it's basically providing different spaces in which they can actually immerse themselves in something that, for them, is a lot of fun and is super engaging. But at the same time we know will enable them to learn and acquire these skills. And that is something that we will not talk to kids about. We don't tell them, "Oh, you're going to learn through this experience." But of course, in designing our experiences, we want to make sure that they do go through these kinds of immersive journeys. And that's very much the message that we also communicate to parents and various stakeholders.

Brian Crecente

You know, I'm absolutely fascinated with the LEGO Group's use of fluid play, this idea of creating experiences that allow people to fluidly move between the physical and digital in their play. And it seems to me that that is an increasingly important part of the LEGO Group's approach to the sort of new experiences that you've been talking about. What role do you think concepts like fluid play will take in the future of digital play and LEGO video games? And how do you think that will compare to sort of the more traditional forms of all digital video games?

Julia Goldin

I think this is an evolution and how children are going to play that is going to be here for a long time and will continue to evolve, and it's driven by the innovation that we see around us, because more and more we see physical objects that are enabled digitally and seamlessly, and have intelligence and ability to respond and react to external stimulus, whether it's voice or whether it's behaviors. And I think that will continue to enable this fluid play more and more and more. And we see that. We launched LEGO Super Mario in 2020, and we could see how much kids were engaged in their ability to actually play out something they used to be purely digital in the physical space, but similarly, they could easily move in between the physical world into the digital app. So I think that's just an easy way of understanding how fluid play works and how it can evolve. I think it's going to be very important because it gives an opportunity for even more immersiveness. And we know that also, this is something that parents will support because a lot of parents understand the benefit of digital play, but over 70% say they still would love to see experiences that connect both digitally and physically.

Brian Crecente

So Julia, a little earlier today, we heard from Niels about where he thinks the LEGO Group will be going over the next 25 years. I'm just curious what your thoughts are on that. Can you give us your personal perspective on how you see the company's digital-playing video game strategy evolving over the next quarter of a century?

Julia Goldin

Well, 25 years is a really long time. So let's see where the journey takes us. I think it's been an amazing journey. You know, in these years, a lot of things have changed and evolved. We have released 180 LEGO games across many different platforms and went from console to PC and web and now to mobile. And we've been working with a lot of different partners. So in general, it's been very successful 25 years. I think in the future, games will continue, and digital play will continue to play an increasingly more important role, because it gives us a lot more ability, as I said, to actually be very relevant and engaging to kids, meet them where they want to be, and at the same time, do something that is unprecedented and unique, by connecting strongly digital play with physical play. And there are many different opportunities, but for sure, given the foundation that we're

building on, we will be, one, very focused on delivering on our mission to inspire and develop the builders of tomorrow. We will be looking to leverage all of the potential that digital transformation and evolution and innovation gives us to enable us to deliver immersive and engaging experiences, to be able to deliver opportunities, even more opportunities for kids to explore their creativity and their imagination to express themselves. Even more opportunities for them to go on missions that help them to problem solve, to move through challenges, to build their creative resilience and their confidence. And even more opportunities to seamlessly connect the digital and physical world. I think that's going to be another very important dimension of digital, playing digital games, which previously we have not – we couldn't have probably imagined to the same extent 25 years ago.

Brian Crecente

I know you probably hear this question a lot, and I know Niels told us he does, but I'd love to hear your personal perspective on this, and that is, do you think that the digital LEGO brick will ever replace the physical LEGO brick? Or do you think we'll always have those physical bricks out there for children to play with?

Julia Goldin

Personally, I believe that there will be roles for both digital and physical. And the reason I say that is because the hands-on experience is really important, and it's really rewarding. And I still see a very unique experience that building with physical bricks gives to a child or a person. And therefore, I believe that the physical brick will always have a really key role to play. But I also feel that there is a lot of room for digital experiences to enhance the physical experience, or also be in parallel, an opportunity to build and rebuild and create amazing things. For sure, if you kind of think about the types of building that you can do, it is different. It gives children, in particular, more possibilities in some ways to build really big when it comes to digital play because it's easier, but at the same time, the kind of pride and the kind of satisfaction that they get out of creating something with their own hands, is also something that's really exciting to see, and I know that that is highly appreciated by parents. We know through our own data and all the research that we've done, that even though parents around the world really appreciate the qualities, the positive qualities of digital play, but seven in ten say that they would be happier to let their child play with digital games if it also involved the physical play. So I think they also fully understand the importance of the physical experience for children's development. So we really believe in the hands-on minds-on experience. And I think the combination of physical and digital is a perfect representation of that. I believe, personally, the physical play, and the physical brick will be at the core of the LEGO Group moving forward. But I also believe that digital play will evolve and will continue to become more and more prevalent.

(Music)

Ethan Vincent

I like hearing about the physical and digital play at the LEGO Group and the experiences it creates, right, Brian? I mean, it's not really an either-or. They can be both, and I think in many ways, that's what makes fluid play. As Julia describes it, it's the best of both worlds. It's a very additive experience that can increase immersion without losing the benefits of either form of play.

Brian Crecente

That's true. Hearing that insight from Julia and Niels adds a sort of big picture perspective that really helps to provide context to the sort of creations that the LEGO Group has been focusing on over recent years, at least in terms of how LEGO video games and digital experiences have evolved, become such an integral part of how the company innovates and play.

(Music continues to play softly)

Chapter 4: Conversation with Sean McEvoy – 28:38

Brian Crecente

And now we're going to be adding to that perspective with Sean McEvoy, who started at the LEGO Group in 2017 as the head of LEGO Games. His perspective comes from his own day-to-day focus on how games get made inside the company. And in fact, in 2019, he even stepped in as the executive producer of the LEGO Super Mario experience and theme sets. What's interesting with that particular theme set is that it has gone on to become one of the company's most successful launches. We spoke with Sean about his experience leading LEGO Games and what the future holds for gaming through the lens of the LEGO brick in this last interview.

Ethan Vincent

You joined the LEGO Group in 2017. That's the same year that the company kind of reorganized the way it handled the development of video games. Can you kind of walk us through maybe the company's strategic approach to video games prior to that reorganization? And maybe how it changed in 2017 and why?

Sean McEvoy

Absolutely. In terms of the changes we made, I actually view them as more philosophical, as opposed to structural. And that related – that philosophy anyway, from our perspective – related to what a LEGO digital play experience could be and who it could be for. And I remember I was listening to lots of [Bits N' Bricks] episodes in the lead-up to this interview. And I remember one of the earlier episodes, I'm gonna paraphrase, but there was comment, that the audience for LEGO games kind of couldn't be faulted for assuming that

the TT action-adventure titles were the entirety of LEGO digital play. And that they were, you know, they kind of were LEGO games, full stop. And in some respects, those games deserve that mantle. And I would say it's not an exaggeration to say that I wouldn't be sitting here and talking to you guys if it weren't for TT Games and their visionary products. But in 2017, in addition to that partnership with TT, we decided that we would explore new genres and new types of digital play, because we had a hunch that LEGO digital play could appeal to broader and more inclusive audiences. And that includes more adults, more diverse and inclusive kids audience, more preschoolers. And to this day, I think looking back, award-winning titles like LEGO Builder's Journey and DUPLO World are starting to prove out that we were really onto something. And it feels really rewarding to know that our games are beginning to reach a larger and more diverse audience of players globally.

Ethan Vincent

That's awesome, yeah. So how do you think these changes have impacted the sort of games that the LEGO Group works on, and the way they work on them?

Sean McEvoy

Well, to use the example of Builder's Journey, that was a game that was an entirely new approach for us in so many ways. First and foremost, it was developed by an internally funded studio, Light Brick Studio in Copenhagen, led by Karsten Lund. Secondly, it sought to tell a story in a non-traditional way. So, you know, as opposed to minifigures, and cutscenes, and really strong and overlaid narrative, the team placed digital LEGO brick-building and problem-solving at the heart of the play experience. And the narrative was subtle and poetic and incredibly powerful still. And I think that, because of those kind of shifts from what was expected, the game really surprised audiences with a play experience that was truly unexpected, based on what they'd experienced of LEGO digital play in the past. And in other ways, it was what they'd always wanted in a LEGO digital play experience. So something really tactile, something that was like a true expression of the joy of building and pride of creation that's at the heart of everything we do as a company. And I was just reflecting the other day, that I think it says a lot that the most consistent kind of constructive feedback we get in reviews of that game was that they wanted more. So basically saying, you know, give us more of this game and kind of an expanded Builder's Journey experience. And to that, I will just say, stay tuned.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, that's awesome. I mean, that's one of the things I remember Karsten talking about is that the biggest point of feedback was, I'm so quickly done with these levels. Thank you, but I finished it in a day and a half, and obviously, in these times of COVID we rush through our games, or at least we have more time to finish them, I guess. But that's cool. I think that you're absolutely right on how this new innovative approach has kind of pushed that in the right direction. Let's talk a little bit about these groups that are working on video games at the LEGO Group. As I understand it, there's like five different, I don't know, departments,

divisions, and maybe you can help us kind of understand what they do and what sort of focus they have as they approach working on games.

Sean McEvoy

You're absolutely right, we've sort of organized ourselves into five, what we call "workstreams." And we're, we say it a lot, but we're a – we like to say a small but mighty team that's spread across the globe and focused on these initiatives. And the way we've organized ourselves is that, what we're trying to do is really to deliver on that promise of expanding to new genres, expanding to new audiences, and expanding to new geographies for LEGO games. So really kind of redefining that expectation of what a LEGO game can be and who it can be for. So then, very specifically, we've got, we have a team focused on what we call our "core audiences." So this is a team that's responsible for our triple-A console and mobile titles across all platforms. Then we have a team that's focused on what we call "new audiences." And that team is developing concepts and partnerships that will allow us to bring innovative, new digital play experiences to adults, to preschoolers, and to a much more, as we view it, diverse and inclusive audience of kids. And that means that we're going to be looking at new genres and play experiences beyond action-adventure. So it's not to say that we don't see great value in action-adventure and in those TT Games titles that have done so much for us and really built the foundations for LEGO games, but we just think there's a big opportunity to do more and reach diverse audiences. And then we've also recently built a team focused on self-publishing. So one of our work streams is working with developers to bring innovative, what we would describe as, kind of double-A titles to console and PC platforms. So really connecting to hyper-creative, small teams of developers, and thinking about ways that we can either fully fund or co-fund development and publishing activities for those titles. Then we have, speaking of new geographies, we have a team that's focused on APAC and China, and really looking to ensure we develop partnerships and products that can resonate with local audiences in that region. And then, and we're finally at five, I haven't lost count yet. Last, but definitely not least, we've got a team that's focused on innovation in a space that we call "social creative platforms." And these are digital play experiences that are inherently social and collaborative in nature, the kind of digital playdates that our audience loves. And we feel a tremendous responsibility to offer more experiences like this in our portfolio. So we're hard at work developing and partnering to offer more of them to our audiences. And that brings us to five.

Ethan Vincent

Wow, 25 years ago, right? The LEGO Group was firmly just this physical toy company, and today it's a master of, not just the physical creative space, but the digital. How important a role do you think video games played in that journey? And how important do you think digital is in general to the LEGO Group?

Sean McEvoy

So I've got to take a little bit of issue with that characterization of the LEGO Group as a master of the digital play space, Ethan. And to be honest, no, I really think that we are on that journey to mastery, but I really don't think that we're there yet. And that is a huge aspect of our mission at LEGO Games. I think, right now, we are just beginning to see the indications of the impact that a really diverse portfolio of LEGO digital and fluid play products can have on our brand, and the enormous opportunity they represent to reach millions of kids and families and LEGO fans of all ages worldwide. But at the same time, I also believe that we're developing capabilities, we're building partnerships, we are truly beginning to dream big in a way that's going to position us for even greater long-term success. And all of that is going to be built on the foundation of these last 25 years of innovation, and great products. So, I'm super excited for the future, but I really do think that we are right in the midst of that journey. And I could not be more excited for what's to come.

Ethan Vincent

I do want to see what your vision is. I mean, talking about the future is definitely one of those things where you're supposed to dream big, you're supposed to reach for big things. I want to hear what Sean has to say about dreaming and maybe your vision of what the future will be, and you know, maybe it's the next 25 years, considering we've just brought 25 years of LEGO games to an anniversary.

Sean McEvoy

I think it's on two timescales, Ethan, and I think that in the short term, you know, I talked about our upcoming products. I am so excited for that portfolio, some of which I can talk about, like *LEGO Star Wars: The Skywalker Saga*. That is the result of this tremendous, long-standing partnership, right? Like our partnership with TT Games. And then you have future products, which, again I have to be a little bit mysterious here, are the result of really exciting new partnerships that are going to bring new genres and new digital play experiences to our audiences. And then in the more distant future, this is where it gets incredibly exciting to me because I think our opportunity is unique. When you look across the industry – and both the toy industry and the digital entertainment industry – I think we have an opportunity to build a portfolio of play experiences that cut across our digital and physical portfolio, and the company's unique ecosystem of physical locations. So LEGO retail stores, and the LEGOLAND Parks, and other real-world locations that also represent opportunities for play. And that that digital and physical ecosystem of play can seamlessly combine digital and physical and fluid play. Because for kids, there isn't a distinction to be made: Play is just play. So for me, 25 years from now, that is still going to be true. And if our vision comes to life, and I am so confident it's going to, the LEGO Group is still going to be leading the way when it comes to inspiring and developing the builders of tomorrow across digital and physical and fluid play. So I couldn't be more excited to be on that

journey. I think we've got such a great team to achieve that. And there's a huge opportunity ahead of us.

Brian Crecente

I know you can't talk about the specifics of what the five teams are working on. But I'm curious if you could talk in a little more detail about why you, and I guess others, decided to create those specific five teams. Like, why focus on those five groups versus five other types of things that you could focus on?

Sean McEvoy

It's a great question, Brian. There's a couple of reasons why. The first was, we recognized that as we had been previously structured, we really were – we were very much platform-focused. And so what that led to, I think, was actually quite a bit of disconnection in terms of the way we were developing our portfolio of experiences. And also, there was the risk that we were kind of putting audiences second in our priority, and really thinking specifically about, "Well these are the right products for this particular platform, and we know what we know about our audience, and so we will deliver something that is going to make sense to that audience on that platform." I think we're recognizing that, more and more our audiences are playing seamlessly across all of those platforms. And many of the products that we're creating for those platforms are cross-platform in and of themselves, right? So we really thought, let's think about ways that we can kind of break down some of those barriers, and actually, even though I spoke to kind of five workstreams, be a little bit less siloed and a little bit more able to kind of work across and support each other, have knowledge sharing and ideas that are shared across, and not be super precious about, well, this is a product that can only appear on a certain platform with a certain partner in a certain genre. We really want to start to open up the aperture a bit in terms of how we develop those concepts, and then how we drive them forward.

Brian Crecente

And I know that this is a very specific question, but I think it speaks to a broader point, which is the notion – one of your streams is social [creative] platforms, and obviously that's become a huge thing with the rise of things like Minecraft and Roblox and Fortnite. So what I'm curious about is, is there, in your mind, an approach, that the LEGO Group would want to take where it creates its own sort of metaverse, sort of its own major social platform? Or do you think that the future is more about linking up with some of these preexisting social platforms?

Sean McEvoy

I think the first thing to say is that we're actually hard at work already in that workstream, via our partnership with Unity and the Unity Microgame project, to start to offer those tools for creativity and sharing and a much more social play experience. That is, to us, that kind of begins to be the foundation for something that could be much bigger. But what we've

also said within the team is, as opposed to kind of PowerPointing our way into a strategy and a suite of a roadmap of products, we really want to start to, whenever we can, actually partner and begin to build, encounter our audiences where they are and get feedback from those audiences. So while it's a, you know, that is an early day's partnership that's really showing a tremendous amount of promise, we could envision that something like that could become much bigger over time. And really, just as I said previously, when we're thinking about an ecosystem of experiences that cuts across digital and physical play, those kind of tools for creativity we see as really foundational across that entire ecosystem. So investing in those kind of tools is definitely where we see our portfolio heading over the next 25 years for sure. Whether that's one product or a suite of products or sort of philosophy for how we approach product development, I think it's all of those things to some degree. And, as I mentioned before, there's some stuff that I kind of can't talk about just yet, but that we'll be excited to talk about it in the not-too-distant future.

Ethan Vincent

I did want to ask you your perspective on what you think is maybe the biggest challenge that you're faced as the vice president of LEGO Games? Since we do get to the core sometimes of how we're feeling about where things are at, and I would just be curious what your thoughts are, if you would be willing to answer that question.

Sean McEvoy

I'd actually characterize it less as a challenge and more of an opportunity. I think that this podcast is a great testament to the fact that there has never been a lack of willingness to explore the space of digital play and games at the LEGO Group. I think that our opportunity now is to really shape that willingness into very direct action. And to ensure that, as we've mentioned so many times before, we're building for the next 25 years – we're building on those foundations that have been built by everybody who came before us and contributed to all of the incredible projects that have been brought to market over the last 25 years. I don't think we've ever been better positioned to move that legacy forward in a hugely positive way. And I think that the company recognizes that in a really powerful way right now. So to me, it's again, a little bit less of a challenge, a little bit more of an opportunity that we have to as stewards of LEGO games here at the LEGO Group, we've got to take advantage of it. And so that has me really excited for the future.

(Postscript music)

Bits N' Bricks: Credits – 45:38

Ethan Vincent

Bits N' Bricks is made possible by LEGO Games. Our producer is Ronny Scherer. Your hosts are Ethan Vincent and Brian Crecente. Episode producing and editing by Ethan Vincent.

Writing by Brian Crecente. Mixing and sound design by Dan Carlisle. Music by Peter Priemer and Henrik Lindstrand from the award-winning game LEGO Builder's Journey, which you can play on Apple Arcade today.

We'd like to thank our participants: Niels B. Christiansen, Julia Goldin, and Sean McEvoy. We'd also like to thank the entire LEGO Games team, and Anders Tankred Holm for additional recording 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, MINDSTORMS, DUPLO, the Brick and Knob configurations, and the Minifigure are trademarks of the LEGO Group. © 2021 The LEGO Group.

All other trademarks and copyrights are the property of their respective owners. All rights reserved.