

Overwatch's® Unusual Journey From Esport to LEGO® Set

It may surprise you to learn how few video games have made the leap to physical LEGO® theme sets.

Despite the major overlap between fans of both hobbies, only about a half-dozen video games have been brickified. That includes LEGO Minecraft, LEGO Super Mario, the mini-packs of LEGO Dimensions (Sonic, Midway, Portal), the recently announced standalone Sonic set, and LEGO Overwatch®.

There are always challenges when taking any popular standalone franchise and bringing it into the child-friendly, creativity-empowering world of LEGO theme sets. And Blizzard Entertainment's Overwatch is a prime example of how that process can work, highlighting a central issue with some existing entertainment properties.

Guns and colorful LEGO building bricks don't usually mix.



In fact, the company goes to great lengths to avoid representing modern weapons in any real-world theme sets. So, when the company's talented designers started contemplating recreating key elements of the Overwatch video game with bricks, they were faced with a problem: How do you turn a hero shooter into something that meshes with the LEGO Group's family-friendly toys?

The solution came by examining the game's rich backstory and characters, which have evolved to the point of existing beyond the gameplay itself.

"When you start talking to people at the LEGO Group about what world this game lives in and what context it lives in, it's a franchise born within a game," said the LEGO Group's Sten Funder Lysdahl. "And I think in many ways we can draw similarities to other franchises which also have guns. When we dive into it, I think Overwatch is a very colorful and inclusive world. It's a fantasy universe with speaking gorillas and hamsters and so forth."

Lysdahl said that doesn't mean that the LEGO Group didn't discuss and examine the issue internally, but it wasn't a massive concern.

Ultimately, the LEGO Group and Blizzard Entertainment decided to work together to create a series of Overwatch theme sets. That work, Blizzard's Mike Hummel said, started in 2017 with high-level discussions. That then led to both teams visiting each other's campuses.

The Blizzard team and the LEGO Group team sounded equally excited about their trips, getting a chance to dive deep into the rich and colorful history of each company to examine not just the unique aspects of their creations but the surprising similarities as well.

For instance, Blizzard Entertainment, like the LEGO Group, goes to great lengths to maintain physical archives of their history.

"We do have a team that's dedicated to maintaining artifacts from all the Blizzard games," Hummel said. "The group also runs the library that we have at our headquarter campus in Irvine. And all of those things are kept in a similar process. Every year at BlizzCon, we march those out, and we let the fans interact with them."

The next step was for both companies to decide how to go about whittling down the 32-character roster of characters and many colorful settings and set pieces to the few that would be turned into boxed theme sets by the LEGO Group.

One of the early characters selected was Bastion, who was actually brought to Blizzard Entertainment as a prototype before the companies agreed to create the kits.

Hummel said he remembers seeing it unveiled at the presentation and being antsy to get his hands on it to see if it transformed like the Bastion character in the game. Ultimately, the group settled on a number of iconic characters and locations and then got to work.

The idea, Hummel said, was to ensure that there was a diverse selection of characters and locations for players to build with those first sets.

Some of the challenges the LEGO Group designers faced in bringing the characters to life included making sure they nailed the scale so that the minifigures, when appropriate, could fit inside their larger equipment or armor.

D. Va and Reinhardt, in particular, presented unique challenges, but the LEGO Group managed to nail the look and size of the creations, Hummel said.

The designers also made sure to sneak a bunch of easter eggs and surprises into their designs, Lysdahl said.

"We also added a lot of detail, I don't know if you noticed it, but we have other references to other Blizzard games in there," he said. "There's a nod to Diablo. There are some posters that are in there that are a credit to some of the beautiful animations that are in the game. And there are stickers around the Junkrate & Roadhog set to make it really come alive and feel authentic."

Ultimately, the LEGO Group and Blizzard Entertainment worked together to release eight regular sets: Watchpoint: Gibraltar, Bastion, Junkrat & Roadhog, D.Va & Reinhardt, Wrecking Ball, Dorado Showdown, Hanzo vs. Genji, and Tracer vs. Widowmaker.

Lysdahl said that the work between the two teams resulted in a good friendship between the companies and that that relationship continued to today.

Hummel declined to say definitively if there were any new Overwatch or even Overwatch 2 LEGO theme sets coming, but he did say that the two companies continue to discuss the possibilities.

"Our strategy for future releases remains unchanged from the launch of the program," he said. "We continue to look to the LEGO Group and Blizzard communities to guide us. We are listening to their recommendations. We're watching the custom models they continue to create. And that's really what's going to guide us into the future.

"We are definitely still talking with each other. We are looking for new opportunities."

Explore more...

In order of appearance

[LEGO Minecraft](#) — Official LEGO Group page

[LEGO Dimensions](#) — Wikipedia

[LEGO Sonic the Hedgehog](#) — Press release

[LEGO Super Mario](#) — Official LEGO Group page

[LEGO Overwatch sets](#) — Blizzard Gear

[How LEGO Overwatch Was Designed](#) — YouTube

[Giant LEGO D.Va from Overwatch](#) — Beyond the Brick on YouTube

[LEGO Overwatch - How Heroes Play Tribute Video](#) — YouTube

[Blizzard 30th Anniversary | Welcome Home](#) — YouTube

[Overwatch](#) — Official website

[Overwatch brick Bastion skin](#) — Kotaku

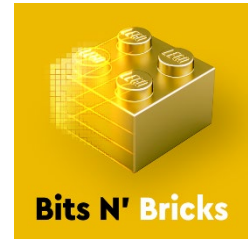
[Overwatch 2](#) — Official website

[What do cows have to do with Diablo?](#) — Diablo Wiki

Transcript

Bits N' Bricks Season 1 Episode 15: LEGO® Overwatch®: A Conversation

March 17, 2021 · 44:44



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 Overwatch – 00:33

Ethan Vincent

Hey, Brian.

Brian Crecente

Hey, man, how's it going?

Ethan Vincent

It's going great. It's another wonderful episode, a conversational episode today.

Brian Crecente

Yeah.

Ethan Vincent

And we are looking at LEGO Overwatch. While the LEGO Group has been, you know, making video games for more than 25 years now, physical LEGO brick sets and themes that are built around existing non LEGO Group video games, are actually fairly rare. I think the first one was born out of the concept in the LEGO CUUSOO program, which later became

LEGO Ideas. And that was based on Minecraft, and that original pitch became the Minecraft: Micro World, you know, it's that forest set and was released, I think in June 2012, June 6 2012 to be exact. And you know, that first set led to dozens of more releases and Minecraft remains obviously one of the most popular themes for that company. But you know, since the first video game theme released, there have been fairly few new video game additions to official LEGO game theme sets, right?

Brian Crecente

Yeah, no, you're absolutely right, which is on some level, at least as a gamer, it seems strange to me. So you've got, as you mentioned, you've got Minecraft obviously, huge deal. And then LEGO Dimensions, which was the LEGO Group and TT Games take on Toys to Life, that brought with it this amazing bunch of add-on packs, some of which were based on video games like, you know, Sonic the Hedgehog, and they had that really cool Midway Arcade, and of course Portal was one of the sets. And then earlier this year, the LEGO Group announced it was turning this LEGO Ideas' creation based on Sonic the Hedgehog and the game's Green Hill Zone into its own set, so that's another one.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, and don't forget last year's mega hit, you know, LEGO Super Mario and the NES model.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, that's true. But back in 2018, the LEGO Group and Blizzard Entertainment announced that the two companies were working on this new range of LEGO themed sets based on Blizzard's popular Overwatch game, which, you know, when that news broke, I was over the moon. And so, the first six sets were unveiled in November 2018. And then they went on sale in January 2019. But actually, the talks between the two companies started way back in 2017. And probably not too surprising, if you know a little bit about how the LEGO Group works and some of its own sort of core concepts, the project had a number of major hurdles to clear before the sets would be able to come to life.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, that's true. And I think one of those hurdles included, you know, things like the LEGO Group's traditional stance against featuring contemporary weapons of any sorts in its themes, as well as trying to kind of narrow down which of the game's many popular characters and settings, you know, should be turned into LEGO sets. I imagine that to be pretty overwhelming, right, Brian? Where it's like, you look at a video game, it's like, I want everything to be turned into LEGO theme sets. But yeah, obviously possible. So really cool.

Chapter 2: Conversation with Michael Hummel – 03:31

Ethan Vincent

We were able to chat with Mike Hummel, who's the director of product development for Blizzard Consumer Products, about how a mutual respect between the LEGO Group and Blizzard Entertainment around you know, the wonderful creations both companies make, inspired and fueled the creation of these popular sets.

(Music)

Ethan Vincent

So Mike, can you tell me a little bit about, you know, how the LEGO Group and Blizzard started? You know, like the year these first conversations kind of got off the ground?

Michael Hummel

Yeah, let me think about that...I think things began to shift into high gear, probably shortly right after the announcement of the game. One thing we see is that the Overwatch community is constantly inspiring the Blizzard teams with artwork, videos, and custom LEGO builds created from their own collections. Looking at those, you know, that's when we really wanted to pursue the opportunity of bringing our Overwatch universe to life through LEGO bricks. Let me think, when conversations began, I can remember we had a lot of initial ideas, and a lot of them actually went on to become construction sets. From my own experience on the consumer product side, I can remember I really wanted to see a physical transforming Bastion. And so, you know, I was really excited when the LEGO Group first visited the Blizzard campus, and that Bastion prototype was one of the very first sets they showed us.

Brian Crecente

So if there are some, for some reason, some people out there who have not seen Bastion, I know that's boggles the mind, but if that were true, how would you describe what Bastion is?

Michael Hummel

Well, Bastion is this amazing character that, within the game, he's got three different modes. And so that really allows, from a consumer product's perspective, it's very interesting that it's three-in-one characters, and to being able to work with LEGO brick engineers to create to engineer that product so that all three of those modes were captured and you could transform him from one mode to the next, was really exciting for us.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, and so he's sort of like, is it fair to call him a robot? Is that...or is that off-brand? Like, what do you guys internally, what do you refer to him as?

Michael Hummel

Let's call him an omnic.

Brian Crecente

Right, of course. So, obviously Overwatch is huge, has a huge following, but you guys also have World of Warcraft, you have Diablo, you've got all of these amazing IP. Why was it that Overwatch was the one that you felt was like, this is the right game for a LEGO set.

Michael Hummel

I think we were really guided by the characters and the maps of Overwatch. The many maps of Overwatch allow players to adventure and a hopeful future, kind of on like a global scale. And if you think about some of those maps from the Horizon Lunar Colony to the Hollywood, it was really like a playground of possibilities when we were able to work with the LEGO Group on figuring out what those initial sets were going to be. There's a diverse cast of characters from the game, and they have so many different skins. It just seems like it was a perfect fit for the LEGO minifigure format. And then, you know, even think about the vehicles right? You know, one of the sets we did was the Dorado Showdown set. So we even get the benefit of having, you know, more people spend time on the payload by constructing it through the LEGO kits.

Brian Crecente

it is. And you know, what you guys ended up with is, is simply amazing. I am curious, once you decided you wanted to move forward on this, how was it that the two groups work together? Were you sort of coming to the table with pitches or like, what was that back and forth, like,

Michael Hummel

You know, to my memory, from the very beginning of the process, it was a highly collaborative opportunity between the two groups. I mean, there were multiple trips. We had both teams visit the respective company headquarters' for creative syncs on what we wanted it to do. The LEGO brick engineers presented a number of prototypes for the Overwatch game developers to take a look at to get their feedback. From my perspective, it was one of the best meetings I've had the opportunity to attend during my time at Blizzard. You know, speaking of that Bastion piece, I can remember being very distracted in that very first meeting because I kept looking at it. And I wanted to get up during the meeting and convert it into tank mode.

Brian Crecente

That's so cool. And so was that initial prototype, was it something that could be actually changed? Or was it something they designed to be able to sort of go between modes?

Michael Hummel

That was the first question I had and I was asked to, "Don't jump ahead, don't jump ahead, wait till they present during the meeting." And then ultimately, they did show us that they were thinking about it when they were making the prototype that they wanted it to change. And that was something that we wanted to see in the final model that was released.

Brian Crecente

That's very cool. Now were you among the few Blizzard folks who went to Billund, Denmark to LEGO Group's headquarters to kind of do the tour?

Michael Hummel

You know, maybe after the pandemic, I'll have the opportunity to participate in a second visit. I did get a chance to talk to my colleagues and they told me it was an exceptionally memorable experience for them. They got to visit the LEGO House, the production factory, they were given a tour of where they store every LEGO set that's ever been created. I can say as someone who helps the internal Blizzard archival team that maintains historic products for our BlizzCon convention and for campus displays, I would very much like the opportunity to visit the LEGO studios.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, it's definitely an amazing place. I think you'd really enjoy the archives at the LEGO Idea House, but it sounds like you have something very similar. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

Michael Hummel

We do have a team that's dedicated to maintaining artifacts from all the Blizzard games. The group also runs the library that we have at our headquarter campus in Irvine. And all of those things are kept in a similar process. We're inspired by what the LEGO Group has done, and every year at BlizzCon we march those out, and we let the fans interact with them. I believe at BlizzCon 2019, we had the Blizzard arcade. That was a great place for us to show off some of those cooler things from Blizzard's past.

Brian Crecente

That's very cool. So you all have these meetings, I understand they came to visit you as well. Once you decided on doing this, doing the Overwatch-themed LEGO sets, how did

you go about deciding which of the many settings and characters should be turned into sets?

Michael Hummel

Yeah, that's a great question. You know, it was an iterative process between the teams on what we wanted to do. To my memory, we started with like a basic outline of how many sets would be included at launch. And we got to see the size and the brick piece count of those products and what we were looking to build towards after the initial releases. We mapped out a list of possibilities and then we began to focus on which Overwatch maps and the specific characters that worked well for the different set configurations we were considering. We really wanted a diverse selection of characters and locations for players to build with those very first sets. Sometimes it was, you know, we concepted around a central set piece, I'm thinking like, maybe like the rocket in the Watchpoint: Gibraltar set, and then other times it was really, just really all about the characters like the Junkrat and the Roadhog, Junkertown kit.

Brian Crecente

Were there any particular challenges that you all faced, either in trying to come up with which figures you wanted, or did the LEGO Group come back to you and say, "Hey, you know, it's really hard, for instance with Bastion, it's very hard to have him do this sort of mode change." Were there things like that you guys had to work on to try to figure out solutions for?

Michael Hummel

Yeah, for sure. I mean, one thing I can remember is we knew from the beginning, like one of the first things that we were talking about is that we really wanted that LEGO D.Va piece, but we needed it to be sized in proportion so that her minifigure would fit inside of her mech. And you know, what the game team was really impressed with was the LEGO Group's creative solution for the Reinhardt build that was actually included in that release. You know, if you look at it, this was something that wasn't pulled directly from the video game. But the solution allowed for that Reinhardt minifigure to be at the same scale as the other character figures in the series. And simultaneously, because of that creative solution, his large format, his armored version was appropriately sized. And together those two pieces created this amazing double tank set.

Brian Crecente

Very cool. Yeah, that is, those are, it's very neat to see how those minifigures interact with their vehicles, or as you said, I guess like the armor. So, were you there? Or I'm assuming if you weren't there, you at least saw the reaction when this was unveiled? What was it like at BlizzCon when these were rolled out?

Michael Hummel

I was there. And for sure, it was one of my favorite memories from the convention that year. I mean, thinking about it, between the set displays, we had a behind-the-scenes panel with the LEGO brick engineers. And of course, there was that eight-foot tall LEGO D.Va statue. You know, for us, for the consumer product's team it was definitely the premiere event for the show. The fans shared that same level of excitement and anticipation that we had when we first learned that we would have the opportunity to work with the LEGO Group. I can remember before we could publicly announce the partnership, it was incredibly difficult for me not to reveal anything to my son and daughter. So you know, in addition to being able to see and hear the player's reactions firsthand at the convention, I received the additional benefit of being the coolest dad in the world - and I still have the mug to prove it.

Brian Crecente

So you mentioned the D.Va and I think Tokki, the mech statue that you had on display. How did that come about? Was that something that the LEGO Group came up with? And did they build it on site or did it have to be transported?

Michael Hummel

Yeah, there's quite a few stories about that piece. You know, actually there were two of them made, and they went on a world tour after BlizzCon before one of them received a permanent home at the Blizzard Irvine Campus. You know, in both onsite construction of these pieces, they actually had professionals come out and build out the installations. I was there while they were doing it and I was able to check out the...you know it was a massive instructional booklet that accompanied the displays making the statues. I can remember, I volunteered to take a week of my own time and attempt to build it myself. But yeah, they told me my time was better spent somewhere else.

Brian Crecente

That's amazing.

Michael Hummel

Yeah, I don't know if I agree with that decision, but ultimately, it was probably better that we left it up to the professionals. Some other fun facts about that: that statue is constructed of 144,000 bricks, and we were told it contains the most pink bricks of any display that the LEGO Group has ever created.

Brian Crecente

That's very cool. So you, in 2019 I think it was, you guys released this amazing brick Bastion, LEGO brick-themed skin for Bastion inside Overwatch, which is sort of the opposite of what you all were doing with the LEGO Group. How did that come about? And were there any

sort of challenges? Was that a LEGO Group idea or Blizzard idea? And yeah, I'm just curious what the process was there.

Michael Hummel

It was a shared experience, you know, our collaboration opportunities with the LEGO Group, the brick community, and the Blizzard fans allows us to go beyond just the construction sets. I mean, there were a lot of things that we had the opportunity to pursue, from the LEGO animated videos to, we ran some player tournaments, our game developers building some sets on camera. You know, we continue to look for opportunities to bring both of these worlds together in new ways. Now, within the game, we support events that allow us to put the spotlight on an Overwatch character, and we can reward players with the opportunity to earn a new skin while playing the game. You know, and that program that was the genesis that really allowed us to collaborate with the LEGO Group on the release of that brick-inspired Bastion skin.

Brian Crecente

So I would be remiss if I didn't bring up Overwatch 2, obviously a lot of anticipation for that game, I think it's coming out next year, I think that at least that's the latest we've heard. I'm curious: are there any talks right now underway with the LEGO Group about perhaps coming up with some new LEGO sets themed around the new game?

Michael Hummel

We have no new updates to share at this time, but there will be future opportunities for sure for us to reveal more about some new Blizzard consumer products. You know, the Blizzard websites and our social channels are the best sources for new information. And we encourage everyone to continue to watch these spaces.

Brian Crecente

Do you think it's fair to say that the the LEGO Group and Blizzard Entertainment aren't finished working together? Like I'm assuming that sounds like there's still talks at least between the two companies?

Michael Hummel

We are definitely still talking with each other. We are looking for new opportunities. But again, we have no new updates to share at this time.

(Blizzard's Welcome Home trailer plays:- Home, isn't always where we live. For most of us live in many worlds. Home is an indefinable space.)

Ethan Vincent

What you're hearing is the opening of Blizzard's 30th anniversary Welcome Home trailer. And surely it's epic. And so if you haven't seen it, you know, go to YouTube, check it out.

But yeah, it's a very special year for Blizzard Entertainment, you know, 30 years. That's amazing, so I guess my last question, Mike is, you know, speaking maybe, you know, for the company as a whole, or at least you know, in what you've heard around the company, what do you think it's been like for people who work at Blizzard Entertainment to see some of the company's creations immortalized in LEGO brick- theme sets?

Michael Hummel

Yeah, this is definitely a special year for Blizzard. Our 30th anniversary celebrations allow us to share memorable moments from our past. As we head towards Overwatch's fifth anniversary, which is also happening later this year. As part of the Blizzard Consumer Product's team, we are very thankful for the opportunity to work with the LEGO company. It was one of the high points of my professional career. You know, eight-year-old me is very proud of, well, older me.

Ethan Vincent

Nice one.

Chapter 3: A Closer Look at Overwatch – 18:39

(Music)

Ethan Vincent

I enjoyed that interview. It was great hearing about the love that the LEGO Group has for Blizzard Entertainment's collection of video games. And how that you know, helped shape which game the company would decide to turn into theme sets. And, you know, I haven't really played Overwatch much, it's kind of a confession. I know about it, but yeah, I'm not living in that world right now, but explain it to me a little bit, Brian, like, tell me a little bit about the game and obviously helping audiences who aren't familiar with the game.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, sure. So Overwatch is what's known as a hero shooter. And what that means is that it's a team-based, multiplayer first-person shooter game. So think of it as like, sort of like Call of Duty, but in this sense, it's very cartoonish. The characters include things like, you know, giant gorillas and a woman in a mech, and another woman who can fly with these angel wings. So there's a number, there's 32 playable characters. And so to play the game, what happens is that people are sort of matched up and they're dropped into this match. They're broken into two teams. They choose among those 32 playable characters, which ones they want to play for the match. And gameplay is essentially boiled down to one side, one team trying to achieve some sort of goal. So that can be things like escorting a payload, which is like a truck across the map. And then the other side is trying to stop them from doing that, from achieving that goal. And this is usually done through this sort of

fantasy, cartoonish gunplay. So the game was designed to be, and it turns out is, a very popular form of esport as well. So you see this being played on a competitive level, both professionally and even on the college level.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, you know, it's kind of interesting, because turning this into a LEGO theme set is a bit unusual, I think, even on a number of levels, right, Brian?

Brian Crecente

Yeah, I mean, I think that one of the ways they did this is that the Overwatch, as a property, has sort of outgrown its initial video game, if that makes sense. So it's gone on to become sort of a broader franchise. And so now there are these sort of short cartoon-like videos that you can watch that actually provide backstory to the characters. And there's even a digital comic series. And there's this very rich sort of overworld and all of these backstories that are...they're really only hinted at in the game, because the game is so, you know, it's like a football match where everybody has a goal and they're trying to achieve something. But you've got this massive backdrop that the Blizzard Entertainment and the developers are really just starting to explore. And I think that helps a lot with the LEGO Group's approach.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, it sounds like you could argue that the LEGO Overwatch theme sets are more about the broader world in which Overwatch exists than maybe the actual gameplay, right?

Brian Crecente

Yeah, no, absolutely.

Chapter 4: Conversation with Sten Funder Lysdahl – 21:44

Ethan Vincent

Cool. So we actually talked to Sten Funder Lysdahl. He's the senior marketing lead in product development at the LEGO Group, about you know, this very question.

(Music)

Ethan Vincent

The first question that we obviously like to ask everyone is: if you know, does anyone at the LEGO Group play Blizzard games or Overwatch? Are there any super fans out there you know of Sten?

Sten Funder Lysdahl

Plenty. I would say, I can't count how many I know of. In my current team we have a longtime WOW [World of Warcraft] player, very dedicated, know every bit details in. Yeah, I even remember back in the process of developing Overwatch, how many people came actually to the project, I remember coming in and offering support and they're showing their passion for the franchise and the game. I know we had one who actually met her husband in a Blizzard game who, was also herself a high ranking Mercy player I think, and one of the top 500 players in the world at that time. So there was a lot of dedication around and yeah, yeah, so there's quite a few, I would say, not just Blizzard games, but also just games in general.

Brian Crecente

So I have to think that some of that passion that some of those people had at the LEGO Group for Blizzard games, and in particular for Overwatch, must have been a important part of the decision to try to get this made into a theme set. The reason I asked that is I think Overwatch as a video game, because it has guns in it, and because it has that sort of cartoon-level violence, there must have been some pushback at the beginning. So I'm just curious, was that a big challenge? And what was it that made the team decide to really fight to have this made?

Sten Funder Lysdahl

For me gaming is a little bit like a franchise. And I think when you start talking to people at the LEGO Group about what world this game would live in, what context it lives in, it's a franchise, all within a game. And I think in many ways we can draw similarities to other franchises who also have guns. So I think once you start telling a story, I think people quickly understand what we're talking about and why guns is not necessarily a big concern. So I think that's the short storyline. I think, when we dive into it, I think Overwatch is a very colorful and inclusive world where I think many people thought the game itself and the creators, Kaplan and the team, wanted to really to sell is, is the fantasy universe, right? With speaking gorillas and hamsters and so forth or anything. And I think there the interesting part is that when it's fantasy, the premises changes, like with Star Wars, or Batman and so forth. And so guns become secondary. It's of course, it's something we reflect upon and talk about, it's not...we know that people are looking at the LEGO Group for many reasons, and I think one of them is definitely also the violence aspect of it. And so it's very much about how you interpret that gameworld or franchise. So of course there was dialogue and we talked back and forth about that as well here, but I wouldn't say it was a massive concern. I think anytime you enter new territory like games, there are some people who are new to that, and in particular if they're not familiar with gaming themselves, and therefore these conversations, of course, have to take place, and they took place to some extent I would say just to make sure everybody was on the same page.

Ethan Vincent

So, Sten, we talked to Mike a little bit about this, but I'm curious about this origin of the Blizzard Entertainment LEGO Group collaboration and kind of your side of the story here. How did this idea come about?

Sten Funder Lysdahl

To my knowledge it started, the conversation started back in 2017. And I think I wasn't part of the first meetings with Blizzard, and I think as soon as Overwatch actually came out there was interest, and I think on our side at least, we kept an eye on it from the very get-go. And I also know Blizzard had an eye on the LEGO Group to some extent at least. I think the first serious conversations took place in 2017 among senior staff and then I was brought in at the end of 2017.

Brian Crecente

So you, this idea sort of starts floating around. Did it start with Overwatch or was it just you wanted to do something with one of the properties that the Blizzard Entertainment had?

Sten Funder Lysdahl

Overwatch was on our radar because of the way the universe sort of constructed or built. We have an eye out for any entertainment franchises, in particular gaming, that we find relevant and interesting, but definitely Overwatch was the one we had on our radar early on.

Brian Crecente

What was it? I know you talked a little bit about that, but was it sort of the inclusivity and the creativity of the world that drew you to Overwatch in particular?

Sten Funder Lysdahl

I think it's the storyline behind Overwatch that really intrigued us I think there's the fantasy element of course because on the surface if you don't dive into the trying to understand Overwatch, I think it can, can be many things but once you you know, you familiarize yourself with with Overwatch and understand it, what the game is about and how it's trying to basically fight for a better world and and the characters how well created they are, background stories and how most ever I think Blizzard put into making this an inclusive and colorful world that really has a broad appeal and but also stands for something I think that was that was what caught our interest.

Brian Crecente

So I understand that. During this process, I think early on, there were a group of people from the LEGO Group who went to Blizzard headquarters and then some people from

Blizzard Entertainment who came to the LEGO Group. What were those meetings like those trips?

Sten Funder Lysdahl

I remember first time being in Blizzard headquarters, I was a bit starstruck, I was the big fan of Overwatch and meeting Jeff Kaplan for the first time there was a that that's that's humbling. I think when you meet people and from from something you were passionate about yourself, but I also think it was just meeting the whole of the Blizzard team behind Overwatch and seeing you know, they're super kind people, they're passionate about what they do. They're passionate about the LEGO brand. And I think we are super excited on the LEGO Group side, just for for being there and talking about this. We brought in different concept ideas, of course prepared a lot. So bringing a lot of those ideas along and sitting at the Blizzard headquarters and, and talking about a future product line like the LEGO Group was that was super exciting. I also think I think we quickly realized there was quite a good ... there's a lot of respect and good energy in the room. Just over the course of the stay in Irvine, but also when the Blizzard team came to Denmark, and Billund, the LEGO Group's headquarters. I think they're super passionate about LEGO Group as well. So I think there's still really I would say it was a super collaborative approach we had to the whole project. And I think the passion from both sides helped fuel that a lot. And that started from the very get go of those first meeting in Irvine. And later on in Billund it continued.

Ethan Vincent

Would you say it was sort of a like a hard sell to convince Blizzard that they should have an Overwatch LEGO theme set? Or was that something they were on board with right away?

Sten Funder Lysdahl

I think we were on board right away. I think we had ideas of our own but I also think they had many ideas as well. I think they also came up with some early ideas and how it could look like so it's quite easy to get going. I think what's interesting when you talk about it, about gaming, character-driven universes, it's always how you translate it into a very square world, so there's a lot of organic forms in Overwatch, basically because of the characters, but could also be down to the vehicles, so on and so forth. And so I think we talked a lot about what it could look like and I think some of the early conversations was definitely around sort of the DNA of what a LEGO Overwatch product would look like.

Ethan Vincent

That's cool, yeah. So Brian and I were talking and we heard a fun story. And it was about the LEGO Group first going over there and you had Bastion with you and there were some people at Blizzard who were very antsy to get their hands on it and to change it into different modes. What was that meeting like?

Sten Funder Lysdahl

I remember that meeting, I think we were in the room, sort of in one of the Overwatch team's core meeting rooms and we brought a whole bunch of models, and basically a range of models to test out, you know, what would work and what wouldn't work. And we didn't know what the Overwatch team would think of the different ideas and directions and...but one of them definitely caught on the eye immediately was the Bastion model, we have a fantastic designer, Luis, who works tirelessly on it. And the first time the Overwatch team saw that they will just immediately in love with it. At least it's my interpretation, like many others were. So it was just a great meeting and the transformation of the model, that actually didn't come around in the first round of the model, I think Luis did three, four rounds of that model before we got it right and everybody was happy about it. So the first time...you see the model, it came as Bastion as a character and not turned into a turret. And then once you see this transformation, and show that to the Overwatch team they were...I think their jaws dropped a bit. I think...I think we felt it was a really strong representation of their character. And I think once also see the transformation, people ... they all see it and was really surprised and happy about it.

Brian Crecente

That's curious, I'm interested in how it was you guys would go about...I know obviously the LEGO team has a lot of experience recreating things using LEGO bricks and elements. How did you go about figuring out things like the transformation? And also, were there challenges? I know, we've interviewed other designers who've talked about, for instance, with Doctor Who having to have special bricks made to get the color right. Were there things like that that came up with the Overwatch set?

Sten Funder Lysdahl

Absolutely. I think we had two larger batches that were done where there was a lot of tricks to it. I think the interesting part was, I think with Overwatch, was we did a lot of research and insights on it from very early on to understand also what would Overwatch mean in the world of a LEGO consumer? But also what would it...what is important for an Overwatch fan? When we talk about what translates their passion into LEGO bricks - what would they care about? What would they think is important? And a lot of learnings came, or insights came out of that. I think it's interesting, for example, with the Millennium Falcon, you see that for short amount of time in a movie. So it's not that you see, have a deep knowledge around what the interiors look like, of course, you can freeze images and you can sort of study them. But overall, it's a moving piece that moves on and unless you watch the Han Solo movie, or I think then it's fairly short time you spent with that model, to be fair, but when you talk to people who game a lot, and people who...Overwatch fans who play this game so much, they're so...they know the ins and outs of this world so the authenticity becomes extremely important. You have to care about these models down to the very little details and translation of how you translate that world, because not everything can be directly transformed into LEGO bricks or the LEGO system or the LEGO core brick system.. It's important to get that right. And there are some ways we translate certain things when it comes to the bricks. So that was very interesting to do. And there

were certain elements across the line that were, particularly of course, had a lot of focus on particular with characters. So we molded a lot of new elements, particularly around hair pieces and so forth.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, speaking of minifigures, Sten, when we were talking with Mike and the folks at Blizzard, they mentioned how surprised they were that the LEGO team was able to kind of nail the scale, like the sizing of the minifig actually fitting inside these vehicles, and armor in one case. Was that pretty challenging or was that something that you were absolutely sure that the LEGO design team could nail?

Sten Funder Lysdahl

There are a lot of talented designers at the LEGO Group I would say, but yes, it was. I would say it was a challenge. There's a lot of rebuilds of the models to make sure we had the right proportions and it felt true and authentic to Overwatch. So yeah, of course, D.Va was one where we had to figure out direct, exact right way of getting the minifigure to fit into that the cockpit. We also had a fun story around a Reinhardt, where we brainstormed around the set and how Reinhardt could actually be minifigure as well as a head. That didn't come in the first iteration for sure.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, so I'm curious, internally at the LEGO Group, were there are a lot of people, I guess two questions. One: were there are a lot of people vying to be the designers for these sets because it was so popular? And also, was there a lot of conversation about which characters were going to make the cut? I'm assuming everybody there who plays the game probably has favorites and probably wanted to see them in LEGO brick form.

Sten Funder Lysdahl

So first question, there were a lot of designers who, first time around seeing a game like Overwatch coming into the LEGO portfolio was extremely exciting for many designers. So we got a lot of people who showed up and helped out. And of course, we tried to find the designers that can help build good models, but some of them are super Overwatch players, know every bit of detail, which I think is important as well, in building...in putting your passion authenticity into that sort of set you built. So there was a lot of that, but also people coming to the project just helping because they were, you know, like one designer, a graphic designer, was really good at his work, but he has some ideas. So there's also a lot of collaborative work within the LEGO Group design teams. And then a lot of input from the Overwatch [team] of course, as well in terms of what they felt would, what could be interesting and fun to do. And there's always trade-off discussion, because there's so many characters, as you pointed out, people have a certain passion for one character. And we had to make trade-offs that were not always easy trade-offs, but of course you had to do it, and we also wanted to make sure we had some good interesting combinations like either

Reinhardt, but also Junkrat, and, and Hammond and so forth, wanted to make sure we could put the right sets together at the right, sort of when we launched them in different waves, so that it would become interesting for the audience as well. And listening a lot to the community, I would say. I actually think the community from both sides played a huge role in some of the selections on the characters because we kept monitoring the conversations in various forms.

Brian Crecente

That's interesting. Do you, I can't remember if you said, do you play Overwatch yourself?

Sten Funder Lysdahl

Yes.

Brian Crecente

Do you have a favorite character?

Sten Funder Lysdahl

Yes, well I have several. But my main was, it was in the beginning, Bastion, and later on also played a lot of Mercy. And a bit of D.Va.

Brian Crecente

So you...I know Mercy was...you got at least Mercy in there, right? In the one of the sets. Were there any discussions about doing, obviously you talked about balancing the characters that you're doing in the theme sets. But you also have all these settings that are just amazing in Overwatch. How much discussion was there around whether or not to include settings and whether you wanted to include one particular setting versus another?

Sten Funder Lysdahl

It's interesting with a game like Overwatch because it's such a character-driven game, and as soon as you, from a LEGO Group design point-of-view, want to make sure you have an interesting set for the fan. We had to go in and figure out where this makes sense to play out a scene of course, choke points in the maps were one thing. It could also be backdrops. And I remember one particular insight from a research we in Boston where we had a fan interviewing a fan of Overwatch and he clocked in, I think over 600 hours of play, and when he saw the Gibraltar spaceship he couldn't recognize where it came from. So I think it was interesting because they're so focused on the character and their abilities, so we had, you know...and once you start hearing those, you of course you get a little bit sort of curious what is it that works, what is it that they notice, and then you have to make a set that really tries it. A lot of them are built around a character...because characters...because that is what Overwatch about, and then figuring out how to navigate a cool spaceship into set as well. And then after that we also added a lot of detail, I don't know if you notice it,

but we have references to other games, Blizzard games in there and one of them is a nod to Diablo.

Brian Crecente

Really? Now where's that?

Sten Funder Lysdahl

There's a Dorado set, there's a pinata which is a nod to the Diablo world, so-

Brian Crecente

You should have put some some cows in the background.

(Laughing)

Sten Funder Lysdahl

But there's so many, there's so much passion to put into certain...the posters in the Dorado set there's hidden posters in there for ... as credit to some of the beautiful animations that Blizzard did but also the Junkrat set there's a whole background story around Roadhog and Junkrat. There's also these stickers around and so Easter eggs put into the set that we also played around with to really make sure the set came alive, and you know, authentic and relevant way for the fans.

Brian Crecente

I want to talk a little bit more about that sort of interaction or intersection of video games and LEGO theme sets, but before I do, I'm curious about the 2019 skin that came out for Bastion, that was a brick Bastion that was this LEGO brick-themed skin. Was that a Blizzard idea or was that something that LEGO Group came up with? And how involved were you all with that?

Sten Funder Lysdahl

I would say we were ... of course we had dialogue with Blizzard around it, but it was definitely a Blizzard idea. When it comes to integration in a community-driven game, which I would call Overwatch to a large extent, I personally, sitting with the product line back then I felt quite responsible for not getting too involved in it because it cannot in my opinion be a consumer product going into...to a game. It has to be a tribute, the other way around to, you know, the story of Bastion and who is he and that of course, there's a link to the LEGO bricks, but I think it's important that it was the Blizzard team and the Overwatch team that came about what they did. We of course looked at some of the original work but the colors, the build, everything is from the Overwatch team. And I find that a huge credit because I know they've worked really hard on it, every aspect of it, you know, to fit the current rigging of the model, the shading and everything, but also the sound, if you notice the sound on the model is very different than the original Bastion, and that also is in of

course in the dialogue with the LEGO Group and making sure it feels authentic to Bastion, but also has a brick feel to it.

Brian Crecente

So as a personal fan of Overwatch, I'm assuming that you've been paying close attention to Overwatch 2. Are there any hopes you have for a crossover between the new Overwatch when it comes out and perhaps new LEGO sets themed around that game?

Sten Funder Lysdahl

That would be cool. I think we just keep continue our dialogue with the Blizzard team and seeing what the future brings. It's a little bit tricky. I think it's also we want to make sure that we deliver exactly what the fans want and what Blizzard wants. So I think we have a good, I will say even friendship today with the Blizzard team, and then we have close dialogue going on. Listen also to what the community says and what they're doing. And then yeah, let's see what the future holds.

Brian Crecente

So this is...I was...you were talking a little bit about that sort of intersection of video games and the LEGO Group. And it's interesting that despite that sort of, I think that fan base between those two sort of hobbies and passions, there's not a lot of sets. So there's the Minecraft set, now there's the Sonic set that's coming out, both of which started as LEGO Ideas' pitches, obviously Dimensions had all of those amazing mini sets, and you have Overwatch. Do you think we can expect to see more video game characters and themes coming to LEGO sets in the future that perhaps aren't even Blizzard but are just kind of across the gambit?

Sten Funder Lysdahl

I would hope, I mean, for me gaming is a franchise approach, and so when they start some franchises start in the movie space or cinema space, others start in the gaming space and then transforms into these amazing franchises. So I think there's so much out there for us to explore and do more of, and I think we, I would hope we could do way more also our own fans, right? Of LEGO bricks, they're not just friends of the movies, they're fans of games, and as you mentioned a couple of them yourselves. I'm super excited about Super Mario collaboration as well. So hopefully with a lot more there will be victory.

Chapter 5: Conclusions – 41:22

(Music)

Ethan Vincent

Well, that was cool talking to Sten about Overwatch theme sets. And you know, again, this kind of harkens back to some of the podcasts we've even done, Brian, about video games that are turned into theme sets. We've got Super Mario, Sonic the Hedgehog, you know, even Dimensions there's these really cool iterations of LEGO brick sets that are based on video games, and it's really cool to see those come to life, and you know, obviously, for collectors, but also for someone who's just like deeply involved in that world, and, man, I can see this, you know, it constantly evolving, and I just think we're at the very beginning of this. It's very exciting to see how vast the LEGO brand expands into the video game space, which I think is really exciting too, Brian.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, I liked what he said about likening it to movie properties. And I think he's right. And also it's important to note that in this day and age, video games are as important, or maybe even more important, to sort of the younger generation of people coming up now, when it comes to what they connect with. And so I think it's great that the LEGO Group seems to recognize that and understands that is important, as you know, plucking some of those amazing movie properties out and creating these sets like Star Wars and Lord of the Rings. It's now like, now you've got to look at Super Mario and Sonic the Hedgehog. Personally, being a Blizzard superfan myself, I love the Overwatch sets. I'm super anticipating them maybe doing something for Overwatch 2. I think at the latest BlizzCon, they had this amazing LEGO brick mosaic that had been made, and it showed off a bunch of the Overwatch characters. You know, maybe that's just art they had there, but I'd love to think that that was some subtle hint that Overwatch 2 is going to be getting its own theme sets. Personally, as a fan of Diablo I would love to see Diablo-themed set come out. And of course there are a million properties, I'm exaggerating a little, but there's a lot of properties out there that are video games that people love: Final Fantasy; Pac Man; Space Invaders - I'm old, you could tell (inaudible) But like turning those into LEGO brick theme sets would be amazing, I think.

Bits N' Bricks: Credits – 43:47

(Post script music)

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. Original music by Peter Priemer and Henrik Lindstrand from the award winning game LEGO Builder's Journey, which you can play on Apple Arcade today.

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