

How Nintendo Inspired LEGO® Brawls' mix-and-bash

Before LEGO® Brawls was a frenzied clash of minifigure mashups, Red Games Co. was designing a game much more like classic mobile runners Fun Run and Jet Pack Joyride, the developers said in an interview on LEGO Bits N' Bricks this week.

"We put together a couple of ideas for them, but this one was definitely the front-runner," said Jared Kroff, executive creative director at Red Games Co. "It kind of started out as a – not an endless runner, but a side-scrolling competitive runner. So probably the best reference on mobile would be Fun Run. But we were referencing also Jetpack Joy Ride as far as one-touch, simple gameplay."



The team liked how Jetpack Joyride allowed players to hop into different contraptions that would change the controls and the player's abilities, he said.

"That's perfect for the LEGO Group because you can just build anything out of bricks," Kroff said. "The original concept was like a race, a side-scrolling runner where you're trying to start at the beginning and make it to the end."

But some on the team were really into a different sort of game for the Nintendo DS. A New Super Mario Bros. minigame had Mario and Luigi running around on a classic Mario map seeing who could collect the most stars first. The game had Mario-themed power-ups as

well. Getting hit by the opponent made you drop your stars. The first person to five stars won.

"We just love that game," Kroff said, who fondly remembers intense battles against co-workers on long flights. "We would just look like these man-children, you know? We're just sitting next to strangers and just playing the DS and laughing so hard because something really funny would happen in the game.

"And so that was something that we referenced in our pitch, that we just loved that you could take these familiar Mario controls and make a game where it's just a battle over something, and it was a ton of fun."

Over the course of development, Kroff said, the project became more and more like the Mario Vs. Luigi gameplay, and less and less like the side-scrolling runner they originally pitched.

The result is a simple King of the Hill-like fighting game that's often likened to the LEGO brick version of Nintendo's Super Smash Bros. games.

Kroff noted the similarities, but added that the team worked hard to make their game more mobile friendly. That included things like locking the camera down to just the player's view and not zooming way out to capture all of the players in the game. They also wanted to create something that would help change the smartphone from a device that blocks families off from one another to something that brings friends or family together.

A big part of the game's appeal is that it focuses so heavily on the LEGO Group's enormous minifigure library. Players start with a relatively small selection of elements from which to build their minifigures, but that grows over time as they unlock new features.

Not only can a player change the look of their minifigures, but they also get to customize their characters' weapon and special attacks, which can dramatically change the gameplay.

"We ended up with team-based gameplay where we're referencing Overwatch," Kroff said. "It is kind of awesome to say, 'Let's take what's fun about Overwatch and apply it to this really simple side-scroller.'"

"The idea was, what if you could take all of the Overwatch characters and pick your favorite abilities and attributes and put them together to make your own hero? That was something that we thought was really similar to building with LEGO bricks."

The game also has an eclectic mix of themed maps, each unique in both their presentation and the way they challenge players to maintain control of the selected spot needed to win. The Western map, for instance, has players fighting for control of a saloon porch and includes mine carts that can be rolled into enemies.

The game took about a year to develop, arriving in September 2019 as an Apple Arcade launch title.

Since going live, LEGO Brawls has evolved and expanded quite a bit, with the team in Salt Lake City, Utah, adding a wide range of new minifigures, abilities, and even tapping into new and old theme sets.

Recent additions include maps and figures pulled from LEGO Hidden Side™, LEGO Jurassic World™, and LEGO Ninjago®. The process of creating this constant stream of new content includes regular meetings with the LEGO Group teams working on new theme sets.

"We launched with only three levels, which was really minimum viable, so we always knew that we wanted to add more," Kroff said. "As we play the game ourselves and we talk with our partners at the LEGO Group, we ask what would make this even better, and we just kind of head in head in that direction.

"Our goal is that the more we expand the game, the deeper the experience becomes, and new fans of Brawls are even better off."

Explore more...

In order of appearance:

[LEGO Brawls](#) – Official website

[Red Games Co.](#) – Official website

[Jetpack Joyride](#) – Official website

[Fun Run 3](#) – Google Play

[New Super Mario Bros.](#) – Wikipedia

[Mario Vs. Luigi minigame](#) – Mario Wiki

[LEGO Minifigures](#) – Official website

[LEGO Ninjago](#) – Official website

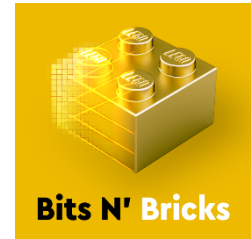
[LEGO Hidden Side](#) – Official website

[LEGO Jurassic World](#) – Official website

Transcript

Bits N' Bricks Season 2 Episode 21: Birth of a LEGO® Brawls-er

May 00 2021 · 0:52:18



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.

(Bits N' Bricks theme music)

Chapter 1: LEGO Brawls – 00:33

Brian Crecente

Scorpion-throwing mummy queens, hot dog suit-wearing pirates, intergalactic girls, super wrestlers: LEGO® Brawls is a minifigure lovers' dream packed with the sort of mashups that would take a crate of blind bags to recreate.

Ethan Vincent

It also has this crazy mix of settings pulled from a bunch of fan-favorite LEGO themes like Jurassic Park, Pirates, Ninjago, and Blacktron.

Brian Crecente

And then you kind of put all of that together with this sort of King of the Hill battle between two online teams, and you're left with a pretty quirky and fun Apple Arcade game.

Ethan Vincent

In this week's episode of Bits N' Bricks, we talk with Red Games Co., the Salt Lake City, Utah-based developer behind the minifig brawler LEGO Brawls. I had a chance to visit the studio and get a behind-the-scenes tour of where the game creation and ongoing support

happens. I also had a chance to chat with some of the team members about their workspace, how the studio was formed, and their early endeavors in gaming.

Brian Crecente

I'm so jealous. It sounds like it was a fun place to visit and-

Ethan Vincent

-it was.

Brian Crecente

And who knows, maybe one day I'll get to visit it.

Ethan Vincent

Yes, you will.

Chapter 2: Interview with Jared Kroff – Part I – 01:46

Brian Crecente

Fortunately, I was able to at least chat with Jared Kroff, who's the Executive Creative Director at Red Games about the game's inception, and find out some surprising information about how LEGO Brawls started life as a mobile phone sidescrolling racer, its Nintendo-inspired evolution, and how the game continues to get such robust support. Now let's have a listen.

(Music)

Brian Crecente

How was it that Red Games somehow got in contact with the LEGO Group and started working with them?

Jared Kroff

Yeah, so we were in contact with the LEGO Group for several years about different projects, and we have a history of having done some projects that used the LEGO brand in the past. It was many years ago that we did kind of like an interactive website through LucasArts for one of the LEGO Star Wars™ console titles, which was technically a marketing website, but it was an interactive kind of multiplayer experience that actually was kind of like a precursor to some of the gameplay for LEGO Brawls. And so we had some interactions with the brand and we had some contacts there that we met at conferences and stuff like that, and we talked over the years and eventually the right opportunity came up where the LEGO Group was reaching out to a small group of studios to pitch creative original ideas for LEGO Games. And so we were able to meet with a group

of them at the Toy Fair out in New York, and they told us what they were looking for, and then that led to the opportunity that became LEGO Brawls.

Brian Crecente

So that initial meeting or that idea that they were looking for some pitches, did they have any sort of specifications in terms of what sort of games they were looking for people to pitch to them?

Jared Kroff

So it was it's actually a really awesome opportunity in the way that they set the whole thing up that they basically said, "You know, if you could build any game, like if there were no restrictions, just use a studio, if you could build any game, tell us what *that* game would be, and then we can figure out how it can become a LEGO brand thing." And when you think about it, that's like the most like LEGO Group proposition ever to basically say, "If you could build anything, what would it be?"

Brian Crecente

Yeah, that's so cool.

Jared Kroff

And so they put that to us, and it started this process, and they were really smart about the way they set up the prototyping to prove out the concepts and kind of narrow them down to which concepts would be the most successful. And so we were really appreciative of that kind of rare opportunity to just pitch whatever our dream project would be.

Brian Crecente

So what was that initial pitch? And what was sort of the core conceit behind it?

Jared Kroff

Yeah. So, we put together a couple of ideas for them, but this one was definitely the front-runner. And it kind of started out as not an endless runner, but a side-scrolling competitive runner. So probably the best reference on mobile would be Fun Run. Are you familiar with that game?

Brian Crecente

Yeah.

Jared Kroff

They're on to like Fun Run 3 now. It's just a huge franchise, you know, it's a really, really successful and fun game. But we were referencing also Jetpack Joyride, as far as just one-touch simple gameplay with the idea being that – kind of like Jetpack Joyride, how you can

get in these different types of current contraptions that change your controls a little bit, but also change your abilities. You're like, "Well, that's perfect because you can build anything out of bricks, so maybe I collect some LEGO bricks, and then I can build a powerup, and then that gives me an edge." And the original concept was like a race, like a side-scroller runner where you're trying to start at the beginning and make it to the end. But we also referenced a title that was on one of the Nintendo DS Mario games. I remember playing it on the original Nintendo DS, which at the time was such a great device, and at the time was extremely novel. Me and my partner Adam here at the studio used to – we would be on trips on a plane ride, and Nintendo DS had just come out. And we would be playing Mario versus Luigi, which were just literally – it was like a mini game included with New Super Mario Bros on the DS. And you just play like normal Mario but it's like versus each other and you're trying to collect stars. But you can use your power-ups, your fireballs, and superstars and stuff like that to eliminate the other player and they drop a star, and then you try to pick up their stars, and the first person to five stars wins. And we just loved that game, and we were grown adults on the airplane, and sometimes we wouldn't be sitting next to each other. And at the time, the concept of playing an online game definitely didn't exist on an airplane. And even the idea of an ad hoc Wi-Fi connecting two devices was pretty novel. And so I kind of – we would just look like these man-children, you know, because we're just sitting next to strangers and just playing the DS, and just laughing so hard because something really funny would happen in the game. And so that was something that we referenced in our pitch was we just loved that you could take these familiar Mario controls, and just make a game where it's like, dude let's just brawl it out, you know, and just battle over something. And it was a ton of fun. And over the course of the development, the project, the concept started to lean more towards the Mario versus Luigi gameplay, and we kind of left the Jetpack Joyride/Fun Run concept behind, which is kind of a natural thing to happen, but it started out as like Fun Run, and then it turned into Mario versus Luigi over time.

Brian Crecente

That's cool. So you send them this prototype. What sort of impact does their reaction to that, and I guess, over time working with them, what sort of impact did they have on the game's final iteration?

Jared Kroff

I have to say we work with a lot of awesome brands out there, you know, some some of the larger brands in the world. And they're all great. They're all great, but but the LEGO Group really brings something unique to the table. And they were really awesome to work with because they really do stand by that vision and that promise to let us build what we think is going to be the most fun, but at the same time, providing proper guidance for what would be appropriate for the LEGO brand. So they give us a lot of flexibility, but they also give us a lot of guidance. And what's interesting is that, I found that they really just felt like they were just part of the team. And so rather than it being this formal process where we're like, "OK, we did all this work, and now we're submitting it and it has to get

approved or denied or sent back or something like that," they were more just like in step with us. And so that kind of organic conversation we'd have with them and they'd just be like, "You know, I was playing the build and what about this idea?" And they would present ideas that would contribute and influence the game. It's interesting how I feel like in the end it not only made a better product, but it made a better LEGO product and a more authentic product because there was a real collaboration rather than an approval or rejection process on certain things. So we would go out and visit them in Denmark, they'd come out and visit us, we'd spend some time, we'd play the game together, we'd laugh, and they'd throw ideas, we'd throw out ideas. And just a really amazing group and an awesome experience. I think it lent itself to really good creativity.

Brian Crecente

It's interesting when we talk on this podcast, we talk to people who work with the LEGO Group or work at the LEGO Group on LEGO video games, there's often this discussion about making something that has sort of LEGO DNA, or that fits in with the ideals of the LEGO Group. When you were working on your game, how did you find that sweet spot, and in your mind, what makes it different than making some other brawler that just has a different IP?

Jared Kroff

It's interesting because if I go back and I look at the – literally the original bullet points of what we sent over to them, we made mention of the kind of customizing your brawler as being part of the metagame. But at that time it was probably just kind of like, yeah, it's LEGO, so you'll collect stuff and customize your character. But the minifig became the core of the game. And at some point, early in development, we had this idea of a minifigure is, for the most part, made up of pants, a torso, and a head. And if you only give me those three things to work with, I can click together a bunch of different pants and torsos and heads and I can make a unique character. And so we want to do something similar with your brawler design where you would have three power-ups you could choose. So it gives you enough flexibility to build something unique, but not so much that it's overwhelming. It's still as simple as clicking together a minifig. And so you have a light, medium, and a heavy power-up, and I combine those three things to have essentially a gameplay strategy or a play style or just a personality. And as we started to put that together, I feel like that's where the game really kind of found its soul, and found that unique LEGO offering. We referenced, we ended up with a team-based gameplay where we're referencing Overwatch, which is awesome to like say, "Well, let's take what's fun about Overwatch and apply it to this really simple side-scroller."

Brian Crecente

Yeah.

Jared Kroff

But Overwatch is awesome because you have all these amazing heroes that you can master and learn how to counter them, but then also how to play with them, and every game you might be playing with a different character, and you might have your favorite because of a certain skill or ability or style that they have. And the idea was, well, what if you could take all of the Overwatch characters and pick your favorite abilities and attributes, and put them together to make your own hero? And that was something that we thought was really LEGO brick-like, and so we combined that with not only just customizing the way your minifig looked, but thinking of them they're not just a minifigure, they're a brawler, they're a LEGO brick brawler. And so what's their personality? What do they look like? But then what's their style? What do they play like? What are their power-ups like? What are their abilities, and what's their play style? And let players collect as much stuff as they can and come up with something that's truly them and truly unique. And I think it's been a strength of the game.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, so how long did you end up working on this? What was the development time for the game?

Jared Kroff

So again, we built that prototype, you know, we worked on it for just like six weeks, which was just awesome first step to take. And then we probably started development that fall – so fall of 2018. And then it launched as an Arcade title in September of 2019. And we worked on it that entire time, so core dev to launch was about a year, more or less, which is, I don't know, in a way fast and in a way, it's slow for us at the same time. But we really never stopped development on Brawls, launch was just the beginning and it's been pretty steady development since.

Brian Crecente

I'm curious about Apple Arcade. It was, I think, either a launch title or very close to a launch title. How did Apple Arcade become a platform for this game? And once you knew it was going to be an Apple Arcade title, did that have any sort of impact on the game's design and your your plans for ongoing support?

Jared Kroff

Yeah, so we obviously had started discussion with the LEGO Group before Apple Arcade was announced. And so we had the idea for the game, we knew we were going to build the game, and when the Arcade showed up as an option for the title, it really was just the perfect home. It felt right because we were already leaning into this idea of a same space multiplayer competitive game like Smash Bros., but on mobile where we're all holding our own device. And then with Apple Arcade, it added the ability to play on your Mac and also play on Apple TVs we were like even better. And we just felt like we were, again, we just

found the perfect home because we were already trying to create an experience that leveraged, essentially, the apple platform for a really unique gameplay offering that was console-like, but in that console that you already have in your pocket that you don't really think about. And multiplayer was just a really, really big part of it. But it did definitely influence, I think, the design because it allowed us to lean even more in that – into a family-friendly, multiplayer experience where the metagame didn't have to become maybe what it would have had to become, had it been a free-to-play experience. You know, sometimes free-to-play is thought of as a dirty word, or it's like, oh, you know, it's like all these things, all these in-app purchases, and all these grinding mechanics and things like that, you know, that we say is ruining video games, I guess. Some people say that. But at the same time, players really have become accustomed to these types of metagames and kind of expect this type of unlock system and for there to be this endless trail of things to unlock. And especially kids today, just like the way that they play games, the way they see the world, you know, it's like, "I gotta level up my character, and I gotta collect all these different things," and that's what we expect in video games. And so we still ended up with a metagame that is like that, but it's one that is hopefully feels rewarding and positive to players, and maybe not quite as burdensome. And certainly, we were really behind what Apple is doing with the platform, which is providing parents with a space that they can feel safe sending their kids there, knowing that there's no ads in the game, that there's no, you know, they're not gonna meet some stranger in the game. It's a game that's not only safe but it's quality. And so that soul is what really lined up with our values already as a studio, and particularly partnering, I think, aligns up with the LEGO Group's values as a brand. And so all those things came together to just help Brawls focus I think in the right place.

(LEGO Brawls Gameplay music plays)

Chapter 3: A Closer Look at Character Creation – 16:31

Brian Crecente

Alright, so I want to pause here in my live interview and break the fourth wall so that we could talk very quickly about the fantastic minifig creation process in Brawls.

Ethan Vincent

It's so great.

Brian Crecente

It is. So, basically you can go in and you can choose a bunch of different elements, you can switch up head gear, the head, the body, the torso, and you have to unlock all this stuff. And you can end up with crazy creations like I have one that I'm looking at right now. He has cat legs. He's wearing a slip, it sort of looks like. He's got a baguette for a weapon. He's got a French mustache, and of course, is wearing bunny ears.

Ethan Vincent

Perfect.

Brian Crecente

And so yeah, you just go in and you may create your own mashups, they're a lot of fun to do. You can also create their special abilities and you go through and choose what those look like. And then finally, when you've done all, that you then get to create the name of your character.

Ethan Vincent

Yes.

Brian Crecente

And so the way this works is you have two different spots, two different sets of words. And they're essentially randomized, and you just decide which two you want to use by choosing arrows. So let's do this. I'm going to go ahead, (tapping sounds) I'm going to the first one right now I'm tapping to the right to have it switched through names. You tell me when to stop.

Ethan Vincent

OK... stop!

Brian Crecente

OK, excellent. And then, not just the fact that you told me to stop, but also that's the first word. Excellent. OK, and now we're going to go with the second one. What's the second one? Tell me when to stop.

Ethan Vincent

OK, OK, OK, OK, and stop!

Brian Crecente

Ooh. Oh my gosh, this is so good. Excellent Ballerina.

Ethan Vincent

(Laughs) It is so great.

Brian Crecente

It works because, you know, he's got the slip on and the bunny ears. That doesn't make any sense. But he's cool. I like him.

Ethan Vincent

And maybe if you're really incredible at Brawler, it will be one of those names where it's like, "Oh, I can beat this character." Like, actually, you can't, you know, if you get really good.

Brian Crecente

It's Excellent... Excellent Ballerina. My favorite among all of my characters is Golden Kitten, and you've got to watch out for him.

Ethan Vincent

Great character, for sure.

Brian Crecente

So, let's get back to the interview, we will unpause Jared who's staying right now in stasis, and we'll get right back into the interview.

Chapter 4: Interview with Jared Kroff – Part II – 18:41

Brian Crecente

You know, it's amazing. I played the game when it first came out and I got so into it that I actually went to the LEGO Store in my nearby mall, and went to that little kiosk of minifigure parts and spent probably – not probably, definitely – way too long trying to build my minifigure from the game, to the point that I think there were several people who worked there who were kind of hovering around saying, "Can we help you something?" Was that something you expected to see happen, and have you heard of people doing that, like wanting to find the real life version of their minifigure that they play in the game?

Jared Kroff

Yeah, that's actually really awesome. You know, what it reminds me of is something that's obviously just totally unique to working on a LEGO title. Kicking off a game, our normal process for us would be, alright we're going to build a power-up, so let's draw a concept sketch. And then once that concept art looks good, well then we'll go into some geometry and some texturing, kind of goes through this natural process of, from an idea to an asset, a playable thing that's actually in the game. What's crazy unique about working on something with the LEGO Group is that all of the stuff has to be to scale, built out of real bricks. So all of a sudden, my colleague who's normally drawing a concept sketch is downloading Stud.io, and he's actually building his concepts out of bricks, which is awesome, you know? No one complained about this. They're all having a great time. And we just had so much fun. It was a little daunting because you don't become a master builder, so to speak, overnight, and we're gonna have to submit these builds to the LEGO Group for review, but just the creativity that came out of it was amazing, and I think a

highlight for me was, I went to one of our artists named Ron, he's been working at our studio for a long time. He's just a real – he's an amazing illustrator and animator, and not too bad with some bricks as it would turn out. And I go to Ron and I'm like, "You know, I have this idea. We have power-ups where it's kind of something that shoots projectile, something that you hold. And then we have vehicles that you drive, but I need something in between. I want something that it's kind of like a backpack that you wear, and it still shoots projectiles, but it provides some sort of armor to the minifig. So, you still run and jump like a normal character, but you're clearly wearing this backpack, which it's like in between a gun, for lack of a better word, and a vehicle." And Ron comes back in a couple hours, and he's built this hot dog stand that's in the game that has, you know, (chuckles), it doesn't make any sense, like I would love it if I saw a vendor doing this, I would definitely buy a hot dog. But he's got the grill attached to the back, and then this little canopy thing with a little hot dog brick on top, and then it would shoot ketchup and mustard as its projectile. And like that was not prompted at all. I didn't tell him I need a hot dog thing theme. I told him I need something that would provide armor to a minifig.

Brian Crecente

Of course your brain goes to hot dog when you hear armor.

Jared Kroff

Yeah, yeah exactly, so he comes back with that. I sent it over to some of our partners at the LEGO Group, and they just loved it right away. And, again, I think that that kind of speaks to how when the LEGO Group really stands by their own values and lets us just take the bricks and find the fun, you end up with something that you never could have planned out on paper. But (I got a little sidetracked there), but at the time that we were building those, started to make those builds, when our friends from the LEGO Group would fly out to Salt Lake City and visit us, they would bring us the builds because it would be hard for us to find all the exact bricks, you know, because in Stud.io you can just grab any brick that exists. But they would do the work, and I just like loved the idea that they're over there in Denmark building our power-ups out of bricks (chuckles) And they'd bring them in and they'd come and set them on the table, and we'd look at them and be like, "That's our game, right there." So it's definitely something that we talked about that we're like, "How cool is that that people could get a favorite power-up and create a brawler that they're really proud of?" And that, technically it's a little bit tricky because you've got to find all those bricks, but they could actually build that out of bricks. And so we try to make sure that all of our power builds are viable, and when we send some of the builds over to the LEGO Group, it's awesome when they come back and they'll be like, "We have some feedback on this snake car. If you add a piece like this, it will improve the structural integrity of the car." (Laughs) They're like, "Obviously it doesn't matter for the video game." It's like, yeah, whatever, but we want it to be authentic. We want it to be real, you know? And I'm not gonna make any promises, some of our builds might be a little bit brittle if you actually do them out there, but it is something that we're really proud of. I like that story that you did that, and it's something that we thought about, and we would love to add a feature at

some point, where as I'm browsing all of the power-ups in the game, I could view build instructions and set lists, pieces lists, and maybe print those out and build them for myself.

Brian Crecente

I think it's a really neat idea. And hopefully, maybe that's something you guys can do. What I like is I – so I played this a lot, stopped playing it for a while, recently I went back to go play it some more and I noticed that LEGO Brawls is all over the place on the Apple Arcade page and on iOS, like it gets a lot of promotion. What do you think is driving that? And I'm curious, how well is the game doing? It strikes me it must be doing really well to get that much promotion.

Jared Kroff

It's done really well on Arcade. While we don't have exact stats of how we rank against the other titles, we've been in that – they have a top games on the Arcade list that you can always see on the Arcade page, and Brawls has never not been in that list in the almost two years, or I guess year and a half since launch. And so we're really proud of that. We think that we're always in that top 10 percentile of titles on there. And it's done really well. I think that we just ended up with something that strikes the right chords, I think, for the Arcade audience – lines up with what Apple is looking for and what the LEGO Group is looking for, and it's just been a great tentpole title for the platform.

Brian Crecente

One of the other things I couldn't help but notice is the massive, robust support that you all have been giving the game. You're tapping into things like Hidden Side and Jurassic World™. What is the process that happens when you're trying to decide how to continue to support the game? And I'm just curious, what is it that you're hoping to achieve with this sort of robust support?

Jared Kroff

I think it's maybe one of the differentiators for us on Apple Arcade. If you look at some of the other titles, they tend to be kind of like stories that begin and end, and you play through them one time, maybe two times, but then it's kind of, "Great, there's 200 other titles on the platform so it's time for me to move on." Where our model is a little bit, I think more traditional console model where we're trying to build an evergreen title like Smash Bros. We knew the title had a lot of potential. And we were really happy when we found the right home for it on the Arcade. But it's really just been something where, after launch, we just kind of look at the game, look how it's doing and then say, "OK, well, how can we make this better?" Which is also a very LEGO Group mentality. I believe their motto is, "Even the best isn't good enough" or something like that.

Brian Crecente

"Only the best."

Jared Kroff

Only the best, yeah it depends on how you interpret it, but yeah, "only the best is good enough," which means even when you achieve the best, there's always a better best. It's like, how can we make it even better? And so it was successful at launch. We did make some important changes at the beginning. We launched with only three levels, which was really minimum viable, in my opinion, so we always knew that we wanted to add more. But it's just something that's organic, that as we get feedback from fans, as we watch how the game's performing, as we play the game ourselves, we talk with our partners at the LEGO Group, we just kind of say, "What would make this even better?" And we just head in that direction. And it's ended up being a cadence where we try to have a meaningful update every month or so. You know, the depth of the game that we have for a new player who's just discovering Brawls for the first time, they kind of jump in and are like, "Wow, look at all this great stuff!" There's all these different levels and Jurassic World – they love that. Different cycling seasons and things for them to unlock. And so that's really our goal is that, the more that we expand the game, the deeper the experience becomes, and new fans of Brawls are even better off than the people who caught the game at launch.

Brian Crecente

So the Ninjago update looks like it is a little more robust than previous updates. It has things like solid gold versions of Ninjago heroes, and you've got a new level and emotes. And it all seems to be tied to the 10-year anniversary of Ninjago. Can you walk me through how that update came about and how was it designed?

Jared Kroff

Yeah, yeah. So we had started a process where we – when the game launched, we didn't have the concept of seasons. And so what we were doing is we were going back through all of our existing levels that we had built at that point, and kind of creating season content to match that level. We find a bunch of castle content, and we build a season of things for people to unlock. And we knew that Ninjago would be big, even without the anniversary. It's just such a huge brand within the LEGO toys. And it just so happened that we'd been saving Ninjago, because it's awesome, that when it came time to lock down on that particular level, that our friends at the LEGO Group were releasing all these 10-year anniversary toys, and they start to show us some of these toys, which we're just blown away with the – the gold minifigs is all you got to say, you know? It's like the ultimate, a very Nintendo-style kind of unlock, and that's something that we want to do more of in Brawls, and we were excited to start with Ninjago. It's awesome that the toys on shelves, and what's coming out in the game, are the same thing. A kid can be playing Brawls this month and be like, "I just unlocked the minifig that came in the set that I just got my birthday," or whatever, you know, and it's like the same thing. And we love, again, we wanted that Smash Bros. style batch of content, where it's the mashup of everything. It's almost the history of the LEGO Group in a game where you can build anything and just go brawl. And so you have the old IP, and then, not only the newer IP like Ninjago, but also the

Ninjago content that just hit shelves this month, and it makes it something that's both historic, but also very current, and we're hoping to do more of that in the future.

Brian Crecente

So I'm curious with Jurassic World. I was actually really surprised to see that in the game just because I know there has to be multiple IP rights that you have to juggle. But the second thought I had was, man, wouldn't it be great if you added things like LEGO Star Wars™, or LEGO Marvel or LEGO Indiana Jones. So, I'm just curious, is that something you're starting to look at? And how likely is something like that having it come to Brawls?

Jared Kroff

Yeah, we were super excited to do that deal with Universal, another great group over there. And Jurassic World ended up being the perfect fit, right? When you take control the T. rex on the Jurassic World level, it's kind of like one of the most iconic moments in Brawls, and you can even run that T. rex into a bathroom, if you remember when the lawyer gets eaten (chuckles). The T. rex smashes, we tried to recreate that moment. That's so fun. That's so cool to kind of appeal, again to – Jurassic Park is another one of those brands that it appeals to the parents and it appeals to the kids because the new films have come out, and so you're bridging these generational gaps. Some of those brands that you mentioned might be a little bit more difficult to implement than others, but we feel really confident that the brands that we're able to get in will be rewarding, and hopefully surprising maybe the fans in a way, but that also if it just so happens that you're a true fan of that IP that you can be like, "Oh that's cool, like cool way that they fit that in, the way the power-ups work, the way the level looks," and things like that. It feels Jurassic World, but it also feels LEGO. And then hopefully, it also feels Brawls, if that makes sense.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, no totally. So Builder's Journey is another LEGO video game that came to Apple Arcade and has been very successful. But, they recently announced that they are now going to be making the leap to other platforms. And boy, would I love to play Brawls on something like the Nintendo Switch. I'm just curious, is that something you're looking at, or what are the plans for, perhaps, going beyond Apple Arcade?

Jared Kroff

Yeah, I mean, it's such an interesting time to be working in video games. It really wasn't too many years ago where there was this strong division between mobile games were almost kind of not even considered real games, and then you had console's like, that's the real deal. And PC, of course, and the whole VR thing, we won't talk about that. But you know, everything's moving in a direction now where titles are platform agnostic. You'll see a lot of the big brands going in that direction where you don't think about it like that anymore like, "Oh, is that a mobile game or a console game?" It's just an awesome game, and it's on every platform where it makes sense. And so we're really excited about that.

Builder's Journey isn't the first Arcade title to be available on multiple platforms. And I think that speaks to the quality of games that are on the Arcade platform, that they can live on console as well as on the Arcade. We'll be excited to see what happens with Brawls, but I think that there'll definitely be some exciting news real soon.

Chapter 5: On Tour at Red Games Co. – 33:21

(Game sound effects)

Brian Crecente

So, Ethan, you were in the area doing some documentary work and visiting family when we decided to dig into this week's topic.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, it's really cool how the stars aligned on this. I was in Salt Lake City with a production company working on a documentary series, and my parents live about an hour away, so it's really convenient and nice to combine the two. And as we were putting the episode together, of course, I knew they Red Games was based in Salt Lake City so I reached out to them. And even more surprising was the fact that an acquaintance of mine, Jenirae Reynolds, turned out to be one of the producer's on LEGO Brawls. But I'll tell you what, Brian, to actually go and do a field recording on site for Bits N' Bricks was just so refreshing. Of course, taking all the right COVID precautions, you know making sure we had masks on, social distancing, all that stuff. But yeah, it was just so fun to be in this kind of live environment on tour. And so, here's me on tour at Red Games Co. in downtown Salt Lake City. (Music)

Ethan Vincent

Hey, Jenirae.

Jenirae Reynolds

Hey.

Ethan Vincent

Nice to see you.

Jenirae Reynolds

Nice to see you, too.

Ethan Vincent

It's been a long time.

Jenirae Reynolds

It has.

Ethan Vincent

Glad that we get to meet up here in this really cool space.

Jenirae Reynolds

Yeah, it is really cool. So this is Red Games, Red Games Co., our offices, it's a big kind of open area, a little industrial.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, like a big loft.

Jenirae Reynolds

We got some exposed kind of concrete pillars and stuff. Very cool.

Ethan Vincent

The first thing you see when you come in is what I would say first, you see that Champion Street Fighter II edition-

Jenirae Reynolds

Right.

Ethan Vincent

-old arcade style.

Jenirae Reynolds

Yeah, old arcade cabinet and a ping pong table, which is I think, a staple of all games companies.

Ethan Vincent

That's right. Yes, you have to start with that. And then the first thing you see is like a nice little LEGO model. And then you come over here and see sets.

Jenirae Reynolds

Correct, yes. So we do have a lot of LEGO sets around the office because we think it's important for the people working on the game to be immersed in the sets and how the bricks look and how the minifigs look and sort of how things all fit together right, because our artists basically create bricked exact versions of builds for the game.

Ethan Vincent

I'm sure the LEGO Group wouldn't want it any other way, right? It needs to be-

Jenirae Reynolds

It has to be authentic. There's a thing that's like, if that's not how the brick works or how it looks like it can't be that way in the game. They have to hold swords and shields and melee weapons, like the way that a normal, an actual minifig would hold those things.

Ethan Vincent

That's awesome.

Jenirae Reynolds

And then we actually over here have like a whole Ninjago City set up with like all these lights and things. These little lantern pieces with the strand and these banners, we actually used these pieces in the Ninjago 10-year anniversary when we redid the level. Our artists took these little banners and then put the gold Ninjago 10-year emblem on those white flags. So, you know, we have like digital versions of a lot of these sets, and we kind of will pull little pieces for just decorating. You know, we take a lot of inspiration from the actual sets, so yeah!

Ethan Vincent

So cool.

(Music)

Ethan Vincent

And then you've got this cool, like conference room area, which has the typical huge whiteboard wall with all the secrets I'm not supposed to know.

Jenirae Reynolds

Yeah, so this is our conference room where a lot of brainstorming happens. The entire wall is a whiteboard, the whole table is a whiteboard, everything in here is a whiteboard pretty much.

Ethan Vincent

And I look at this wall and you've got Ninjago Prime, you've got all kinds of different things. I'm not going to call them all out, but it's really exciting to see you've got minifigures and all the accessories that go with it. It's pretty cool. And I'm assuming these are-

Jenirae Reynolds

These are like remnants of past releases and milestones that were done. So I'm the second producer on Brawls. There was a producer, she still works here, her name's Tasha who was the original producer that worked on Brawls through development and launch and then post-launch. So this is just sort of them planning out different features for the game. So there is a single-player progression in the game currently, where players can basically master these champion characters, and they have their own loadouts and their own special emotes and weapons. So you can mix and match and customize your characters to play, or you can just play as Super Wrestler or as the Heroic Knight or as Intergalactic Girl. So this is where they were planning out some of those champion archetypes for the first launch of the game.

Ethan Vincent

The other thing that is very nice to see, and the LEGO Group has this, too, whenever you go into a conference room, is this (sound of Ethan rummaging through LEGO bricks) tons of LEGO bricks.

Jenirae Reynolds

Yep, exactly. Yeah, we have those all around, and there's actually a couple over there too.

Ethan Vincent
So, this is nice too. You've got the release and a calendar, which of course is very game development. And I could just see the product management, you know, writing these all down and you can see the developers sitting here going like, "Oh, man, whatever."

Jenirae Reynolds

Getting mad at you for putting too much stuff in one week. Yeah, that's how it goes.

Ethan Vincent

And nothing's more awesome than putting the lock sign next to a date, right?

Jenirae Reynolds

Yep, exactly. Yeah. So we're, this is our next release sprint that we're going to be planning.

Ethan Vincent
It's funny, because I came at a day where, you know, it's kind of convenient for me or not convenient because there's so much going on, right? It's game development.

Jenirae Reynolds

Yeah, yeah, it really doesn't stop. Like there's always something. I mean, even if you're pre launch, right, and you have, you know, the more traditional product release cycle of like, alpha, beta, vertical slice, all of that stuff, like you still are constantly having to deliver on

those milestones. But it gets even more chaotic when you're in a game that's live, and people are playing and you're constantly having to update content for players. There's always bugs.

Ethan Vincent

Well, it's also one of those things where it's like you develop and you're always developing thinking, OK, we'll be good. We'll deliver. That'll be done. Then we'll take a little time and breathe.

Jenirae Reynolds

Oh, there's no time. No, there's no breathing time. What are you talking about? (Laughs)

Ethan Vincent

It's so brutal. It's so brutal. And yet, when it's all working, it's very satisfying.

Jenirae Reynolds

Yeah, I mean, basically, by the time we are submitting a release, which actually today is a submission day, so we have a submission that we have to get out, you're like, alright, so we submitted that, that'll go live in three weeks. But like we're well into the next thing by the time it goes live. And you know, sometimes you kind of keep tabs on Twitter or Discord or where players are talking and interacting, just to kind of see how they're reacting, right? Like we have data that we look at. But yeah, there's not a lot of time to be like, that was a great release and congratulate ourselves and he's like, alright, what's the next thing? And you're immediately off on the next thing, so...

(Tune plays briefly)

Ethan Vincent

Look at all these minifigs.

Jenirae Reynolds

Most of these are from the minifig series, which was a huge, I think, a huge win for the game that we were able to use the minifig series because it added so many characters and pieces and so much more customizability – is that a word? Yeah.

Ethan Vincent

I think so. And we had a whole episode with Tara Wike on minifigs, and it was fascinating.

Jenirae Reynolds

I know, it was funny, when I was listening to that she was talking about, she's like, "While there's a couple games that are coming out that are really celebrations of the minifigs" and

I was like, "Please say Brawls, please say Brawls." And then you guys were like, "Brawls?" and she was like, "That's the one" and I was like, "Yeah!" (laughs)

Ethan Vincent

I remember that. I remember that. I think that was Brian who was asking about that. That was great.

Jenirae Reynolds

Yeah, so like some of these, you know, like if players were here looking at this they would recognize these from the game. We have the Classic King and the Classic Queen minifig, and they're actually the mascots of our castle level, so you play for Team Queen or Team King. You know the Mummy Queen here is one of our champions. Corn Cob Guy was released in a recent minifig-of-the-week (chuckles) for Western season. So yeah, these are all recognizable things that you can collect and customize in the game, which is fun.

Ethan Vincent

It's very cool. It's cool to see them all in minifig format, and it does remind you again that the game is based on LEGO minifigs and LEGO experience, you know, LEGO DNA. It's all over the place. And then you see him here and you got your LEGO bricks (sound of LEGO bricks mixed).

Jenirae Reynolds

The best sound.

Ethan Vincent

Well, cool. Thanks for the tour. This was really fun, and what a cool space and just a cool vibe. And yes, I imagine when it's popping with employees and people, when it's in normal operation, it's going to be – we'll have to quiet them down, shh guys, guys.

Jenirae Reynolds

Hey, we're recording.

Ethan Vincent

Whoa! whoa, whoa, whoa, so here we are. Thank you so much for that little tour.

Jenirae Reynolds

Yeah, thank you.

Chapter 6: Office Interview with Jared Kroff - Part III – 42:18

(Music)

Ethan Vincent

So Brian, after my tour with Jenirae, I had a chance to also meet with Jared Kroff, the Executive Creative Director. This time in person which was such a nice diversion from our usual remote sessions.. And Jared also walked me a little bit through Red Games Co., and kind of tucked away in the corner there's this one-to-one replica of the motto of the LEGO Group – "Only the Best is Good Enough" – and it was actually made by the one of the creative directors there, Adam, out of wood, and it was done really well and impressive. And Jared said that is was something that the LEGO Group also really responded to when they came and visited the studio. But it was just so great to sit down with Jared in his office and also talk face-to-face to ask a few more additional quations about the history of Red Games and how their studio kind of evolved.

(Brief part of a tune)

Ethan Vincent

What sort of games does Red Games focus on? If you had to explain the kind of games you work on, I mean, what would you say about the Red Games library? And what do you guys focus on?

Jared Kroff

So early on, the emphasis was on innovative uses of technology, or unexpected uses of technology. And so the first app that we made was called Pet Peaves Monsters, and it was a pet-growing app. But the original idea was that you could only battle someone who you could actually see in the real world. It started out with this thing where we would actually hold our phones up to each other, and it would use the camera to recognize the Peave, and like, it's almost like the Japanese beta fish when they see each other, they kind of freak out, that was the idea that's why they're called Pet Peaves is because when they see each other they get all riled up into this battle mode. And it ended up turning into this tabletop thing where you would play, if four of us all had Pet Peaves, we would put our devices, – I don't know where this idea came from – we would put our our four devices on the table next to each other, and it would form one kind of like jumbotron screen. And then they would kind of like run across, like my Peave would end up on your screen, but the battle might spill back over onto my screen. And it's kind of this like, really just like, weird idea, but we loved the social aspect of it, that we could be sitting around a table at lunch and we're using these devices that we have in our pockets already, but in this weird way that we never thought of before. And we really, really, really loved that idea, and so when you start to see things like Pokemon Go and stuff that took augmented reality and geolocation, things that existed and people were familiar with, but you put them together in a way that's

interesting, and suddenly you have something that feels really novel and exciting, and it feels kind of magical to people that they're like, "How does this work? and "I don't really know, but it's just fun." So that's been a big part of it. And that's still a big part of what we do. We're always looking for that fun little twist.

Ethan Vincent

What do you think makes a game a Red Games game? It takes a while to develop a voice, I think, as a gaming studio and to like identify like, wait, what do we do? Who are we? How do our things look, you know? After you get through like what our logo should look like and geek out about that, there's kind of a point where you have to go like, no, seriously, like, what's your voice? Who are you?

Jared Kroff

Right, right. It's interesting, I think a lot of it has to do with actually having smaller teams. We end up where games have a little bit more of a handcrafted kind of feel where every team member was so passionate, invested in that project, and in the product as a whole, that it just kind of shows in all of the details from the UX and the UI and the game screens down to the core gameplay itself, you just kind of like see that love that went into making the product. Where sometimes when things scale really, really large, and you have really talented people, but only focusing on this micro section of the game, it's harder for all of those things to line up. And obviously some large studios do it very, very well. And you have these Fortnite type situations where, who knows why it kind of came out so great, but it just resonates. But I think that handcrafted kind of fine attention to detail, and really fun characters, I think that's a Red Game. And then I also think lighthearted is a big part of it. We tend to do really well with nine to 11 year old demographics because they want something cool, they want something competitive, but they still just like to laugh, you know, I'm like if it's funny, and you check all those boxes, then you have a hit. And that's something that we kind of enjoy, too. We're kind of old kids I guess in some ways.

Ethan Vincent

That's good. That leads right into my question about your relationship with the LEGO Group. Obviously that target demographic of 10 to 11 year old kids is a special age, I think also for the for the LEGO Group, because you're coming out of maybe all your experiences building with LEGO sets as a kid, but you're also maybe right before that dark age cut off that's going to happen when you turn teenager and start doing other things. And so you've got this unique thing where you have a maturity and a kid who enjoys and appreciates and might recognize that humor, but also just just such a cool age: adventurous; exploratory; willing to do everything; full of energy; want to just play, kind of thing. Talk to me a little bit about that relationship with the LEGO Group, how that started? And maybe how that was a good fit, perfect fit in kind of where you were and where you wanted to go, you know?

Jared Kroff

Yeah. Yeah, it really is, it really is kind of a perfect fit. I don't know, I might botch this, but there's a quote from George Lucas where someone asked him like, who he thinks the target audience for Star Wars™ is. And he says it's for kids, or young teenagers, basically it's similar to what you were just saying that it's like they're on the verge of basically deciding if they're going to be a good person or a bad person. And like that's kind of what Star Wars™ is about, like, hey, you got a choice man, you can go down whichever path you want. And I think that we play in a space kind of just before that, it's like, alright they're gonna have to make this big decision, but they're still kind of out there and just discovering stuff and having fun and laughing and having a good time. So I think it's kind of interesting what you're saying. I think that the LEGO Group kind of plays there as well. We talked to the awesome people at the LEGO Group a lot about the history of their product, and how they integrated conflict and things like that, you know, in kind of like the right way, and it can be a fine line. And we really believe in that because we want our games to be family friendly, but we also want them to be competitive, and sometimes that takes the form of combat in a video game. But you can keep that within a space that doesn't have to be overtly violent, or have no respect for human life and things like that. You can still tell a fun story that has conflict. And if you look at the LEGO films and the products and the way that they take, sometimes, maybe films that are a little bit more dark, but they get them into their product and they still embrace it and make a true version of that film but that plays safe and is maybe more appropriate for that younger age. Something that I just really, really respect about their group. And it really, it really lined up with the types of stories that we wanted to tell as well.

Chapter 7: "Two Hours Later" – 50:17

(Music)

Brian Crecente

So, Ethan, as an excuse, I re-downloaded LEGO Brawls, which I loved when it launched, but hadn't played it for a while, and thought to myself, I'm gonna just go in and see what it looks like, play a match or two. Like two hours later I'm like, "I've got to go write my script."

Ethan Vincent

Two hours later. Exactly. Yeah, that's hilarious. Yeah, no, and everything that I heard there, and just all the excitement and some of the things I didn't know. I'm super excited to jump to the game. So I would also encourage anyone to take a little gander in LEGO Brawls because, yeah, once you start, you cannot stop I believe, right?

Brian Crecente

Yeah, it's a lot of fun to play with friends and sort of just run around and be a LEGO minifig hooligan.

Bits N' Bricks: Credits – 51:21

Ethan Vincent

Bits N' Bricks is made possible by LEGO Games. Your hosts are Ethan Vincent and Brian Crecente. Producing by Dave Tach. Our executive producer is Ronny Scherer. Creative direction and editing by Ethan Vincent. Writing by Brian Crecente. Mixing and sound design by Dan Carlisle. Music by Peter Priemer.

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For questions or comments, write us at bitsnbricks@LEGO.com. That's Bits, the letter n, then Bricks at LEGO.com. And as always, stay tuned for more episodes of Bits N' Bricks.

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