LEGO® Island: Birth of a LEGO Video Game

It may not have been the first LEGO® video game, but it was arguably the most impactful.

LEGO Island released in September 1997 to overwhelmingly positive reviews. The open-world LEGO game went on to become a best seller two years in a row and planted the roots for what would become the most successful approach to both the looks of digital LEGO bricks and the philosophical approach to digital play with those toys.

The game's timing couldn't have been better.

Game Crash and Nintendo Fear

To fully understand how and why the LEGO Group greenlit the creation of LEGO Island, you need to go back to the infamous video game crash of 1983. Video game revenue peaked that year, but a combination of over investment and poor control of physical stock led to a drop of nearly 97 percent in revenue by 1985. The collapse bankrupted a slew of video game companies and nearly destroyed the once-booming video game industry.

In 1986, Nintendo managed to revive the industry by sneaking its Nintendo Entertainment System console into toy stores. It did this by packaging the system with a plastic robot and marketing it more as a toy than a video game console. The NES's tremendous success reinvigorated the market, and then the arrival of the Game Boy portable system in 1989 expanded that market. Over the next half-decade, the number of companies reentering the game industry began to blossom. By 1995, the arrival of the fifth generation of consoles included massive players like Sony and its PlayStation. The computer gaming market is also taking off with massive hits like Warcraft, SimCity, and explorative puzzler game Myst.

Amid this second wave of video game growth, California-based software company Mindscape began exploring ways to expand its video game business. The studio started looking into toy companies and decided that pitching a game to the LEGO Group would be a great idea.

Wes Jenkins, who would become LEGO Island's creative director, and Paul Melmed, who would become the game's education and research director, traveled to New York City to pitch the idea to the LEGO Group at the annual Toy Fair in February 1995.

The pitch came as the LEGO Group was starting to worry about the impact Nintendo and video games were having on the toy business. The company feared that video games were taking up an increasingly large amount of a child's free time.

That fall, the LEGO Group leadership asked Tormod Askildsen to explore the impact of video games and whether the LEGO Group should invest in the new medium. In December 1995, Askildsen presented their findings. Most important among them was a single stark statement: Getting into the game industry wasn't an option; it was a necessity. A month later, the LEGO Group announced a deal with Mindscape for the developer to make a series of video games, the first one based on the LEGO Town theme.

The Making of LEGO Island

The development of the game ended up taking nearly two more years but involved several interesting creative approaches. Among them was the decision to build a full-scale version of the game's titular LEGO Island with real LEGO bricks and then invite children to come and play with it. By watching what the kids did, the developers were able to hone in on the sorts of play that would be most interesting.

The team also spent quite a bit of time examining and debating the philosophical nature of digital play and how LEGO toys fit into a video game, both in its representation and interactions.

As the team grew to more than 100, work was poured into several aspects of the game, including the ability to play as many different characters, each designed to represent different forms of intelligence, as described by Dr. Howard Gardner's multiple intelligence theory.

The team also worked to build its own game engine for LEGO Island, with the expectation that the new engine would be used for several sequels to LEGO Island.

As development steadily marched toward launch, the Mindscape team regularly checked in with both the newly formed LEGO Media International and a group of researchers at the LEGO Group's Strategic Project Unit Darwin. Those LEGO teams helped to keep Mindscape's designers on track, pushing them to do things like including more building in the game, adding more vehicles, and excluding non LEGO brick construction, like ropes.

While LEGO Island focused on the building aspect of LEGO toys – allowing kids to build different vehicles and explore the island from a first-person perspective – it also had a story-driven experience. If a player built a police helicopter and is playing as Pepper Roni, it kicks off a storyline that sees the Brickster escaping from jail and trying to destroy the island. It's up to the player to stop him. The game actually has two endings, one showing the island's destruction and the other showing Pepper helping to get the Brickster locked back up.

The game launched on Sept. 26, 1997, but according to Jenkins and many others on the project, the day before launch, Mindscape fired everyone on the team. Many of those impacted said Mindscape fired the employees to avoid paying bonuses tied to the game's sales.

Ultimately, the LEGO Group rescinded its license with Mindscape, and the company didn't make any more LEGO games. But that wasn't the end of the LEGO Island franchise.

LEGO Island and Beyond

Despite hitting in the fall of 1997, LEGO Island was the eleventh best-selling computer game of the year, with about 325,000 copies sold and $12 million earned. The following year it made it to number seven on the charts with more than 400,000 sold. Mindscape's total sales for 1997 jumped by 70 percent compared to the previous year, thanks in large part to LEGO Island.

As the game continued to rake in money, it also won several awards, including family game of the year and best kid title from the Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences in 1997. It was also named the top-rated "virtual toy" by Family PC and received the reviewers' choice stamp of approval by Home PC's kid testers.

But it wasn't until 2001 that the game received a sequel: LEGO Island 2: The Brickster's Revenge, which was developed by Silicon Dreams Studio. The studio also went on to make a third LEGO Island game: Island Xtreme Stunts, in 2002.

While the Silicon Dreams developers were well aware of LEGO Island and the work done by Mindscape on a sequel entitled Beneath the Phata Sea, Silicon Dreams decided to start from scratch with LEGO Island 2. 2002's Island Xtreme Stunts was co-published by EA with LEGO Interactive. This final LEGO Island casts Pepper as an action star in a movie shot on the island.

LEGO Island Fandom

Of the three LEGO Island games, the original remains by far the most popular and fondly remembered. It spurred immediate positive feedback and legions of fans who don't just play and replay the game but invest in keeping it alive or even reviving it.

"I had played LEGO Island as a kid, but my interest in it really probably goes back to 2013," said LEGO Island superfan and collector Ben Davies. "I pulled it out of storage. I played through it for nostalgia's sake, and I just realized that, 'Hey, this is a really charming game. I'm getting all this, the humor and little references that I didn't get the first time playing through the game.' Flash forward a few years, and I end up traveling and speaking to all the devs and working on acquiring the lost materials from the game, which had gone off to who knows where over the 20 odd years since release."

Floris Thoonen is also an avid fan of the game, but he's not just collecting its history; he's working with a team to create it. He and the roughly 50 others in Project Island hope to fully recreate LEGO Island using modern technology.

"It's a lot of working together, and it's not easy," he said. "but I think it's really redeeming to kind of do this. And we are growing as we are progressing as well. The end goal is

definitely to have a finished game that people can play and enjoy and kind of get this nostalgia back from the old game.

Thoonen recalls playing the original as a child and remarked on the wonderful feeling it gave him of a sense of being able to do anything.

"That was just really, really cool," he said. "I felt like there was quite a lot of freedom. I would like to have that even more because it goes back to the essentials of self-play. With playing, you kind of just try things out; there's no objective."

Lessons Learned

Looking back, it's clear that LEGO Island was an important milestone for the LEGO Group, noted documentarian and co-host of Bits N' Bricks Ethan Vincent.

"It not only proved to the LEGO Group that bricks and minifigs could exist in a virtual world as a clear digital representation of the physical but also delivered video gameplay for children in a wholesome, educational and entertaining way," he said. "It was a more than a successful experiment; it was something the LEGO Group hadn't done before and offered a strong response to the sudden rise of video games and its threat to lure away their pre-teen base."

Vincent also noted that valuable lessons can be found in the development process and its relationship with Mindscape.

"Although the LEGO Group was updated and involved creatively, paying particular attention to the emotional and educational aspects of the game as it related to kids, I feel that they were a bit lackadaisical when it came to ownership, rights, and residuals in dealing with Mindscape as a gaming company," he said. "Maybe the problem is that the LEGO Group is just too nice, but time and time again, we will see the LEGO Group make the same mistake of not securing a stronghold on the game during the final release phase, and somehow they lose their grip on a valuable asset. It happened with Gazillion and LEGO Universe years later, and to some extent with the TT Games deal for LEGO Star Wars."

LEGO Island is indeed a fascinating game, and its development is equally fascinating. It's a title that set the stage for the LEGO Group's future success with video games and helped establish many of the rules that would later help such games stand apart.

"Take all of that and add to it the fact that this group would hold regular think sessions on the deeper philosophical meanings of LEGO toys, digital toys, and play in general, and you have what is surely one of the most impactful, most important video games in the LEGO Group's history," journalist and Bits N' Bricks co-host Brian Crecente said. "Other titles would make more money, move more copies, or grab more attention, but I think it would be hard to argue that any game would be as impactful across the 25-year history of the LEGO Group as its first."

Explore more...

In order of appearance

[An Interview with Wes Jenkins the Creative Director of LEGO Island](#) (before 2017) Online article

[LEGO Island ad](#) (1997) YouTube video, 40s

[LEGO Island walkthrough](#) (2016) YouTube video, 2h 3m

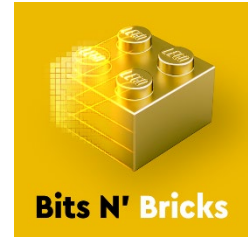[LEGO Island soundtrack documentary](#) (2019) YouTube video, 33m 29s

[Project Island trailer](#) (2018) YouTube video, 1m 19s

[Project Island](#) (2019) Fan web site

Transcript

Bits N' Bricks Season 1 Episode 4: LEGO Island

December 30 2020 · 0:55:32

Prologue - 00:00

(Phone call)

Scott Anderson

Hello?

Brian Crecente

Is this Scott Anderson?

Scott Anderson

Speaking. Is this Brian?

Brian Crecente

Yes, it is. How's it going?

Scott Anderson

Fine. How are you?

Brian Crecente

Good. Let me start by asking what is it that you did on the game?

Scott Anderson

I was the producer. And if you look at the credits, I was the mayor of LEGO Island.

Brian Crecente

Nice! Are those two things that went hand-in-hand or did you have to go up for election or something?

Scott Anderson

Yeah, there was an election. We all raised our little elbow-less arms.

(Laughter)

Bits N' Bricks: Introduction - 01:13

Ethan Vincent

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

Brian Crecente

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

Brian Crecente

This week's episode takes a look at arguably the first serious LEGO video game release: LEGO Island. Released on CD-ROM in late 1997, The Adventures on LEGO Island was first introduced at toy fair in March of 1997 in New York city.

(Announcement for Adventures on LEGO Island followed by commercial)

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, so that was the LEGO Island commercial that aired in the US in 1997. And it had that, you know, signature Seinfeld like slap bass there... it's kind of fun. It's an ad that features this younger kid, you know, maybe 10 or 11... and he's being teased by his older brother and he uses the mouse to take control of the situation... all in this spirit of LEGO Island. So at this point, it's probably important to note that neither Brian or myself are LEGO employees. We were both commissioned to research the rich 25-year history of LEGO Games.

Chapter 1: LEGO Futura and the Nintendo Threat - 03:25

Ethan Vincent

As we dive deep into the vast world of LEGO Island, our focus will primarily be with firsthand accounts from those who created the game at Mindscape, the gaming licensing partner of the LEGO Group, and not necessarily on accounts within the LEGO Group during that specific time period. In doing so, we will not only examine the trivia and mechanics of LEGO Island itself, but assess its cultural impact on the LEGO Group and really try to understand this unique point in time where the LEGO Group transitioned from the physical to the digital.

(Music)

Tormod Askildson

Well, back in the fifties and sixties the LEGO Group was about building sculptures, static objects... then came the wheel, then came LEGO Technic with functions. So you could actually add movement to it. Then came Mindstorms with sensory input, you know, sensor feedback, stuff like that, meaning that you could actually add behavior. But the world around us was becoming increasingly virtual... more and more things is happening in the virtual space. We need to be there.

Ethan Vincent

That was LEGO employee Tormod Askildsen, who has been with the LEGO Group since 1983 and is the head of adult fan engagement at the LEGO Group. This was from a conversation I had with Tormod back in 2008 about the importance of the LEGO Group getting involved in digital gameplay. Brian, you also talked to Tormod, I believe, and you talked to him about a very specific timeframe, which was before LEGO Island. Tormod had a little bit to do with this idea of digitizing and doing games... so forth and so on. Tell me a little bit about that and maybe some of the things he talked about.

Brian Crecente

Yeah. So, back in the fall of 1995, Tormod was asked by corporate management to look into the children's software market, specifically, they wanted him to identify and evaluate opportunities within this market, and interestingly, it was a request that was driven by this concern around the growing video game industry and how companies like Nintendo were eating up huge chunks of a child's free time.

Ethan Vincent

So, Brian, how did we get to this point? Help me a little bit with the background on the gaming industry, and what kind of leads up here to 1995.

Brian Crecente

Sure. Now, to understand what's going on in the game industry, you need to go back a little bit. So there was something in 1983 called the video game crash. And what happened here was essentially Atari flooded the market with too many games and they couldn't sell and it almost killed the entire game industry. Fast forward three years and Nintendo enters the market with the Nintendo Entertainment System... they kind of trick stores and retailers into selling their system by calling it an entertainment system, not a game console... it includes a little robot. So they basically are saying, this is a toy. So that takes off, it blows up. 1989 you have the Game Boy, which expands the market even further. So now you have portable gaming systems.

1992 you have the Super Nintendo Entertainment System, which makes the gaming industry even bigger. So by 1995, you're entering what is considered by the game industry, the fifth generation of consoles. And that brings in some massive players. Nintendo's already huge,

but now you have PlayStation with the Sony entering the market. And so it's becoming this big thing. A year later, Nintendo's gonna come in with the Nintendo 64. So the world of console gaming is booming as is the world of computer gaming, where you have titles like Warcraft, which is at the time a real time strategy game. You have Dune II. You have Maxis' popular line of Sim games like SimCity. And then you have titles like Myst, which are showing the popularity of explorative puzzle games.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah. So that's pretty amazing too, because you are starting to see these games that are highly involved. This idea that, you know, youth and kids and us, from the Atari generation or something, is now going to do like... deep dive gaming. And I think that's pretty interesting because you've got video games that are actually demanding a lot of time to be involved with, to be engaged with.

Brian Crecente

Right. I mean, the reality is everybody only has so much time. Children only have so much time. So when they have their free time, they're going to play with toys or now they're going to watch TV or play video games. And video games are becoming a larger and larger part of what they do with their time. Now the LEGO Group was already sort of playing around with the idea of video games and had been for a while. So you've got things like Futura, which was this sort of R & D part of the LEGO Group and they were looking at all kinds of things, including virtual reality experiences and the idea of using CD ROMs, and maybe including those with building sets and maybe creating digital versions of how you build. And of course the internet is taking off. So it's a really interesting, important time.

Ethan Vincent

You interviewed two former LEGO employees who worked with the R&D team, LEGO Futura in Boston. There's Kitty O'Neil, who was hired as a kinetic sculptor right out of college in 1992. And then Michael Thompson, who was her boss. And he had a degree in computer science. And one of the stories I love is he actually submitted an unsolicited application to the product development department at the LEGO Group.

Michael Thompsen

I think my application ended with, "... not only can software help contribute to the LEGO Group, but the LEGO Group can help contribute to software." So that was kinda my dream.

Kitty O'Neill

So I started in '92. They were already doing stuff where they were using the computer to do something to the brick.

Michael Thompsen

I remember I was the first to present the internet at the LEGO Group and I, and it was all text back then. This was 94. But it was, there was no web at that point. Not, not in generally in use anyway. I presented this and nobody got it, but Kjeld came up and he was just, he was just completely… putting his knuckles to his head and going, "This is incredible. You know, this is going to change the future." So he really gets it.

Kitty O'Neill

Before the LEGO Group had any software, we did a catalog with pictures of different LEGO software boxes that we just made up. But we were trying to show them that you could have a whole line of software and that they would be for all the different age groups. And so we made up all these titles and descriptions and it looked like a real catalog that you could buy.

Michael Thompsen

They thought it was really interesting, but the problem was that the company didn't know how to deal with software. They had no idea. They didn't have any kind of organization to deal with software. They wouldn't know how to develop it. You know, they had no idea.

(Music)

Kitty O'Neill

PC games were really popular. So it was just in the Zeitgeist, you know, games is going to be a big deal. I mean, people have been playing games on the computers for 10 years, but it was really building and it was becoming a big part of toy fair.

Michael Thompsen

We did in '93, I think, we did the very first CD-ROM that we, that we produced, but not as a product, just as a concept, but it was basically a game. It was called LEGO Town. And it was kind of cool because we did some of the first attempts at how do you animate LEGO figures, you know, can a parrot fly and will it move its wings or, you know, does it fly with the wings stuck to his side and so forth?

Ethan Vincent

Man, I love these interviews about the pre LEGO games era. Now these phone session recordings were all done last year in the fall. And this was of course before you, and I knew that any of this would be turned into podcast snippets or conversations. And so it's funny, you can actually hear your typing alongside in the background, but yeah, there's so much packed in here, Brian, right? This idea that LEGO Futura needed to sell LEGO headquarters on the validity of software and video games. I love that picture of Michael presenting the early internet to Kjeld Kristiansen for the first time, and just how excited he was… this

attempt that LEGO Futura makes over and over again, it's between what... 93 and 95, and really trying to help the LEGO Group jump on the digital and video game bandwagon.

Brian Crecente

Yeah. I mean, it's important to note also that it's that same year, well in 96, another group was launched, a very important group. The Strategic Product Unit Darwin was brought on and some of the people who were working on some of that stuff at Futura moved over to Darwin and Darwin's mandate was to, among other things, explore the possibility of video games that can recreate LEGO toys in a digital form. So this is sort of in the air, you know, this idea that LEGO play has to go digital in some sense, and that toys and the internet and everything is sort of, going to take over. And then, Tormod is asked to do this report. He hires a couple of people. They have a small group of researchers that put together this report, which by the way, is called Elvis, I think because video games had the company all shook up... which I love, I love that name.

And so this report, it takes basically over the fall of that year, they work on this report, they deliver it in the winter..and it's findings are really, I think, a wake up call for the company because it's not just saying, "hey, yeah video games are important." The report stresses that entering the video game market was not an option... it was an absolute necessity. So, on December 21st, 1995, there's this workshop held with Tormod and some other folks, in which they present their findings through a PowerPoint. And Tormod and his fellow researchers lay out what the opportunities are, what the different entry strategies are and the best way to position LEGO toys within the video game industry.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah. So the timeline is actually kind of unique in how it leads into LEGO Island as a game that's supposed to, you know, come about. But before all this happened, someone had to greenlight and fully greenlight this idea that the LEGO Group was going to go into games. And why do you feel that was such a debate? Why was that being discussed so long? I mean, if you look at, you know, video games... they've been around for so long, even up to 1995, that you would think maybe the LEGO Group would have started earlier, what are your ideas on that, Brian?

Brian Crecente

I think that the LEGO Group as a toy company, as a company that had been around for very long time and had always worked on the physical viewed digital creations with some suspicion. Both because they saw the digital creation taking away some of their market. But more importantly, I think like a lot of people back in that time period, you know, it was sort of the comic books of its era. It was this idea that video games would rot your brain... you know, they weren't educational, they weren't healthy. It was just viewed as sort of a mindless time-waster. And I think for the LEGO Group to really come to grips with that, they first needed this Elvis research project. But also we come to find, maybe decades

before they really got a grasp on like... this is important and this is how we do it, and this is how these things can coexist.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah. I think also the other thing that plays into the LEGO Group is the fact that there was a whole group that felt like... if you were to force a story upon kids or have them do something that was task or narrative driven in video game, that would take away the game and play experience per se. Like you would be forced to play a certain regiment of a game instead of just, you know, mixing all those genres like is so common when you're a kid you're just mixing everything. Plus I don't know if they had quite the handle on early youth that was starting to decline. And that was the real Nintendo threat I believe. You'd probably forget the plastic brick quite easily during that time.

Brian Crecente

You know, video games themselves, people who make video games and people who have been in the industry for decades have long struggled with that balance between a crafted experience that is more akin to a movie or a book... and the idea of creating a toy-like experience that is more akin to giving a kid a sandbox to play in or a toy box to go through and play around with. So, the fact that the LEGO Group, which doesn't have any experience creating video games at the time, steps into this and looks at it and instantly, seemingly identifies an issue that video games and video game makers have long struggled with, I think is very telling and frankly, very impressive.

Ethan Vincent

Absolutely. Alright. Let's take a little break here. Before Jet Set Radio, Crazy Taxi and Grand Theft Auto, LEGO Island was the first to have an interactive radio station. Let's take a listen here...

(L.E.G.O Radio commercial)

Chapter 2: The Making of LEGO Island - 16:53

Ethan Vincent

Let's take a look at the beginning, how it all started. Brian, tell me a little bit about the setting and how did LEGO Island come about?

Brian Crecente

You know, it's really fascinating, especially when you sort of lay it over the context of what's going on in the world in terms of video games and toys, and then what's going on at the LEGO Group. So in the mid nineties, there's this California education software company called Mindscape. And so Mindscape... we could do a whole thing on

Mindscape... they have a fascinating sort of turbulent history that started in '83 by a guy who worked at Scholastic. But they had a history of publishing video games, but they went through a lot of ownership changes. And so during this time period, they decided that they wanted to focus a bit more on different types of video games. So one of their departments heads started looking at who they might be able to team up with in the toy industry. So they see this as another avenue for making money. And after doing some research on big toy companies, they of course settle on one of the biggest, the LEGO Group, and decided that's the approach. That's the company they want to go after. So they give this project, this sort of pitch that they want to come up with to a guy who goes on to become LEGO Island's creative director, his name is Wes Jenkins... and the people who knew him described him as this amazingly creative person, this sort of fountain of ideas and enthusiasm at the company. And he goes and he grabs another guy named Paul Melmed, who would then become LEGO island's education and research director. And the two of them sit down and come up with this amazing pitch for a game featuring LEGO Town, the LEGO Town sort of set, and they go to the New York Toy fair in February of 1995 and pitch their hearts out to the LEGO company.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, and the timeline here is real interesting, right Brian? Because in February 1995 they're there and they're pitching the LEGO Group. And how does that go? What happens? I mean, how do they react? And obviously this seems to gel and fuse perfectly with this attempt they had with LEGO Futura and Tormod and those people wanting to actually have a video game.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, it's really interesting. You look at this pitch that seems like it went really well and you sort of take that time period, which is February '95, and then drop it into the world of the LEGO Group, and going back a little bit to what we talked about a little earlier in this discussion... remember that the Elvis research project kicks off in '95. So, February '95 the LEGO Group has this interesting idea pitched to them. And we know they'd already been thinking about video games because of Futura. And then we know in the fall... so let's say September of '95, Tormod is asked by the folks at the LEGO Group, the higher ups at the LEGO Group to have a look at video games. So one could assume that probably these three things line up very neatly. So you've got Tormod doing this research, he delivers his report to the folks at the LEGO Group in December of '95, where he basically says, "... it's not an option... we need to get into video games." And then, lo and behold, in January of '96, just a month later, Mindscape and the LEGO Group formally announce a partnership to develop a CD-ROM game based on the Town play theme that would allow children to live and play in this virtual LEGO world.

Ethan Vincent

Yes, so I guess it's important to realize too, that this pitch that took place at Toy Fair, Tormod wasn't there, right? So it's not like, you know, Mindscape or Wes Jenkins or Paul are pitching to Tormod directly, but they're pitching to someone within the LEGO Group I'd imagine, right? So once they get this approval, what were the first steps in creating this game? Obviously it's a really big topic to say, it's a Town play theme. What is it that the game turns into and how does that happen? What are some of the next steps here, Brian?

Brian Crecente

Right. The nature of LEGO play is that it is very open. You could do almost anything with it. So after they get the green light, they start forming this big team. And it seems like Wes and Paul are two of the core people who really come up with a lot of the originating ideas for the game. One of the things that's really fascinating is that Paul who has a background in psychology came up with this idea early on... that the game could, on some deeper level, explore Dr. Howard Gardner's multiple intelligence theory. And we can talk about that a little later, but it's this theory that holds that human intelligence is actually broken down into what was originally seven different abilities - so, logic; linguistics; interpersonal skills; music; things like that. So the idea that Paul had was to allow children to become sort of characters that each represented these different forms of intelligence, and then they would explore this LEGO world through these different personal lenses. So you have on the one hand, Wes who is creating this world, this LEGO world, but you also have Paul who comes up with this really interesting, grounded-in-education approach to how those characters would be designed.

Ethan Vincent

And I think that's really important too, because obviously that's a huge interest that the LEGO Group has, right? They're interested in not just creating a game that you play once and then you're done with, but they wanted to create the same experience digitally that they did physically. So this idea that there's an educational tie-in, that there's different skills involved in actually playing the game and using the same skillset you do in physical building, you could use it digitally. This was a huge breakthrough I think or at least getting on the good side of the LEGO Group, I would say, because, the game no longer felt like completely disassociated with the company. It was actually fused very nicely in this little place. So when you look at the team, how did this work? How did they do this? I mean, it sounds very philosophical, very lofty ideas... now you have to actually make a game and you're also in the mid nineties, right? So technology is kind of limited.

Brian Crecente

Yeah. So they built up a actually quite a huge team. So, Wes Jenkins was obviously on the team. And there were other people like senior producer Scott Anderson, director of development Dennis Goodrow, project manager Mari Collings, and the lead 3D artist Dave Patch. So this group of sort of leaders got together and decided early on that instead of

creating what they viewed to be a traditional video game, they wanted to create something that, I think it was Wes, maybe Scott - one of them told me, or I read - that what they wanted was to create something that was more like a toy that happened to have gaming features. So what that means is they didn't want it to be this sort of directed experience. And we talked about this earlier... instead what they wanted was to offer children this sort of open field in which they could play and create their own experiences. And in doing this, you know, that's a bigger challenge because not only are you talking about, you know, the difficulties of engineering and technology, but you have to just create a lot of assets to do this. So over time I'm told the team that worked on this game ended up growing to more than a hundred people, which is tremendous.

Jim Brown

Scott joined Mindscape to work on the LEGO Island game. And he... a real good friend of his, that he knew through college and other stuff, Dennis Goodrow... they were both working there and they were looking for programmers and Scott called me and I was ready for a change. So I went to a Mindscape, which is in my hometown.

Ethan Vincent

So that was Jim Brown. He's from Novato, California, where Mindscape was located at the time. And, Brian, I believe he's one of the lead programmers listed at the end of the credits of the game as programming wizard and the godfather of code. But one of the real gems we actually have is this behind-the-scenes VHS tape, where Scott Anderson walks the floor at Mindscape, and it's this wonderful time capsule of that era, where he kind of introduces the large LEGO Island team and shows off the game.

(Music)

(Behind-the scenes tour at Mindscape with LEGO Island)

Ethan Vincent

So Jim Brown here talking about the difficulty of the graphics, and it's important to keep in mind that Mindscape is essentially developing LEGO Island for kids who are probably using their parents' old PCs. And so these really basic computer specs had to be kept in mind. So the bar's pretty low here, technically. And yet, from the interviews you conducted, Brian with Scott, Dennis, and Jim, it's clear that they were still all eager to pursue this very ambitious world creation.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, there's a lot to be said about the collaborative process of creating this game, because it sounds like early on the game was... while it had these interesting aspects to it... they still were creating sort of this more, maybe slightly more linear experience and didn't have a lot of building or vehicles. The LEGO Group came back and said, Look, you need to

have more building because building is a big part, obviously of what the company does, but also vehicles are a big part of what they do. So they asked the developers to start focusing on this building aspect, which would in theory allow kids to build these different vehicles and then explore the Island from a first-person perspective. They also had this fascinating, story-driven experience that wasn't really required, but that if you wanted to kind of feel like you were playing a game that had a story, you could dig into that. And frankly, I really do love the story here, it's so great. So basically what would happen is if the player had already built a police helicopter, and if the player happened to be playing as Pepper Roni, which is one of several of many characters in the game you can play as... it kicks off this storyline that has Pepper Roni essentially delivering this pizza to a character named the Brickster who's in jail. And then the Brickster uses that pizza to somehow escape from the jail, and then he starts going all over the Island and basically causing destruction. And it's up to the player to stop him. The game actually - another sort of amazing thing for a game of this time period to do - it actually had two different endings, one showing essentially the Brickster winning and the other showing Pepper Roni winning.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, great alternative ending. You know, if the Brickster wins, it basically sounds like this:

(Excerpt from LEGO Island: Brickster winning ending)

Ethan Vincent

You know the camera's flying through around the Island and we see bricks and set pieces scattered everywhere. The Brickster stands on a classic red two-by-four brick-

(Excerpt continues: Brickster laughing maniacally)

Ethan Vincent

-maniacal laughter. Lightning strikes in the background. Yeah... and then the camera pulls back out of the scene through the clouds and in the distance you still hear LEGO Island in mourning, all these distant cries... it's pretty dramatic. But then of course it kind of flips to the Infomaniac telling us that everything's going to be okay and you can play it over again. And, it's kind of a fun alternative to the classical happy ending.

(Excerpt from LEGO Island: Infomaniac's advice)

Brian Crecente

And, going back to that original concept, importantly, the game had these five playable characters, each of which aligned with a different type of intelligence. It's a very subtle thing... and their names are amazing by the way. I love all of their names, but in the instruction manual, I think they kind of break it down for you. You've got Mama Brickolini whose intelligence is musical. And then you have Pepper Roni who is mathematical, and

then you have Papa Brickolini whose intelligence is coordination. Then you have Nick Brick whose intelligence is spatial. And Laura Brick who's interpersonal is her intelligence. And then, I guess they didn't want to have too many playable characters... so they also added, the final two types of intelligence to two non-playable characters, one being the Brickster, and the other being the Infomaniac and the Infomaniac is sort of like your guide to this world - who, by the way, Wes Jenkins, I think, sort of denied that it was deliberate, but if you put the Infomaniac up against a picture of Wes Jenkins, you would think that that's exactly how they designed him to look... which is great. But yeah, so that's sort of how they injected these intelligences into the game.

(Music)

Ethan Vincent

Yeah and to me too, it's one of those interesting things where I think if you wouldn't tell me those things, I might not pick up on them. I don't feel like these are extremely overt things. But how long did it take Mindscape to create the game? It sounds all very ambitious, you know, different intelligences... a whole world, I think they had up to 35 characters too. So we've got so many different things that we're trying to do here and build here. How long did it take him? How's Mindscape going about creating this game?

Brian Crecente

Yeah, it's a lot of work. And one of the reasons it took so long though, was because they had decided that they wanted to create essentially their own sort of platform upon which this game was gonna be programmed and built. And the reason they did that was because Mindscape, the developer, hadn't just landed a deal for LEGO Island, it had actually landed this sort of contract that had built into it the ability for this studio to make a number of sequels. So the first game was meant to be LEGO Island, obviously, and then the second game, which the team had already started doing some work on and had actually done some prototyping on, was a game called, Beneath the Phanta Sea, as in fantasy... another great pun of course. And that was a game that was going to take place under water... and it was going to have all these kinds of creatures and experiences, and it was meant to be this game that was more about exploring the importance of ecology and environmentalism from an educational perspective. So in their mind, in Mindscape's mind, LEGO Island was supposed to be the first immersive 3D game designed specifically for children and sort of the beginning of a series of important, fun 3D games for kids, that also had an educational edge to them.

So, you know, we talk about the experience of playing the game, and when they started developing I think one of the things that they really focused on was the ability to move around. So Pepper Roni is this fan favorite. He gets to sort of explore, obviously in the vehicles he builds, but also on his skateboard which he can use to kind of ride around on the island. And then as development of the game goes on, they began to add more vehicles that you can build as one of these characters. They also took some things out - so

it wasn't always about adding features. So for instance, one of the early versions of the game actually has ropes in it, but everybody who's a fan of the LEGO Group knows, you don't really have LEGO ropes, those things don't exist. So they had to remove that and things like it from the game, but yeah, it was essentially this two year journey to answer your question.

Scott Anderson

Wes and I, and his wife, Kyle helped to build LEGO Island.

Ethan Vincent

Senior producer, Scott Anderson, again here.

Scott Anderson

So once we kind of had it mapped out, we built a copy of it in a big room at Mindscape... and it was LEGO brick size. So we had little LEGO characters all around, and we brought kids in to play with the LEGO bricks. Then we would, by watching how they played, we would get ideas for what to put into the game. When we watched the kids playing on our giant LEGO Island, we saw that the girls were more interested in building the Island. So they were interested in putting different kinds of trees on the Island, things like that... whereas the boys were much more interested in the racing part of it, the girls were more interested in the - and this wasn't universally true, but just one of the things that we noted... So we made it so that you can go to the Island and change everything. You could make the island your custom Island..you could customize the sky, and you can customize the trees and the color scheme and everything. So that turned out hopefully to have gotten us a lot more girls playing games than otherwise would have happened.

Brian Crecente

It's such a smart idea when you think about development ideas. So the play testing that they did went on throughout the process of creating the game because they wanted to make sure that kids were getting the experience they expected from the video experience that they expected from the toy experience. So they really wanted that one to one to exist. There were also a lot of discussions that maybe don't happen these days in terms of LEGO games, because simply there wasn't a LEGO game to look at. So not only did they have to create a game, but they also had to figure out all these sort of philosophical things about LEGO bricks and mini figures. Scott, I think it was Scott told me that they would have these meetings that they called "Yes meetings," where basically everybody would get together and no matter what the idea was, no matter how crazy or impossible it seemed, you weren't allowed to say, "no, that's a bad idea." You just had to agree with them and say yes, and they would then go home and sleep on the idea. And the next day they'd come back and try to sort of maybe bring that down to reality a bit... but fascinating stuff.

Ethan

Yeah. It is. It's this inclusive think tank kind of culture, you know, that really allows teams to offer up ideas and suggestions.

Chapter 3: LEGO Island and Beyond - 36:41

Ethan Vincent

When is LEGO Island released and how does that go?

Brian Crecente

Yeah, so it's sort of, unfortunately, a tragedy. Not the game. The game's great. The game comes out. LEGO Island was released on September 26, 1997. Unfortunately, according to everybody we spoke to, the day before the game came out, Mindscape ended up firing everybody on the team or just about everybody on the team.

Scott Anderson

When the game came out, we knew that it was going to be big. We have a terrific program in place for bonuses, for the team. And when the game came out, rather than pay off the, uh, the people who work on it, I mean, they sold like a lot of copies in the first day. And so they owed us royalties, they owed us a lot of bonuses and they decided that they would fold the company rather than pay us. So they fired the whole team, and then they folded the company.

(Music)

Brian Crecente

I can't even imagine, you know, putting two years of all of that time, all that excitement into this game, starting work on the next game and then having the rug pulled out from under you like that. So in the game industry, this still exists today, a lot of times, built into a contract with someone who works on a game is that they get a share of some of the profits..they get bonuses based on how well the game sells. And according to Wes, and a couple other people we spoke to, they believe that the company did not want to have to pay out those bonuses. So they fired everybody before it started selling. Absolutely terrible and the end result is that that team was done away with, and essentially for at least a brief period of time, the LEGO Island was the one and only game in that franchise. It wasn't a franchise, it was a single game and Mindscape would not go on to make any of the other games.

Ethan Vincent

So, Brian, how did the game do, how did LEGO Island do when it was put on the shelves when it was ready to be sold? I mean, how did LEGO Island perform in the market?

Brian Crecente

So, it did super well. That's the short answer. So the longer answer is, you have to remember that this is a game that came out in the fall of 1997. So when you look at the year's sales for 1997, it's only getting a few of those months. So despite that, it ends up being the 11th best selling computer game of the year, selling about 325,000 copies and earning $12 million. The next year, where it had a full year of sales, it ended up selling 400,000 copies. So it outsells its first year, not only was this game doing gangbusters, it essentially revived Mindscape. So Mindscape's total sales, not just sales of LEGO Island, but total sales for '97 jumped up 70% compared to the previous year, thanks mostly to LEGO Island.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah. So amazing performance in 1997. And when you look at some of the games that were released that same year, you had like "Final Fantasy 7," you had "X-Wing vs. TIE Fighter," "Golden Eye," "Tomb Raider 2", "Quake 2," "Gran Turismo." There are so many games out there that they were kind of competing with, obviously in different segments, not exactly PC CD-ROM games, so forth and so on, but still a pretty amazing lineup, I would say. And so when you have that kind of success, and obviously they laid off, you know, most of their team, what was Mindscape planning on doing, or what was the future to look like for them or how would they use that momentum? What was done here by mindscape?

Brian Crecente

Yeah, I mean, again, this sort of stresses the tragic elements of this story. It's a fantastic game. It paves the way for the future successes of, I think a lot of LEGO games down the line, but in the short term, it wasn't so great for Mindscape. So the initial plan was for Mindscape to make a slew of follow ups to LEGO Island, but the LEGO Group – I get a sense unhappy with the way Mindscape was treating its employees, instead, cut a deal to essentially rescind the licensing rights to the company… and Mindscape was left with the profits from that game but no ability to make a future LEGO Island. And keep in mind this is Mindscape acting as a contractor so this isn't really on the LEGO Group. So it wasn't until 2001 that the game actually ends up getting a sequel, "LEGO Island 2," which was subtitled "The Brickster's Revenge." But that game was actually developed by a studio called Silicon Dreams. And Silicon Dreams also went on to make a third LEGO Island game called "Island Extreme Stunts," which came out in 2002.

Ethan Vincent

So you have these spinoffs that come and they're not necessarily related maybe to LEGO Island, or how would you explain that? What were those games like, Brian?

Brian Crecente

Yeah, I mean, it's, again, they were fine. They were fine games, but the reality is… they didn't have that same, you know, feel that that original game had. They weren't… while

Silicon Dreams were very aware of the original LEGO Island, they were also very aware of "Beneath the Phanta Sea," they – Silicon Dreams – instead decided to start from scratch when they made LEGO Island 2.

Ethan Vincent

And is that basically like a rehash of LEGO Island just with better graphics?

Brian Crecente

I mean, the storyline sounds the same. I think there's more building going on, but the storyline's very similar. In fact, the Brickster, I believe uses a pizza to escape again, leading me to wonder why Pepper Roni hasn't figured this out yet... cause he keeps delivering these pizzas. "Island Extreme Stunts" actually drops the LEGO Island name... so now it's just "Island Extreme Stunts." It is a direct sequel. This one is also developed by Silicon Dreams. In this case though, it is not only published by LEGO Interactive, but it is co-published by Electronic Arts, and it's essentially the final LEGO Island.

Ethan Vincent

Like you said, it's the same thing over and over again, basically how long can we roll with this idea, which is kind of the downfall of any game that tries to, you know, put out sequels I would say, and doesn't create something new and just wants to piggyback off what was done, you know?

Brian Crecente

Yeah, an you know, this suffers also from the fact that you have this change in development studios. But you know, I think it speaks to the power of the original game, of LEGO Island... that there are so many people out there, to this day, who absolutely adore this game... and don't just talk about it but do something about how much they love this game.

Chapter 4: LEGO Island Fandom - 43:18

(Bits N' Bricks music)

Ethan Vincent

That the LEGO Group has a large loyal fan base covering all age groups is a well-established fact by now. And it's no surprise that LEGO games has a similar following. There's the LEGO gaming community, Rock Raiders United, and a simple LEGO video game title search in Google or YouTube will pull up a treasure trove of materials. When searching for LEGO Island, you'll find videos of gameplay walkthroughs to entire mini-docs with found VHS tapes and phone interviews. There's podcasts like "Retro Reset" and "Memory Card" they talk about LEGO Island... websites with software patches to fix bugs in the original game and even swap a higher quality version of the soundtrack into LEGO Island. So there's

definitely no shortage of LEGO Island super fans out there, and one such super fan, researcher, archiver and collector is Ben Davies.

Ben Davies

I had played LEGO Island and as a kid, but my interest in it really probably goes back to 2013. I pulled out of storage, I played through it for nostalgia's sake. And I just realized that... hey, this is a really charming game. I'm getting all the humor and little references that I didn't get the first time while playing through the game. Flash forward a few years and I finally got the time to do that. And so I ended up traveling and speaking to all the devs and working on acquiring basically the lost materials from the game, which have gone off to who knows where over the 20 odd years of its release.

Brian Crecente

Do you feel that other people feel the same way in terms of, you know, the LEGO Group has this breadth of games that were released that now spans 25 years... do you think LEGO Island stands out for everybody that way? Or are you sort of unique in your love of that game?

Ben Davies

Those who played it originally, they still have a sort of a very fond association with LEGO Island. I mean, while gameplay wise, it's sort of, it hasn't aged the best. I mean, in terms of writing, voice acting, music, it's still definitely one of the most well received LEGO games in that regard.

<center>(Excerpt from a recruitment video for Project Island)</center>

Brian Crecente

What you just heard was an excerpt from a recruitment trailer for Floris Thoonen's "Project Island." So Floris, when did you start recreating LEGO Island?

Floris Thoonen

When I personally started was like a few years back when it started not as a team project yet. But I think we went public on this... on the 20th anniversary of the game, which was, I think around two years ago.

Brian Crecente

And when you went public, how many people were working on it then?

Floris Thoonen

When we went public... I think not a lot. I think about 12 or so.

Brian Crecente

And how many people are working on it today?

Floris Thoonen

I think officially in our server... we have about 50 people. They're not all contributing like actively... but everyone kind of contributes a brick and does a little bit there.

Brian Crecente

You're building it brick by brick!

Floris Thoonen

(laughs)

Yeah, exactly.

Brian Crecente

Do you have any sense, like when do you think you'll be done with this?

Floris Thoonen.

Yeah, it's a bit of a hard question. We are working on this kind of demo right now and it's going pretty well, but it kind of depends on how far we want to take this and... yeah, how much we can do. We're all kind of working in our free time, so it's all really dependent on that.

Brian Crecente

So... you probably know this, but the original game, it had a team of more than a hundred and it took them more than two years. And obviously this was a team of people who were used to working with each other and had a lot of history. Do you feel like it's achievable to get the entire game done or is that not even your goal?

Floris Thoonen

Yeah, it's a lot of working together and it's not easy, but I think it's really redeeming to kind of do this and we are growing as we are just progressing as well... new people that are interested in seeing this project... so that's also really helps out a lot. I think the end goal is definitely to have a final game that people can play and enjoy and kind of get this nostalgia back from the old games.

Brian Crecente

Like what was it about this game that stuck with you? Why is it that this is the game you decided to recreate and not some other?

Floris Thoonen

What resonates with me is kind of that it's kind of similar to the games I like now, because what I really appreciate in games is kind of this open world… this relaxed feel, having this kind of feeling that LEGO Island gave. I don't think I have played another game which has done that really.

(Music)

Ethan Vincent

What is that feeling? Tell me a little bit about that. I want to hear it because I don't think we could ever imagine what that is like to play it in a time where you say, "Oh my gosh," this is everything I dream of at night when I go to bed as an eight year old. You know what I mean? Tell me a little bit about that. Like, what is that feeling?

Floris Thoonen

I think it's quite a wonderful feeling because especially when you're young, you just have the feeling that you can do anything, and I think that's just really special that you just go into this world with all this LEGO people and, you know, you can just be there and be a part of it. And I think that's just really, really cool. I felt like there was quite a lot of freedom. I think what I would like right now is to kind of have that even more because I think it's really just comes back to that essentials of play. Because playing you kind of just try things out. There's no objective really because it's all up to what you decide yourself.

Chapter 5: Conclusions – 49:31

Ethan Vincent

In a way, LEGO Island was what the LEGO Group always wanted out of a video game. I feel like they wanted this sandbox exploration, they wanted properly animated mini figs, they wanted the LEGO brick to be represented properly, they wanted humor and wit… even this narrative, this story-driven game play as a viable extension to physical play with the LEGO brick.

The LEGO Group now seemed to have clear answers to some of their questions like, "Can the LEGO Group deliver a digital experience?" and "Can the LEGO Group make their money back on an investment like this?" And I think both questions were answered with, I think, an affirmative yes… you know, considering this Mindscape residual buyout and some of the things that took place there, but that resounding yes, as an answer here, were strong. And I feel like the LEGO Group was definitely now in the video game space as a real player.

But at the same time, I feel like the LEGO Group could have learned some valuable lessons early on when it came to their collaboration and involvement with Mindscape. Although the LEGO Group was updated and involved creatively paying attention to a lot of the

emotional educational aspects of the game, as it related to kids, I feel that they were maybe a bit lackadaisical when it came to ownership rights and residuals in dealing with Mindscape as a gaming company. And maybe the problem is that the LEGO Group is just too nice. You know, in reasearching some of the projects moving forward, we see the LEGO Group making similar mistakes of not really securing a stronghold on some of the games they were involved with the game during these final release phases. And somehow they seem to lose their grip a little bit on what becomes a real valuable asset. This reminds me a lot of what happened with Gazillion and "LEGO Universe" back in 2011. But regardless of their struggles with Mindscape, it's clear in 1995 the LEGO Group was all in, when it came to gaming and LEGO Island was treated like a serious project and they weren't afraid to do it right. So to me it's all pretty positive when it comes to LEGO Island.

Brian, what's your takeaway?

Brian Crecente

Yeah. I think you bring up some really interesting points, Ethan, especially the points you raise about the sort of seeming similarities between Mindscape and the LEGO Group and Gazillion and the LEGO Group. But you know, in general, I think that LEGO Island, a game that was made 23… 24 years ago, is this fascinating game that has an equally fascinating development history. Here's this game, really the first game made with the LEGO Group as a partner that may be even without realizing it creates and capture some of the fundamental principles of a successful LEGO game. It's an open world game. It also has these great dad jokes and silly humor, which I personally love, and it even features a host of playable mini figures, and these are sort of the core elements that we really see come to light in a LEGO Game in 2005… when Traveler's Tale takes these elements and makes them its own when they realease "LEGO Star Wars," the video game.

It was Travelers then that ran with that approach and evolved it and polished it and perfected it until it became not just the defacto way to make a massively successful LEGO game, but in some ways the best approach to making a family friendly adventure game.

And all of that, I think goes back to this team at Mindscape who had what was basically this clean slate to start working with. I love that this was the team that was interested, not just in establishing the rules of play for a LEGO game, but also helping to define what it was to be a LEGO toy in the digital world. And that the same group also worried over things like how they could inject some form of educational values in their games… in this case through these forms of intelligence that I talked about earlier. I think that's even more stunning. You know, that's an important element of what makes the LEGO play, LEGO play and for them to bring that over to video games is so telling. You take all of that and you add to it the fact that this group would hold regular think sessions on the deeper philosophical meanings of LEGO toys and digital toys and play in general… and you have what is surely one of the most impactful, most important video games in the LEGO Group history.

Other titles would go on to make more money or maybe move more copies or grab more attention. But I think it would be hard to argue that any game would ever be as impactful across the 25 year history of the LEGO Group as its first.

Bits N' Bricks: Credits - 54:34

Ethan Vincent

Bits N' Bricks was 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. Original music, sound design and mixing by Peter Priemer. Additional music provided by tracks from the LEGO Island game and Henrik Lindstrand from the award-winning game, "LEGO Builder's Journey," which you can play today on Apple Arcade today.

We'd like to thank our participants: Katie O'Neill, Michael Thompsen, Scott Anderson, Jim Brown, Tormod Askildsen, Ben Davies, and Floris Thoonen. We'd like to acknowledge the entire LEGO Games team as well as the great folks at the LEGO Idea House for their support. For questions and comments, write us at bitsnbricks@lego.com.

And as always, stay tuned for more episodes of Bits N' Bricks.