

How a Caped Crusader LEGO® Game Led to a Massive Buyout

A \$210 million video game acquisition that became a formative pillar of a major studio's investment in the game industry may not have happened had it not been for a tiny caped crusader.

Fresh off the success of the initial series of LEGO® *Star Wars*™ video games, developer TT Games was looking for a way to prove that they could bring their magic to a new franchise.

"The team was asking, 'What are we going to do next?' and we're having conversations, looking ahead," said TT Games director Jonathan Smith. "Where do we go from here? This seems to be working, but proving that it can work beyond *Star Wars*™ was absolutely the next problem to solve."



Smith said the team started looking at other possible world-renowned properties and decided to meet with DC Comics and discuss Batman™. That turned into a licensing discussion with Warner Bros. Entertainment, which led to a chat with the head of the company at the time: Kevin Tsujihara.

Ultimately, the success of that Batman deal led the two companies to agree to an acquisition, Smith said.

Martin Tremblay, who would go on to run Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment from 2008 to 2016, said the success TT Games had with their original LEGO *Star Wars*[™] creations grabbed the attention of everyone in the video game industry.

"They were breaking records, and very wisely Warner, lead back then by Kevin Tsujihara, had the vision that they could make something even bigger within Warner," Tremblay said. "They were one of the key pillars of building up Warner Brothers interactive."

Warner Bros. purchased TT Games in November 2007, when the studio was developing not just LEGO *Batman: The Videogame*, but also LEGO *Indiana Jones*[™]: *The Original Adventures*.

TT Games started work first on LEGO *Batman: The Videogame*, but the team quickly learned that it is impossible to create anything tied to the Caped Crusader in a vacuum. To start with, there is more than 80 years' worth of comic books. Then there are the newspaper comics, the radio dramas, television shows, a stage show, past video games, and of course the movies.

Early on, Warner Bros. and DC comics gave the folks at TT Games a bit of freedom. They weren't, for instance, asked to tie this first LEGO *Batman* game to the Nolan movies. Both understood those movies tended to skew a little bit older than the traditional core audience that TT Game's titles attracted.

Facing a massive timeline, as well as a huge list of enemies and fellow heroes, the development team settled on a specific approach to figuring out what should and shouldn't be included in the game.

"We started with the classic tropes of *Batman*, going all the way back to Adam West, grappling up buildings, throwing batarangs, wearing capes," said John Hodskinson, who headed up programming on the game. "And obviously, being a LEGO game, we wanted those characters to have a number of abilities. So we arrived at the concept of suits, which was quite a *Batman* thing, certainly, going back to the comics."

The team also came up with an interesting approach to the game's story. Instead of simply dropping players into one of *Batman*'s many existing adventures, they decided to create an entirely original plot – a first for TT Games. They also broke campaign up into two distinct storylines: One told the story of *Batman* and *Robin* as they fought the villains, and the other cast players as the villains carrying out their nefarious plans.

About six months into the game's development, news came down that most of the team would have to shift over to work on LEGO *Indiana Jones: The Original Adventures*

The run of LEGO *Star Wars*[™] games was so popular that LucasArts approached TT Games to ask them if they could use the same treatment to create a LEGO *Indiana Jones* game. They wanted a game that could go live alongside the new movie in 2008, which meant refocusing the team's attention to get that game out before LEGO *Batman: The Videogame*.

A skeleton team was left to work on Batman as the bulk of the developers wrapped up Indiana Jones. Some of the lessons they learned while working on Indiana Jones came back with the team as they returned to Batman. That included refined workflows and tools and even some game mechanics.

LEGO Batman: The Video game launched in the fall of 2008 and did well thanks not just to the subject matter, but also its ties to a console.

It wasn't long until TT Games started thinking about making a sequel to their Batman video game hit. The success of the first title made that decision easy.

One of the biggest changes that came with LEGO Batman 2: DC Super Heroes was TT Games' decision to add voice acting to the game. Previously, that was something more associated with the LEGO video games of the early '90s than the TT Games titles.

Darryl Kelley, producer on LEGO Batman 2: DC Super Heroes and LEGO Batman 3: Beyond Gotham, said TT Games director Jonathan Smith deserves credit for the original idea, which he championed very early in the development process. They had been experimenting with the idea, and once they saw it in action, they felt like it was a perfect fit. Darryl said voices made a huge difference. When LEGO Batman 2: DC Super Heroes was released in June 2012, the team also delivered an impressive soundtrack, bringing in some of the Danny Elfman score from the 1989 Batman movie as well as the John Williams score from the 1978 Superman movie.

The decision to create a third LEGO Batman video game, which wrapped up the trilogy in November 2014, came shortly after the release of the second, when it became clear that the franchise was still getting quite a bit of traction.

Where LEGO Batman 2 had 75 playable characters, LEGO Batman 3 had more than 200.

The LEGO Batman Movie Game hit mobile phones in 2017, and a spinoff called LEGO DC Super-Villains, which featured 270 playable characters, followed LEGO Batman 3 in October 2018 on consoles and PC.

That means that Batman has had more LEGO video games made about him and his cohorts than any other third-party franchise in LEGO Games history, outside of *Star Wars*™.

Kelley has a theory about why that is.

"I would say simply because the universe within DC is just so vast," he said. "You have an established storyline with established comics and history that go way back. Batman himself is hugely iconic. The awareness around Batman is through the charts. So to be able to lean on an intellectual property like Batman I think has been very fortunate for the LEGO Group."

Kelley added that, outside of LEGO *Star Wars*™, no franchise has had as big an impact on TT Games' ability to continue to make games and make them profitable for the LEGO Group.

"If we didn't have the LEGO Batman franchise, it may have been a different story of where the LEGO Group went in terms of video game strategy and investment in that team," he said. "It definitely played an important part in the history of the LEGO video game timeline."

Explore more...

In order of appearance:

[LEGO Star Wars™: The Video Game](#) - Wikipedia

[LEGO Indiana Jones: The Original Adventures](#) - Official website

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

[Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment \(WBIE\)](#) - Wikipedia

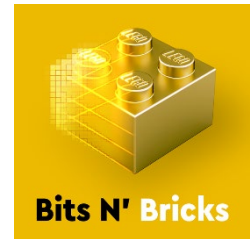
[Batman \(1989 film\)](#) - Wikipedia

[Superman \(1978 film\)](#) - Wikipedia

Transcript

Bits N' Bricks Season 3 Episode 34: Holy Game Development, LEGO®
Batman™

Sept. 22, 2021 • 42:58



Prologue – 00:00

Announcer

Please note that this episode of Bits N' Bricks contains instances of misuse of the LEGO trademark, which must always be used as an adjective and never a noun. As a reminder, it is never appropriate to refer to the company that designs and produces LEGO brand products as LEGO. Rather, the correct name for the company overall is the LEGO Group.

Announcer

I hope that was severe enough. Was it severe enough?

Studio Engineer

Yeah, that was great, Ben. We got it.

Announcer

Alright. On with the show.

Bits N' Bricks: Introduction – 00:39

(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.

(Season 3 Bits N' Bricks theme music)

Brian Crecente

Hey, Ethan.

Ethan Vincent

Hey, Brian.

Brian Crecente

I'm curious. Did you – have you ever read comics? Like, were you ever a comic book guy?

Ethan Vincent

I was. I read comics but mostly one comic.

Brian Crecente

So wait, what was the one comic – I'm assuming your favorite comic – what was that?

Ethan Vincent

It's Incredible Hulk. Anything with Incredible Hulk as a kid I was just obsessed with.

Brian Crecente

Wow, Hulk, the Hulk. I actually loved the Hulk. Hulk was pretty cool. I like the TV show, though. I was a big TV show fan of that. I have to admit, I am a bit of a Marvel fanboy myself. But there is one exception: I love Batman.

Ethan Vincent

Ah, that's great. Yeah, Batman's incredible. I mean, what a universe.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, you know, it's probably because the very first time I ever heard of Batman was not in his old like, newspaper strip or the comic book. It was actually on a record. Back in the '70s they released a bunch of these Batman radio dramas on record. I'm not sure if they were rereleases of the old radio show or if they made new ones, but they were like an entire story on a record, and I used to sit and listen to this record all of the time.

Ethan Vincent

That's awesome.

(Excerpt from Power Records' The Catwoman's Revenge

Narrator: "The night crawling vermin of the underworld and the avenging angel who is their foe – the Batman!")

Brian Crecente

And I think that's sort of what cemented my love of Batman.

Ethan Vincent

That's cool. I'm glad you said record and not phonograph, you know, that would date you, I think, even more (crosstalk and laughter). There's a lot of Batman out there, you know, so I'm not too surprised that he has records as well. He's been around since the '30s. And along with being immortalized in comics, Batman also has his own mini franchise of LEGO video games from TT Games, and that's what we're going to be talking about today. So hold on, here we go.

Brian Crecente

Kapow!

Chapter 1: Before LEGO Batman – 03:07

(Tune break)

Brian Crecente

TT Games had an enviable problem back in the mid 2000s. The studio saw tremendous success with *LEGO Star Wars™: The Videogame* and its sequel, but it still felt like it had something to prove. So everyone at the studio, TT Games' Director Jonathan Smith tells us, was asking the same question.

Jonathan Smith

What are we going to do next? What are we gonna do? Where do we go from here? This seems to be working. Proving that it can work beyond *Star Wars™* is absolutely the next problem to solve. So the steps beyond that are, can we do that with another Lucas property? And we loved *LEGO Indiana Jones™*. And can we do that with a non Lucas property as well, perhaps? And that's how we then came to meet with, initially, DC Comics and then Warner Bros., talking about LEGO Batman.

Ethan Vincent

That meeting went very well – so well, in fact that the two quickly came to an agreement on TT Games' next title: *LEGO Batman: The Videogame*. It was through that connection that TT Games first started chatting with, the then head of Warner Bros., Kevin Tsujihara. That LEGO Batman licensing deal was so easy to lock down that it ultimately moved to a bigger partnership and then a full acquisition. Martin Tremblay, who would go on to run Warner Bros. Interactive Entertainment from 2008 to 2016, said the success TT Games had with their original *LEGO Star Wars™* creation, grabbed the attention of everyone in the video game industry.

Martin Tremblay

They were breaking records – the number of units that were sold of the first game, and very wisely, I would say so, that Warner, led back then by Kevin Tsujihara, had the visionary of who can make something even bigger than you know within the Warner – and they were – one of the key pillar of building up Warner Bros. Interactive, by the way, I mean, they were bringing a huge amount of revenue per year and numbers of units. I mean, every single game were selling five, six million units to begin with at the beginning, which was unbelievable. And among the blockbusters that you can see on core game, because core games were selling, you know, when you were selling 6, 7, 8 million units, it was all driven by gamers loving it and everything else, where family games were usually trending into 500,000 units to a million-and-a-half units per year. But then they broke, you know, the first game just by itself sold 3.5 million units. Boom! And everybody were like, "Oh my God, what is it? What is it? What is this thing?" And that's the reason why I'm telling you from a creative perspective, kind of created a new genre, but also from a publishing perspective, they found a marketplace that nobody else were in. You know, the movie-base game were, yes, funny but sometimes violent. They were mimicking perfectly *Star Wars*™ with the *Star Wars*™ thing. Where with LEGO minifigs it is so different. You go with LEGO toys and it's just by looking at it and it became funny and accessible to the entire family without parents being scared about what could happen in video games, which, you know, violence has been always an issue in games.

Brian Crecente

Warner Bros. purchased TT Games in November 2007 when the studio was in the midst of developing not just LEGO Batman: The Videogame, but also LEGO Indiana Jones. That twin development was more intertwined than most at the studio. Because of a last minute shift in when LEGO Indiana Jones was expected out, the team working on Batman had to press pause and move over to Indiana Jones to help get that game out first, and then return to their Batman creation. But before that little diversion, the team had to come up with a solid concept for Batman.

Ethan Vincent

The team quickly learned that it is impossible to create anything tied to the Caped Crusader in a vacuum. To start with, there's more than 80 years worth of comic books. Then there are the newspaper comics, the radio dramas, television shows, past video games, and of course, the movies. Early on Warner Bros. and DC Comics gave the folks at TT Games a bit of freedom. They weren't, for instance, asked to try and tie the first LEGO Batman game to the Christopher Nolan movies. Both understood those movies tended to skew a little bit older than the traditional core audience that TT Games' titles attracted. John Hodkinson, who headed up programming on the game told us about wrestling with, and ultimately, incorporating the world's greatest detective's immense history and infusing it with LEGO values and humor.

John Hodskinson

Well, the timing was really interesting because, as I understand it, I think Christopher Nolan's first trilogy film had come out a few years before we started work on LEGO Batman. So that was fresh, but of course, the tone is reasonably dark. And we all grew up with the Tim Burton, followed by the Joel Schumacher films, and of course, going back even further it's still very well known, was the Adam West series. And being a LEGO-branded product, we wanted color, and life and humor. So we drew primarily, I think, from the Tim Burton production design. I think a dark, brooding version of LEGO Batman would end up being kind of satirical or funny anyway. So no, we went with color, and life and slapstick. And also that was in our wheelhouse anyway. That was the signature in the LEGO DNA for our video games at that point. So, you know, it just felt natural to apply it to Batman.

Ethan Vincent

Facing a massive timeline, as well as a huge list of enemies and fellow heroes, the development team settled on a specific approach to figuring out what should and shouldn't be included in the game.

John Hodskinson

Yeah, we started with the classic tropes of Batman, you know, going all the way back to Adam West grappling on buildings, throwing batarangs, wearing capes. And obviously being a LEGO game, we wanted those characters to have a number of abilities. So we arrived at the concept of suits, which was, you know, quite a Batman thing, certainly going back to the comics. Yeah, it felt really natural to find – for the main characters to have suits. And then we had to figure out the best way of delivering those suits to the player. That's where we ended up with the idea of the suit changes because we thought we could integrate those into the level puzzles.

Brian Crecente

The team also came up with an interesting approach to the game's story. Instead of simply dropping players into one of Batman's many existing adventures, they decided to create an entirely original plot – a first for TT Games. They also broke the game's campaign up into two distinct storylines. One told the story of Batman and Robin as they fought the villains of the story, and the other cast players as the villains carrying out their nefarious plans.

John Hodskinson

I'm not entirely sure how the idea came about, but DC and Batman's kind of world and Gotham in particular, has fantastic vehicles and really good colorful, characterful villains, so we knew we had to get them, all the classic villains, in. We just wanted the player to be the villains, so we came up with a structure in which you achieve the mission as a hero, and then you went back as villains to understand a bit more about their crazy plot. So it's more about, I don't know, finding the abilities that the villains can do, and kind of mapping those

onto the abilities that the heroes can do as well, but in reverse. The villains use their abilities with chaos and destruction, rampaging around the level shooting the place up, whereas the heroes are more about exploration and solving problems, and you know, solving the case, if you like.

Brian Crecente

The decision to split the game's campaign between the dynamic duo and their infamous enemies, had a significant impact in the game design as a whole, Hodskinson told us, because it allowed the designers much more leeway.

John Hodskinson

You know, we chose three different strands of the story, one for Penguin, one for Riddler, and one for Joker, of course. So we had, essentially, five different levels and two versions of each of those levels. So you might think the levels were reused, but they were all completely different. It was just the same situation flipped on its head. First, you see how Batman investigates the case and eventually brings the villains to justice. And then you go back later, if you want to, and see what the villains get up to causing chaos leading up to their nefarious plot. Yeah, I mean, going back to what that gave the designers is just total freedom, really. And each of the three strands of story paired one of those key villains with another bad guy. So throughout the five levels of each villain's story, you really got to know the main character – Joker, Riddler, or Penguin – but the other villains came in and out constantly, so it added a lot of variety, particularly to that villain mode, but I can't remember whether it was us or the LEGO Group, or a combination of all those companies, but we decided we didn't want the player to be the villain until they played the hero and seen that good won the day. But I don't know if everybody who played that game actually played and enjoyed the villain mode because they were almost hidden behind the hero mode.

Ethan Vincent

The approach the team took meant that there was a slight possibility that some players didn't actually play or see the villain levels because once they played through the Batman version, they spawn back into the Batcave, where they had to pull a switch, go to Arkham Asylum, and then find the villain mission room.

John Hodskinson

I always wonder in retrospect, whether we got that kind of design decision right or not. I mean, I know the game was well-received and sold many copies, but did everyone, who played it, even know that there was the same amount of game as a villain? I like that, hindsight is a nightmare fuel, I think anyway (chuckles), a retroactive nightmare.

(Tune break)

Chapter 2: Game Design and Story – 13:51

Ethan Vincent

Deborah Crook, a technical designer at TT Games, said as the design and story were being worked on, she and others started to come up with environments and abilities for the upcoming game's characters, which in turn influenced design and story.

Deborah Crook

At the time, we didn't particularly have a story filled out yet. And so we kind of thought about the kinds of environments that we'd like to see. I was particularly keen on having fairgrounds in there because I always thought, you know, the kind of abandoned fairground is always kind of, in my mind, been associated with that kind of superhero folklore, so yeah, we sort of looked at the characters and thought, "Well, what can we get these characters to do? You know, it might fit with what we've already got, that already exists, but it might not." We came up with the idea of the suit changer because, you know, Batman's all about his suits. And so it was like, "Well, how do we kind of build puzzles around these different abilities and, you know, if we do kind of have different sort of grappling abilities and demolition abilities, how do we kind of build that into environmental puzzles?" and the sort of suit change and everything came about, just as part of that thought process, you know, as a way of building puzzles around suits.

Ethan Vincent

John remembers in particular work that went into creating a new targeting system. When players took control of Batman they wanted the heroes to target specific items in the environment, or specific enemies – not just press a button to attack, in other words.

John Hodskinson

You know, that was more of a villain approach. We wanted Batman or Robin to sort of decide what to target, decide what to aim at. And we wanted to kind of integrate the puzzles into that as well, so there's usually specific latches and catches and things that you need to target – not that often, but often enough to remind the player that it's something that they can do. It's another ability in their tool set of mechanics. And, I remember writing the code and thinking, "This is the kind of thing that's going to be used again. So what should I call it? I don't want to call it batarang because that's Batman-specific." So I remember calling the code and the files boomerang, because it's something that you throw, and it comes back.

Brian Crecente

Were you right? Did end up getting used in other games?

John Hodskinson

Oh yeah, loads (chuckles). A good example is LEGO Harry Potter™ targeting spells. Much more advanced by that point, and I only wrote the first version. I believe, after the Harry Potter games became more sophisticated, and it was based on my original code, but it was much improved by them.

(Tune break)

Brian Crecente

To give LEGO Batman: The Videogame a bit more nuance, they also tweaked combat in general, essentially fine tuning the work that went into those early *Star Wars*™ games.

John Hodskinson

Combat, of course, is an interesting one, because at face value, it doesn't have much sophistication, because as many amateur reviewers will tell you, you just mash the buttons, and then things smash and then you build things. But we did want to give players options, so they can pick up enemies and then throw them to the ground or kick them into the air. If you have super strength, the way you attack a character will be different and they'll fly through the air, and it will be guaranteed a one-hit kill. You can obviously use your batarang for combat – sometimes it knocks characters out, sometimes it kills them. And the most important thing with the combat was to get the rhythm right. We always used to call it the beat. So, bang, bang, bang, bang, bang, whatever it was, it had to feel responsive enough on the controls to feel good, but the animations needed to make it look good as well. So, we did concentrate on that a lot, and I believe there was quite a few changes and many discussions about, you know, the animators would have loved to have done incredibly complicated and very cool looking animations, but we wanted to maintain that rhythm. And, we did spend a lot of time on that in particular.

Brian Crecente

Deborah said the team also worked on the backend creation tools, making it much easier for game designers to quickly implement and test out designs inside the game. The developer's early games relied on a system that made it very difficult to change things on the fly.

Deborah Crook

There's an editor mode that you'd be able to go around the 3D space, and there was like different ones. There'd be a grapple editor, or blow-up editor, and you could go into each one and you'd set up what you wanted, and you can place them, move them, and then you'd press play and it would run. You weren't ever kind of live editing. It was always, kind of, you'd be in editor mode and then you'd press play, play it, and then go back and tweak things.

Brian Crecente

About six months into the game's development news came down that most of the team would have to shift over to work on LEGO Indiana Jones. The run of LEGO *Star Wars*™ games was so popular that LucasArts had approached TT Games to ask them if they could use the same treatment to create a LEGO Indiana Jones game. They wanted a game that would go live alongside the new movie in 2008, which meant refocusing the team's attention to get that game out before LEGO Batman: The Videogame, which was, of course, already in production. Deborah said a large part of Batman was already sort of roughed out when the call to shift over to Indiana Jones came.

Deborah Crook

We always had a tendency to try and block out as much as we could, you know, to sort of fill out the game before it had all of the intricacies and all the detail. We did always try to sort of plan out the scope in a kind of in a sketch form well before we'd start filling in the detail, just so that we kind of understood what we were looking at.

Brian Crecente

John said that a skeleton team was left to work on Batman as the bulk of the team wrapped up Indiana Jones and then moved back to Batman.

John Hodskinson

It wasn't difficult, but it was just such a busy time. I mean, we all worked a lot around that time but it was so enjoyable. I mean, remember we're going from *Star Wars*™ to Batman to Indiana Jones, back to Batman. I mean, these are the huge licenses, and they were a joy to work on. I do remember it being an incredibly busy time, that's for sure.

Ethan Vincent

Both John and Deborah said that some of the lessons they learned while working on Indiana Jones came back when the team returned to Batman. That included refined workflows and tools and even some game mechanics.

Deborah Crook

There was certain mechanics that were done for Indy, like push blocks. I might be getting this wrong though because it's all very hazy. But I think like push blocks and stuff. They were they were all done for Indy, and they are in Batman. They definitely benefited, but just from the general sort of the tools being more stable and more established.

(Excerpt from the Official LEGO Batman the Videogame Launch Trailer:

Narrator: "From the makers of LEGO *Star Wars*™ and LEGO Indiana Jones comes LEGO Batman. When the villains of Gotham City are up to no good – "

Clayface: "Ahh! heh heh"

Narrator: "– sometimes the only thing more important than fighting evil is becoming it."

(Joker laughs)
Narrator: "LEGO Batman: The Videogame.")

Chapter 3: Release and Sequels – 21:23

Ethan Vincent

LEGO Batman: The Videogame, launched in the fall of 2008, and did well thanks not to just the subject matter, but also its ties to a console.

John Hodskinson

It did sell a lot, partly because it was bundled with Xboxes, Xbox 360s. That, as I understand it, made a huge difference to the sales numbers, but I think it was just an incredibly solid, arcade-like experience. I think it just fulfilled people's expectations. It didn't change the world of gaming or anything. It wasn't a huge surprise. It's just that when LEGO *Star Wars*™ came out, people didn't know what LEGO plus *Star Wars*™ was going to be, but when you told them about LEGO and Batman together, they had a certain expectation by this point. And I think it just nailed it. So, I don't think it was a surprise that it was successful, and I don't think it was a surprise that it wasn't universally praised either, because we knew we're making a game that we wanted kids to be able to get through – and their parents. So, you know, at the face value it's not a sophisticated game. It doesn't use all the buttons on the controller. And some levels you only need to do five or six things to get through. So, even now, where we put more stuff in our games, I have to think, is that the right thing to do? Who are we making the games for?

Brian Crecente

It wasn't long until TT Games started thinking about making a sequel to their Batman video game hit. The success of the first title made that decision easy, Darrell Kelly said. And he would know because he was the LEGO Group's producer on both LEGO Batman 2: DC Super Heroes, and LEGO Batman 3: Beyond Gotham.

Darryl Kelley

There was obviously a lot of success in the first LEGO Batman game. We hadn't really produced a superheroes game, to that degree at that point in time, so it was very well accepted from fans, and something very different than what we had offered previously. So I think there was a large appetite to want to build on that success and make the game even better. How can we improve it? How can we really add, you know, novelty to this game. And that's one thing I always find with Traveller's Tales and TT Games is they're all continuously looking to improve upon their predecessor, and LEGO Batman 2, I think, was a perfect example of them trying to improve upon, you know, some of the game flow, the mechanics, the story play options. Creating a hub, as an example, was incorporating LEGO Batman to the Gotham hub. Just much more of a fully immersive environment with a lot

more functionality and free play options than we've had previously. And I guess that's the mantra of both TT Games and the LEGO Group: How do we always create and deliver the best product, in the sense that, only the best is good enough? How can we improve and continue to make that fun and immersive experience better?

Ethan Vincent

One of the biggest changes in the Batman sequel was TT Games' decision to add voice acting to the game. That was something more associated with the LEGO video games of the early '90s than the TT Games titles.

Darryl Kelley

The original game actually, that was non console, which was LEGO Island came out in '97, that was the first game – was on Windows back then – that had voices.

(Excerpt from LEGO Island:

Pepper Roni: "You have to take my skateboard! I'll bet you'll be a real riding Betty, but here's a hypothetical: You're cruising doing some switchbacks, tail sides or going 540 and a bar comes up. Do you grind it or Smith it?)

Darryl Kelley

But never had a game that was produced with TT to contain voices before LEGO Batman 2.

(Excerpt from LEGO Batman 2: DC Super Villians:

Joker: "What's going to come out of that mouth of his?!"

(game noises)

Batman:"Sorry to wipe that grin off your face, Joker."

Joker: "You're not sorry. You're not sorry at all.")

Darryl Kelley

So in the past, a lot of the games just used grunts or jibberish from the LEGO minifigures. In this game, the decision was made, "Let's add voices.' And there's a lot of hesitation, especially in that point about, you know how that would come across, not only to the community, but it's going against the formula that has so far worked within the LEGO video game space. But adding voices really just made the game that much better and something that, hence, continued on for all the titles that we've produced. We've had voices in every game.

(Excerpt from LEGO Batman 2: DC Super Villians:

Superman: "Hey, guys, need a hand?"

Batman:"With what? Parking?"

Superman:"Yeah, sorry, I wanted to be there for your award – I mean, Bruce Wayne's award. I got tied up."

Robin: "Me too. Kids weren't invited."
Superman: "So, saw you put a big hole in the theater."
Batman: "I'll get it repaired."
Superman: "I already did that. Also I put your boat back in the water.")

Darryl Kelley

It was definitely a big debate. There was a lot of concern about the potential what that might do to, not only the characters, but to kind of take away that, you know, naive type of approach, the fun that kids get from hearing LEGO minifigures is kind of grunt and moan, and you kind of determine what they're feeling, you get the sense of that – that humor element was the big concern. And that's what makes these games so great. It brings a very serious kind of tone of a certain theme or IP, putting it into the LEGO universe, and it taking on a completely different meaning. So there was definitely some concern in terms of how that would come across. There was a lot of discussion, going back and forth to make that happen. But we got to a point that it made sense, especially after seeing some initial animations and clips of, even a side by side, of that same scene with just, you know, grunts and moans versus that scene with, you know, actual voices. It just made the game come to life in a way that you didn't think was possible, that you might not have believe it, you know, that it would actually have that type of impact. And it certainly did, so I think it was just a tremendous opportunity for TT Games to bring that forward, for the LEGO Group to buy into, you know, that new kind of approach, and it really kind of formed the basis for all the video games that are produced today for us.

Brian Crecente

Darryl said TT Games director Jonathan Smith deserves credit for the original idea, which he championed very early in the development process. They'd been experimenting with voices, and once they heard it in action, they felt like it was a perfect fit. Darryl said voices made a huge difference in the game. The team also delivered an impressive soundtrack bringing in some of Danny Elfman score from the 1989 Batman movie, as well as the John Williams score from the 1978 Superman.

Darryl Kelley

It definitely added a lot more context and that feeling of just amazement, especially, I always felt, playing as LEGO Superman, seeing him for the first time, hearing the music, being able to play with him was just something you've always wanted to do, and to do it in a LEGO game was just pure gold. I think the goal again, for the LEGO Group as well as TT Games is, you know, to look at ways to improve and sometimes that is gameplay mechanics, and sometimes that is the visual look of a game. We've experimented a lot on that and how we can bring the environments to life or the characters to life in different ways, but, you know, that's about the context. It's about, how do you make the environment feel rich, like you're engulfed, you're part of it. I think the power of music or the power of dialogue, putting a real persona to the characters, it helps to really kind of

incubate that idea. And when it's all said and done, and you see it all come together and come to life, it's an experience that we hadn't put out before. It wasn't something that any consumer of the LEGO video game franchises has seen or played. So to, you know, kind of immerse themselves in that type of environment, it just brings so much more meaning to the game, more of that positive attachment. I think that you can't – it's hard to find, it's hard to cultivate, it's hard to, you know, figure out what is the right formula. But in this case, all those, you know, all those different points of the recipe came together to make an amazing game.

Ethan Vincent

John Hodskinson remembers how the team struggled bringing Gotham to life. In particular, the development had a lot of trouble getting the pedestrians and traffic to behave in a believable manner – that is, until TT Games founder Jon Burton looked at what a mess the traffic and pedestrian systems were and came up with his own suggestion.

John Hodskinson

As I remember, Jon Burton just took a step back and said, "Right, we haven't got the technology to make traffic systems and pedestrian systems. So, the city is in chaos. So, we can just have burnt-out vehicles and people panicking. We don't need to solve that problem." And the levels were fewer, and we added more variety of level types compared to Batman 1, because the first game had those 30 levels, and they were all of the same format, whereas the sequel – both sequels – had a lot more variety, and certainly a lot more complicated mechanisms, and just more stuff in general. But of course, you have to progress when you go from one game to the next. So each time it kind of felt like we were progressing in the right way.

Chapter 4: Beyond Gotham, More Minigames and Characters – 30:57

(Excerpt from LEGO Batman 3: Beyond Gotham:

Batman: "Space. The last remnants of the unexplored. A never-ending expanse of darkness.

Here at the edge of the universe, I look into the abyss at – "

Superman (Offscreen): "Batman!"

Batman: "I look into the abyss"

Superman: "Bruuuuce."

Batman: "Seriously?"

Superman: "Is that a new space suit? Your suit looks really good is all I'm saying. One hero to another: It's really working for you.")

John Hodskinson

I did suggest taking Batman out of Gotham for the third game, and I think other people had suggested it as well. And Jon Burton really took that on board for the story and went crazy with it because there was so much stuff in that game. It was like a real kind of mashup of Batman, DC, with the Lanterns, and so on, and also some pop culture stuff as well. So it was a really crazy mashup.

Brian Crecente

The team also continued the approach used in the first LEGO Batman game, writing an original story for the second, but this time, it was much larger with 15 story levels and a massive open world to explore as any of 75 playable characters.

Darryl Kelley

You've got the Joker and you have Lex Luthor involved – two of the most iconic bad guys in the DC Universe – so when they're teaming up, you're fighting them in this epic story. There's nothing like being a superhero to, you know, really save the day, and I think they did a tremendous job of trying to top the story that did involve the original movie, and coming up with something new that you feel you want to, you know, really engage with and save the day.

(Excerpt from LEGO Batman The Movie: DC Superheroes Unite (2013) Official Trailer:
Commissioner James Gordon: "What would a candidate like Lex Luthor want with the
Joker?

Harley Quinn: "It's a riddle!"

Riddler: "Oh, come on. That's my thing."

Joker: "This time I'm going to pull Batman apart.")

Brian Crecente

The story was even used in a film adaptation called LEGO Batman: The Movie – DC Super Heroes Unite, which used the game's cutscenes, and then filled in the gaps with newly animated scenes. The game hit in June 2012, and that film in May 2013. And then in November 2014, LEGO Batman 3: Beyond Gotham hit, wrapping up the LEGO Batman trilogy. Darryl said the decision to create a third LEGO Batman came shortly after the release of the second, and it became clear, once more, that the franchise was getting quite a bit of traction.

Darryl Kelley

It always amazes me how quickly they can develop games and how many games that sometimes they may have in their pipeline. Back in those days, there were times where we would come out with two games a year. Sometimes they were, you know, over the course of time in development, but even three. So LEGO Batman 3, it didn't surprise me that the

idea was to launch that again in 2014, which it did get released in November of that year. So the timeline to build that and what they have on the docket in terms of new functionality or updates or where they wanted to take the franchise was, you know, it was very courageous and brave in terms of their scope of what they wanted to do, but I really had trust in their vision and what they wanted to move forward with, in terms of LEGO Batman and his next adventure.

Brian Crecente

Where LEGO Batman 2 had 75 playable characters, LEGO Batman 3 had more than 200. It is also, Darryl said, by far his favorite.

Darryl Kelley

I just love what we were able to incorporate into this game that basically TT, their vision, and what they came up with to create, not only, the number of playable characters. They also incorporated a lot of minigames in the experience including a 2D arcade shooter where you were in a small craft, spaceship, it was almost like arcade mode. We incorporated the 1960s Batman mode, which, you know, for those who are old enough to remember is just amazing, where you can play as classic Batman characters. You also have the music, you have the classic vehicles, there's classic voiceovers, they even have the classic POW mode that you can remember watching the old TV series. So, just all of that coming together for me just provided a hours and hours of content that you can explore within the DC Universe through obviously, you know, the LEGO Group and the twist that we put into each and every one of our games with the humor, the immersion. It just all came together in a perfect storm, and so LEGO Batman 3 would have to be my favorite game that we've made within the series.

(Excerpt from The LEGO Batman Movie Game app official trailer:

Batman: "I'm really good at this."

Narrator: "The LEGO Batman Movie Game app now available on iOS and Google Play.")

Ethan Vincent

The LEGO Batman Movie Game hit mobile phones in 2017, and LEGO Batman 3: Beyond Gotham, was followed up in October 2018 with a spin off called LEGO DC Super-Villains, which featured 270 playable characters.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, now and just so we can put all this in perspective, Ethan, that means that Batman has had more LEGO video games made about him and his, I guess pals, than any other third-party franchise in LEGO games history, outside of course, of *Star Wars*™.

Ethan Vincent

Wow, I mean, that's impressive because, what? There's probably around something like eight now, eight kind of video games around *LEGO Star Wars*™.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, that's right. Yeah. And I think – We asked Darryl Kelley about this, and his feeling is that that happened because Batman exists in this vast and rich universe.

Darryl Kelley

It's an established storyline with established comics and history that go way back. Batman himself is a hugely iconic – the awareness around Batman is through the charts. So to be able to lean on an intellectual property like Batman, I think has been very fortunate for the LEGO Group, and I think it has been one of the best intellectual properties we could lean on in comparison to things like *Star Wars*™. It's just so vast that you can do so much, you can tell so many different stories, you can pull from so many different comics and storylines, or you can create something completely new. And I think that's one thing we were very fortunate with is to be able to, you know, have some new creative freedoms, in terms of storytelling, really to kind of create some different suits for Batman, you know, to have different abilities, the ideas and the conceptual kind of make up were endless, with obviously some restrictions, but I think that we definitely capitalized on the opportunities that we had, and TT Games brought forward just an extremely well- developed, thought-out and structured game that you really just want to build upon, immerse yourself in, and continue to play for years to come.

(Tune break)

Chapter 5: Conclusion – 37:46

Brian Crecente

I suppose it shouldn't be that surprising that Batman games had an oversized impact on TT Games' approach to video games. Darryl points out that the LEGO Batman games came at a time when TT Games was starting to feel like it needed to prove itself again. He also notes that, where *LEGO Star Wars*™ laid the groundwork for getting future work, LEGO Batman allowed the studio to deliver the fantasy of being a superhero to children.

Darryl Kelley

Who doesn't want to play as a superhero? Everybody wants to be a superhero. So they definitely helped to, you know, lay the groundwork for a lot of games. So, you know, if it wasn't for the original LEGO Batman, we probably wouldn't have seen, you know, other games like Indiana Jones or additional *Star Wars*™ content. I mean, things of those nature all are tied to some of these very early titles. The success of those, you know, they paved

the way. So, it definitely has a big space in terms of, not only the exposure and fandom in terms of the kids and adults loving the original LEGO Batman game and subsequent games, but also from a company standpoint, the LEGO Group obviously values this because it helped to draw the connection between the video game industry and, you know, our LEGO theme sets. You can find sets that are available for LEGO Batman within the LEGO Batman game and vice versa. So the consumer wants to play out that specific scene in the LEGO Batman game, and they can do so by getting that said and having that adventure, or they're building it while they're playing the game, I've seen. So there's just a lot of correlation between the two which certainly helps the LEGO Group to, not only meet new audiences with gamers, but also to kind of build that cohesion between two different segments and channels.

Ethan Vincent

Hodskinson said he recently went back and replayed the LEGO Batman video games, and was surprised to find how well they stand up compared not to just modern games, but the volume of titles that TT Games released over the years.

John Hodskinson

Going back to it, it just makes you know what you're going to expect every time you pick up the controller. And it's very clear. When you play it everything is very clear. You know where the characters are on screen, you know where you need to get to. And it might not always be clear how –we didn't get everything right – but you know where you're going. And I think some games these days spend a lot of time telling players where to go because there's so much detail and everything is so complicated.

Brian Crecente

Darryl adds, outside of LEGO *Star Wars*™, there hasn't been a franchise that has had as big an impact on TT Games' ability to continue to make games and make them profitable for the LEGO Group.

Darryl Kelley

If we didn't have the LEGO Batman franchise, it may have told a different story of where the LEGO Group went in terms of video game strategy and investment in that group and the team. Again, when I started within licensing, and I was managing the video game development, I was the only one. It was just me. And from games like LEGO Batman, LEGO Batman 2, LEGO Batman 3, by the time I got to the end of that, there was an entire team surrounded around me. So it definitely helped to put more focus from the LEGO Group on the video game space, and the opportunity that it served up in terms of meeting our consumers and providing them a great experience with the brand. So it definitely plays an important part in the history of the LEGO video game timeline.

(Postscript music)

Bits N' Bricks: Credits – 41:46

Ethan Vincent

Bits N' Bricks is made possible by LEGO Games. Your hosts are Brian Crecente and Ethan Vincent. Producing by Dave Tach. Our executive producer is Ronny Scherer. Creative direction and editing by Ethan Vincent. Research and writing by Brian Crecente. Art direction by Nannan Li. Graphics and animations by Manuel Lindinger and Andreas Holzinger. Mixing and sound design by Dan Carlisle. Disclaimer voice is Ben Unguren. Opening's child voice is Milo Vincent. Music by Peter Priemer, foundermusic.com, and excerpts from the LEGO Batman video game series. We'd like to thank our participants: Deborah Crook, John Hodkinson, Darryl Kelley, Jonathan Smith, and Martin Tremblay. We'd also like to thank the entire LEGO Games' team. For questions and comments write us at bitsnbricks@LEGO.com. That bits, the letter N, then bricks@LEGO.com. And as always, stay tuned for more episodes of Bits N' Bricks.

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