

Return of the LEGO® Star Wars™ Battles

LEGO Star Wars™ Battles was a great smartphone game concept that simply couldn't get over the hump and go live, until it was killed and brought back with the help of Apple Arcade.

The title lingered in soft launch for nearly two years, never quite hitting the metrics needed to release it widely, before the LEGO Group, developer TT and Apple came together to give it another chance at life as an Apple Arcade title.



"There was a belief that this game really could do something, could be a game that people would really enjoy," said Vaughan Wallis, the LEGO Games producer on the title. "So I think everyone was reluctant to close it down.

"Those metrics are kind of a validation. Is this game fun? Does it have legs, from a gameplay perspective? How do we bring this game to market? "

LEGO Star Wars™ Battles went live as part of Apple Arcade in late September 2021, the culmination of a journey that started back in 2017 at a service station on the M25 motorway in England.

Tom Stone, a TT Games founder, rang up Jason Avent, who he knew from his work at Electronic Arts, to talk about starting up a new studio.

The two met at that gas station, and Stone managed to convince Avent to come out of a semi-retirement to help launch a new TT Games studio dedicated to making mobile games from the ground up.

The studio knew almost immediately where it wanted to set its first game: the brick-ified universe of *LEGO Star Wars™*.

Chris Bowles, the creative director at the studio, said the group wanted to create a *Star Wars™* game that could tap into the full history of the franchise and deliver a kind of player-versus-player battle arena to players.

With an idea roughly sketched out, the team put together a video presentation to show LEGO Games and the LEGO Group what it would look like in action.

The video showed players plucking minifig characters off of digital cards, dangling them over a playfield, and dropping them into the world of the game. Once on the battlefield, the minifig would come to life and start fighting.

Wallis said the game was very appealing to the LEGO Group, not just because of the mashup of LEGO bricks and *Star Wars™*, but because it would appeal to a broad audience, so the concept was quickly greenlit.

The team set about pulling in all of the characters they wanted to include and coming up with a framing device that would explain why players are having these battles.

When you launch *LEGO Star Wars™ Battles*, C-3PO explains that the game is actually a battle simulator designed to train future generals in the Rebel army. As he walks you through the game's rules, 3PO says that any general worth their salt needs to know what the enemy is thinking – and that's the narrative justification for aligning yourself with the Dark Side, too. Because you're a general in training, exploring the full history of *Star Wars™* and all of its locations and units makes sense.

But Bowles said that, even with that framing device, the team had to figure out what they could fit into the game.

"We just wrote a list of all the characters that we knew, knowing that that wasn't going to be nearly enough to kind of populate the game," Bowles said. "So it was really a journey of discovery, of kind of digging and finding all these great characters that existed in all these different expansions to *Star Wars™*."

Among the many characters players can pluck and drop onto a battlefield, are the adorable porgs.

Avent said that the idea of including the space puffins as soldiers in a mobile strategy game may have been helped along accidentally by the LEGO Group and a bit of knitting.

"We got some LEGO kits from the LEGO Group as part of the partner program and one of them was a giant porg," he said. "One of our programmers, his granny gave us a little woolen hat, and it ended up being on the top of this porg. I think that might have been the

kind of the creative inspiration for them being in the game because it is this giant thing right in the middle of the office that you kind of chuckle at when you walk past it.

"What you initially think is that they're not going to be able to harm anyone. And then you think, 'Well no, but that's funny, isn't it?' And that's what LEGO toys bring to the LEGO *Star Wars*™ brand."

The studio also had to monetize the game. And since it was destined for smartphones, the most obvious choice was the free-to-play model. But that gave LEGO Games pause. Avent and his team, coming from a long history of success in the mobile game market, had experience with free-to-play, but they also understood that the LEGO Group may not be open to the same format they've used before.

Ultimately, the developer and the LEGO Group agreed on a form of free-to-play with relatively light monetization based around a concept of fairness and transparency.

"Is the game fair and transparent in its business model?" Wallis asked. "We really wanted to make it very clear – in terms of communication and simplicity of the business model – what you could actually purchase in the game, and then making sure that the game was really razor sharp in terms of communication to the user, so that it was crystal clear as to what they were buying."

A lot of work went into nailing that approach, and ultimately it didn't just set the rules for LEGO *Star Wars*™ Battles, it also helped to solidify the sort of approach the LEGO Group would ask other developers to take on future free-to-play mobile games.

The game went into soft launch in India and the Philippines in September 2019, after a year of development. Months later it rolled out to a few other markets including Canada and Denmark.

Typically, in this process, once a game hits the sort of engagement a developer is looking for, it is then rolled out to the rest of the world – or most of it.

TT and LEGO Games soft launched *Star Wars*™ Battles to test the gameplay and get feedback from as many players as possible. The studio even worked closely with a play test company to get deeper stats and more clarity on play issues early on. With the service allowing players to narrate and record their experience as they played.

Bowles said those early days in soft launch provided not just key learnings, but big challenges about how they could improve and push the game to become what the team envisioned when they first put together that demo video for the LEGO Group.

That included things like shrinking the battlefield to speed of the time between encounters and tweaking the camera angle to offer players a better view of the combat.

While TT made some major changes, LEGO *Star Wars*™ Battles still lingered in soft launch, first for months, and then approaching years.

It wasn't until November 2020, a bit more than a year after the game's initial soft launch, that Avent said he started thinking about Apple Arcade. Apple's monthly subscription service strips away external monetization. Players don't need to buy a game or app or contend with in-app purchases or loot boxes. They can play any game in Apple Arcade as much as they want for that single monthly subscription fee.

Avent said he thought it was a perfect fit, and the LEGO Group loved the idea, too.

With the decision made, TT now had to take a game that had been live for more than a year, that was designed as a free-to-play game, and remove it from the app store, rebuild it, and relaunch it.

In May, the developer announced that *LEGO Star Wars™ Battles* would be "closing" and that it would no longer be available after July 1, 2021. And players were not happy with the news.

"When you have a player base who engaged with your game daily, and you're about to pivot, you're aware that it's probably not going to go well," Bowles said. "And when we did close the game, we knew we were going to Apple Arcade, but we couldn't communicate that to the player. That was a shame. It would have been great to deliver that message at the same time. It's just not possible sometimes, you know? That's the way it is."

In August, TT was able to tell players that *LEGO Star Wars™ Battles* would be returning as an Apple Arcade exclusive in September.

Typically, the biggest change that comes when a free-to-play game makes the leap to Apple Arcade is having to strip out all of the game's monetization methods.

But Avent said that, because TT developed the game using the LEGO Group's fair and transparent philosophy, it actually wasn't that difficult.

And because the game was offline and being retooled for Apple Arcade, the team also decided to rework other elements of the title as well. Those changes include minor tweaks like delivering players access to a broader roster of heroes more quickly and adding events. But also some big changes like what came with the game now being available on the iPhone, iPad, and television, through Apple TV.

Wallis said the LEGO Group is very happy with the result, which essentially turned a free-to-play game with built in monetization into a premium experience tethered to Apple Arcade's subscription.

"I think TT have done a really wonderful job in converting the game into an Apple Arcade offering and into a non-free-to-play game," he said. "I've been super impressed with the way that they've actually converted it to a premium game."

"I also think this was one of those games that really sort of helped to start having more discussions, and start outlining a framework really, where we can have these discussions internally with our child safety team, and so on."

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In order of appearance:

[TT Games](#) – Official website

[BossAlien](#) – Official website

[CSR Racing](#) – Official website

[Apple Arcade](#) – Official website

[Porg](#) – *Star Wars*™ Databank

Transcript

Bits N' Bricks Season 3 Episode 35: Return of the LEGO® *Star Wars*™ Battles

September 29, 2021 • 44:26



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.

(Bits N' Bricks Season 3 theme music plays)

Brian Crecente

Hey, Ethan.

Ethan Vincent

Hey, Brian.

Brian Crecente

How's it going?

Ethan Vincent

Going great.

Brian Crecente

I'm curious, I have – I know that you and I've been playing the new *LEGO Star Wars™* game. What do you think about it?

Ethan Vincent

Oh man, *LEGO Star Wars™* Battles. I love it. It's great.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, you know, I played it back when it was a free-to-play game, and I spent a lot of time playing around with it, and I really love how they've put it together.

Ethan Vincent

Totally. Yeah, I had a lot of fun with playing it. One of the things I love doing is switching back and forth between the Light Side and the Dark Side. You know, you switch from, you know, Luke Skywalker, Darth Vader and the music immediately changes (dramatic music). And I also love that excitement and anticipation right before you go into the arena. You don't know if you're going to be the Light or the Dark Side, and it's been a really cool game to play and get to know better.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, there's – it's neat, if you haven't played it yet you should check it out. It's basically – you're sort of set up to play against another player. One plays the Light Side, one plays the Dark Side. You have little towers, and you're basically trying to capture land and destroy the other person's base. And it's chock full of lots of references, and of course, that delicious TT Games' humor.

Ethan Vincent

Totally. I mean, there's a lot of fun jokes in there, in between. I don't know if you saw those, Brian, there's like these dad jokes that are kind of implanted. One of them is: What is the internal temperature of a tauntaun?

Brian Crecente

Yes, I am and I'm all about the dad jokes. If you know me, you probably know that.

Ethan Vincent

Do you know what the internal temperature is of a tauntaun?

Brian Crecente

No, what is it? Tell me.

Ethan Vincent

Luke warm.

Brian Crecente

(Collapses into laughter) It's so good!

Ethan Vincent

I know. It's so stupid.

Brian Crecente

I'm going to steal that, so I'll be making that joke later today.

Ethan Vincent

Yes, please.

Brian Crecente

Yeah and of course we haven't just been playing the game. We also got a change to chat with the TT Games folks in Brighton, England, the developers behind the title, about how they came up with the idea and its more than three-year voyage from concept to Apple Arcade title.

Ethan Vincent

And don't forget that in that time there was a nearly two-year soft launch and then the game was closed.

Brian Crecente

It's quite an odyssey.

Ethan Vincent

Yes.

Chapter 1: The Odyssey – 03:24

(Tune break)

Brian Crecente

It all started not too long ago, or really, not that far, far away.

(Record Scratch. Sudden pause)

Ethan Vincent

Oh, Brian, here we go again –

Brian Crecente

Dad jokes! OK, fine. It all started back in 2017 at a service station on the M25 motorway in England. Tom Stone, one of the founders of TT Games, rang up Jason Avent, who he knew from his work at Electronic Arts, to talk about starting up a new studio. Jason has this long history in game development and some experience with running a studio in Brighton, England in particular. After his time at EA, he went on to Climax Studio as the game director and then became the game director of Disney's Black Rock Studio. In 2011, after the studio shut down, Jason founded BossAlien in Brighton, bringing with him a bunch of the developers from Black Rock. BossAlien, which created the incredibly popular smartphone CSR racing games, was sold to NaturalMotion games, which in turn sold to Zynga. So, Jason said when Tom came to him, he wasn't quite sure if he was ready to run a studio again, let alone someone else's studio. But then came that meeting with Tom at a gas station alongside the highway.

Jason Avent

Originally I wasn't planning to start a studio or get a job with somebody else. The plan was to maybe wait for a while, enjoy semi retirement.

Brian Crecente

This is Jason Avent speaking.

Jason Avent

And he talked me into it because I've always loved LEGO bricks and *Star Wars*, and he said that there's a good opportunity to work with both of those IPs. And I thought that was really exciting, so in the end I got kind of got convinced to start the studio. So we're affiliated with TT Games, and we're working with Playdemic, the developer and publisher for *Golf Clash*. So, we were working with them on the mobile side and with TT on the IP side. And then gradually, we kind of developed our own relationships with Lucasfilm and the LEGO company. And we developed it independently.

Ethan Vincent

Jason set up what was then called TT Brighton, designed to create smartphone games from the bottom up, it opened in January 2018. The studio knew almost immediately where it wanted to set its first game – the brick-afide universe of *LEGO Star Wars*™.

Jason Avent

I mean, you know, LEGO and *Star Wars*™ go really, really well together. And *Star Wars*™ is one of the biggest properties on the planet, and it's personally very exciting for me and many of the people on the team. So it was the obvious choice for the game to try to do first because if we're doing something quite new for the LEGO Group and LEGO IP games, you know, we best off start with try and lower the risk by using the biggest properties.

Ethan Vincent

Once they settled on the property, the next step was figuring out what sort of game they wanted to make. Chris Bowles, who became one of the creative directors at TT Games, said Jason approached him with a compelling offer.

Chris Bowles

Jason had kind of come to me and said, "I think there's a chance to work on a game you might be interested in." And at that point, I didn't really know what kind of game might turn my head from the game I was currently on. Then he said, "You know, I think it could be a *LEGO Star Wars*™ game." And I kind of went, "OK, wow! You have my attention." And he was putting together a studio in Brighton. I was living in Brighton but commuting to London at the time, so obviously, the appeal of not getting into a train to commute every day was was appealing, but obviously, with *LEGO Star Wars*™ being a brand that was something really exciting. So we knew that there was an opportunity to make a *LEGO Star Wars*™ game for mobile. Now, there'd been iterations of *LEGO Star Wars*™ games before, but they've been ports of previous console titles, so there was an idea around, you know, obviously, there's a huge amount of *LEGO Star Wars*™ characters to draw on, the idea of there being some sort of utilizing these characters and these LEGO minifigs, in a kind of PvP battle arena-based game. You can visualize it when someone pitches that out, you can kind of see how that would work. So there was a very rough outline of what their game could

look like. So Jason and I kind of sat down and broke down what we thought the core pillars would be for a game like that.

Brian Crecente

With the idea sketched out, the team put together a video presentation to show LEGO Games and the LEGO Group what the concept would look like in action. The video showed players plucking minifig characters off of a digital card, dangling them over a playfield and then dropping them into the world of the game. Once on the battlefield, the minifigs would come to life and start fighting. Vaughan Wallis, the LEGO Games product lead for the title, said the game was very appealing to the LEGO Group, not just because of the mashup of LEGO bricks and *Star Wars*™, but because it would appeal to a broad audience.

Vaughan Wallis

So it definitely made a lot of sense for us to develop another LEGO game that was targeted at adults. But the the 10 to 14 year old demographic was also interesting because that is also a time when we traditionally see boys moving away from LEGO products, and this was a great way for us to say, "Hey, well, we can actually engage this slightly older boys demographic at a time when they might be typically moving – or starting to move – away from the product with something else with something that they would find interesting and appealing." So that was definitely one of the selling points of this game.

Chapter 2: Development – 08:32

Brian Crecente

The LEGO Group loved what they saw and gave the project a greenlight. Now it was up to the developers to breathe life into the concept.

TT also leaned heavily on the expertise of the folks at Lucasfilms Games.

Jason said they usually have loads of ideas at the studio whenever a team starts on game design, because at that point, anything is possible. He views this early stage of development as an ideas funnel, but as you start to put things together and make decisions, he said, your options naturally reduce.

Jason Avent

So that's the process, I'd say you go through during the first six to 12 months of any game production. And in this case, the size of the map was one thing because it creates having more play space kind of makes it more interesting and especially in a strategy game, because if you're focusing on one corner of the map, somebody could be doing something interesting and dangerous over the other end of the map. And so strategically, it's quite interesting then to have that balance between you having to manage what you're doing here, but also keep one eye on what your opponent is doing so you can perhaps build

things that respond to the things that they're building. And that was one of the aspirations that we had. It was too complicated, I think really, if we're honest with ourselves, it's too complicated for a mobile game where you want the battles to be two to three minutes long, so that people, you know, can fit them into the gaps in their day. So there were elements like that. Also, I think, control complexity. So we had direct control in a similar kind of way that you might have with a dungeon crawler or a game like Brawl Stars, where you had direct control of the character, and you could control things around the character, and the focus would be whatever's around the character at that time. And that means you need continuous control inputs, which is quite demanding for a mobile game, and that combined with a big open map, that was – it just proved to be a bit too much, I think, for people as we playtested it and thought it through. So those two vectors kind of were reduced down as we went down the ideas funnel. So now, we still have a degree of control over the hero characters in the game because each hero character has a different hero ability that recharges rather like it would do in a MOBA like League of Legends. So you bring the character in, then they walk up the screen towards the enemy base and towards the enemy troops, and you get to choose when their ability is triggered. And the strategic impact on the game is very, very high. So it's quite good value. So even though we've ripped out direct control of heroes, actually, you get the essence of what the hero needs to do and how each hero is different from one another, and strategically what impact they can have on a battle. But it's down to one button now – one button and a timer – which is great for mobile design. And the same was true of the buildings. I think one of the prototypes, or one of the videos, we had the idea that you could build wherever you wanted to on the map. But that creates too many strategic possibilities, which makes balancing really, really, really difficult. So, now we have build pads in the arenas, and you have to take a troop past the build pad in order to claim it. And then you can build a tower of one of two choices that you put in your deck when it starts to give you strategic advantage and to push the battle line up. So you get the benefit – say it's a flame tower, it's got an area of effect damage, or it might be a shield tower, which sort of shields itself and draws fire, or it might be a droid factory that kicks out a droid every couple of seconds. So you get to choose what type of strategy you're going to play based on which tower pad you're going to capture and which tower you're going to build there. So again, you have a lot of the strategic depth that we were going for in the prototype, but without the control complexity. And it's much more knowable in terms of options and balancing and planning the overall strategy of the game.

Ethan Vincent

The team also had to fit their game within the fiction of the *Star Wars*™ universe. Here's Chris Bowles again.

Chris Bowles

So you know, we kind of just looked at what does LEGO *Star Wars*™, that universe, what does it contain? What are the kind of characters that, you know, because *Star Wars*™ as a universe has lots of characters, but how many of those have been kind of realized in LEGO

set form? So the first job was to kind of think about all the key characters in the *Star Wars*™ universe that we think the fans would want and expect to see in a game.

Ethan Vincent

And that's where the game's clever framing device comes in. When you launch *LEGO Star Wars*™ Battles, C-3PO explains that the game is actually a battle simulator designed to train future generals and the Rebel Army. The simulator can make anyone a general, even R2-D2. As he walks you through the rules of the game, 3PO explains that any general worth their salt needs to know what the enemy is thinking. And that's the narrative justification for aligning yourself with the Dark Side, too. And because you're a general-in-training, exploring the full history of *Star Wars*™ and all of its locations and units make sense. But Bowles said that, even with the framing device, the team had to figure out what they could fit into the game.

Chris Bowles

You start off from like a fan perspective, you know, what am I aware of as a *Star Wars*™ fan? There's layers to being, you know, a real *Star Wars*™ fan or someone who's aware of it. And we fully admitted that we weren't, you know, we didn't know everything about every sort of expression of *Star Wars*™ that there was, so I think, you know, you go through, and you go, "OK, what are the characters I know? Sure, I know – I've heard of Darth Vader, Luke Skywalker and Yoda, but outside of those major champion characters, what are the other people out there?" So, it was basically just going and doing the research, and we'd think of a specific scene in a film, and we just wrote a list of all the characters that we knew, knowing that that wasn't going to be nearly enough to kind of populate the game. So it was really a journey of discovery of kind of going in digging and finding all these great characters that existed, and all these different expressions of *Star Wars*™, be it the Clone Wars, or additional films that come out like *Solo* or *Rogue One*, and just combing through those guys, and kind of going well this, you know, in the *Star Wars*™ universe, a lot of guys just shoot lasers, so just having people that did all the same kind of actions wasn't helpful, so being able to kind of differentiate between troops that could potentially be used for melee attacks or troops that may occupy the air in the battle was kind of important.

Brian Crecente

The developers knew they couldn't create a game where Luke would fight alongside Darth Vader. There had to be a division of armies. And once that division was created, Bowles and his team needed to balance each side's troops, while still giving both sides unique units.

Chris Bowles

This concept of Light Side versus Dark Side, and it's not always as clear cut in the movies, so one of the earliest ideas that we had the very beginning of the game was this concept

of a spinning medal that would occur during the matchmaking that would land on either the Light Side or Dark Side. This would determine the army that you then used in the subsequent battle. So that idea itself kind of was the foundational seed of kind of going, 'OK, so now we're going to have to go – let's have a Light Side deck and a Dark Side deck, and, you know, how do we deliver these cards to the player during the early part of the game? How do we divide these troops? How do we decide who's a Light Side or Dark Side unit?' That was a really interesting part and that was definitely one of the early parts of the game that a lot of the game kind of sprang out from.

(Tune break)

Brian Crecente

Armed with the idea of two sides, two armies for players to fight with, the team set about selecting which characters would be used in the games. They built the game entirely with pre-existing LEGO *Star Wars*™ minifigs, with few exceptions, according to Bowles.

Chris Bowles

You know we tried to have, not always a one-to-one match across the two army types, but we had a flame trooper on one side, and we needed something to kind of balance out the Light Side. Now, there is a clone flame trooper that exists in the *Star Wars*™ universe, but it never been realized as a minifig, so our artist kind of created the 3D render. We then submitted that to Lucasfilm and to the LEGO Group for approval. And just to see that – sourcing that character, because it needs to fit a certain role – and then seeing that become realized as a digital LEGO minifigure fitted in was really excellent, and especially when you've got these two big IP holders with Lucasfilm and the LEGO Group, getting them both on board and both agreeing, and then seeing that troop being played in the battlefield is really special.

Ethan Vincent

Another amazing addition to the game, one you might not normally think of in a game of Light versus Dark battles, are the adorable porgs (porgs screech), but they work really well in the game. Jason explains how the idea came about.

Jason Avent

We got some LEGO kits as part of the partner program, and one of them was a giant porg. And one of our programmers, his granny gave us a little hat, a little woolen hat, and it ended up being on the top of this porg. And I think that might have been the creative inspiration for porgs because it's this giant thing right in the middle of the office that you kind of chuckle at when you walk past it. What you initially you think, "Well no, porgs are kind of defenseless, and they're not going to be able to harm anyone." And then you think, "Well, no, but that's funny, isn't it?" And that's what LEGO Games brings to the LEGO *Star Wars*™ brand, I think: comedy, humor. It allows the characters to do things that they're a

bit too serious to do in the films in the normal universe. It sort of supercharges it with a bit of comedy, a bit of tongue-in-cheek slapstick.

Ethan Vincent

Chris said the team is immensely proud of how they incorporated the space puffins into the game.

Chris Bowles

It's such a cute character when you see it in the movie. The idea of them, you know, working together as a group to take down Darth Vader is – it's compelling, and they have their trademark screech. And it's something that, you know, it wasn't the first thing out of my head, but when one of the designers pitched it, we kind of went, "Yes!" And there is a little minifig and it is tiny. Once you start playing the game and you see, you know, six or seven of them absolutely destroy an AT-AT it's really satisfying. And I think that in itself kind of encapsulates *LEGO Star Wars*™. So it's something that we were really conscious of ensuring comes through in *LEGO Star Wars*™ Battles. And the porgs are great example of that.

Ethan Vincent

The team, which was new to the TT Games' fold, also had to nail the charm and humor of TT Games' back library, something Bowles said that the games from its sister studios were known for. Getting that humor right wasn't nearly as difficult as making sure the players could see the humor on their relatively small phone screen.

Chris Bowles

The camera is quite far away from the action. And, you know, we're using animations to kind of convey this humor and charm. We had to look for other opportunities in the game to kind of bring this humor and charm to the forefront. So you know, for example, on the homescreen, we made it so there's a huge version of the champion character that you're using in one of your decks, Luke or Darth, and they're animating on that home screen when you boot up the game. And they're performing actions which are humorous. You go through the decks and you look at the card info screens, you see the full size models, full animations. They're animations that you might see on the battlefield, but it's just too far away, so finding opportunities to bring that through, and more recently, we've added 3D emotes or 3Dmotes as we've called them, so whereas traditional games kind of use these 2D elements, we've really kind of thrown our hat into the ring, so that, you know, how can we better this? So we've got these 3D emotes that spring up, and again, you know, you've got Darth Vader force lifting a porg and tossing him away, there's an example of just one of them, and that alone has given us another additional aspect to kind of bring that humor and charm through.

(Tune break)

Chapter 3: Making Loot – 19:57

Brian Crecente

The studio also had to figure out a way to make money with the game. And since it was destined for smartphones, the most obvious choice was the free-to-play model, but that gave LEGO Games pause.

Vaughan Wallis

The area where we definitely had some questions was around the business model.

Brian Crecente

This is Vaughan Wallis speaking.

Vaughan Wallis

Because a lot of the previous titles that the studio had developed before it became TT were these big free-to-play game experiences. And we had a big question around, "OK, well, what is a LEGO free-to-play experience?" It's not something we had really done. Of course, now we have some free-to-play games out there, right? We have LEGO Tower, we have LEGO Legacy, but at the time, again, the development of this started a fairly long time ago of LEGO *Star Wars*™ Battles, at the time, this was new territory for us. So there was a question, "OK, well, what does a free-to-play game here at the LEGO Group actually look like? What would be an acceptable version of that? And, you know, how can it be done in a way that the game and the model is in line with the LEGO Group's values, but then it's also allowing our partners to make a sustainable business?" So that was a really big question. So I think we spent a lot of time at the beginning of development just talking around that.

Brian Crecente

Jason and his team, coming from a long history of success in the mobile games market, had experience with free-to-play, but they also understood that the LEGO Group may not be open to the same format they've used before.

Jason Avent

Well we didn't have any of these restrictions when we were working on CSR Racing and CSR Classics, and those were blue-blooded, free-to-play games. I hadn't had any experience of catering to a child audience, and there are significant differences – and in fact, you know, in the three-and-a-half, four years we've been working on this game, a lot of the regulations have been firmed up around the protection of children and creating products for children on the free-to-play and digital in general. So I've been learning as the industry has been learning. You have a kind of assumed child audience, which means that you're not really – you know, regulations kind of stop you having any social interactions, so you're not allowed to talk to one another because, obviously, that's slightly dangerous.

Brian Crecente

The LEGO Group looked very closely at what would make the most sense and be the most appropriate monetization model. They wanted, Vaughan said, to ensure that a game that might be played by younger children, even if it wasn't aimed at them, was safe. And that opened up an important discussion that had a big impact on the company's future mobile titles.

Vaughan Wallis

So the question of, "OK, well, what is an appropriate free-to-play model for kids?" is very relevant.

Brian Crecente

This is Vaughan Wallis speaking.

Vaughan Wallis

And so it looked at things like features and monetization features. So it was things like, OK, is it acceptable to do, for example, a loot box in the LEGO free-to-play game? How many currencies can we have in a LEGO free-to-play game? Should there be a spend limit? Should we have a monthly spend limit? Should we have a daily spend limit? Is it OK to offer discounts to younger users as well in the game? How do we communicate those discounts if we do allow that? Is it OK to have advertising in the game? That's also something that's very prevalent in the free-to-play model are in-game ads, because that's obviously a good and sustainable source of revenue. Is it something that users actually like to have? We also have had a discussion with our partners, not just TT, but also other partners that have actually pointed out to us that an in-game advertising model can actually be something that users like because they get the game for free, and then it's kind of this trade off, well, yes, they have to watch some ads, but they still get a good game experience, and they don't feel pressured to buy anything. So yeah, I mean, there are all of these sort of these leavers which you can see are being used in free-to-play and we basically had to look at each one, or at least the ones that TT was proposing and say, "OK, what is our take on this? How do we go about evaluating this in the LEGO context?"

Brian Crecente

Ultimately, the LEGO Group and TT Games came up with an approach built around the concepts of fairness and transparency.

Vaughan Wallis

If I, as a user am coming to the game, and let's say, I want to buy a hero card. I want to unlock a hero unit by purchasing it. When I go in there, is it clear that if I buy, let's say, 1,000 gems, that then that translates into unlocking a hero card, and not into, sort of, it's unlocking half a hero card, and I still have to grind in order to unlock that. I think one of the things we see in free-to-play games is that they tend to bundle up a lot of different stuff

together, so it could be, sort of, you know, 100 gems, 300 coins, and then some upgrades, diamonds for a particular unit, and it's not very clear as to what you're buying. I think, even as an adult, you come into these games, and you're kind of like, "Well, I'm buying something, and it looks like there's a hero on the bundle that I'm buying," but in the end you often are actually not purchasing what you think you got. And so it's quite confusing at the beginning. So we really wanted to make it very clear, in terms of communication and simplicity of the business model, what you could actually purchase in the game. I think another area was in-game advertising. So I think in-game advertising was a fairly long discussion point. I think in the end, we did not feel comfortable with in-game advertising, because, you know, we felt that it potentially could lead to patterns of addiction, meaning that the most popular advertising model in free-to-play games are incentivized ads. So you go into the game, and then the game says to you, "OK, do you want to restart? Do you want to restart the game? Or do you want to continue the game? Or do you want to earn an extra 100 coins? Just watch this ad, and then you can get that." And I think that is a concern for us, because we kind of felt like it wasn't really integral to the core loop of the gameplay, but it was this thing that was basically tempting users to just click on one more time, and just creating a sort of pattern, a habit-forming pattern that we were uncomfortable with, so the in-game advertising actually took the decision to not to actually put in- game advertising in the game.

Ethan Vincent

Jason said, both groups put in a lot of time researching and discussing the issues with fairness and transparency as guiding principles.

Jason Avent

There were a lot of negotiations, and there were a lot of sort of study groups. You know, we'd go off and do some research, they'd go off and do some research, and we'd pool that together and sort of discuss the findings. In some ways, we were kind of trying to predict what GDPR and COPPA would say. In other cases, the LEGO Group were a little ahead of us in that they've, you know, they've dealt with a lot of these issues before, so we defer to them. Sometimes we took those judgments and did our own research, and were able to kind of modify them and move them on. So the LEGO company are quite progressive, open, fair, and they've really been a great partner to work with in this regard, and many others. So everything had to be checked against this concept of making it fair and transparent, which I think then, you know, allows parents to still trust the mobile game, trust a free-to-play game.

Ethan Vincent

Vaughan said that the hard work didn't just set the rules for LEGO *Star Wars*™ Battles. It also helped to solidify the sort of approach the LEGO Group would ask other developers to take on future free-to-play mobile games.

Vaughan Wallis

I would say our discussions with the TT group, were really instrumental in us sort of forming, OK, our first draft of: this is what a LEGO free-to-play game could be. These are the things you need to take into account when you're designing your features. So yes, that definitely informed the work that we did for our latest titles like *Legacy* and *Tower*, I think it was, so yeah, it was a super valuable exercise for us.

Chapter 4: Soft Launch – 27:18

Ethan Vincent

It would also, it turns out, have a significant impact on the evolution of *LEGO Star Wars™ Battles* years after its soft launch.

Brian Crecente

A soft launch is like a beta test for a mobile game. A studio releases a game for a large group of players to essentially stress test the game, and the developers can tweak it before rolling it out to bigger, more important markets. *LEGO Star Wars™ Battles* arrived in India and the Philippines in September 2019 after a year of development. Months later, it was rolled out to a few other markets like Canada and Denmark. Typically in this process, once a game hits the sort of engagement a developer is looking for, it is then rolled out to the rest of the world, or at least most of it. TT Games and LEGO Games soft launched *Star Wars™ Battles* to test the gameplay and get feedback from as many players as possible. Chris said the earlier you get feedback, the quicker you can react to it.

Chris Bowles

The version of that game that went out initially is wildly different. We learned that battlefield was initially much larger, and the camera was further away because of it, which meant you couldn't really see the action. Readability of the troop-on-troop action was hard to make out, which is, which isn't helpful in a game of its type. And that time to the first engagement of, I put a troop down, your opponent puts a troop down, when they meet was a little long. So you know, reducing the size of that battlefield, bringing the camera in, increasing the rate at which the battle starts was something that we learned really, really quickly. Obviously, when you've got a game that contains all these different types of characters in a battle simulation format, there's a lot of tweaking to do to kind of ensure that it's balanced. We could see – we we're getting data on which troops were overpowered, which troops were underutilized. We don't want there to just be a single deck, a single meta that kind of evolves, especially in an early game. So a lot of work went into kind of doing that troop balancing. And we, you know, obviously with, again, at this be looking at session length and retention figures, things like that.

(Tune break)

Ethan Vincent

TT Games worked closely with a playtest company to get deeper stats and more clarity on play issues early on, Chris said. The service even allowed players to narrate and record their experience as they played.

Chris Bowles

As is with any game that the more user-testing and feedback you get, the better. You know, test often, regularly often, and incorporate the feedback you get. And it's always the way, it's never the stuff that you're worried about that comes through, it's the stuff that you think is a banger, it's stuff you've never even thought about that will come back to bite you. So a lot of work was done with the onboarding of the game, like the player's first 10 to 15 minutes. And it was really eye opening to see the mechanics that players didn't get the first time they played the game. And a lot of that comes from, you know, as a developer, you know, you're testing these mechanics daily, and you just become blind to some of these things, and things that you think are obvious, a new player just isn't going to get. So it was really interesting for us to see mechanics that we just thought were a given, players just completely not understanding at all. So we'd spend a lot of time ensuring that – looking at ways to kind of communicate and educate the player on these core mechanics without throwing up 100 text boxes in their face in order for them to be able to understand it, because no one reads text boxes, they always spam them through.

Ethan Vincent

Chris said those early days in soft launch provided not just key learnings, but big challenges about how they could improve and push the game to become what the team envisioned when they first put together that demo video for the LEGO Group.

Chris Bowles

There's definitely some moments, key swing moments in the game, I think. One that definitely comes to mind is in the initial version of the game, the camera was a lot more top down, looking down on the action. And, you know, we sat with that version for a good three or four months. And in the editor that we we're using you've got the natural game scene viewer on one screen, and you've got the, you know, the environment on the other. And all the fine detail in the animations and the artwork was being totally hidden by the camera being so top down. Jason was just like, "Look, should we just try moving this camera in, and change it to be a bit off angle?" which we did, and it kind of sounds obvious in retrospect, but at the time, especially with a game of this type, when you're working on margins, as a player, you know, a certain pixel here or there is a difference between hitting a troop or not hitting a troop, there was a nervousness to kind of moving a camera so dramatically, but as soon as we did that, you know, the whole world came to life. The whole 3D aspect really shone, and with a game like this where having that many 3D troops on the pitch was quite a technical achievement, you know, a lot of games kind of use sprites, and it's something that we set out as a team to say, look, we think we can do

better. And moving that camera, it had such a dramatic effect, but it made us have to – we had to go back and change a lot of the UI, we had to ensure that troops, that used to be visible with the previous camera, who are now being hidden behind towers at a certain camera, we had to come up with systems to kind of display their location without being too obvious. It affected a lot of things, and, you know, it increased the amount of work we had to do, but it was totally worth it, and everybody could see straight away that it was right way to go.

(Tune break)

Ethan Vincent

While TT Games made some major changes, it still lingered in soft launch, first for months, and then approaching years. Vaughan said the game's unusually long soft launch happened, in part, because there was so much belief that LEGO *Star Wars*™ Battles could be great, but it wasn't quite proving itself.

Vaughan Wallis

So there's a belief that this game really could do something, could be a big game that people would really enjoy. And so I think everyone was reluctant to close it down. And so, you know, the process of soft launch is that you go into soft launch, and then you set your KPIs. And those KPIs are things like day seven retention, so how many users come back after the seventh day after downloading it? So the general approach is that you try and hit those metrics. And those metrics are basically kind of the validation – is this game fun? Does it have legs from a gameplay perspective? And so, you know, there was a lot of effort spent in trying to do that. And the game was definitely sort of nearing those goals. And then sort of the other bit there is, then you also start testing it from – you start testing doing some small user acquisition campaign testing as well to sort of see how the game resonates with users. And I think, you know, we were always getting close to our KPIs, we're approaching them, things were getting, you know, looking better, but it was taking quite a lot of time. And I think the discussion was, "OK, well, you know, how do we bring this game to market? Is it that we take it to global launch, or is there something else we should consider?"

Brian Crecente

As the team wrestled with those questions, they continued to iterate on the game, tweaking things like the ranking system and leaderboards. Then a promising new opportunity arose in November 2020, a bit more than a year after the game's initial soft launch: Apple Arcade. Apple's monthly subscription service strips away external monetization. Players don't need to buy a game or app or contend with in-app purchases or loot boxes. Instead, they can play any game in Apple Arcade for as much as they want for that single monthly subscription fee. Jason said he thought it was a perfect fit.

Chris Bowles

I remember Jason coming and saying to us that, you know, Apple are really interested in bringing this to Apple Arcade.

Brian Crecente

This is Chris Bowles speaking.

Chris Bowles

And it's not something that as a team that we thought about before. And the more we sat with it, you know, the more we kind of liked that decision. Apple Arcade, dominantly short form narrative, arthouse kind of games, whereas this kind of game-as-a-service type game. There wasn't many out there, and we really felt that we could put a mark in the sand and be those guys. Apple were really keen to have LEGO bricks and *Star Wars*™. It just seemed like a great fit, and with the fair and transparent approach to kids gaming, that the LEGO Group are all about, you know, not having microtransactions in the game, allowing players just to progress at their own pace without feeling the need to spend was something that we felt really important.

Brian Crecente

Vaughan said the LEGO Group also loved the idea.

Vaughan Wallis

This is a game that has huge reach, right? The free-to-play market is hundreds of millions of users. And of course, Apple Arcade is not the same scale, but that doesn't necessarily matter because, again, we've launched two games on Apple Arcade, and we've had great experience with like that, so the volume is not everything by any means. So for us, based off the experience we've had with Appple Arcade of having launched two games on there as a publisher, we were totally on board with moving to Apple Arcade.

(Tune break)

Chapter 5: Return of the App – 35:19

Ethan Vincent

With the decision made, TT Games now had to take a game that had been live for more than a year, that was designed as a free-to-play game, and remove it from the App Store, rebuild it and relaunch it. So in May, the developer announced that *LEGO Star Wars*™ Battles would be closing and that it would no longer be available after July 1, 2021.

Chris Bowles

When you have a player base –

Ethan Vincent

This is Chris Bowles speaking.

Chris Bowles

– who engage with your game daily, and you know you're about to pivot, you know, as a human, and as a player, as a game, you're aware that it's probably not gonna go down well. And when we did close the game down we, obviously we knew we were going to Apple Arcade, but obviously we couldn't communicate that to the player, so – which is a shame. It would have been great to deliver that message at the same time, but it's just not possible sometimes, you know? It's the way it is.

(Tune break)

Ethan Vincent

Then in August, *LEGO Star Wars™ Battles* returned. On August 30, the developer announced that the mobile real-time strategy game would be getting rereleased as an Apple Arcade exclusive in September. And it hit just this week, but getting there took a bit of work. Typically, the biggest change that comes when a free-to-play game makes the leap to Apple Arcade, is having to strip out all of the game's monetization methods. But Jason said that, because TT Games developed the game using the LEGO Group's fair and transparent philosophy, it actually wasn't that hard to do.

Jason Avent

I think it would have been more difficult to have a game make the transformation if it weren't built with one eye on this concept of fair and transparent. So we only have two currencies in the game. Some free-to-play games have, you know, 12 or 15 different currencies, and you pay for one and then you realize that actually you need to start paying for another one, and then once you've invested in that, you know, you feel like then you need to, you know, get another – you reach another block, so you need to buy that currency as well. We have a paid currency and we have a non-paid currency. So stripping out the shop was relatively easy, changing the way that we'd give new characters out on a more reliable schedule. And we still have sort of the element of surprise in terms of what not knowing what you're going to get and when because you can't give everybody the same cards, because otherwise the game at the start of a player's career is going to be really boring, because you're going to be matched with players the same skill level as you, and you all have the same cards. And all the way through your career, you kind of need that chance element. So we kind of benefited in some ways from the free-to-play element of having these sort of surprise giveaways. "Oh, I'm not sure what – I'm battling through this, I'm at the end of this battle, I'm not sure what I'm going to unlock." You know that's the way that the game kind of works. So from the point of view of making sure everybody doesn't have the same decks and nothing had to change, you know, nothing had to change in terms of the distribution of the characters. It was really a case of just stripping out the

shop, and given that the economy was relatively light touch for free-to-play game because we wanted it to be fair and transparent, it was much simpler than it may otherwise have been.

Brian Crecente

Because LEGO *Star Wars*™ Battles was offline and being retooled for Apple Arcade, Jason said the team also decided to rework other elements as well.

Jason Avent

You'll get more of the characters more quickly. You will have a broader roster of heroes more quickly. We had hero tokens so that you can earn from different events. We've got an event system that is much better formed now. I think we're going to find ways of helping players to compete and go up leagues. That's on the roadmap. And there are some new characters that people will have not seen yet. There's quite a lot to see. The structure of the game is different as well. So if somebody has played the free-to-play version before, I think it's still worth giving this a go because it is a very different approach, and I think it's quite fun. It feels very different. Certainly, the metagame feels very different.

Brian Crecente

Chris said that bringing the game to Apple Arcade also meant that it had to work not just on the iPhone, but the iPad, the Mac and the television with a controller using Apple TV.

Chris Bowles

That in itself is a bit of an achievement when you think about converting what is – what has been primarily designed as a touchscreen, touch interface game, to work with the controller. So the game LEGO *Star Wars*™ Battles does work with all supported controllers on Mac, tvOS. And it's one of those things where you go, "OK, we have to support tvOS. Gosh, we have to support a controller. How is that going to work?" and then going through and playing the game with a controller, again, it's just another set of – it poses so many challenges that we have to overcome. And it plays brilliantly. And we're really – that's one of the things we're really proud about the conversion and going over to Apple Arcade, is that you can now play it with a controller. So, then as soon as you go to the Mac and tvOS, obviously you've got these widescreen horizontal, I'm sorry, landscape layout. Now we can't just stretch the game environment to fit that, because a lot of it doesn't exist because of the form factor of the devices. So it does give us an opportunity to increase the resolution, or one of the things we really want to do is to kind of bring those LEGO champions, that the player is collecting and playing with, to the forefront again, so as you're playing a game, we'll display the LEGO champion that you're using on the left-hand side of the screen, and the other LEGO champion that's in your other deck on the right-hand side of the screen. And these are baked as your decks change so as you change your deck, so it's kind of live and organic. And then we're going to be increasing – opportunities to move some of the UI that can become cluttered when you're on a small-screen interface,

you know, having the opportunity to push some of this stuff out of the way and really let the camera zoom in closer is something we've taken the opportunity to do.

Chapter 6: Conclusion – 40:57

Brian Crecente

Vaughan said the LEGO Group is very happy with the result, which essentially turned a free-to-play game with built in monetization, into a premium experience tethered to Apple Arcade's subscription.

Vaughan Wallis

I think TT have done a really wonderful job in converting the game into an Apple Arcade offering and into a non free-to-play game. And yeah, I've played the Apple Arcade version as well, of course, and I have to say, you know, it's just as satisfying. They focused in on the progression system, they focused in on the AI and making sure that their bots can handle games with users early on in the game, and also when there aren't necessarily enough users to play the game again, because again, it's going to Apple Arcade, I think it's not always certain that there's going to be other users at your specific skill level that you can play against. So how do you handle that? So that was also an area that the team focused in on. But you know, I think they did a great job on that. I can barely tell the difference. I'm not the world's best PvP battle player, but that said, I've been super impressed with the way that they've actually converted it to a premium game, essentially. You know, again, the shutdown of the game we weren't able to give the users a lot of information, and maybe – I think that is a learning for us. How could we have maybe handled that a little bit better? That's one thing. I think maybe another thing is that, you know, Apple Arcade is this great platform, and it's a great platform for many different types of games as well. I think that that's also been something that's been interesting for us. And then I think, just overall – this isn't related to Apple Arcade itself – but I think, you know, overall, for me, personally, I think it's been a really interesting journey, in terms of discussing, "OK, what is a great LEGO game, in terms of business model? What is the right business model for LEGO Games? What is the right way of doing social features in a LEGO game?" All of these sort of these difficult questions, I think this was one of those games that really sort of helped us to sort of start having a discussions and start outlining a framework really, where we can have these discussions internally, you know with our child's safety team and so on, so I think that was – that has been probably the biggest learning for me with this game.

(Postscript music)

Bits N' Bricks: Credits – 43:15

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 *LEGO Star Wars™* Battles, which you can play on Apple Arcade today. We'd like to thank our participants: Jason Avent, Chris Bowles, and Vaughan Wallis. We'd also like to thank the entire LEGO Games team. For questions and comments, write us at bitsnbricks@LEGO.com. That's bits, the letter N, then bricks@LEGO.com. And as always, stay tuned for more episodes of Bits N' Bricks.

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