

SimCity Inspired a Living LEGO® Railway Video Game

Birds chirp, cars beep, a plane soars by toting a sign. A train huffs and chugs along tracks that cut over roads and through tiny towns bustling with activity. More SimCity than LEGO *Star Wars*™, the world of LEGO Loco was an anomaly even for its time.



The 1998 game, created by developer Intelligent Games, came at a time when the LEGO Group and its LEGO Media International division found themselves with their first hit video game, LEGO Island, but still unsure of what exactly it meant to be a LEGO video game.

"LEGO Media was set up to take a strategic look at video games," Rob Smith, executive producer at LMI from 1996 to 1999, told the LEGO Bits N' Bricks podcast. "I think the LEGO Group probably had concerns that gaming was potentially cannibalistic to the core toy business.

"The purpose was to sort of help the LEGO Group understand the right steps to make a game and the right genre, the right IP to look at, and the right gaming environments to go for."

To achieve this, LMI essentially performed an open casting call for developers, letting potential studios know that LMI was looking for pitches using LEGO bricks and theme sets.

To sort through the growing list of pitches they were getting, London-based LEGO Media International worked closely with folks at the LEGO Group back in Billund, Denmark to assemble a launch package of games that would all hit in the fall of 1998.

The result was three games: LEGO Creator by developer Superscape, LEGO Chess by Krisalis Software, and LEGO Loco by Intelligent Games.

LEGO Loco was born of a notion to create a digital toy that would live on your computer's desktop. That idea came after the studio worked with Will Wright and Maxis – the studio behind SimCity, Sim Ant, and the like – on a title called SimIsle: Missions in the Rainforest.

"For a period of time, the studio was really fascinated by what you might call little computer people," said Kevin Shrapnell, who was director of development at Intelligent Games. "This idea that something is alive in there, and it has its own will and its own freedoms and it puts demands on you. And that was really interesting."

The studio discussed ideas like growing a plant on your desktop, or building gardens. They even became enamored with the idea of a little digital S&M pal.

"It's the little computer person idea that just stuck with us." Shrapnell said. "And you push things to the edge. You think, 'Well, OK, what would be ridiculous? Like what would be like everybody would talk about?' And you go, 'Well, look, if this was like your little pet, literally your little pet slave, your S&M slave?' It would be hilarious – totally inappropriate, but it would be done in this pixel art style. I mean, we're not talking about anything really graphic. We talked about it having other themes to try and make it more appropriate. Just the topic is not really going to going to fly, but it stuck with us because, you know, it's sticky. It sticks with you."

When Intelligent Games added the LEGO Group and its many theme sets to their concept, that shifted the company's thinking to a much more specific and palatable set of ideas. They still wanted to create a digital toy, but now with LEGO bricks.

That eventually led to the idea of creating a little train set that would live on your PC desktop, an idea that Smith and the group at LMI loved.

Once the game was greenlit, it quickly started to evolve. First, changed from a desktop widget to a program that would run in its own window. Then it expanded to include more than just the train, said Suzanne "Maddi" Maddison, who was one of the programmers on the game and came up with its name.

"It started off as a train set but then actually grew into this whole world," she said. "The train set was just one element of this toy/game. There were then minifigures. There were buildings. We had planes and birds flying overhead. And the little flowers would open up. It was quite a rich environment. There were factories – you'd get the workers that walked to the factories. We had roads. We had paths.

"It was kind of like more of a simulation game. It was a toy that you could just play. There weren't any missions or anything. You literally just played with it."

The studio also created many delightful little surprises for players. There were seasons, for instance, that changed the look of LEGO Loco, and if you put different buildings together, they would become a surprise third structure. There were also a lot of little jokes hidden in the animations of minifigs as they went about their digital lives.

Players started the game with a full toy box packed with LEGO brick buildings, train tracks, roads, stations, crossings, and even scenery. Once the player stops building and closes the toy box, the little world slowly comes to life with minifigures moving in, going to work, and traveling around the world of LEGO Loco. Players then create trains to run on the lines, watching the whole world unfold from a bird's eye view. It even gave players the ability to connect the game with other computers LEGO Loco and send messages to other towns.

While LEGO Loco didn't make a huge splash when it was released, it remains a point of pride for those who worked on it.

"It wasn't the kind of game that was reviewed on and got on the front cover of Edge Magazine," said Intelligent Games founder Matthew Stibbe. "There were no big aliens or Japanese cartoons and giant guns. But it's the one that I'm the most proud of. I don't remember whether we got good scores or reviews. It really doesn't matter. The fact that several of my friends' children played it and enjoyed it made me very, very happy and very proud."

It is also one of the only games that Stibbe still, more than 20 years later, gets fan mail about.

"When I look back on LEGO Loco, I see a game that had some different ambitions," he said. "It was trying to be fun, it was trying to be open ended, it was trying to be, you know, delightful."

Explore more...

In order of appearance:

[LEGO Media International](#) - Wikipedia

[LEGO Loco](#) - Wikipedia

[Intelligent Games](#) - Wikipedia

[Maxis](#) - Official website

[SimCity](#) - YouTube

[SimAnt](#) - YouTube

[SimIsle: Missions in the Rainforest](#) - Wikipedia

[Dune 2000](#) - Wikipedia

[LEGO Creator](#) - Wikipedia

[LEGO Chess](#) - Wikipedia

[Strategic Project Unit Darwin](#) - Inside the LEGO Group's Secretive Strategic Product Unit Darwin

[Mindscape](#) - Wikipedia

[Superscape](#) - Wikipedia

[Krisalis Software](#) - Wikipedia

[LEGO Loco Postcards](#) - YouTube

[LEGO Loco Easter Eggs](#) - YouTube

Transcript

Bits N' Bricks Season 2 Episode 23 · LEGO® Loco: LEGO Games' take on SimCity

June 9, 2021 · 35:07



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.

(Child's voice announcing Bits N' Bricks)

Bits N' Bricks: Introduction – 00:40

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 2 Bits N' Bricks theme music)

Ethan Vincent

For many, the world of LEGO video games is about the titles that sort of bookend the past 25 years of digital creations, LEGO Island and the fabulous TT Games creations. But there's so much more to explore in this quarter of a century. A great example of that is this cool little LEGO train sets simulator. LEGO Loco was one of the three games released in 1998, as a wave of early titles overseen by LEGO Media International back in the late '90s. Today, we're going to talk about this lost digital toy.

Brian Crecente

It's a game that was created by a studio that would go on to make massive sports and strategy games like Dune 2000, 2002 FIFA World Cup, and PGA Tour '98. LEGO Loco was inspired by the toy-like creations of Maxis: games like SimCity, SimAnt, and SimIsle. And let's not forget the, um, S&M angle?

Ethan Vincent

What?

Brian Crecente

Yeah, you're gonna want to hear about this.

Ethan Vincent

Oh boy.

(Musical interlude)

Chapter 1: LEGO Media International (LMI) – 2:19

Ethan Vincent

The LEGO Group entered the world of video games a little more than 25 years ago when it lent its brand to Sega for a little known game, LEGO Fun to Build, for little known system, the Sega Pico. But it wasn't really until 1997, two years later, that the LEGO Group started getting deeply involved in video game creation. While LEGO Island was developed by Mindscape, the studio worked closely with two divisions of the LEGO Group in its creation. One division, Strategic Product Unit Darwin, was a deeply innovative think tank inside the LEGO Group focused on all forms of digital innovation, including keeping tabs on this major video game creation. But there was also LEGO Media International, a London arm of the LEGO Group interested in creating products outside of the traditional toy line. When LEGO Island was released in September 1997 to overwhelmingly positive reviews, it didn't just become a bestseller for two years in a row, it also inspired the LEGO Group, and in particular, LEGO Media International, to push deeper into the video game business.

Rob Smith

I mean, this kind of goes back multiple years.

Brian Crecente

That's Rob Smith. He was an executive producer at LEGO Media International from 1996 to 1999.

Rob Smith

LEGO Media was set up, I think, to take a strategic look at video games. And I think the LEGO Group was, probably had concerns that gaming was potentially cannibalistic to the core toy business. So there was, you know, sentiment that, while licensing was a safer option for the business, I think from a revenue perspective more money could be made if the LEGO Group published their own games themselves, so there was definitely a sort of risk/reward decision that they made. I'm glad they did it because it gave me a wonderful job, but the company was set up to actually lead, from a gaming perspective, and to really manage that business from within rather than have to rely on external partners. And the purpose there was to sort of help the LEGO Group understand the right steps to make and the right genres, the right IP to look at, and the right gaming environments to go for. And that was the main purpose of it: to really own the entire process, in a good way. You know, they didn't want to outsource stuff, and that was actually a very positive thing. And it was all about ultimately making the highest quality products for market, and that was kind of a reassuring thing back in those days.

Brian Crecente

Smith describes LEGO Media International as a sort of incubation company: A very, very small group with just a handful of people trying to find developers who would be a good fit for the LEGO Group and make games that would work well with the properties the company owned.

Rob Smith

We announced that LEGO Media International was the publisher, and of course, the development community took a lot of interest.

Brian Crecente

To sort through the growing list of pitches they were getting, LEGO Media International worked closely with folks at the LEGO Group back in Billund to try and put together sort of launch package of games that would all hit in the fall of 1998.

Rob Smith

We had to think quite creatively about what the initial launch titles would be. I have so many people to please if you think about it: Ultimately the families that were buying the

games, as well as, fundamentally the LEGO Board of Directors who clearly had high expectations and probably a little bit of nervousness about a bunch of games industry people coming in and potentially risking the LEGO brand – that logo carries that weight with it – so we had to think very, very carefully about the lineup of titles and how they fit within the the ethos of the business. But also you have to think about the end consumer. What kind of experiences do those children want to play with within a LEGO game?

Brian Crecente

Ultimately, LEGO Media International settled on three games: LEGO Creator by developer Superscape, LEGO Chess by Krisalis Software, and LEGO Loco by Intelligent Games.

Rob Smith

We did come through with some ideas. LEGO Creator was the play and build experience, very specifically a play and build experience. LEGO Loco was actually based on play materials, but actually drove a level of curiosity as well. There's lots of things to do and click on and fun things that would happen. And then LEGO Chess was an interesting one because colorful, beautiful looking, it fitted so beautifully with LEGO minifigures. But it was actually a parentally friendly idea. If you think about it, parents have an aspiration for their children to learn and understand chess. So it was a thought, let's actually do something that it would actually really address a desire for parents, not maybe so much from a child's perspective, but the parents have an aspirational value attached to chess, so let's get them to buy that for their children. And they can actually learn chess in a very fun and interactive way.

(Excerpt from LEGO Chess: "A wham a bama a lama, a wham, bam, boom. Oh, hi there, buddy. So you want to grab a slice of the action and join my chess gang? Well, that's cool with me.")

Chapter 2: LEGO Loco as Digital Toy – 07:12

Ethan Vincent

Rob Smith mentioned that LEGO Loco is a play experience and we've called it a digital toy. There's a reason neither of us are referring to the title as a video game. And it goes back to SimCity and Will Wright.

Brian Crecente

It's a fascinating topic. I'd like to think everyone has had some experience with a Will Wright creation. He's the designer behind SimCity, SimAnts, The Sims, basically any game with the word sim in it, but the thing about his creations is that they are designed to be more like a toy than a game. It's an important distinction for Will Wright. He once told me that toys are more open-ended than games and that games are more of a subset of a toy.

Toys, in his mind, go hand in hand with play, which for Will, is all about a toy version of problem solving. A lot of this comes from Will Wright's own experience as a child with self-directed education through creative inspiration, a guiding principle of the Montessori school he attended and all Montessori schools. Many, if not all of Will Wright's games, are a form of autodidactic toy, a creation that allows children to play without realizing they're learning, another important element of Montessori education. So when you play the Sims, you're really experiencing Maslow's hierarchy of needs in game form. When you play SimCity, you're learning about the impact of zoning and city planning. And Spore, which Will calls a toy universe, was meant to be an examination of things like Darwinism, intelligent design, the Drake equation, and the film Powers of Ten. Ultimately, Will Wright's games are a vehicle for imagination and spark for intellectual curiosity. They don't have scores. They don't really have an ending or a way to win. They're simply toys. And in many ways, the notion LEGO Loco creator Intelligent Games had of creating a digital toy rather than game, came from their time working on a game for Maxis, which was Will Wright's studio.

Chapter 3: Intelligent Games and Out-of-the-Box Thinking – 09:06

Ethan Vincent

Matthew Stibbe's interest in designing games started when he was a teen. By the time he was preparing for his history finals at Pembroke College in Oxford, he was finalizing his first video game, 'Nam 1965-1975 was based on a Vietnam War board game he created when he was 18. A publisher signed the video game, launching Stibbe into a new business and a new career.

Matthew Stibbe

When I was at university I designed, programmed a couple of games that seemed to be commercially successful. And when I left, I had a choice of going into banking management consultancy or starting my own computer games' company. And at 21, computer games seemed like a very good option.

Ethan Vincent

Stibbe formed Intelligent Games with that first title, quickly landing new deals with major publishers and producers like Mindscape and Electronic Arts. Over the next few years, Intelligent Games worked on a diverse selection of games, including Imperium, an adaptation of the movie Waterworld, and SimIsle with Sims creator Maxis.

Brian Crecente

In SimIsle, players hire agents, who then save or develop the rainforest of a variety of islands. It, like many of the creations of Maxis, is more like a digital toy than a video game,

and working on it motivated the team at Intelligent Games to begin thinking more outside the box when it came to game development.

Kevin Shrapnell

For a period of time, the studio was really fascinated by, you know, what you might call little computer people.

Brian Crecente

That's Kevin Shrapnell, director of development at Intelligent Games at the time.

Kevin Shrapnell

This idea that something is alive in there, and it has its own will and its own freedoms, and it can put demands on you. And that was really interesting. And we would, we talked about plants and little gardens, and it fits really well with the core concept of play rather than a game.

Brian Crecente

He said that this out-of-the-box thinking eventually started to take shape as one particular idea, a concept that just wouldn't go away at the studio as the team wrapped up work on SimIsle.

Kevin Shrapnell

The internal project name was S&M Slave, and it was never pitched to anybody, and it was always really just this project. And we, you know, we're a small studio, independent studio, and just a group of people having fun, and you're working on your core products, and in the background you're always having ideas, you're always talking about projects, and this one or that one. And it's the "little computer person" idea that just stuck with us. And it just becomes, as I said, you push things to the edge, it's kind of you think, "Well, OK, what would be ridiculous? Like what would be like everybody would talk about?" And you go, "Well, look, if this was like your little pet, your little, literally your little pet slave, your S&M slave, it would be hilarious." Totally inappropriate, but it would be done in this pixel art style. I mean, we're not talking about anything, you know, really graphic. We talked about it having other themes to try and make it more appropriate. It's much more an app than a CD-ROM game. Just the topic is not really going to going to fly, but it stuck with us. You know, it's sticky, it sticks with you.

Brian Crecente

Despite its risqué subject matter, the core idea, the notion of having a little person living on the desktop of your computer seemed to stick with the studio and its developers. It wasn't really a game. It was much like SimIsle more toy-like, and then news bubbled up that the LEGO Group was looking for game pitches. And while pitching an S&M pal to the family-

friendly, kid-friendly company was a complete non-starter, there was something there that seemed like a good fit.

Kevin Shrapnell

The problem is, it became not a marketable idea when you start to deal with kind of edgy, sort of bondage themes of ideas, and it's so not a good fit for the LEGO Group.

Ethan Vincent

Here, Kevin Shrapnell speaking again.

Kevin Shrapnell

And not politically correct for games at the time. A lot of the time, when you're kicking around ideas, pushing it to the edge is a good way of kind of finding cool things, and then, you kind of rein it back, you say, "Well, that is fine, let's talk about that edgy bit. But what is, what's really actually interesting about this, is the fact that I have this little fake person, this little fake creature, and it has needs, and I have control over it. And some people take that in one direction, and people want to pet it, and other people want to dominate it. You can play with that in different ways, but the ideas behind it were interesting.

Chapter 4: The Idea of the LEGO Brick Train Set – 13:31

Ethan Vincent

So the studio has this idea of a toy, this living digital thing on your desktop, and as Kevin pointed out, they knew it wouldn't ever take the form of that little pal, so they started thinking about other ideas. Maybe a plant that you could take care of, or building entire gardens that live on your desktop. But then when they added the LEGO Group, and its many theme sets into the mix, that shifted the company's thinking to a much more specific set of ideas. They still wanted to create a sort of digital toy, but now do so with LEGO bricks.

Kevin Shrapnell

When it when it comes to them thinking about building a playset –

Ethan Vincent

Here's Kevin Shrapnell again.

Kevin Shrapnell

– a lot of that thinking about "Can you bring it to life?" as well as "Can you build it, but can you bring it to life?" I think came into the design thinking that was applied to this project.

Ethan Vincent

Shrapnell also said they were sort of using the town setting – you know, looking at the variety of pieces and objects and ideas that could be tied to that theme – and one of the things that really struck them was the company's wonderful brick train sets.

Kevin Shrapnell

Trains are just a really nice vertical within what could be an incredibly diverse and open product. Obviously, the ambition for the product in this case was relatively tight. This was, I think the second wave of projects, digital projects for the LEGO Group, and we were, I think like LEGO Chess, we really want a product for this year, for this Christmas, let's be very narrow about it, but still honor the spirit of the playsets. And I think trainset fits that perfectly. And I'm super proud of the things that go on in the game and how that experience turned out.

Brian Crecente

Intelligent Games pitched the idea of a LEGO train set for the desktop and won early approval from the LEGO Group, but they still had to finalize the idea. That turned into a number of trips to Billund, Denmark to meet with the LEGO team, and for those working on the game, a much better understanding of who they were working with and what the company wanted to achieve with those next three games. Matthew Stibbe explains.

Matthew Stibbe

The way it played to me, at the time, the communication we had was this idea that this could be the next generation of the company, the next generation of the LEGO Group, the next evolution. And that was represented to me, or in my memory, as both being a threat, like the LEGO Group has to keep up with the modern world and digital age, but also here is an opportunity to invent new ways to play, here is a new – a way to invent new ways to connect and engage children, adults. And I think that latter part, that sense of excitement, was very, very motivating.

Brian Crecente

Also motivating, on a very personal level for Matthew, was his visit to the LEGO Group's fabled archives.

Matthew Stibbe

We went out to Denmark, to Billund, and we went to the ideas house. They took us down into the basement, which was a bit like a nuclear bunker crossed with the last frames of Raiders of the Lost Ark. So it was this library of every LEGO kit that had ever been produced.

(Soft music plays)

Matthew Stibbe

And as we, as they wound through the shelves on these sort of archive devices, they have big, big moveable shelves. And like Proust's madeleine, I saw a couple of LEGO kits that I must have had when I was three, four, five that I had sort of forgotten. And then I saw them. And there was one that was a rocket launch pad. Now, I had completely forgotten that I had had that. And I saw it. And I actually felt tears welled up because I suddenly saw it. And I remembered playing with that in the kitchen and with my mother when I was a child. And I remember that how that – so it brought back memories from I guess I must have been three or four. You know, how often are you given the gift of memories from that early in your childhood? So yeah, that's what I was thinking of.

Brian Crecente

There's something powerful about the ability of a childhood toy to tap into forgotten memories. I've never been fortunate enough to go there myself, but everyone we talked to seems to say the same thing. It's a very emotional trip. I know you've taken several trips there, Ethan, and I'm just curious what that was like for you and why you think it's so impactful for those who visit it.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, that's a good question. I think for sure the magic of the LEGO toy, but also, just the overwhelming power of memory and emotions coupled with childhood play. It reminds me of that scene in Ratatouille, you know where the food critic, Anton Ego, has that strong emotional flashback when he takes a bite of ratatouille, and is immediately transported back to the kitchen table as a young boy. I remember having similar feelings, you know, in the basement of the LEGO Idea House when I found the LEGO Galaxy Explorer Space set I played with as a kid in the '80s. But another historical encounter happened that Matthew Stibbe tells us about. It's significant, especially in light of the 25th anniversary of LEGO games. They actually visited the Strategic Product Unit Darwin group. We did an entire episode on the skunk works team that was created to explore taking the physical LEGO brick into the digital realm, so take a listen to that episode. But even before Strategic Product Unit Darwin was shut down in 1999, LEGO Media International was pushing the agenda of video games forward, especially following the success of LEGO Island. And eager to create a second wave of games, LMI wanted to show the full diversity of what it meant to be a LEGO video game. It wasn't long before Intelligent Games was invited to formally pitch their ideas to LMI and the LEGO Group. Rob Smith recalls the enthusiasm of his team presenting a playable LEGO desktop railway toy.

Rob Smith

They approached us with initially a very small dev team that had worked through the idea and we thought, "Great, let's bring them in for a pitch," and it was really fortuitous actually, because as I recall, it was Maddie (Suzanne Maddison) and Dee Jarvis made the initial pitch at our offices in Hammersmith. They're incredibly enthusiastic, and they clearly love LEGO

bricks. Again, what was amazing was they're actually situated so close to our offices in Hammersmith, London. It was incredibly easy and convenient for me as the executive producer just to head over there on my bike and catch up with the team on a regular basis. But yeah, they came into the office after working on this pitch, and their enthusiasm – and actually, the technical and creative talent they demonstrated – was really interesting. So we had a sense of competence and trust that they could really deliver, but actually deliver to a level of quality that was expected by a brand like the LEGO Group's, which was a very, very big deal for us.

(Musical interlude)

Chapter 5: LEGO Loco as Desktop Experience – 20:28

Brian Crecente

Suzanne Maddison has been called Maddie since she was in grade school, which is about when she also started programming.

Suzanne Maddison

If you remember, we used to get the magazines, we used to get all the code listings in. And so for this ZX Spectrum, I started typing in all of the coding from the magazines, and they would never work, there were always errors, and I would try and fix those errors. And then you'd get the next month's magazine, the games magazine and it would tell you, you know, what the issues were and give you the typos and stuff. But that's how I started messing around really with computer games when I was quite young. Then I went to university and did a computer science degree. So I started looking around for games jobs, and I saw an advert for a programmer at Intelligent Games. So I contacted them, had two interviews with them, and I got offered the job – which is fantastic! So I reached my dream of being a programmer in the game's industry.

Brian Crecente

Maddie's first game at the company was eventually dropped by the studio, so she was shifted over to work on LEGO desktop railway. She built the prototype turning Stibbe's and the rest of the team's ideas into functioning bits of code. Then she wrote up the project plan, development milestones, technical documents, and got to work with an artist fleshing the game out. It was also her idea to rename the game into something a bit more poetic. And thus, LEGO Loco was born.

Suzanne Maddison

Initially, it was an idea of having a little train on your Windows desktop. (Sounds from LEGO Loco) This is Windows 95, and this is having a little gadget, a little toy, so it would actually

run on your desktop in between the windows and you would put down the little railway and the train would around. It was really a gadget, a kind of a toy.

Ethan Vincent

Kevin Shrapnell said there was an early almost obsession with the idea of this digital toy running on a desktop as a gadget rather than in a window. The initial idea was that your computer's desktop would be the playspace.

Kevin Shrapnell

We never achieved this in the long run, but the idea was that it could be running all the time. So you have your desktop playing away, and you could be doing other things on top of it, but you still have your railway running underneath your desktop. And then to build on that, hey – this probably wasn't the thinking, probably wasn't right for audience, and it didn't end up being in the game – the idea that you're in an office, and you just connect all the desktops together, and everybody's personal set connects to everybody else's set, and you kind of have an uber train set around the office under a WAN. And that's really interesting, but it's also pretty niche, and what we ended up with is influenced by that thinking but really for a much more approachable product to include, obviously, kids who aren't working in offices. So yeah, I think that was a big factor.

Ethan Vincent

Eventually, LEGO Loco shifted a bit and became an experience that ran in a window on your desktop. And it also expanded to become more than just a set of LEGO trains.

Suzanne Maddison

So it started off as a train set, but then actually grew into this whole world.

Ethan Vincent

This is Maddie speaking again.

Suzanne Maddison

And the trains were just one element of this toy/game. So yes, so while it did start out with just the trains, there were then minifigures, there were buildings, we had planes and birds flying overhead. There were little flowers that would open up. There were lots. It was quite a rich environment. There were factories. You'd get the workers that walked to the factories. You had roads, you had paths. So it wasn't just about trains, even though it started off just being a little train game. There weren't any missions or anything. You literally just played with it, and then, when you got bored of it, you could just start again.

(Sounds from LEGO Loco)

Ethan Vincent

So players started the game with a full toy box packed with LEGO brick buildings, train tracks, roads, stations, crossings, and even scenery. Once the player stops building and closes the toy box, the little world slowly comes to life with minifigures moving in, going to work, and traveling around the world of LEGO Loco. Players then create trains to run on the lines, watching the whole world unfold from a bird's eye view.

Suzanne Maddison

So one of the things that I designed at the beginning was, because it was this track, I designed it as a grid-based world. So we wanted it so you could easily lay the track, and it would meet up again, and you could get your trains flowing relatively easily. You didn't have to think too much about getting the track ends to join up again. So yeah, so that was all quite a grid placement of where you put the tracks and everything. And it was easy. It was easy to make things meet up. We had points, we had bridges, we had tunnels. So the bridges was quite interesting the first time because, obviously, we've got the flat graphic of the train. And then we've got the flat graphic of the bridge. But obviously, as a train goes over the bridge, half of that bridge, you can't see, and then the other half has to go in front of the train. So we have to split the graphics on that. And there were little things like that they were quite fun to get over, little problems.

(Sounds from LEGO Loco)

Brian Crecente

Another interesting element of the game was something the team called Easter eggs. Maddie explains.

Suzanne Maddison

So, if you added two elements next to each other, specific elements, something might happen, the graphic might change. They're also things time-based. So Halloween, little pumpkins would come out. They also got nighttime as well, where the graphics would darken. So yeah, there were a lot of things in there that would come out as you played the game.

Brian Crecente

Those embedded surprises gave a rich sense of life to the game and inspired players to try multitudes of combinations in their little LEGO Loco creations. They were also a favorite of Matthew's, and of at least one person at the LEGO Group.

Matthew Stibbe

I think that's just a delightful part of the game.

Ethan Vincent

Here, Matthew speaking again.

Matthew Stibbe

So for example, if you put two buildings together, they turn into a rocket launching pad (sound of rocket launching), that statue of a Viking that does a mooney or something, and on Halloween you get witches flying over, and in the winter the ground turns snowy, and there are all these little things just hidden away in the game to make it more fun and see if people can discover it. And again, I think that's a very common thing these days to bury Easter eggs, and if you pay on Steam or on the Apple Arcade, you get these little sort of badges, you achieve this, you unlock that. That was something I think the team building it really did a great job, Maddie and Bruce and the rest, just to sort of invent that and that felt very playful to develop as well as being very playful to play with, if that makes sense. I think that was the team being a little bit inventive.

Ethan Vincent

As development on the game proceeded, Rob Smith and the LMI team organized a trip for the three studios working on that wave of games. They wanted the groups to meet one another and have a chance to discuss their creations at the LEGO Group headquarters in Denmark. Maddie said it was during that trip, while presenting the game to a roomful of other developers, that she learned the game would have network support.

Suzanne Maddison

I remember some of the developers saying, "Oh, that sounds really cool. You know, is it networked?" And I remember saying no, at that point. And then I do remember coming back off the stage, and then Rob basically saying, "It will be networked." I was like, "Oh, OK!" (laughs) So then the idea developed that these little trains could go into other people's LEGO Locos, and they would deliver these little postcards, so you could type a little message on your postcard that would go into the train, and you'd see this little card on the train, and then you'd have a tunnel at the side of your world, and the train could go through the tunnel, and it would go on somebody else's screen.

Ethan Vincent

Because the game allowed players to type in their own messages, that meant the developers had to create a list of words not allowed or that were inappropriate, and add it into the programming. Unfortunately, that multilingual list initially included the game's own name - Loco. Maddie said she doesn't recall how they worked around that limitation, but they managed to keep both the list and the title intact. After about a year and a half of development, the game was released on November 11, 1998 for Windows PC. Launching alongside LEGO Chess and LEGO Creator, LEGO Loco helped to establish the look and feel of those early LEGO games.

Suzanne Maddison

The box that the LEGO Loco came out in was fantastic. It was really really good. It was just obviously bright, colorful LEGO colors as soon as you saw it. It was like a big box, probably about A4, quite deep, and then it had like a front leaf. And then inside were two little pockets. And there was one for the disc which had the game on. And there was another one, and it was LEGO Racers. It was actual LEGO bricks. And it was a little box where you can make a racing car. And that was to advertise one of the other games, LEGO Racers, which is one of the three that were coming out. So that was really nice. It was a shame it wasn't a train. I'd have preferred it to have been a train. But no, it's great to get actual physical LEGO bricks of a game. Nice touch, good advertising, obviously advertising their next game.

Matthew Stibbe

We felt quite a responsibility to the brand –

Ethan Vincent

Here's Matthew Stibbe speaking again.

Matthew Stibbe

– to the integrity of the play experience. That had been drummed into us through these, not by diktats or documentation or rules and regulations, particularly – I think they were all figuring out how to make LEGO games, it wasn't just us – but through the experience of LEGOLAND, from the ideas house, and so on. So there was definitely that and I think we must have all felt that responsibility. Certainly I did.

(Musical interlude)

Brian Crecente

While LEGO Loco didn't make a huge splash when it released, it remains a point of pride for most who worked on it.

Matthew Stibbe

It wasn't the kind of game that was reviewed and got on the front cover of Edge Magazine.

Ethan Vincent

Here, Matthew Stibbe again.

Matthew Stibbe

(Laughs) No, big aliens and Japanese cartoons and giant guns. And I think perhaps, as a company, there was a sense that we would have liked to have been famous for that kind of thing, but I get fan mail for another game we made, still. And apart from that one, LEGO

Loco was the only one that, since I left the game's industry in the year 2000, the only one that people mention to me, or the only one really that people remember, and that's just so satisfying.

(Musical interlude)

Matthew Stibbe

Looking back on it, of all the games that I was closely involved with creatively, rather than as a business person, it's the one that I'm the most proud of. I think it's the one that, you know, I think it burnishes my geek credentials, these days is, "Oh, yes, you know, I designed a game for LEGO," but it is actually, it's got some nice elements to it, some nice gameplay ideas, it was ahead of its time in interesting ways. And it didn't just follow the script of what everyone else was doing. So, the reception, I don't remember whether we got scores or reviews. It really doesn't matter. The fact that several of my friend's children played it and enjoyed it made me very, very happy and very proud.

Suzanne Maddison

LEGO Loco was the first project that I worked on, first games project that got released, so for me it's always very special – and it's LEGO brick as well!

Matthew Stibbe

For me emotionally, LEGO Loco was closest to home. I was the biggest fan of LEGO bricks. It was the toy I played with as a child, and indeed, it's the toy I play with as an adult. (laughs) I'm surrounded by my Ghostbusters car and my R2-D2 and various other things in my little geek den where I'm talking to you now. So for me, it was also emotionally significant because it was the last game that I had some direct hand in inventing, designing – you know I didn't program it, and I've got to shout out Suzanne Maddison and Bruce Heather and Lee Morse and Dee Jarvis and Simon Evers and the whole team for their amazing work. They made it happen. They made it real. I had a stake in it from the beginning, and I loved it for that reason. I think, when I look back on LEGO Loco, I see a game that had some different ambitions. It was trying to be fun. It was trying to be open-ended. It was trying to be, you know, delightful. Delight is something that doesn't happen very much in games these days. So whether that was part of the history in the sense of whether it persisted or transmitted into anything else, I don't know. But as a sort of point in time and an attempt, I would say that was very important, and I think the concept of delight is important to Loco.

(Sound of train whistle)

(Postscript music)

Bits N' Bricks: Credits – 34:04

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. Writing by Brian Crecente. Mixing and sound design by Dan Carlisle. Music by Peter Priemer, foundermusic.com, and excerpts from the LEGO Loco soundtrack. We'd like to thank our participants: Suzanne Maddison, Kevin Shrapnell, Rob Smith, and Matthew Stibbe. 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, bricks@LEGO.com. And as always, stay tuned for more episodes of Bits N' Bricks.

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