

The LEGO® Minecraft That Almost Was

The creator of Minecraft was well into development of a LEGO® brick take on his massive hit when he decided to suddenly walk from the deal with the LEGO Group in early 2012.

The problem, according to Daniel Kaplan, who worked on the project at developer Mojang Studios – and others at the LEGO Group – was the level of bureaucracy and rules imposed by the brick company.

"There were a lot of rules from the LEGO Group, like what we could do and could not do. And those were basically at the end of the day, the ones that made us break the deal with the LEGO Group," Kaplan said in the most recent episode of LEGO podcast Bits N' Bricks.

The project started out as an idea by Minecraft creator Markus "Notch" Persson around the time he released the first retail version of the game in 2011. Long a fan of the toys, which he at times said inspired his creation of Minecraft, Notch decided to pursue a lifelong dream of working with the LEGO Group.

After being introduced to the company, folks at Mojang and the LEGO Group held several meetings where they discussed the idea, and it was immediately clear that both companies were interested in working together.

The LEGO Group's Daniel Mathiasen was among those who spoke with Notch. He noted that much of Notch's impetus for creating a LEGO game was powered by his childhood memories of playing with the toys.

"It had dawned on him while he was working on Minecraft that the power of the LEGO brick experiences he had had as a kid," Mathiasen said. "And he really, really wanted something to happen between our two companies and bringing out some great experience."

So Notch initially got the green light to create a prototype, something he whipped up in Java, which essentially recreated the Minecraft experience with LEGO bricks.

The ultimate goal, according to Kaplan, was to create a fully realized LEGO brick world with a variety of biomes based on different LEGO themed sets and with its own sort of adventure. The look of the game was meant to illustrate worn down LEGO bricks and use a sort of stop-animation movement that was meant to capture the look of a child moving a Minifigure by hand. But the more they went down the road of development, the more the developers at Mojang realized that the LEGO Group had its own set of rules and processes in place for developing with its brand.

A meeting with LEGO Group lawyers and the small team at Mojang was the final straw, and Notch apparently pulled the plug.

Those working closely with Mojang on the project at the LEGO Group were devastated. After the deal fell through, some even floated the idea of the LEGO Group buying Mojang. That idea worked its way all the way to the top but was eventually rejected.

While the initial idea of Brickcraft, codenamed Project Rex Kwon Do at Mojang, came about in 2011, the LEGO Group had long been exploring the notion of creating a sandbox construction game that would capture both the look and feel of the brick, as well as the philosophy of playing and building it had long nurtured.

For years, people at the LEGO Group had been discussing and even testing a variety of ideas for a game that would essentially deliver a bucket of digital bricks to children and allow them to build whatever they want in a LEGO world.

One of those ideas eventually worked its way into some of the early design work of MMO LEGO Universe, but that was eventually watered down and turned into one facet of a much bigger game.

Following the breakdown of the Brickcraft work, the LEGO Group continued its efforts. At one point, they spoke with Microsoft about working together on its sandbox game Project Spark, but that didn't come together.

Teams then worked on an original idea at the LEGO Group with developer Funcom to create a sort of digital shoebox experience that would allow players to create their own little brick-based dioramas. That idea eventually made way for TT Games' work on LEGO Worlds. While LEGO Worlds did launch, it never approached the level of success that Minecraft found.

Looking back at the missed opportunity, documentarian and Bits N' Bricks co-host Ethan Vincent points to what he sees as one of the major stumbling blocks the LEGO Group faced.

"There is a boldness required to just do it and to maybe not be bogged down by some of the complicated lawyerly interactions and musings, and even the super ambitious task of trying to get every single LEGO brick into the gameplay experience," he said. "A certain boldness and vision will be required for LEGO Games to move forward."

Brain Crecente, journalist and Bits N' Bricks other co-host, noted that while Brickcraft was a missed opportunity for the LEGO Group, there are still plenty of opportunities open for the company.

"The people at the LEGO Group identified that Minecraft nailed Minecraft, so we don't need to recreate that," he said. "I look forward to seeing what they do in the future and how they create, not the next Minecraft, but the next LEGO game that's amazing and unbelievable."

Explore more...

In order of appearance

[Mojang Studios](#): Wikipedia entry

[Minecraft](#): Official website

[LEGO Universe](#): Wikipedia entry

[Project Spark](#): Wikipedia entry

[Funcom](#): Official website

[TT Games](#): Official website

[LEGO Worlds](#): Official website for Nintendo Switch version

Transcript

Bits N' Bricks Season 1 Episode 1: Minecraft



Prologue – 00:00

Paal Smith-Meyer

I think trusting the fundamental experience of the LEGO® brick is something that has been a challenge for the LEGO Group in the past 25 years.

Danny Bergmann

We all felt that we should've been doing that game, right? That it was the one game we should have been doing at the LEGO Group, that's Minecraft.

Daniel Kaplan

I think Minecraft is the best LEGO digital experience you can get. There's nothing that can compete with it today, as far as I know. And I really hope there will be a LEGO digital experience, but Minecraft is the closest thing we have right now.

Bits N' Bricks: Introduction – 00:41

Ethan Vincent

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

Brian Crecente

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

Ethan Vincent

Hi, and welcome to our episode of Bits N' Bricks. To set the stage a bit and maybe help tease some deeper meaning into one of the game design project code names you'll hear several times in the journey we're about to embark on. Well, I decided to begin with this little cult classic clip from 2004.

(Movie clip from Napoleon Dynamite's Rex Kwon Do commercial)

Ethan Vincent

That was of course the iconic Rex character from the film Napoleon Dynamite. And as you might recall, Rex was the local dojo owner in Preston who is out to teach small town Idaho how to defend with the strength of a grizzly, the reflexes of a Puma, and the wisdom of man.

(Movie clip from Napoleon Dynamite - Rex Kwon Do)

Ethan Vincent

His martial arts studio is called Rex Kwon Do. And yeah, it's one of the code names for a special project we'll be talking about today. And one last thing before we jump into the episode, maybe an important disclaimer, neither Brian and I are LEGO employees. We were both commissioned by the LEGO Group to examine and document the history of LEGO games spanning over the last 25 years, and almost smack in the middle of the LEGO Group's rich history timeline in games we find today's story. So, enjoy.

Chapter 1: The Ultimate LEGO Game – 02:41

(Music)

Ethan Vincent

So, let's dive right in, Brian. Today we're going to talk about the world's biggest video game I think there is, right?

Brian Crecente

Yes. It is in many ways the perfect LEGO game. I think children and adults are dropped into this open world where they can tear apart or build with pieces of the world around them. And really the only limitation is their imagination. But it turns out that despite how perfect of fit this game is, it's not actually a world made of LEGO bricks, instead it's actually Minecraft.

Brian Crecente

It wasn't the LEGO Group that made Minecraft, of course, but rather a single developer in Sweden. So since its launch in 2009, Minecraft has become the single most popular video game in history. The studio Mojang, was purchased by Microsoft back in 2014, for 2.5 billion, that's billion with a B, dollars. And the game continues to thrive on old and even

new gaming platforms. But what if things had gone a little differently? That's what we're going to be talking about in this episode. But back before Minecraft exploded in popularity rising to near ubiquity, the developer actually reached out to the LEGO Group about teaming up to create a Minecraft LEGO game. There was even talk within the LEGO Group itself about buying Mojang. So what happened, and why this an interesting story that actually starts decades before Minecraft was even a glimmer in the eye of its creator.

(Music)

Ethan Vincent

So for about as long as the LEGO Group has been making video games, they've been after this ideal, this idea of something maybe roughly defined, but something also really crystal clear, for them it's the perfect LEGO video game, right? It would empower players to build, energize their creativity through a simple construction system or tool. And it would provide a safe digital sandbox within which to play. Perhaps most importantly, it would deliver the player to a world where LEGO bricks were limitless, right? As long as they existed in the real world, they would be available in digital form without any limitations. You and I talked to Daniel Mathiasen, who's a former LEGO employee and is currently the General Manager at FRVR. And he talked to us about this ideal that the LEGO Group was chasing.

Daniel Mathiasen

It was one of the early digital concepts. You can even go back to some of the early LEGO Media days, very early, pre 2000 I think, and see some concepts there where our colleagues, at the time, were exploring that. It kind of became like a holy grail for the LEGO Group. And in that sense, I think also a part of it is what was making it difficult was that people saw it as one thing, that were trying to hunt that experience, that product, that one thing that was a digital creative experience. But that was definitely what we were trying to do in the company; is trying to find that one concept that we could bring out to the kids.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, chasing and trying to find that one concept was something that LEGO Group was really after, and Paal Smith-Meyer, who was an employee at the LEGO Group for a long time, and currently the Marketing Director at Playfinity, talks about what this LEGO game or play experience could be.

Paal Smith-Meyer

The notion of a sandbox game wasn't yet there, but the LEGO play itself was like a sandbox game in reality. The dream at the time was really to find a way of importing physical LEGO models into the virtual world, and then being able to experience them there. So for instance, building a racing car and then sitting inside that car and racing around in a LEGO world.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, so if you look at the early history of LEGO games, you can't help but notice that many of those titles seem to lean into this notion of exploration and building, even if it's on a rudimentary level. So take, for instance, LEGO Island's ability to roam the game's tiny community, or LEGO Creator in its efforts to give players the ability to snap LEGO pieces together in a game, these different elements of an open world sandbox construction LEGO game seemed to always be at least in the peripheral of the LEGO Group's vision. That came a bit more into focus in the early days of LEGO Universe, a creation that would go on to focus more on delivering a massively multiplayer online adventure game. Some of its early roots actually explore the idea of creating a vast digital world rife for exploration and LEGO brick-building, and during sort of the tail end of that development before it launched, there was this addition of the ability to kind of create your own little Island and then use it to do a lot of building and construction and sharing.

Paal Smith-Meyer

We have been working on the LEGO Universe, and earlier on in LEGO Universe there was a direction, which we call Happy Flower-

Ethan Vincent

This is Paal Smith-Meyer again.

Paal Smith-Meyer

-which was really to provide the tools of making the game, to the players themselves. So it was a sandbox experience, but the direction at the time was moved towards something more like World of Warcraft, which was at the time, the big game. So it's only later that we realized, at least I saw, that there was something called Minecraft out there.

Ethan Vincent

So, Paal Smith-Meyer here, obviously talking about LEGO Universe, which was announced as a branded MMO LEGO game in June of 2007. And as we talk about an upcoming episode, the team at Netdevil proceeded to prototype and develop the game for years internally. And what Paal's talking about here, Happy Flower is actually the IDE game editor platform that was used for the adult fans of LEGO community to build and create with digital bricks for LEGO Universe. And then obviously, like Paal mentioned, LEGO Universe was kind of shifted during the game development and pushed into a more MMO story-driven direction.

Chapter 2: Minecraft – 08:47

Ethan Vincent

But while all this was going on, meanwhile, a little-known Swedish developer began crafting a pet project in his spare time using Java. And when it first hit in May 2009, Minecraft didn't receive a lot of attention, but obviously that would change very, very quickly. So by 2009, LEGO Universe had been in development for nearly two years and was well down the path towards delivering an action-based online game. And when Minecraft hit and developers started to take notice, it grabbed the attention of more than a few inside the LEGO Group.

Paal Smith-Meyer

So the initial thought I had when I saw Minecraft for the first time was, this is the LEGO brick experience in an online world. This is really the endless possibilities you have when you have infinite bricks, and you can do whatever you want and build whatever you want. That is Minecraft. So the initial reaction to seeing Minecraft was really, this is something that we were working on. This could have been the LEGO brick experience. And so it was kind of little bit mad actually.

Brian Crecente

And when you say that you're referring to the work you were doing at LEGO Universe?

Paal Smith-Meyer

Yeah, referring to LEGO Universe and that development that we didn't trust ourselves enough to make a sandbox game. We didn't believe that was cool enough. So we wanted to go more the battler route, the more storyline route. So we didn't actually trust the LEGO DNA enough to launch that experience. And then seeing that Mojang launched experience was, you know, it was kind of looking back at ourselves and saying, we should have done this.

Ethan Vincent

Someone who was also at the front lines in developing LEGO Universe was Danny Bergmann, he's currently with LEGO Games. And he also talked about his reaction to Minecraft.

Danny Bergmann

Yeah, it was in 2009, I believe, where the first versions came out from Notch, right? And I think we noticed it right off the bat because, of course, it got a lot of attention in the gaming space, too from this being this...I guess also the first real survival game in this space. And then also...so I think we noticed it at that point, of course, but then also as we...as the years go by and we get into 10 and 11 and we see that kids really takes this in and really likes the freedom and the simple building of that system that he's created. He created it in Minecraft. I think that's where we really started noticing it.

Brian Crecente

So, while Minecraft continued to thrive with Markus "Notch" Persson releasing an alpha and then a beta in 2010, LEGO Universe didn't launch until the tail end of 2010. It's timing, which was complicated with the lingering death of MMOs at the time, a drop in an interest in subscription games, and this push towards digital releases and away from physical copies, all helped to contribute to an ultimate closure of the game in 2012.

Daniel Mathiasen

It's back to the point about the holy grail. People wanted LEGO Universe to have a chance and not be disturbed by anything else. And at the time we started to see that it would be very hard to get LEGO Universe to a commercial success. And Minecraft was really early days. So it didn't have the kind of numbers that you would be looking for traditionally in an IP or in a game from the LEGO Group, but it was growing fast, and it had a loyal fan-base operating.

Brian Crecente

But around the time Notch released the first retail version of Minecraft in 2011, he also reached out to the LEGO Group with an interesting proposition. Long a fan of the toys, which he at times has said inspired his creation of Minecraft, Notch was pursuing a lifelong dream, which was to work with the LEGO Group. Now we spoke with Daniel Kaplan who was employee number one, the first person hired by Notch, even before Notch created the company, Mojang. He talked with us about their passion for the LEGO brick and the chance they may have to work with the company. And some of the effort they went to, to try to get in touch with someone over there.

Daniel Kaplan

We didn't have any contacts at the LEGO Group. When I started, we met with another guy, Notch and I, and he knew a couple of folks over at the LEGO Group. When we told him that we were very keen on getting in touch with them, because a dream project of ours would be to actually create a LEGO-branded game in the similar vein as Minecraft. He helped us get in touch with the LEGO Group and the LEGO Group management over there, but it took quite a long time before we hit home and found the right people, because obviously Minecraft wasn't as big as it is today, so it was hard for them to grasp as well, that if this was a thing or not, or just a fluke. So I completely understand their reasoning in terms of not jumping on the possibility or opportunity of working with us, but it took quite some time before we got in touch with the right persons at LEGO Group.

Daniel Mathiasen

So the first meeting we had, Notch and I spent quite a long time talking about that motivation.

Ethan Vincent

Again, Daniel Mathiasen speaking.

Daniel Mathiasen

And it was nostalgia for Notch. He was telling us a story about his LEGO bricks and the drawer in his childhood home and his fond memories. And he hadn't set out to build Minecraft as any kind of LEGO brick experience, but it had dawned on him while he was working on Minecraft that the power of the LEGO brick experiences he had had as a kid. And he really, really wanted something to happen between our two companies and bringing out some great experience.

Daniel Kaplan

LEGO bricks were a huge inspiration of Minecraft. And we talked a lot about the LEGO Group and its influence on us and on the game as well. And I mean, the similarities are quite easy to see. It's the whole block brick system that Minecraft utilizes as well that the LEGO Group invented.

Chapter 3: Brickcraft or Project Rex Kwon Do – 15:05

Brian Crecente

So Notch's excitement around the project, which was code named Brickcraft, at the LEGO Group, and Rex Kwon Do, by Notch was obvious. He even tweeted about it a bunch of times. And some of those early tweets he talks about the progress of the game and seems elated that this prototype that he was working on had been green-lit by the LEGO Group.

(Music)

Tweet read aloud by voice actor

Twitter handle @Notch, September 5th, 2011, 8:19 AM. Secret project Rex Kwon Do begins today. It will involve caffeine and giggling.

Daniel Kaplan

There were a lot of high fives and a lot of coffee and a lot of dreaming going on for sure. And we were super, super excited. I can't...it's hard to describe because we were just so blown away about us having that opportunity of working on something that we thought was the coolest thing ever.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, it's cool to hear Daniel Kaplan remember the amount of excitement at Mojang over project Rex Kwon Do. So Brian let's talk a little bit about the game play in Minecraft and Brickcrafts. So tell me a little bit more about that.

Brian Crecente

Yeah. So I think it would be fair to say that probably everybody has pretty much heard of Minecraft or maybe they've even seen it or played it.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, unless you live on a different planet you've got to have seen Minecraft at some point.

Brian Crecente

Right, and one not created by Minecraft, but so basically when you go into this game, it auto-generates a world for you. The world is made out of little pieces, they're not LEGO studs, but what they are, are little one...they look a little bit like one-by-one bricks. So they're material. And sometimes that material can be grass or it can be stone, or it can be lava or sand, but they're all shaped up by these bits, these one-by-one bits, and you're dropped into this world and you have a little pickaxe and you could go around and dig tunnels or completely level an area. And all those resources that you're digging up, kind of go into your bag and then you can use those resources to then go build things. And if you've played this game, there are two ways to play it. You can play it in an exploration mode where you don't have to worry about any dangers. You can also play it in a survival mode where when the sun goes down, creepy things come out after you, one of which is called The Creeper, by the way. So it's really this interesting thing that even someone who has never played a game you're dropped into this, and within five minutes, you're having fun and building things, which is very LEGO brick-like.

Ethan Vincent

And also like within five minutes, you kind of start understanding, right? I mean, it's really remarkable how intuitive it is. And then the gameplay aspect, I think, is this kind of threat that at any time, what you've constructed can be destroyed. You can be attacked by spiders, zombies, creepers, whatever, you know? And so it really has these great strategy elements as well in this almost like sandbox experience, I would say.

Brian Crecente

Right. And what's interesting, those two modes that you have, one does feel, even though it's very loosely sort of modeled after a storyline, it does feel a little bit more like you have end goals. The other one feels like somebody just gave you a bucket of LEGO bricks and said, you know, maybe that bucket of LEGO bricks is already snapped onto a platform or into a big shape, but they basically said, here's a bunch of LEGO bricks, take them apart and build something. Of course it wasn't LEGO bricks, and that was sort of the thing. While

Notch acknowledged that LEGO bricks had a huge influence on him in designing this game. It wasn't a LEGO game. And so when they started talking together and came up with this idea of Brickcraft, the early concept was essentially to take the Minecraft design and gameplay loop, and then add the LEGO brick aesthetic to it. And one of the key shifts was moving away from that one-by-one bit design. So where Minecraft, if you were to convert that completely over to LEGO bricks, Minecraft would be just those one-by-one bricks, and what the LEGO Group and what Mojang wanted was something that included all of this sort of eclectic, diverse mix of LEGO bricks that you could build with, which makes the game obviously a lot more complex, but it provides you with more resources and variety of shapes - essentially all of the stuff found in LEGO bricks. We talked a little bit with Daniel Kaplan about some of that work on the prototype and what Notch did to try and recreate that feeling.

Daniel Kaplan

That was the prototype. Like just start with very, very few pieces and see if it works because we knew that LEGO bricks were way more complex in terms of placement of the units of bricks. And that was something we found that was very elegant with Minecraft was that it was only like one-by-one bricks, in comparison to the LEGO Group's quite complex and vast library of bricks. And Markus actually built the first prototype completely by himself with various LEGO bricks as a template for the game. And he managed to create a prototype that generated terrain with the various LEGO bricks and a FPS control camera where you could run around and place bricks in various places and have various options of how to place the bricks.

Brian Crecente

Now when you showed this to the LEGO Group, what was their response? Did they want to pursue this?

Daniel Kaplan

Yeah, and that prototype got green-lit at the LEGO Group. So what we started to do then was actually to hire people for that project. So I was the producer from our side on the Rex Kwon Do project, and we hired two new developers, two new coders that would help us on the project because we couldn't use the prototype that Markus produced to create the proper game. So we actually started to build a game engine specifically for the LEGO game.

(Music)

Tweet read aloud by voice actor

Great progress on project Rex Kwon Do today. This is the clearest screenshot I can show - September 7th, 2011. Ha! Project Rex Kwon Do isn't fun to play at the moment. Analyzing

why is challenging and interesting -September 8th, 2011. Rex Kwon Do is probably going to start in two to three weeks - November 29th, 2011. In other news, looks like project Rex Kwon Do got green-lit (four big grin emojis) - December 5th, 2011. Remember project Rex Kwon Do? We canceled it to focus on Minecraft, Scrolls and eventually Ten to the C that we own 100% ourselves instead - June 19th, 2012.

Ethan Vincent

Yeah, so there you have it, all of those kinds of cleverly read tweets between September 7th, 2011 and June 2012. And then that final kind of abrupt tweet in there, you know, June 19th stating that the Rex Kwon Do project was over, finished, canceled. And this seemingly sudden decision by Mojang to back out of the project was both heartbreaking to those involved at the LEGO Group, but also not a total surprise as Daniel Mathiasen pointed out in a conversation about some of the issues that may have killed the project.

Daniel Mathiasen

It became a legal mess on our side of the table. It was back to big corporations and small companies not being able to work together. So our legal team emphasized a lot of things that were in the grand scheme of things wouldn't matter, like looking back and seeing the epic nature of what Minecraft has become and driving force in a kid's culture in itself, like listing out the hurdles that the LEGO Group put up for this would be ridiculous. Like strategically, they would not matter at all. And it's one of the things that I'm...when looking back at my leadership impact and could I have done anything different? Should I have pushed through? Should I have insisted more in driving it through? But it was like little details that messed it up and, in the end, understandably, Mojang, we just can't waste our time on this, the opportunity cost of sitting and discussing these things. We will never get to what is important, which is making great experiences for the kids.

Daniel Kaplan

Yeah, we had noticed that it was a lot of management, a lot of middlemen at the LEGO Group, and it was hard to understand what was okay to do and was not okay to do.

Ethan Vincent

This is Daniel Kaplan again, giving us his version of why he felt the LEGO Group deal fell apart.

Daniel Kaplan

I think the main issue was that who was designing the game. We always thought that we were the designers and the product owners of the game, and the LEGO Group, I guess, they thought they were the designers and product owners of the game. So I guess it was a bit miscommunication in terms of who was running the project, because at one point we felt more like consultants rather than the ones running the project. And we thought we had

creative freedom in whatever we want to do with the LEGO franchise, but it was apparently, and still I guess, a lot of rules on what you can do and not do with the bricks that we had no knowledge of before signing the contract. And there was something that unfolded while working with the LEGO team. It was just that our teams were so different and we were a very tiny company, the LEGO Group had a lot of people just to manage this project that we were working on, and we felt that it was the wrong way of making games, in our opinion. And that was, I think that was the core thing that made it really hard for us to continue working on the project, because we felt that we could not meet their demands and create the product they wanted and because it didn't match with what we wanted to do. So it's more about that. And we were still excited even till the day we ended the cooperation. So it was just very unfortunate that it never happened, but the...what can I say...the idea of working on a LEGO game was still very exciting for the whole company.

Ethan Vincent

The creative differences that Daniel Kaplan talks about between Mojang and the LEGO Group, to me also seems like a major factor in the project being dismissed quickly. And Kaplan goes on to explain.

Daniel Kaplan

For instance, like one thing we wanted to do was to add scratches to the pieces, the LEGO pieces. And that was something we got a lot of pushback from the LEGO Group, they were like, oh no we can't show pieces being scratched. And we were like, but all LEGO pieces in every box are scratched. And they had this façade on how they want people to look at them that they were very keen on keeping. And we wanted to try to represent LEGO bricks how it is actually in kids' bedrooms basically, or any rooms, but they were very much against that. The questions I had for them, like, okay when can we get the specifications of the Minifigs so we can implement them? And we wanted to try to make sure they were animated, like stop-motion animated, basically like the LEGO movies, you know, the stop motion animate. Then you can, in your mind see that someone was basically holding the Minifigs with their fingers and jumping around with it. And we wanted to simulate that in the game as well.

Brian Crecente

Man, I love that idea of putting Minifigs in the game and including that sort of animation. So, Daniel, what were the bigger plans for this sort of mashup of Minecraft and LEGO bricks?

Daniel Kaplan

It was to create an adventure game at the end of it. Basically what Minecraft is today, it would show different kinds of biomes and the enemies and cultures and stuff like that, because the LEGO Group has a vast library of stuff they've been building throughout the

years. We wanted to replicate all that; to create cities, create jungles, pirate ships, and all those kinds of things that we had lived through during our young years as LEGO builders. So yeah, that was the idea - to make an adventure game out of it.

Ethan Vincent

And that's probably one of the big factors playing into this, right, Daniel? So the fact that the Mojang team, and you were kind of up and coming, you know, Minecraft hadn't really exploded yet to any of these ideas about how to incorporate the LEGO themes and bricks, and are super excited and the way you describe it, it kind of feels like you as these new up-and-coming game developers, you know, without a smash hit yet, were kind of maybe even pat on the head a little bit by the LEGO Group. I mean, is that something you feel like maybe happened here as well?

Daniel Kaplan

For sure. Yeah, for sure they did. I don't think the LEGO Group guys took us seriously because we didn't understand maybe completely either how big Minecraft could be. And that was why we jumped on the opportunity as well, to work with the LEGO Group, because as you know, back then, there weren't a lot of games who survived for more like a month after release. And we had no idea for how low Minecraft would survive. We were just super happy that it kept on selling every day. And we had, I mean, our estimates were wrong every time because they were based on traditional, game industry forecasts.

Ethan Vincent

And so, obviously the end result here was that there was tension between the two companies and ultimately Notch lost passion for the project and pulled the plug, and Daniel Mathiasen, who was really trying to kind of salvage this deal, talks about some of the factors that may have contributed to that pulling of the plug and his personal take on it.

Daniel Mathiasen

They came in with a lot of energy. And then the items that we, from a legal standpoint, have brought to the table to get any kind of paper in that site. We spent hours and hours on things that are unimportant in the grand scheme of things, but it was important to the LEGO Group at the time. And the way that a big company like that works is that when the lawyers are in the driving seat, then it's really like you have to push really, really hard to overcome that. So it just became extremely tiresome for them to sit in it. And for me, it was just something that we needed to get over with. It's like, I've been through that many, many times before, and I just wanted to get some of those details out of the way so we could get to the fun part, but they started realizing what it would take to drive that home, and it was just the opportunity cost for them were just too great.

Brian Crecente

When you first heard that this was going to not happen, what was your reaction personally?

Daniel Mathiasen

I was super, super disappointed in our ability to help Mojang become a success in a legal context.

Daniel Kaplan

This was a very long time ago; I don't remember all the details-

Ethan Vincent

This is Daniel Kaplan speaking.

Daniel Kaplan

-but it was in our office. And I think, Notch just said we'll end this project now. At the end of the day I think Markus just gets fed up with all the various rules that did not sync with his view and our view of how we want to make games. It was just a very different ways of looking at things.

Brian Crecente

Were you aware or was it a shock because Notch was the one who made the decision? Like how aware were you that you were that close to walking away from the deal?

Daniel Kaplan

Yeah, I was not aware, no, it was more about Notch deciding, as far as I remember. I mean, I had talked with him about the various issues we had already and that probably fueled him to make the decision, but I was not aware that it would be canceled at that time.

Brian Crecente

Do you recall the reaction when the decision was made by the LEGO Group folks?

Daniel Kaplan

I do not. I think if I remember correctly, they got quite shocked that we took a decision that bluntly, and for them I guess, it was just the way of...for them working and explaining how their brand works and what is okay to do, and what's not okay to do. I think it was more like, it's a negotiation like everything else, you talk about issues and you deal with them, but we weren't ready to deal with those kinds of issues that early, I guess.

Ethan Vincent

So did you at all reach out to Daniel Mathiasen with the LEGO Group at that time, or get in touch with him?

Daniel Kaplan

I've been actually keeping in touch with Daniel ever since, and he always reminds me of how sad it was that we ended up not doing the project because he was very keen on it himself. And he had been working at the LEGO Group for quite a long time, and he was very excited about it too. And he told me like, can we try to fix this? Or like, is this completely a no and stuff like that. And unfortunately it was, because I don't think the LEGO Group would be changing themselves to accommodate to what we wanted to do. But yeah, it was really sad. And I talked with Daniel from time to time actually.

(Music)

Ethan Vincent

Once that deal fell apart, a core group of people at the LEGO Group went back to the leadership with a new idea by Mojang.

Ronny Scherer

Well, the idea was, of course, if you can't beat them, join them.

Ethan Vincent

This is Ronny Scherer, Senior Director at LEGO Games, Asia Pacific, talking.

Ronny Scherer

We didn't have anything that resembled it at the time, and it was growing in popularity. And so if there was a time to potentially either invest in, or acquire Mojang, it had to be around then.

Ethan Vincent

So yeah, Ronny tells us here that LEGO Group considered it, considered purchasing Mojang, but Microsoft's interest in the company and its ultimate 2.5 billion price tag, obviously dissuaded the LEGO Group.

Ronny Scherer

So Minecraft was still not the success that it became, so it was still emerging. And so there was, of course, no guarantee that it would end up becoming the cultural phenomenon that it became. I didn't and others didn't do a good enough job of conveying the potential significance and opportunity that would come along with an acquisition like that. We're not a company that is, that has a big history of acquisitions, especially not successful ones.

I mean, you are very familiar with the acquisition of Zowie Entertainment back in the late nineties that was shut down pretty quickly; LEGO Universe that was shut down really quickly. So we didn't have a great track record in putting money into acquisitions that we could sort of look at as a great sort of benchmark for why we should do it, and this would have been by far the largest transaction that we would get involved in. And so at the time we did not have the structure that we have today, where we have a team called LEGO Ventures that's all about investing in playful learning and digital play more broadly. Yeah, so that did not exist at the time so there was really no place to go with a pitch like that.

Brian Crecente

And it must've been a challenging pitch coming on the heels of what was going on with LEGO Universe. Like you go from LEGO Universe, which was this enormous investment, to something that had been shut down, you know, retroactively looking back it now it looks like it was shut down prematurely, but still at the time, I'm sure it was seen as a failure. And then you go to them and say, okay let's invest even more money in buying a studio. Did that, do you think, play a role in that decision? Not to do it.

Ronny Scherer

Absolutely, but it was also, of course, the big difference was that at this time, Minecraft had started to sort of show teeth and longevity. It was not a big, big thing yet, but it was still on a different trajectory. The business model was different. The cost structure, in particular, like the operating cost structure for Minecraft was much, much lower. It was a much, much simpler technical setup compared to what we'd built with LEGO Universe.

(Music)

Chapter 4: Worlds – 37:03

Ethan Vincent

So months after Mojang walked away from the LEGO Group deal and the company decided not to acquire the Minecraft developer, the LEGO Group was approached again by another interesting collaborator by Microsoft for Project Spark. Tell me a little bit about that, Brian.

Brian Crecente

So Project Spark is an interesting thing and interesting blip in the history of Microsoft and game development. This was the game that was being created by a group called Team Dakota, and it was initially released as a beta to the public. And the idea was a little bit like what you found with Little Big Planet for PlayStation and with Dreams for the PlayStation. And that was, you were given this world that you were dropped into and you could create your own experiences and that includes making your own games or movies or whatever you wanted to make. And so it was this sort of creative environment. It was much more

complex than Minecraft, but it still had at its core, the idea of creating things. And so it was turned into a beta, and initially actually released as an alpha, then as a beta and then it was shut down and that shutting down sort of happened right along the same time Microsoft purchased Mojang, and it seemed like they shifted their interest from Project Spark over to Minecraft. So while the Project Spark deal also fell by the wayside, in terms of LEGO Group and its participation, it didn't dampen the LEGO Group's interest in creating its own take on an open world, building exploration game. If anything, it sort of seems like it had the opposite effect and it invigorated those on the team who really had been discussing these titles.

(Music)

Brian Crecente

A few projects seem to kick off right around that time. First, the LEGO Group went to developer Funcom and were working with them on a prototype that would have delivered a sort of digital shoe box experience. So essentially players were given this ability to craft inside a small world of LEGO bricks made inside this fish tank-like cube. So you would set these parameters about how many bricks there were and if there was water and that sort of thing. And then you would build your own creations inside this world. And then when you were done, you would have this sort of LEGO brick diorama that you could share with friends. It sounded like it was a really neat experience, but ultimately it was canceled. Around the same time TT Games, which of course had quite a track record with its successful run of LEGO games, started working on LEGO Worlds. LEGO Worlds, which obviously is a game that eventually was released, essentially delivered entire planets made of LEGO bricks, to players who could experience 3D procedurally-generated worlds into a sandbox game. So you could drop in as a Minifigure, explore this world, build your own creations again with, of course, with LEGO bricks and have that sort of almost Minecraft-like experience. While it was an ambitious effort, unfortunately it just didn't have the level of success they were hoping to see. And there are some inside the LEGO Group who wondered if the company just wasn't taking enough chances with its gaming efforts. So I asked Danny Bergmann about his thoughts on that.

Brian Crecente

When you look back at that moment, that decision to go sort of the safer route and stick with TT Games. Do you feel like how different do you think things would've gone if the LEGO Group had decided to pair up with Microsoft and invest in Spark?

Danny Bergmann

That's a good question. So in hindsight, I think we should have been a little more bold and probably have jumped on something else than just Warner and TT. Because I think we kind of know what we gonna get with Warner and TT and which...yeah, we know what we're gonna get, but I don't think we had the, I don't know if it's bravery, we didn't have the guts

to jump into this Microsoft adventure or even the Mojang. I think it just felt a little more safe. Was it the right decision? No, I don't think it was because we didn't ultimately get what we wanted out of it. And then we're still here, seven years later and we still don't have a mobile version that is somewhat close to Minecraft. It's still being worked on by Warner and TT.

(Music)

Ethan Vincent

So each missed opportunity at creating a game that, you know, like Minecraft can perfectly capture the essence of what it means to be a LEGO video game, comes with the sense that the LEGO Group won't give up on its efforts, even as it examines its own history for how to do better.

Danny Bergmann

A lot of people that are working in the game industry and work with LEGO Games has always had that desire, right? We always wanted to create that game that has a creativity at the heart of it and, you know, have a system and you can create stuff and you can share stuff.

Ethan Vincent

This is Danny Bergmann speaking.

Danny Bergmann

But also think there's been a, you know, our TT adventure has kinda given us that success. And I ultimately think that it's probably also the reason why we chose to go with Warner and TT, because LEGO Games equals Warner and TT games, right for many, many years, and still to this date we're still trying a little bit to break out of that perception of what a LEGO game is. We all felt we should've been doing that game, right? That was the one game we should've been doing, as the LEGO Group, that's Minecraft. But I think there's a lot of other games that is also from the LEGO Group, right? And I don't think it's the only game that the LEGO Group should be creating. I think the LEGO Group has a very varied brand and can, can hold a lot of different games. A lot of different experiences.

Paal Smith-Meyer

I think trusting the fundamental experience of the LEGO brick is something that has been a challenge for the LEGO Group in the past 25 years.

Ethan Vincent

Here's Paal Smith-Meyer again speaking.

Paal Smith-Meyer

And it seems that daring to go back and restart at the core with basic brick-building and free creativity is something that keeps coming up, but we never dare to do. And I think that's going to be the challenge, also moving forward, that it's easy to replicate something that is a story using LEGO bricks, and it's very successful looking at the IP, but it still doesn't mean that the LEGO Group shouldn't pursue, going back to the roots, as a path moving forward.

Brian Crecente

When you think about, again, looking back in sort of hindsight, why do you think it was that the LEGO Group wasn't the company that made Minecraft or something like Minecraft?

Paal Smith-Meyer

I think we didn't believe we were cool enough just as bricks. And that seems to be the challenge still, that it's kind of afraid that all this generation of kids they are into Fortnite or the next generation of kids will be into a new game. And we always afraid that we are not cool enough just being a free, creative, brick world. But if you look at the LEGO brick fan community, they're still exploring the potential of the LEGO brick every day. And I think a world where LEGO brick fans, young and old, can meet and just be creative and shape the world in their own image. That would be a true LEGO digital experience.

(Music)

Paal Smith-Meyer

For me, when I think about it, some of my biggest failures working at the LEGO Group is that I didn't put my foot down enough to say, we need to do this. And I feel like it's the thing I come back to. And when I see the fish tank, for instance, in the LEGO House, I'm like, ahh I knew this was good. I felt it was good. I could see it with the kids. And it saddens me that it isn't that believe in free creativity, which is the reason why the LEGO Group is there in the first place.

Ethan Vincent

How about you, Daniel? Do you feel like there's still this desire to create this holy grail game at the LEGO Group?

Daniel Mathiasen

Oh yeah. As you can hear in my answers, I'm probably still there in spirit sometimes.

Ethan Vincent

Again, Daniel Mathiasen speaking.

Daniel Mathiasen

So the design is still there, and some really nice experiments going on within the LEGO Group, both from how to drive innovation with the LEGO Ventures team, that's doing an excellent job, that's trying to drive outside in innovation, there are some nice experiments in the games team. Yeah. There are, in different places in the LEGO Group, there are still some really, really nice experiments going on in this field. And we have in our time grown in the LEGO group, we grew the people driving innovation in this area from a handful of people to today, that's probably a couple of hundred people driving innovation in this area. So a lot of things have happened and is happening. So yeah, stay tuned for more great stuff from those guys.

(Music)

Brian Crecente

Yeah, it's fascinating to kind of go through this process of finding out where things could have diverged from the launch of Minecraft and its ongoing success to sort of this Project Spark idea. But I think it's also important to remember how invested the people are making those decisions. Danny Bergmann talks a little bit about the fact that this wasn't just sort of something that had to be processed on an intellectual level, but something that really did affect them, and impact them emotionally because they were so invested in this idea of, not only working with Mojang, but even before that, creating this game that so perfectly reflects the ideals of LEGO gaming.

Danny Bergmann

We're still trying to break out of the games seen as marketing, or games seen as licensed business mindset that we have. We still haven't really embraced that it's a craft, it's a thing that we need to invest in. And I think that's ultimately, I think that's the reason why it is that we haven't actually invested in it. We're still trying to get other people to create it for us.

Brian Crecente

From an outsider's perspective, and this could obviously not be accurate, but it seems to me that the single most impactful creation that wasn't made by the LEGO Group, has been Minecraft in terms of how it's viewed by people inside the LEGO Group. Do you think that's fair to say? Has the creation of Minecraft, or something like it, been sort of the single thread that kind of runs the course of LEGO Games history?

Danny Bergmann

Yes, I think so. We started way before Minecraft, right? So I think there's already the desire to do something creative. We just didn't nail it. Minecraft nailed it. And then it...well, Notch didn't really make it for kids, but kids really had got drawn to it. And that's why we also make LEGO Minecraft models products today, right? Because it has an appeal to kids,

which is also kind of weird, right? We are making LEGO Minecraft, and it's kind of a circle thing, but that's what we do. I remember the first time I saw the LEGO Minecraft sets. It's really kind of really weird that we as the LEGO Group take a digital representation of LEGO bricks, puts it in a box, put a billing instruction to it, and then you get a physical product. That kind of says it all a little bit.

Brian Crecente

It's very meta.

Danny Bergmann

It's very meta and it's also very, it's like a little bit of defeat to a certain extent You can feel it, like, come on, really?

Brian Crecente

There must have been some sort of emotional reaction as word of Minecraft and its success spread through LEGO Games. Like I'm assuming, at some point, people must've felt, I don't know, a gut punch or something when they saw that someone else had done this.

Danny Bergmann

Yes. Yes. And of course it was in the later stages of LEGO Universe and of course we saw it there and then the future lab team, and Ronny of course was part of it and me and Ronny... Ronny ended up pitching Jørgen Vig to actually buy Minecraft, right? Which also didn't pan out. I guess, I think we are definitely hungry for a hit. Definitely hungry for making something that really stands out and really get noticed in the company. We've been talking about that for many years. We want to...you know, Universe wasn't it, some of the other stuff wasn't it, but I think we're really hungry for that hit that's not an action adventure game from TT.

Brian Crecente

One of the questions I've been asking everybody, is one that seemingly everybody doesn't have an answer for it, but I'm curious what your thoughts are. Why do you think the LEGO Group wasn't the company that first came up with a game that was essentially like Minecraft?

Daniel Kaplan

Hmm, good question. I think maybe it would require them to have too many people seeing different things and not letting people try out things.

Ethan Vincent

This is Daniel Kaplan speaking again.

Daniel Kaplan

And I think that was the difference, with Minecraft it was just Notch to begin with and he just started doing stuff and not waiting for getting a blessing from someone to do stuff. And I think it's just different way of how companies are structured and how you can start projects. And I think, like even Daniel Mathiasen would need a lot of help to even get the LEGO project, we were working on, to get it approved and get his time to work on it. And I think that's the sad part with big companies where it's, you think they should have like unlimited resources to try out new stuff, but they don't seem to.

(Music)

Daniel Kaplan

I think Minecraft is the best LEGO digital experience you can get. Definitely. There's nothing that can compete with it today, as far as I know, and I really hope there will be a LEGO digital experience, but Minecraft is the closest thing I have right now.

(Music)

Chapter 5: Conclusions - 53:00

Ethan Vincent

Wow. I love that. You know, time and time again, Brian, I hear that. I hear people at the LEGO Group; LEGO employees; internal and external game developers; they're all saying the game that LEGO Games should have really made is Minecraft. And that's just kind of this familiar, you know, circular discussion that continues, and it's really kind of understanding, I think, first of all, the significance of Minecraft as a sandbox play experience where it really is about building and creating, and secondly, the fact that kids everywhere playing it incessantly, like it's a true cultural phenomenon. And when I think about my first reaction to Minecraft, I had a similar reaction like some of the employees in the LEGO Group. I was in the throes of filming the behind-the-scenes of LEGO Universe, and I was really entrenched in looking at this polished world and understanding the makings of it and just the challenge it was to get it to the finish line, you know, and just to finally be able to do what it wanted to do to be an MMO game, where you can build, create and do all kinds of things while following a storyline of sorts. And when Minecraft came along and I saw this kind of, you know, 8-bit rendering, these kinds of choppy, one block worlds, my first impression was, oh my gosh, this looks retro and what is this? But boy, man, did that ever take off. And I'm really inspired by what the culture accepted and how the culture ran with it. And matter of fact, if you look at the King's Landing recreation in Minecraft, that was built by like a hundred skilled builders, and you zoom out to this bird's eye view from above. I mean, you can't tell the difference. I mean, it looks like these buildings are made from traditional LEGO bricks. And I find that fascinating, and this idea that LEGO Games has always been chasing

this holy grail, this idea thereafter, to create the ultimate game that would engage kids everywhere to do just that - to build and create. This ambition of LEGO Games, it's not dead. It's continuing. And it's something that we're going to be talking about extensively in our podcast series, this reoccurring theme of this dream of bringing the physical into the digital and having fun and playing with it. And so for me, this is kind of the ultimate story of how close the LEGO Group came to having that thing, that game, but also learning here the boldness it requires to just do it and to maybe not be bogged down by some of the complicated lawyerly interactions and musings, and even the super ambitious task of trying to get every single LEGO brick into the gameplay experience. So, a certain boldness and vision will be required for LEGO Games to move forward. But overall, I'm just completely in love with this story and this idea of how close and what a near miss this was, but also very positive about the future of LEGO Games and where they're headed now, based, maybe on some of the lessons they've learned here.

Brian Crecente

Yeah, it is really fascinating. I remember when we first sort of unearthed this and talking to people that my first reaction was sort of, I was stunned. And I think my second reaction was, I was sad, because I really wish this had happened. I was lucky enough to play around with the prototype and even in its prototype form, it was a really fun experience. But there's a lot there: Minecraft in its own right has become this massive thing - It has its own conventions; It has an educational aspect; it's used in all these different ways in much the same way that I think the LEGO brick and the LEGO Group is viewed. I think the challenge was something that has been pointed out by several people that we interviewed. And that is, looking at it in hindsight, looking at it from a bird's-eye view, it seems like a no-brainer. Like, of course they should do this, but if you get down into the thick of it and you look at the timing and what the LEGO Group was being asked to do, it makes sense that maybe this didn't work out. The LEGO Group at that time was just getting off a massive project they'd been working on for years with Netdevil in LEGO Universe. And so the idea that they would then quickly partner up with this really small group that was having some success, but really it hadn't blown up yet, that's Mojang and Minecraft, it's understandable that there would be a lot of legalese and agreements that had to be signed. And then from the other perspective, the idea that Notch and Mojang at some point were like, you know what, we don't want to deal with a big corporation. We want to be an indie group. We want to just be able to fire from the hip. So, I could see why those alignments didn't work out, and it's unfortunate on the one hand, but on the other hand, I do think as several of the people we talked to noted, there's so much more out there to explore. I think that capturing what was Minecraft would have been a good idea, obviously before Minecraft came out, or right as it came out. But I think rightfully so, the people at the LEGO Group have identified the fact that Minecraft nailed Minecraft. So we don't need to recreate that. We need to find another interesting and fascinating way to explore digital play and LEGO bricks. And there are myriad ways of doing that. So that's what we're doing now. And I think that's what we hear from the LEGO Group, and I find that inspiring that they can go through this tough journey of almost landing these deals that could have been tremendous

and sort of learn lessons from it and then realize they need to now focus on the future and move forward. So I look forward to seeing what they do in the future and how they create, not the next Minecraft, but the next LEGO game that's amazing and unbelievable.

(Music)

Bits N' Bricks: Credits – 59:22

Ethan Vincent

Bits N' Bricks is made possible by LEGO Games. Our producer is Ronny Scherer. Your hosts are Ethan Vincent and Brian Crecente. Episode producing and editing by Ethan Vincent. Writing by Brian Crecente. Original music, sound design and mixing by Peter Priemer. Additional music provided by Henrick Lindstrand from the award-winning game LEGO Builder's Journey, which you can play on Apple arcade today. We'd like to thank our participants, Daniel Mathiasen, Daniel Kaplan, Danny Bergmann, Paal Smith-Meyer, and Ronny Scherer. We'd also like to acknowledge the entire LEGO Games team, as well as the great folks at the LEGO Idea House for their support. For questions or comments, write us at bitsnbricks@LEGO.com and as always stay tuned for more episodes of Bits N' Bricks.

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