

Our LEGO® Stories

Episode 1: Masters of Reinvention



Introduction: What we'll cover in today's episode (00:00)

Julie: Kids are digital natives and are always on the hunt for something new and fun to play with. So how do we ensure our play experiences are still relevant with the LEGO Group turning 89 years old this year?

Tom: You need to enlighten the fire of your innovators. They need to come to you and say, "I've got this great idea. I can't wait to show you."

Morgan: I took my boss, Will Thorogood and the head of our department, Tom Donaldson, aside, and I pulled them around the coffee table underneath the stairs and showed them an A4 sheet of paper and said, "I think this is a good idea."

Julie: You're listening to Our LEGO® Stories. I'm Julie Foster, and a proud member of the LEGO team.

Loren: And I'm Loren Shuster, another happy member of the LEGO team.

Julie: Take a peek into how we bring LEGO products to life and what we do to have a positive impact on the world in this new series brought to you by the LEGO Group.

This time we tell the story about how our brand-new way of playing, LEGO® VIDIYOT™, came to life.

Coming up in the show, our Chief People Officer and Head of Corporate Affairs, Loren Shuster, speaks with Senior Vice President Tom Donaldson, who heads up our Creative Play Lab, about the work we do to be the masters of reinvention every year. And I talk to Morgan James Walker, Digital Design Director and the original inventor of LEGO VIDIYO, to understand how it came to life.

This brand-new way of playing wouldn't have been possible without our partnership with Universal Music Group. So, Loren also talks with Joshua Burke, Vice President, Head of Global Partnerships at Universal Music Group, about how their know-how within music and ours within play was put into play.

First up, it's Loren and Tom.

Chapter 1: Our approach to innovation (01:48)

Loren: Tom, you are heading up our Creative Play Lab. What's your team's role in innovating LEGO play?

Tom: Our team's mission is to invent the future of LEGO play. And what we really look at is how is LEGO play going to evolve over years and perhaps even the next generation.

So, we need to understand what it is that kids are looking for in the future and how to make sure that the LEGO system remains entirely relevant to kids as they change over the years.

Loren: What do you do to create the right environment for your team to operate in this Lab and to continue to innovate?

Tom: I think the heart of this is to really understand who kids are today and then who innovators are today. So, the first thing is to really think carefully about how to learn from kids, how to use them as our role models, how to build new ways of being curious in terms of going out and just seeing what they do and then saying, "Hang on, that thing was a little bit surprising to me. Tell me a little bit more."

I think about the three F's when I think about innovation: fire, feedback and failure through learning or learning through failure.

But the top one for me is fire. You need to enlighten the fire of your innovators. They need to come to you and say, "I've got this great idea. I can't wait to show you." And a lot of it's a very subtle piece, but it is about creating an environment in which they feel heard, stretched, throwing a few bombs in there every now and again just to stir things up, but also making sure that they really feel that it's an environment where they want to pour their heart into their work.

And if you have the right people pouring their heart into their work for a brand like the LEGO Group and for kids, there's a lot of ways that magic can happen. That's what I've tried to focus on: creating that environment where people feel like they can bring their own passion into their job as part of their daily work.

Loren: We've just launched a brand-new way to play with LEGO bricks, LEGO VIDIYO, which also incorporates music. And it's your team that came up with this really fresh, new idea. How did it all start? Where did the idea come from?

Tom: We were in this very creative offsite where the whole team went away, very far away from the business, and we engaged in three or four or five days of really intense brainstorming.

And in that, we cooked up some really fun ideas about what might happen if you put the LEGO brand together with the music industry.

We threw some teams in a very creative atmosphere. They came up with some hilarious things. I have to say, I have never laughed so hard in my professional life as during that week. It was beautiful and brilliant. And then we brought it back into the LEGO Group in the more daily context. And after three or four or five weeks, we realised that we hadn't found that big idea. And so, we thought, "Okay, maybe it's too big a thing to put together." And we actually looked at closing that project down. But that's where individual passions come to the fore, and something exciting happened just at that point at which we poured all of this energy and tried a lot and then said, "Maybe it's not working out."

And that's when Morgan, who was the originator of the core of the VIDIYO idea, came away. Literally, we closed the project on a Friday. He came back on a Monday and said, "Can I just show you something?" And that was the magic at the heart of the LEGO VIDIYO experience.

Chapter 2: The idea (04:50)

Julie: Here's how Morgan recalls it.

Morgan: I went home a bit dejected on the Friday, but I'd already even on the Friday evening had this idea. I came back in on Monday and said, right, here's my boss, Tom Donaldson, "I'll meet you in 10 minutes under the stairs."

And I just showed them this little sketch of, you know, what became LEGO VIDIYO and just asked for permission just to give at least that one idea a little bit more breathing room. And I think they stuck with music. They also made a bet on just exploring that opportunity space in a more kind of structured way.

I think that was a new thing for us to be able to take on a whole space rather than just the concept. But then I think they saw something in the idea too. And they gave me a month just to figure it out. That's what I asked for. I said, "I just need some time to pull this idea together. And if you like it, we can take it further. And if you don't, we can close it." And fortunately, a month later, we kept going.

Julie: So I'd love to hear more about the creative process. I think a lot of people, you know, look at LEGO designers and are very curious about how do you get all your great ideas?

Morgan: The constant in all of our processes is really prototyping and testing. For me, it's definitely the most rewarding part of the job. Just before you go into a kid's test, you think you know what you're talking about, and within 10 minutes, you find out you don't. But you've learned something new. And normally, by the end of a kid's test, I can't really remember what I thought before. I've just absorbed that kid's viewpoint. And that's just now how I see the concept. And so, it's really, it's quite an iterative process, that. With something like VIDIYO, we're innovating right across the board. We were really clear with everyone that we were developing an experience first and products were part of that. And they were absolutely core to it.

Julie: Here's a taste of the LEGO VIDIYO experience.

Promo video: Introducing LEGO VIDIYO music video maker. A brand new line of music-inspired LEGO products that lets kids be the directors, producers and stars of their own crazy cool music videos. LEGO VIDIYO is powered by physical LEGO tiles called 'BeatBits'. BeatBits unlock powerful special effects and sounds, props, dance moves and wild video effects while you record.

Julie: Now back to Morgan.

Morgan: The first thing that we needed to test was really the BeatBits. Did they make sense to kids? This is a generation who've grown up with really no conception of music as a physical object. That's quite funny to them. We would show them videos – you can find them on YouTube – of kids inspecting a cassette tape and going, "Wow, what is this?" They think it's like some sort of iPhone or some sort of device, and actually think it's a Walkman.

So music has just always been in the ether for them. So, that was probably our riskiest assumption that could we sort of reinvent physical media in a new way as a creative kind of form of media for a new audience? Or was that kind of too retro? Would that work? We really had no idea. So, I think that was one of the most exciting tests. It was just putting these little BeatBits prototypes in front of kids, still with this little PowerPoint prototype and pretending we're scanning them and all that sort of stuff, but they really got it. And they loved them. They

were so colourful and collectable, and they really loved the idea of this physical coding and all the way through. Even when we started making the more interactive prototypes and AR and everything, we were still learning about that process. And I still think it's the heart of the experience when you really pour those little BeatBits on the table and watch how kids use those little BeatBits to plan out their VIDIYO.

Julie: Let's hear what some of the kids said during the testing.

Kid 1: I could make VIDIYOs forever. They are creative. It's just fun, portable, the best! When are they going to be in the stores?

Kid 2: I would share this VIDIYO with my grandma. I think it would make her day.

Kid 3: It's quick and easy. I like how you can switch to new BeatBits – it makes you feel in control.

Kid 4: Whoever invented this is a genius.

Julie: Morgan, there must also be ups and downs in a creative process like this. Maybe you can share a moment where you were stuck and what you did to get past it?

Morgan: I think the biggest challenge and where we sometimes were banging our heads against a wall was really successfully communicating what on earth we were talking about. Just explaining that we were taking an experience to market. We're really a product company at heart, and we tend to focus and can be a bit myopic about the bricks. Probably the thing that made the biggest difference is just taking everyone through the consumer journey. Like, how do I discover this? How do I first interact with it? And that might not be the bricks. That might be the app.

And then why would I then buy a product? All of these questions were very new to us as a company. Why would I stay in the app? What would retain me over time? This was kind of a big learning journey, I think, for everyone, you know, myself included.

I think the good thing really is that everyone really understands music on a pretty basic level. It is so universal that I feel like we always had advocates. As different an experience in the way it was going into market and other things this might have been, it is based on something that really impacts us all.

We all are emotionally affected by music. We're all aware of the power of music. We've all been to really big concerts. We've all watched really amazing pop videos. I wouldn't say we ever lost hope because of that. We felt like we were onto something all the way through, and we always seem to have really strong advocates around the company and just a real sense of belief in the team.

And that's really nice when you're doing something completely new, and you have to really paint that picture, and it's not close to anything anyone's ever thought of before. That's tremendously hard. But I think this is a shared universal passion, I think that gave people all around the company, with very different backgrounds, a sense of buy-in from the beginning.

Julie: Here's Loren and Tom again on making that crucial call when it comes to creative ideas.

Loren: Tom, how do you know when it's time to shut something down? Or when it's time to give it more space to breathe?

Tom: I think we only really shut things down when the passion goes out of everybody's eyes. If you have enough of a spark and the people that are at the core of it really see that spark, then I feel you have to keep investing in those people. And sometimes it can be really painful. A lot of the projects that we've closed, that we were glad we closed and maybe even thought we should have closed earlier, we often closed, and then you'd go back to the team, and they were sort of like, "Yeah we all knew it was coming", and the spark had already gone out in the team, and they'd become people who were doing a job, not people who were exercising a passion.

And so that's also why I sometimes try and kill projects, because if people aren't brave enough to stand up and say, "No, I'm fighting for this one", then you know that the passion's gone out.

But if they stand up and say, "Look, Tom, I'm not having this. There is something here. You've just got to give me more time." If they're prepared to come to me, then I'm prepared to go to my bosses and say, "I'm sorry, we're keeping this one alive." So that's how we know to continue stuff, is that the people that we trust, those are our incredible designers, our incredible project managers, marketing folks, anybody, if they still really passionately believe in it, in the extent that they're prepared to fight with me, then I believe in them and we'll take it forward.

In terms of what, what led other projects to fail, you have to find that simplicity. I have this phrase that I always use: that 'magic works in lo-fi'. Until you find something that's incredibly simple, and yet even when it's sketched on a piece of paper, and you're acting it out with post-it notes, if kids laugh, even when it's not in 3D animation, then you've probably got something. But if you have to work it up into a sophisticated, complex system with a lot of 3D animation and high production value, then you probably haven't got something there. Normally, we close things because we just think we haven't found anything - there isn't that thing that lights up kid's eyes.

Loren: Well, I guess we should all be grateful for Morgan's spark and fire and passion.

Chapter 3: Collaboration (13:05)

Julie: What we're also grateful for is our collaboration with Universal Music Group. Loren talked to Joshua Burke, who's Head of Global Partnerships at Universal Music Group, about why they were curious to play with us and help bring LEGO VIDIYO to life.

Loren: Joshua, can you describe the first workshop at Abbey Road Studios in London – which is a very cool place to have a workshop – where the partnership actually kicked off?

Joshua: Universal Music Group actually owns Abbey Road Studios. And from time to time, the good people over there allow us to hold important meetings.

And, certainly, the first meeting of minds between Universal and the LEGO Group was important enough of an excuse to ask them to join.

The conversation was really all about 'how can we join forces and potentially create something that is greater than the sum of our parts?' And really with the joint vision that music inherently is about creativity and the act of making music is all about play.

And the same is true for both organisations: that we believe at our core in supporting and nurturing creativity and self-expression, inspiring the next generation of music fans and creators. This is something that we both share. And in that first meeting, we covered a lot of interesting topics.

As an output of that meeting, we realised that it couldn't be something that lived solely and squarely in the music space. And it couldn't be something that lived solely and squarely in the LEGO space. It had to be something in the middle, something completely brand new.

And so we knew it had to be big, knew it had to be something groundbreaking and something extraordinary, and there's no better place to have that conversation than Abbey Road Studios.

Loren: When and how did you first hear about the LEGO VIDIYO idea? The actual product experience idea.

Joshua: They gave us a little teaser over the phone, but they asked that we meet them at their office in Denmark, which was frankly another very intimidating endeavour for us because the LEGO office, it's, you know, it's quite amazing what goes on there. I mean it's the centre of the world when it comes to

creativity and coming up with these new creative platforms and ideas. The security was more than our security in the sense that I think we had to hand in our phones, at certain points cover the camera with the sticker. But when we went in everyone was smiling. We sat down in this conference room. They actually, at the time, because this was so secret, they covered all the windows in the room. And I remember turning to one of my colleagues and just said, "What's going on here? This is pretty crazy." And then they took out what was a very early kind of prototype of VIDIYO. And, of course, at the time it wasn't called VIDIYO, there was a code name. So it was all very secret. It completely blew our minds.

Loren: Joshua, any creative process – certainly creating a completely new play experience using the elements of LEGO, play and music – has 'aha moments'.

Are there any 'aha moments' that you experienced from the process?

Joshua: So there was this 'aha moment'. I'm going to tell you the full, unedited story here. So right now, I'm sitting in 4 Pancras Square, which is where the headquarters of our London office is for Universal Music Group, and on the ground floor across the courtyard is a pub. And a lot of meetings that we've had with the LEGO guys, they'd come over here, we'd go over there. These are really long days, so we'd like to unwind over a pint, and we were talking, and I remember Rick O'Neil was in this conversation and Morgan, I believe, was there as well.

And we had this idea if we're going to be authentic and we're going to make all this storytelling around this product really true to the message and the values of VIDIYO, which is creative expression and being true to yourself, how do we do that from a marketing standpoint?

And we came up with this idea – why don't we use the partnership with Universal to legitimise this product as a real cultural anchor for kids and sign to a genuine record deal one of the characters in the app? And I remember coming back to the office after that meeting and having a discussion with another good friend of mine, who's also on the team that works on our side on the LEGO partnership named Blake. And he said, "Love it. If you're going to do it, we need to make sure that it's the Llama."

This is, I think, in January 2019. So fast forward almost exactly two years from there now, we are signing the Llama, which now is L.L.A.M.A, which stands for 'love, laughter and music always'. We signed L.L.A.M.A to a record deal with one of our favourite labels named Astro Works, which is a big dance and EDM label based out of LA.

And we are going to be launching the product, launching VIDIYO in March, with L.L.A.M.A, a new song that was a product of his signing. So, it's just amazing that

you have all these meetings, you have these discussions over a beer, how often do they turn out to be a global thing that actually happens in real life?

This was one of them, and it's actually one of the most exciting elements of the program for us.

Loren: Now that VIDIYO is out there, what do you hope to spark in kids around the world, and how will you judge that VIDIYO is a success?

Joshua: The vision of this project is to make the world a more musical place and to fuel creativity of young people.

And I think what will certainly get me excited, but I also can speak for the teams over here, is if and when this product and this project becomes a big success, and we see kids from all over the world engaging in creating their own music videos. I believe that this is going to inspire the next generation of creators to be even more creative and even more musical.

I won't be happy until I see L.L.A.M.A, or the Llama, with a chart-topping song. That'll be when I know that we did our job, but ultimately, I think that it's already going to be a massive success, and we're just super happy to be part of history here.

Loren: Beautifully said, and our purpose, as you know, is to inspire and develop the builders of tomorrow, and you're talking about inspiring and developing children around creativity, and I could think of no better collaboration than between the LEGO Group and Universal Music.

Julie: You've been listening to Our LEGO Stories with me, Julie Foster.

Loren: And me, Loren Shuster.

Julie: Telling you the story about how LEGO VIDIYO came about was Tom Donaldson, Morgan James Walker and Joshua Burke. This podcast is brought to you by the LEGO Group. Stay tuned for future episodes of Our LEGO Stories on iTunes, Spotify or wherever you find your podcasts.

Please rate and subscribe so we can welcome more listeners.

Explore more

LEGO VIDIYO

- [Product experience on LEGO.com](#)
- [Announcing new music video maker experience](#)
- [DJ/Producer L.L.A.M.A with first single and video, "Shake" ft. NE-YO and Carmen DeLeon](#)

Disclaimer

LEGO, the LEGO logo, LEGO VIDIYO, the Brick and Knob configurations and the Minifigure are trademarks of the LEGO Group. ©2021 The LEGO Group.