

DEVELOPER	Silicon Dreams Studio
PUBLISHER	LEGO Media International
RELEASE	2001-10-02
PLATFORMS	Game Boy Advance



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PUBLISHER	LEGO Interactive
RELEASE	2002-11-18
PLATFORMS	PC, Playstation 2, Game Boy Advance

BACKGROUND

Dean Roskell

Dean Roskell was Lead Designer on LEGO Island 2 (Gameboy Advance) and Lead Designer/Senior Producer on Island Xtreme Stunts (PC/Playstation).

TRANSCRIPT

CAN YOU GIVE SOME BACKGROUND ABOUT THE TEAMS WORK ON DOGS OF WAR AND HOW IT LED TO THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE GAME BOY ADVANCE VERSION LEGO ISLAND 2?

Dogs of War was a pretty bold push to develop an original IP and tech. It was the very early days of 3D RTS games. There was a precursor project to Warmonkeys, which I'm blanking on the name of, it might have been something like Bloodlines, and was about evolving creatures. After failing to land a deal with that it got simplified to remove the evolving concept into a more traditional unit based RTS. At the time it was pretty exciting to work on something that felt quite bold in the industry, though our deal with Talonsoft (a sub of Take 2 that mainly focused on quite dry historical military games, not bombastic sci-fi RTS's) maybe along with other issues I wasn't aware of resulted in the game releasing with almost no marketing. We got trounced by Massive Entertainment's Ground Control, which to be fair was a genuinely a better game that had a bigger marketing push by their publisher Sierra.

We were really hopeful of at least getting to do some expansion packs and a sequel so we could improve on the concept, but it quickly became clear in the weeks after launch that it wasn't going to happen due to poor sales.

I remember we were all called into a meeting to be given the news and IIRC at the same time some options of what we could do next. The two I remember being put forward were LEGO Island and a

Thomas the Tank Engine Game.

The news of the latter pitch caused one artist to storm out of the room. The delivery wasn't the best, telling a team of developers who'd spent the last few years working on cutting edge tech and building a mature game, that their next project is going to be a child's toy train.

I certainly felt a bit lost at the time as my mind was really invested to create a sequel to Dogs of War, though I did for a while entertain the idea of making a train game as I was a fan of the Densha De Go! series of Japanese train sims. The Thomas pitch never went further than that proposal though and LEGO was the obvious choice for us to do. And once we got news of us getting the chance of making the Gameboy Advance version of LEGO Island 2 things got exciting. The opportunity to work with unreleased Nintendo hardware felt like an amazing challenge.

I NOTICED SEVERAL DOCUMENTS MENTIONING A “TEAM 3.” CAN YOU TELL ME WHAT THAT WAS?

Silicon Dreams was made up of a number of teams, each could be thought of as its own thing. Dogs of War was a product of Team 3. It was an odd bit of a thing where for a while we were like our own little studios within a studio, so we had our own identity. It didn't really last though. I guess the remnants of Team 3 made LEGO Island 2 Gameboy Advance, and formed the core of LEGO Island 3 as the LEGO Island 2 team were wrapping up. However, the actual Xtreme Stunts game was mostly both of the teams merged. The closest thing to Team 3 at that point was Xtreme Stunts on the Gameboy Advance.

FROM WHAT I UNDERSTAND, THERE WAS SOME WORK ON LEGO ISLAND 3 BEFORE YOU WORKED ON THE GBA PORT OF LEGO ISLAND 2. WHAT CAN YOU REMEMBER ABOUT THIS EARLY WORK?

Matt Richie wrote a heightmap terrain system that could deform in real time. It also incorporated a day/night setup. So we had a simple build of an interactive space where you could see LEGO Island morph around. It didn't go any further than that, it was just an idea of testing out new tech.

WE WERE TOLD EVERY CHARACTER IN LEGO ISLAND 2 GBA HAD A NAME AT ONE POINT CAN YOU REMEMBER ANYTHING ABOUT THIS?

There were a lot of internal names for things on LEGO Island 2 GBA such as Ryo's house (top left corner of the map). Lots of the team contributed to placing characters and filling out sections of the map, and they each added their own little piece to it. Because we all shared in the build it was fun to open up the latest version to see what changes had been done. Occasionally these would include easter egg like additions of characters named after the team, family members, etc... I can't recall if the names showed up in the editor or we just learned of them through conversation. It was all unofficial though and just a way for us to entertain each other and ourselves as we made the game.

WHAT WAS IT LIKE WORKING ON THE EARLY GAMEBOY ADVANCE HARDWARE DURING

THE DEVELOPMENT OF LEGO ISLAND 2?

It was great to get to work on something where there was no precedent. People weren't exactly sure of its capabilities so we were left to explore the hardware and plot a design based around what we felt we could build within the timeframe.

Even getting the hardware delivered was exciting. A circuit board with exposed wires and a hacked on Super Nintendo controller. Sam Swain took the boards home during the weekend and created a set of clear plastic cases to help protect them.

We were creating something for a device that we didn't even know what it would look like when released. We knew that we couldn't go wild with the hardware, sprites and tiles were an obvious pick, there was Mode 7 similar to what the Super Nintendo had, so it felt sensible to treat it mostly like a handheld Super Nintendo.

With choosing to develop a tile based game. Work got started on an Editor that allowed us to start plotting content and we soon felt this fun synergy between building an island from tiles and building with LEGO. The tiles were made up from LEGO brick arrangements and all the content, houses, roads, objects, were all created from the tiles.

As we were building the island out we'd just see what cool things we could build from the tiles, and when we discovered an issue where it was something you could build using LEGO but we couldn't with the tiles, we'd just go and make some extra ones and fill out our palette. This is partly why we pretty much made the complete island even though there are sections that cannot be seen when playing the game. We were looking at it all in our editor and wanted to see the complete vision of the Island.

THE ORIGINAL IDEA FOR LEGO ISLAND 3 STARTED OUT AS BEING CENTERED AROUND SCRAPPED ADVENTURERS THEME KNOWN AS THE SILK ROAD. CAN YOU REMEMBER ANYTHING ABOUT YOUR WORK ON THIS?

Sure, so LEGO Island 3 wasn't a clear sequel to LEGO Island 2. We had to work with LEGO and understand their plans for which themes they were wanting to promote over the upcoming seasons that fit the timeline of the game's release. So early on the team were working on basic technology, a new engine to drive whatever the game was going to be that would utilise the new Playstation 2 hardware; myself, along with the producers from Silicon Dreams and LEGO were trying to build the plans for taking LEGO's product theme needs and building out a concept that fit. So at the time, they were discussing a product line up based on the Silk Road. LEGO also had an adventurers theme, I can't recall if they were going to be built as exclusive sets or combined so that the Silk Road would become a subtheme of Adventurers.

I did a ton of research into the history of the Silk Road, and Arabian Nights. The proposal I built was to have a multi-location adventure which included the LEGO Adventurers sets and locations, Pepper would be the main player character, and would be themed around a story based on the Silk Road and Arabian Nights. I did some digging through old boxes and found a sample dungeon adventure I designed to show the type of game this would be (see attached). As you can see the adventure, based in Arabia, uses a story based on an idea taken from 1001 Arabian Nights. Pepper (the player) and his partner Johnny Thunder (From LEGO Adventurers). This was the only dungeon design to be fleshed out like this as it was a proposal to see if this fit LEGO's wants and product theme needs.

The design of this game unlike LEGO Island 2 was to be more like Zelda Ocarina of Time, using a flow of moving across a set of different landscapes (with some backtracking), building up a set of key tools which would unlock the ability to access new spaces and perform new abilities, each area culminating in some form of dungeon and boss fight which would test the player's skills using their growing set of abilities, whilst unlocking new abilities for use in future dungeons.

This was a very different design, and scope of the project, which in a combination of LEGO deciding not to go with the Silk Road theme after doing some market tests with their own product line proposals (I believe they had some mockup sets which they showed to people for feedback) we axed.

WERE THERE ANYMORE CONCEPTS/PITCHES BEFORE SETTLING ON THE EXTREME SPORTS CONCEPT?

After the Silk Road theme didn't test well, we had a bit of time before a decision was made on what to build. So I think there were a couple of suggestions. One I worked on with some of the designers was to base a game around a few different LEGO themes and have Pepper journey between them on his adventure.

It might have just been the Adventurers Theme and the zone hopping would have been the sub zones: Egypt (a good replacement for some of the silk road desert theme ideas), Amazon, Dino, Orient (again filling in for other Silk Road events). We had a very, very rough idea which was basically Pepper moves across each sub zone on an adventure. There was a suggestion to use Johnny Thunder as a hero you'd keep meeting along the way, along with Dr. Kilroy, Pippin Reed. I can't remember if we looked to involve The Brickster or look to use Sam Sinister. We might not have even gotten that far into it. It was just a few documents outlining a very rough idea.

I think LEGO were annoyed that they saw us trying to push on them what they should be selling and not us looking to compliment whatever strategy they were thinking about. Really it was more because we knew Silk Road was dead and we had little else to work with until the eventual arrival of Xtreme Stunts. Perhaps it would have been better if we just waited, but we were excited to be wanting to do something.

Following this was them bringing a new product theme to the table based on Xtreme Sports. This fit closer to the existing range of LEGO Island games as Pepper was already a skateboarder, and the Island could make for a good basis for a skate park style environment easily adapting to the physical sets being produced.

WHAT WAS IT LIKE DESIGNING THE LEGO ISLAND MAP FOR ISLAND XTREME STUNTS?

The general thrust was I used the basic shape from the previous games as a starting point then started to draw out a top down view of what it might look like using Paintshop Pro. I think that's the image you have.

I distributed the content we knew was going in as well as some of the ideas of things we wanted to add. This was maintained for a while as we were concepting the overall idea of the game. The key was mainly to shape it around the central mountain so that there was always a point of reference the

player could look at to help guide them.

Alongside building the rough sketch we needed to figure out what the tech would be like to render it on the PS2. So we needed to start to consider polygon count and draw distance. A simple approach was to design with some distance between dense parts so we could do things like use the landscape in-between to block the players view and prevent drawing the models. The mountain was a natural way of blocking chunks of the island.

Once we had some early content to test out we were able to start to assess the costs and then make adjustments. This often meant Jeb coming to my desk and asking me to delete stuff or rebalance things in areas that were causing problems. This is always a bit of a back and forth with programmers wanting an easier life by having you delete a lot and designers pushing back to try and keep as much as possible. Some things are made easier when you need to cut content due to time and budget. But the whole process was somewhat organic as we were still exploring the new hardware of the PS2 at the time, which was a very powerful machine, but also a very complicated thing to extract the power from.

There were no visual guidelines from the IXS setline used in the layout. We were mostly working from zero reference and we didn't feel like we should be limited by what we'd done before on the previous versions of the island so we just took those as loose references and went off in a direction that felt right for the game.

CAN YOU REMEMBER WHY THE MAP WAS CUT DOWN AS DEVELOPMENT ON THE GAME WENT FORWARD?

I have a vague memory of a conversation where we cut out one of the island chunks from the game, I think the top most one shown on the 2D map (I might be wrong there, I can't actually remember what the final island layout looks like). This cut was due to there being a push to reduce the island for performance as well as a shakedown of the game's content and what we'd be able to build for it to ship. Jeb was very happy that day as a lot of polygons were deleted and the PS2 was able to breathe a bit easier.

One thing I remember about the 2D map, as I said it was made in Paint Shop Pro. I had the content drawn on layers and would shuffle buildings around as we were designing. So the map went through a lot of quick tweaks. Some of that was to keep the distribution of content balanced. It wasn't really scientific, just making changes based on gut feelings, knowing that once we got a version playable we'd be making proper changes based on how things felt in game.

EARLY DOCUMENTATION MENTIONS A CHARACTER CALLED ROLF THE VET. CAN YOU REMEMBER ANYTHING ABOUT HIM?

I don't recall the details about many of the individual characters. I remember we had a character bible which would have dated back to working on LEGO Island 2 which we used for reference. Many of the characters that featured in the design throughout development would have come from that, but if nothing fit the design needs, then we would create something new. The Brickimals had more of a grander design for the game, the collection, creation and use. Rolf was meant to play a role in that feature. I don't recall at what point it was cut or how far in development it reached, my feeling is that it

didn't get much past the paper stage and never really had a fleshed out design.

The idea of Rolf being someone who fixes animals made sense to play the role of a guide helping instruct Pepper about the building and uses of the Brickimals. I do have one memory of sitting at my desk combining bricks in many different ways in order to generate ideas for each Brickimal; the goal was to use as few basic brick pieces as possible to create a distinct looking creature.

The Brickimals beyond being a collection and build feature were a hope to give the team a tool to use, say as a feature in a mini-game, quest, or animation opportunity on the island. I wanted to increase the life of the island as the game progressed, and rather than just have all creatures there from the get go, let the player has a significant role in creating it, much like a bag of almost random bricks can be combined by a builder to produce an amazing build which becomes more meaningful than just receiving the end product.

CAN YOU REMEMBER ANY OTHER DETAILS REGRADING SCRAPPED CHARACTERS OR QUESTS?

More than I can ever possibly list or remember. As a basis for the game concept, it went through many iterations until things finally settled on the design of the final product. At one stage I designed something like 50+ minigames similar to what you would get in Mario Party. These were mostly if not all cut as the game solidified on the concept of making larger more grander mini-game sequences seen in the final game, where-as the ones I designed were focused on performing more simplistic actions. Many of them were designed as four player games, which would feature AI in a single player game, and allow for four players to compete in a multiplayer setup. A lot of this work was done during the design and creation of LEGO Island 2 on the Gameboy Advance, the thinking that a simpler style of game would allow for it to be made on both that system (using the system link cable for multiplayer) as well as the Playstation 2/Gamecube. You can see the kind of design concept in some of the mini games that shipped with LEGO Island 2 on the Gameboy Advance.

CAN YOU REMEMBER ANYTHING ABOUT THE GAME’S EDITOR?

We did have an editor, shockingly I'm really struggling to remember much about it now, wow, that's kinda hurting my brain. It was an in-house built system, this was a time when most companies had their own engines and systems outside of the few that licensed, which was generally the Quake 2 engine. The engine had a scripting language, but it was heavily reliant on the input from programmers, unlike the Unreal and Unity we have today that rewards great power to their high-level scripting setups. Most of the mini-games were developed and managed by a dedicated programmer, who would put most of their focus within that code; this was the cost of developing such different experiences which existed outside of the main Island space; I wished I could have found a solution so that all content existed within the confines of the Island but the request to create richer styles of games forced my hand, there simply wasn't the performance in the engine or scope in the size of the island to do so.

DO YOU HAVE ANY OTHER FUN/NOTABLE MEMORIES FROM THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PLAYSTATION 2 AND PC VERSIONS OF ISLAND XTREME STUNTS?

At some point, a bug got introduced into Pepper's locomotion system where there were no upper bounds on how fast he could travel. This wasn't an obvious issue because the movement controller could only input up to a running speed, however, gravity could enable him to go faster. It was discovered as someone ran down the side of the mountain that Pepper got faster and faster, and when reaching the mainland of the island would race forward at high speed until hitting an object or eventually slowing down. Although it was a bug it actually didn't look all that bad and was pretty fun, but then a second discovery was made, if you aimed Pepper towards some sort of ramp that speed would be converted into airtime, launching Pepper into the skies and across great distances. After this second part was discovered team members got distracted as they tried to find better and better ramps and hills to launch off.

I spoke to Andy Bray, the programmer of the system (He later went on to code the A.I for the Alien in Alien: Isolation) and we put a scoring system in the code that would track the distance covered by Pepper when he jumped. So now the team didn't have to predict how good their jumps were; we could actually produce a real high score. We used a whiteboard in the dev room and people went about trying to smash the top score. The first big milestone was to reach the edge of the island, then we found a way to reach one of the smaller islands, then even further, to the point where it was taking an age to swim back on to land, I think we added a reset option to teleport back at this point. This was a fun time and I was frantically thinking of ways so that we could avoid fixing the issue, but sadly my hand was forced and LEGO asked us to 'fix the bug', despite our push to call it a feature.

A GAMECUBE ADVANCE VERSION OF THE GAME WAS CONSIDERED DURING THE DEVELOPMENT. DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW FAR THIS GOT?

The Gamecube version fell to the side during development. We had to get the game running on the PS2 which was a task. Then the general development flow kept hitting snags which meant it was harder to focus on the Gamecube. We needed to get the PS2 version no matter what.
We still expected to get it done with the hope that we'd port things over later on in development. I honestly cannot remember if we had a build up and running at some point just to prove we could get there.

I seem to remember that when I left Silicon Dreams which was prior to IXS being released, there was still hope to get the Gamecube version done and released at a later date, but I think the nail in the coffin came as relationships and the like began to collapse and LEGO was taking a look at what it wanted to do moving forward. Obviously Silicon Dreams left the picture, and shut down the following year.

WHAT CAN YOU REMEMBER ABOUT THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE GAMEBOY ADVANCE PORT OF ISLAND XTREME STUNTS?

GBA Was a totally separate thought process with its own team. I was the only person on the main team that straddled both the console and handheld version for the most part. We developed that on a different floor of the office, actually on the opposite side of the building. So it was like a completely different project. I had a desk in both development rooms and played a different role in each.

I basically brought the overall design requirements from the console version and we brainstormed out what we felt would work best for the handheld design using our knowledge of working on LEGO Island 2. Similar considerations had to be made because of the push to have deeper sub-games

rather than mini-games, which is why we didn't pursue an Island overworld and instead went for the more simplified game map, allowing us to focus on iterating on the subgames.

With the smaller size tileset for some of the LIXS maps on GBA we really wanted to take it further and build out a GTA style city scale idea, it would have been a different game, and we never pitched it, but just seeing the top down style, with the scale and the zoomable camera, it felt like a fully free roaming city could really be a fun place, LEGO City Police or something like that.

Overall, it felt like a much happier and in-control team as we worked. LEGO and EA were much less involved with the Gameboy Advance stuff so it felt we had less concern of overwatch and more freedom.

WHY DID THE GAME'S TITLE GET SWITCHED FROM LEGO ISLAND 3 TO ISLAND XTREME STUNTS? WE'VE WONDERED IF ELECTRONIC ARTS COMING IN IMPACTED THAT.

I can't remember the exact reasoning behind the name change, it was a marketing thing though. to capitalize on the trend of extreme sports, to avoid losing customers if they hadn't played the first two games, and to shift it further away from the educational branding into more of the entertainment space. EA certainly had an impact on that, although they came quite late to the party and the game was very much as it shipped really. Actually, I do have a story about that.

When EA stepped in to joint publish the game they came to visit the offices to check in with the dev team, LEGO was obviously super nervous about this and it was clear there was a bit of power play going on over who really was pulling the reins, IIRC LEGO wasn't in the best financial state at this time so the move to partner with EA was probably a requirement rather than a want. Tom Stone, who was EA's vice president, swept through the office bouncing from staff member to staff member asking what they were working on and if they had anything they wanted to bring up. One of the main design issues that the team were struggling with was LEGO's constant pulling back on anything that resembled violence, they were getting uneasy at any sort of projectile in the game, and I don't mean guns, but things like bananas, this was requiring us to change the designs of games, and even disregard stuff we'd done for LI2. Tom's comment on this was to turn to the room and make a speech about how it all changes now, you want violence you put that in. The team were actually taken aback by the monologue after he left discussion flared up, and while I was happy that he'd basically given more creative freedom back to us I had to temper things by reminding everyone how late in the project we were, but still it did give us some allowances to make adjustments. Tom, who you might know has gone on to produce quite a legacy for himself when it comes to LEGO games, and the statement he gave that day was certainly the grounding of the new path forward for LEGO games. Prior to that we often daydreamed about the idea of making a Star Wars LEGO game but laughed it off as we saw no possibility of doing any justice to the Star Wars universe if we couldn't feature lightsabers, X-wing battles and blasters.

WAS THERE ANY DISCUSSION OF A LEGO ISLAND 4 AND WHAT CAN YOU REMEMBER ABOUT WHAT HAPPENED TO THE TEAM AFTER THE DEVELOPMENT OF ISLAND XTREME STUNTS?

I actually left the project and company just prior to the launch of the game; I think it's fair to say that the relationship with LEGO, the introduction of EA and the state of the industry at the time all had

their say into whether a fourth game was ever viable. The developer Silicon Dreams didn't ship another game after IXS; they struggled, like many other companies, to secure a licence/project deal for a new game. I was involved in pitching concepts to publishers and licence holders, but nothing solidified.

They ended up looking in-house for ideas, where team members pitched projects. The winner of that process was the Urban project, which started and ended with Urban Freestyle Soccer; this was to build on top of the in-house engine that was used for UEFA Champions League and LEGO Soccer. The company folded before shipping this, the publisher Acclaim was already in financial trouble and in their efforts to stay afloat tried too offset their lack of capital by failing to pay developers on the promise that the money was coming later; this is obviously an unsustainable strategy but it allowed them to survive a little longer by letting developers go out of business and adopting the leftover projects for a cut-price, passing the nearly finished code to another developer before shipping the game. In this case, the developer was Gusto Games, a short-lived phoenix that rose from the ashes of Silicon Dreams housed by ex-staff.