

DEVELOPER	Silicon Dreams Studios
PUBLISHER	LEGO Software, EA
RELEASE	2002-11-27
PLATFORMS	PC, PS2 and GBA

BACKGROUND

JEB MAYERS

Jeb Mayers was the Lead Engine Programmer at Silicon Dreams. He worked on LEGO® Island 2: The Brickster's Revenge on PSX, and later Island Xtreme Stunts on PS2.

The following interview was conducted on Feburary 11th, 2025 by Max S.

TRANSCRIPT

CAN YOU INTRODUCE YOURSELF AND EXPLAIN YOUR ROLES AT SILICON DREAMS?

I'm Jeb Mayers. I was the PlayStation 2 Lead Programmer for Island Xtreme Stunts. The PC version had a separate Lead Programmer, but the teams really were one, so we worked on it together, but I was the one that led PlayStation 2 development.

Primarily that's because of the submission process, as the PlayStation 2 version had to be finished first, as there was a three month lead time where you had to go into submission and pass all of the technical requirements that Sony required. Of course, this means the PC version always has a little bit of extra development time at the end.

HOW DID YOU GET INVOLVED WITH SILICON DREAMS STUDIOS?

I was at university in Manchester in around mid-95 with a group of friends and we tried to start our own development house, which was extremely naive at the time. It became apparent that it wasn't going anywhere, so I moved back down south from Manchester. I got an issue of Edge Magazine (known as Next Generation magazine in the States) as it was the one where all of the gaming industry job adverts were - then I sent letters to everyone that was advertising at the back of it.

Within a couple of days, I had a couple interviews lined up, one of which was with Sensible Software, which was Jon Hare's development studio that did Sensible Soccer, Cannon Fodder, and all of those classic 16 bit Amiga games. Then the day after, I had an interview

with Silicon Dreams, which at the time was pretty convenient for me, because it was only about 30 or 40 miles from where I lived, so it was a commutable distance. The studio at the time was developing the official license for Atlanta Olympics 1996 and it was in dire development trouble. So basically they were just hiring anyone they could get a hold of. However, that became my lucky break, basically, because they were so desperate for staff at the time.

WHAT CAN YOU REMEMBER ABOUT HOW SILICON DREAMS GOT INVOLVED WITH THE DEVELOPMENT OF LEGO ISLAND II? WE HAVE BEEN TOLD THE TECH STARTED OUT FOR A GAME NAMED RAW.

I wasn't. RAW's team was essentially what became the PC team for LEGO Island 2. We had been working on a number of other console based titles, so I would have been working on the soccer games like World League Soccer and Michael Owen's World League Soccer, which was Mia Hamm's soccer in the States.

The way I kind of remember it is that LEGO came to us first, because development on LEGO Island 2 hadn't gone smoothly with the original developers, and we had submitted for it. Essentially, this meant LEGO Island 2 was a “get it done” project, as it had a troubled development before us, and they needed someone to finish it.

WHAT CONTENT DO YOU REMEMBER MAKING FOR LEGO ISLAND II?

LEGO Island 2 was a fantastic game to work on. Personally, it was quite difficult for me because I wanted to work on PlayStation 2 and it was another Playstation game. However I now regard it as actually one of the best titles I've worked on. It was a kid friendly game packed with little mini games, of which I think there were 15 odd ones and it was just a fun game.

The PC and the PlayStation versions were also slightly diverged. While most of the mini games were shared between the two, a couple of ones were different. Notably, the Bi-Plane level had a more flight simulator feel on the PC version because Steve Hughes (the lead programmer) wanted to do a more flight simulator thing, and he was allowed to do it. The PSX version of the Bi-Plane level was instead a bit more arcadey, and more kid friendly. The Island for LEGO Island 2 on PC was also a lot more detailed and bigger than the one on PSX, because memory constraints made things really tough at that point.

I also did the Snake Shooter minigame, the one where you're traveling on the back of the car and you're shooting the snakes that come in towards you, which was shared with the PC version.

FROM WHAT WE UNDERSTAND, THERE WAS A DECENT AMOUNT OF CONTENT CUT FROM LEGO ISLAND II. CAN YOU REMEMBER ANYTHING ABOUT THIS?

It's not uncommon for designers to basically scope stuff out and for levels to be mocked up before we ever get to see them as programmers - what you have to consider is parallel development.

Programmers going off and getting the mechanics working, the engine working, and things drawing properly, in tandem without the designers who would be designing the artwork. It's possible that these things did end up in the engine at one point, but I can't say I remember it. The scrapped content could have just been prototyped on the PC version, for example, and therefore the PlayStation team that I was on wasn't privy to it. Which actually makes sense, because console development requires specific hardware, IE development kits, which are expensive.

As every designer and artist has a PC of some sort, ... the PC version of the game would make a lot more sense in terms of prototyping, because it doesn't require the specialist kit that the console does.

DO YOU HAVE ANY FOND MEMORIES WORKING ON LEGO ISLAND II AND LATER, ISLAND XTREME STUNTS?

I do, because LEGO Island 2 was the last game that I did any gameplay programming for. Mostly I've been an engine programmer, doing core engine stuff, and that's basically where I've made my career, but occasionally I did gameplay stuff as well.

When I first started, you did whatever needed to be done and three of the mini games were actually programmed by me. I think that's probably one of the nicer things I've done, because you can have a bit of fun programming a game. This is why we all join the games industry to begin with, because you enjoy playing games and you want to create stuff yourself, because you've always got these ideas that you've wanted to play around with in your head. This game allowed me to actually kind of do that. Also, the game was fairly well received so it was nice that it was my last role as a gameplay programmer too.

Island Xtreme Stunts had a troubled development and it is one of the ones that you prefer not to look back on. From an engine point of view it went okay and actually performed really well on PlayStation 2 and kept parity with where the PC version was. So from a technical standpoint, it wasn't so bad. However, it had a very troubled development internally and the whole studio was facing problems by that point. In fact, the whole group was in trouble actually, which included Attention to Detail and Pivotal Games, who did the conflict Desert Storm series.

LEGO ISLAND'S MAP IN ISLAND XTREME STUNTS WAS INITIALLY PLANNED TO BE MUCH LARGER - CAN YOU REMEMBER THAT CHANGED?

I think the map size was reduced due to the scope of the project, which I think was one of the biggest problems that I seem to remember with Island Xtreme Stunts overall. There was far too much development and I think the physical map size, had we gone through with it, would have been very sparse because we just couldn't have populated it. There wasn't enough time to be able to put all the characters in it with the scripting, the AI logic, and the gameplay to justify having that amount of space.

Instead of making it somewhere we have to walk for three minutes before you actually find someone and the associated gameplay problems that would cause in terms of where does the player go and how do you push them in that direction? I think the idea of having the smaller island was to keep the gameplay more compact and make it manageable.

There would have been no technical issues, because the PlayStation 2 could have supported streaming. Like GTA, we could have streamed bits in and out as you moved around the map.

DO YOU RECALL IF ANY ADDITIONAL PORTS WERE PLANNED FOR ISLAND XTREME STUNTS (E.G. GAMECUBE AND XBOX PORTS WERE ANNOUNCED, BUT NEVER RELEASED.)?

I don't remember any specific GameCube work on Island Xtreme Stunts. I know we did have GameCube hardware at the time because we were experimenting with the engine for Urban Freestyle Soccer.

It was nearly completed when Silicon Dreams went bust and had a GameCube version planned - so the technology was definitely in the studio, but it was never in the scope for Island Xtreme Stunts.

WAS A FOURTH LEGO ISLAND GAME EVER CONSIDERED?

I think basically by the end of Xtreme Stunts the relationship between Silicon Dreams and LEGO had completely broken down, which was a real shame. I still talk to Tim Green and Scott Mackintosh, the producers from LEGO, even to this day.

There were real issues at the management level at Silicon Dreams and it produced a really bad relationship between LEGO, EA, and Silicon Dreams. A lot of people have speculated that it was EA coming into that relationship that ruined it, but I don't think it was that. I think that the problems were entirely on Silicon Dreams' side, and once management blocks had been removed, actually, the end of the development was a lot smoother than the rest of the project's development.

The fundamental problem with Island Xtreme Stunts was that the idea of the concept changed a lot of times. It was originally the Silk Road, then Extreme Sports, and finally Xtreme Stunts which was decided upon, where the scope was just too large. We know they wanted it to be this huge expansive game that we just didn't have the time and resources to work on. This is always a bad situation from a development point of view, because it means you're always up against it.

You never have time to catch up with yourself. The more and more you fall behind, the harder and harder it is to keep up, if you see what I mean. After we wrapped up production on Island Xtreme Stunts, we started prototyping a kind of more Streets of Rage style fighting game based on the old 70s film, The Warriors.

DO YOU REMEMBER ANY SCRAPPED OR UNRELEASED LEGO PROJECTS IN DEVELOPMENT AT SILICON DREAMS?

So obviously you had the soccer games that were based on LEGO, which were pretty good and I think they were quite well received. After Island Xtreme Stunts' development, the relationship between Silicon Dreams and LEGO was so soured that I don't think either party really wanted to work with each other again.

The only thing I will say is that during the transition period between LEGO Island 2 and the next project that then became Island Xtreme Stunts, we did quite a lot of prototyping in terms of what things would look like. This was connected with the move from the PlayStation to PlayStation 2, where you had a huge jump in performance between the two consoles. We did a lot of prototyping with the minifigures, where they actually looked like plastic given the higher polygon count.

We did quite a few little technical demos to basically give LEGO a flavor of what the next console version was going to look like, which is basically what the look that you see in Island Xtreme Stunts is. Additionally, there might have also been little mini-demos that might have sparked people's memories or imaginations of what went on in those times.

WHERE DID YOU GO AFTER LEAVING SILICON DREAMS STUDIOS?

One of the things that came out of that was when I left in 2003 I went to a small studio in Banbury, which was close to where Silicon Dreams was, and we started development on Archer Maclean's Mercury. It was a puzzle game for PlayStation Portable that was a launch title, and a lot of the staff that worked with me on LEGO Island 2 and LEGO Island 3 came over to work with us on Mercury after Silicon Dreams and that actually turned out to be possibly one of the best games that I've ever worked on.

It was published by Sony in Japan on PlayStation Portable, which for a small studio in

Banbury, was an incredible achievement. Rich Hancock was involved with this and a lot of the core programmers for this, like Ade Smith, David Spencer and Ed Bradley, also worked on Island Xtreme Stunts and LEGO Island 2.

So ultimately, it kind of had a happy ending after all, for us.