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# BACKGROUND

## SCOTT ANDERSON

Scott Anderson was the Senior Producer, Senior Project Manager, and Co-Creator of LEGO® Island at Mindscape, Inc.

The following interview was conducted on April 14th, 2021 by Ben Davies.

# TRANSCRIPT

## WOULD YOU MIND INTRODUCING YOURSELF AND YOUR ROLE?

I am the "Mayor of LEGO Island," otherwise known as Scott Anderson. I came to Mindscape a few years ago and saw that they were doing something with LEGO and I thought "oh my god, this is a fantastic property." They didn't seem to understand how fantastic the property was, so I thought maybe I should start to work with these guys, and that's where it all started.

As the project manager, LEGO Island was an interesting job. [Mindscape] were looking for somebody to run the show. They had done a deal with LEGO, and LEGO had seen that there were some good people there. In particular, they met Wes Jenkins, and they thought Wes was just a great guy. So, I came to work there—they said we need somebody who knows C++. Well, I am a programmer but at the time I knew C and I did not know C++. That was on a Friday. By Monday, they wanted to give me a test to see how good I was at C++. So by Monday I was ready. I had learned C++ over the weekend, passed the test, and from there it was just a matter of trying to kind of "reboot" [the project] because things had fallen by the wayside. They really didn't have anybody running the project, they just had Wes coming up with all these great ideas.

## WHAT WAS YOUR EXPERIENCE LIKE JOINING THE PROJECT MIDWAY THROUGH DEVELOPMENT?

On the first day [Mindscape] said "Tomorrow you're meeting with LEGO so I hope you've got a good idea of what's going on." I said "I haven't a clue," but over that evening Wes and I talked. He showed me what was going on, and all of his fantastic drawings. I said "How about if we go home tonight and we'll each write up a little skit that Pepper might do?" as we knew some of the characters. I wanted to know how well I was going to be able to work with Wes, and how

closely we could sync up our ideas. I came back the next day, and he and I had written almost identical skits about Pepper, his skateboard, and his interactions with Papa Brickolini. It was almost, down to the jokes, identical. We realized we were probably brothers from a different mother, and that what we had in common was going to be a big spark for the whole game.

When the LEGO team showed up, it was Chuck McLeish from Connecticut and a few other folks, and they wanted to know what we were going to do. We hemmed and hawed a little bit, and showed them some of the things we were doing in terms of skits and the island. Not everything was sketched out, though, and they were not thrilled. I also decided to tell them the truth about software development; that if you're going to make a new piece of software, it's generally a two-year lead time. They did not want to hear that, because they had previously been told it would only take nine months. They were told that, though, by people who thought it was going to be a 2D program. At the time everyone was doing these simple games where you would go into a room, do some things in the room, pick up inventory, and then you'd leave the room by clicking a button that would take you to the next slide, basically. We wanted to do a completely immersive 3D game, and LEGO thought that was great, and it made a lot of sense to them in terms of gameplay and the way they saw their bricks as a 3D form of entertainment as well.

## WHO ELSE WAS WORKING ON THE PROJECT WHEN YOU JOINED?

There was nobody there but Wes, me, and Paul Melmed, though he was not directly and singularly attached to this project. He was attached to doing a lot of human resources and child education stuff throughout the company.

Our job at this point was to get a team together, and that's what we ended up doing. We spent the next few weeks interviewing people that were horrible. We were afraid for our lives with some of the people that were coming in. [laughing] They would bring in some stolen 3D images, and it was just terrible to see. We were beginning to get a little worried when all of a sudden Dave Patch showed up. Dave Patch showed up and said "gee, I don't know, are you looking for something like this?" He sits down at the computer and he starts to make a LEGO character on-the-spot, which was astonishing. We said "Finally, there are some people in this world that we can trust to get something done here." We counted on Dave to bring in the rest of the good animators, because by putting out an open message for people to come in, we were attracting all sorts of strange types. Dave knew who the good guys were, and we ended up with some of the best animators on the planet at that time. That's kind of where it started.

I realized that I needed to get a really good computer guy. There were two people at Mindscape already there—Marc Roegiers and Dave Foster—who had degrees in computing and were good at their job. They had some thoughts about what we should do, but I didn't see that their approach was going to work for us. It was too constrained. Because of the exploratory nature of LEGO, we wanted to make it as free-form as we could and that required a different level of programming. I was able to tap the best programmer on the planet I know, Dennis Goodrow. It took a lot of talking to him to get him to come aboard because he had other things that were paying fantastically well, because that's what you do if you're the top programmer in the world. I brought him on board, and everything became very different at that point.

## COULD YOU ELABORATE ON HOW STUFF CHANGED AT THAT POINT IN DEVELOPMENT?

At that point, we started coming up with new ideas for how to do path management. We talked to a lot of people about 3D gaming. Dennis and I had not done that much in the way of 3D gaming before, though nobody really had.
There were two main kinds of 3D gaming going on at the time. There were flight programs where you flew over terrain, and there were first-person shooters where you were inside of a room. You were basically able to constrain all the polygons in both of these situations, so that you didn't have to worry about flying over something with rooms in it. In other words, combining the two genres was seen as an impossible job. We talked to a lot of people who told us we couldn't do it. They said there were just too many polygons to deal with. From the very beginning, we had this idea that it wasn't going to work right now, but that in two years the power of the machines would be up to snuff. We counted on Moore's law, or the fact that every year and a half or so the power of a computer doubled. We started doing some tests and decided that this was going to be a winning proposition. A lot of people were dubious, especially Mindscape. They had never done anything like it before, and kept asking us questions.

We got together a fantastic team of people from across the world. Half the time, we couldn't talk to each other because of language issues, but that's when we would fall back on computer language. By the time we were done, we were understanding each other on a level that was kind of strange to somebody looking in from the outside. Having people with different perspectives actually increased the value of the game considerably.

At this point, we had a group of artists who had been assembled by Dave Patch, and a group of programmers who had been assembled by Dennis Goodrow. We were pretty much good to go, so I started working on getting talent. We had a book that you're not supposed to have, that allowed us to call the actors and voice talent directly rather than getting in touch through their agents. When they heard the project was for LEGO, they wanted to be a part of it, and would end up talking to their agent and getting the whole thing to work. We were talking to all sorts of people. I was talking to Steven Tyler of Aerosmith, and he really, really wanted to do something for his grandkids. We couldn't afford half of these people, but they were all willing to pick up the phone and talk with us. That's how we finally started getting some of the voice and musical talent.

Then, all the hard work of programming and doing all the artwork commenced. What we did was we had "yes meetings." The idea is that you get everyone together, discuss what everybody's thinking, and nobody's allowed to say "no, that's a stupid idea." We'd go home and the next day we'd revisit all of these issues. Because of the time everybody got to reflect on these things, we came back with some really good choices that split the difference between all these different ideas.

## HOW WAS THE TEAM THAT WAS WORKING ON LEGO ISLAND ORGANIZED?

I was basically the only management so everyone below me was actually doing something useful. [laughing] I was working with Wes on the dialogue and a lot of the scripting, and we both worked together on some of the skits. Wes and I were always going off to the studios to do voiceover and music work. Wes was in charge of doing all the music, so I really didn't have too much to do with music, but I was at most of the recording sessions. Wes got to do some voices, which pleased him to no end.

There was a core group of programmers under Dennis, which had about ten people or so, and they did a fantastic amount of work. On occasion, we would bring in some other people. We were using tools from Adobe, Autodesk, Microsoft, and Intel, so would have people come in from those companies to work with us for just brief periods, to show us how to use new tools.

Then there was the art group that was basically under Wes and Dave Patch, who was in charge of the 3D animation crew. We realized that we couldn't do it all in house, so we ended up hiring some outside help. We had a group called Flying Rhino that helped us do some 3D graphics out-of-house. They would do renderings, and they would do some of the animation for us.

That's basically it. At the top there was Wes and I helping to design the thing and Dennis telling us that we couldn't do it. He was kind of the guy rooting us in reality. And then there was Dave Patch who was proving all the time that there was no reality, and he could make anything he wanted. We had a fantastic team. Everybody was very pleased to work with each other, and like I say, if you're having 'yes' meetings, it's not a bad thing to go to work.

## CAN YOU BRIEFLY SUMMARIZE THE GAMEPLAY AND PLOT OF LEGO ISLAND?

I had been enamored with the concept of multiple intelligences that Howard Gardner had been putting out. It turned out that Paul Melmed had heard of this as well, and also thought it was a really good idea. The idea of multiple intelligences is that there's not a single IQ that you can attach to somebody. Some people are brilliant at music, but can't write. I think Howard Gardner identified seven different types of intelligence like artistic, musical, logical, mathematical, and things like that.

We wanted to create an educational game that did not look like an educational game, but would make people understand the limitations that other people feel. For instance, the idea was that if you played as Pepper, you would see things in town differently because he was dyslexic. You could also start to appreciate that there are certain things that people could do really well. Pepper was not so great at reading, but was great on the skateboard. We wanted to make people aware of these different kinds of intelligence, while also making a game where kids could be as creative as they were with LEGO bricks.

The idea was that there was a character in the town called the Brickster, who was voiced by David Lander. He was going to take the town apart, and it was up to the rest of the town to try and stop him. When you first entered LEGO Island, you were introduced to the Infomaniac, a character who knew about the island and was there for you whenever you needed help. He was modeled on Wes, which made perfect sense. So, you'd come in, and then you could play as various characters and do different things. If you wanted to play around like a typical game,

you could play with a jetski or race car, but underneath all of this, there was a whole town full of people. As you would pass them, they would talk to you, tell you a joke, or tell you something useful. There was tons of dialogue and you would never hear it all because it was situationally dependent.

Along the way, you'd also get hints that you've got to try and find the Brickster. At the end, after playing games and watching the skits, you were supposed to build the helicopter, and use it to find the Brickster. You would also shoot doughnuts at the cops so that they would have energy and shoot pizzas at the Brickster to slow him down. That's how you'd finally get the Brickster and put him into jail. Of course, that only lasted until you started the computer up again.

## THROUGHOUT DEVELOPMENT, YOU FREQUENTLY CONSULTED WITH KIDS. HOW DID KIDS RESPOND TO THE GAME?

One of the things that we determined was that we weren't going to do this without input from kids. Wes and Kyle, his wife, built a full-scale model of LEGO Island. It was not only good for the artists who could come in and see what [the island] was supposed to look, but for watching how kids would play with the island. We could watch the differences between younger boys and older boys, and between boys and girls.

We had a group of people from the San Rafael, San Francisco, and Walnut Creek schools that we were in touch with throughout, so that we knew that [the game] was going over well with kids. When the game came out, we saw these kids to do some post-reactions. It's interesting how it broke down. What we saw was that the girls would go through and change the town. They would change the color of the sky, they would change trees from one kind to another, and do things most boys didn't even know existed. It was a little different on the girls side than on the boys side, but there was an awful lot of overlap. I think that was also an educational experience for LEGO, seeing that the same kinds of things that the boys wanted to do, the girls wanted to do as well.

As kids have grown up, we realized more and more just how much the game meant to them. There was something about LEGO Island that was really special to them; there was something non-threatening.

## ONE OF THE MOST NOTABLE ASPECTS OF THE GAME IS THE AUDIO. WHAT SORT OF CONSIDERATIONS WENT INTO THE CREATION OF THE GAME'S MUSIC?

We wanted to have a lot of diversity, so we've got crazy stuff in there. We have polkas. Why do we have polka? Well, why not? A lot of it was done by Lorin Nelson. He's a genius, and he was able to do all sorts of different music.

We had lots of people that we tried to get in there. I don't know if you know who Duane Eddy is, but he had created some songs. We were not able to buy them because the company decided that nobody cared about twangy guitars. This was really where Wes came in, in a very strong way, because he knew all these musicians from a past life. He used to work with people

like Frank Zappa in the day, and had fantastic contacts out there. There was a choir that we used from San Francisco. We had people from all over the play that really helped us, and a lot of them went uncredited. I think that we were even able to sneak in a little bit of Duane Eddy.

If you look at how much music there is, it's astonishing how we even got it onto a CD, because it was much more that what you would normally put on a CD, plus there were all of the polygons and all of the dialogue.

### THE GAME OFFICIALLY DEBUTED AT E3 1996. WHAT SORT OF PRESENCE DID THE GAME HAVE AT THE EVENT?

It was quite a big deal. Part of that was that we had finally figured out how to do this 3D world where you could have a building far off in the distance, that had more and more detail as you got closer. Dennis and his team figured out a way of dropping polygons as things got farther and farther away, because there were way too many polygons. Originally, LEGO wanted to see their logo on top of each brick, so we're talking about a lot of polygons here. When we went to E3, we had to bring a pretty hyped-up computer that would be able to do anything that we wanted to do. It took another few months before graphics cards went up another notch and it became easy to play the game, but until then, a lot of people were afraid that we weren't going to be able to do it.

We had a lot of pre-rendered stuff that we were able to show, like the intro of the game that showed us going around the island, seeing things that you actually couldn't see in the game because you weren't able to fly. The other stuff that we showed was kind of low polygon count. We weren't able to show everything that was going on in the game, but a lot of people could see the promise of the 3D game. There was a lot of excitement.

LEGO was there in force, making giant models for us. They really helped us sell this game, and got a lot of enthusiasm going.

### COULD YOU DESCRIBE THE COLLABORATION PROCESS BETWEEN THE LEGO ISLAND TEAM AND THE LEGO GROUP?

We first went off to see LEGO in Denmark. We had a big meeting to give a presentation and Wes was going to talk about the gameplay, when something happened to us. We were sitting down with the top people at LEGO and Wes looked at me and said "I can't talk." He was freaking out about the whole thing, so I got up to give his presentation. Although we were very happy with the direction that things were going, LEGO looked at us and said, "Where is the building?" That was a very uncomfortable meeting, where I basically fell flat on my face trying to deliver Wes' presentation, and LEGO scolded us. [We needed] to be building stuff, and using bricks.

That's also where we learned just how amazing LEGO is. They've got signs that say "Only the best is good enough." It was really a fantastic company to work for. I've never dealt with anybody like that, since or before, that has that much of an emphasis on quality. When [LEGO Island] came together, they were very, very happy with what we had done, but there was a rough start. We were just being too traditional. We weren't thinking it through and we weren't

looking at it the same way they were. For them, this was not about gaming; this was about LEGO bricks. They were looking at this as an extension of their [product] line. If it wasn't as good as their bricks, they did not want to have anything to do with it.

## WHEN THE GAME WAS RELEASED IN SEPTEMBER 1997, WHAT WAS THE CRITICAL AND COMMERCIAL REACTION?

The game was very well received. I don't recall ever getting a bad review. We saw people using it in education. We saw teachers loving it, we saw fantastic reviews, and awards all over the place. The Smithsonian had a copy of it as an example of great software.

The numbers that we sold were just astounding. It by far beat anything that Mindscape had ever done before. It did that right out of the gate, but just kept on selling and selling. I don't know where that money went, because Mindscape was bought by The Learning Company shortly after.

## I UNDERSTAND THERE WAS A CONTENTIOUS RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE TEAM WORKING ON LEGO ISLAND AND MANAGEMENT AT MINDSCAPE. WHAT EFFECT DID THIS HAVE ON THE GAME?

My hope is that it didn't have too much of an effect on the game. My job was to make that go away and not tell anybody about it. People could tell sometimes when I was bummed out because management was pounding on me. Management did not understand the 3D aspect of the game, and they didn't want to do it. They also did not want to pay for the talent that we were getting. They decided that this wasn't going to be that big of a game. We were lucky to get a lot of good talent, but there were a lot of people we weren't able to get because management just didn't see that this was going to go anywhere. In fact, they had such little faith in the project that they decided to give us a huge bonus so that if we were going to make some money off of this, the bonuses were going to be bigger than anything else that had ever been done before at Mindscape.

They took me off [the project] at one point. We went to England with three of the management people and LEGO people did not want to talk to them. They wanted to talk to me because I knew what was going on with the game. It was a perfectly reasonable thing to do, but [management] were offended because they thought I was usurping their power as the big vice-presidents of Mindscape. At one point, they threatened to just leave me there and not fly me back home.

When the program first started selling, we sold like 20 million in the first day, and [management] were shocked. This had never happened to them before, and they realized they were in trouble because of the bonuses. Ultimately, they ended up firing everybody that was on the team, rather than pay the bonuses.

## BEFORE THAT, MINDSCAPE WAS SET TO DEVELOP SEVERAL ADDITIONAL LEGO GAMES. WHAT DO YOU REMEMBER ABOUT THOSE?

One idea was a desert game where you could go out and find places to dig. We thought that it would be fun to dig things up in the desert, and give kids an idea of history. We always wanted to have an education aspect to [our games], but never wanted the educational aspect to overwhelm the game. For instance, in LEGO Island, we did things that educators told us that we shouldn't do. They gave us a list of words we could use for our age range, and the first thing we did was use words that weren't on that list, because we found that kids enjoyed that. We had the word "sesquipedalian," which means big word. It was a word that kids could learn, use with their parents, and then realize they knew a word their parents didn't know.

We had an idea for an underwater game, and this was by the far the most well-developed of the games that we were looking at. The underwater game was going to be talking a lot about climate change, without pounding it into kids' heads. Kids would find things like red tides, which they had to fix somehow. The fix was generally to stop people from doing bad things, so it was a great place for the Brickster to come down and basically act like climate change, and do the bad things that were actually being done by major corporations.

## THERE'S SOME CONFLICTING INFORMATION ABOUT THE TITLE OF THE UNDERWATER GAME. COULD YOU CLARIFY WHAT THE GAME WAS CALLED?

"Beneath the LEGO Phanta Sea" was the original name, because Wes and I were into puns. I had also written a program before I joined LEGO that was called Fantavision. Fantavision was an animation program that let kids do their own animation. We kind of mixed some old stuff in there.

For release, it was going to be "LEGO Sea Challenge." Whatever. It's funny, I write books and when I'm all done, the publisher puts a title on it. It's like "Really? That's what you're going to call it?"

## WHAT SORT OF WORK WAS DONE ON LEGO SEA CHALLENGE?

[On LEGO Island,] we had learned how to do the builds, how to do the travel, and how to get paths to work. [LEGO Sea Challenge] jumped it up a level because now you could adjust your altitude as well as go right and left. There were new tools becoming available to us, like DirectDraw, so we were able to get things like fog effects that looked nice underwater.

Wes, Paul, Dennis, Dave, and I spent a lot of time at aquariums, going out to the ocean, and obviously having a great time out at the beach, but it was all research. That was where we were going in. We recognized, as adults, that we had kind of screwed up the planet and that the kids were the ones that we were leaving it to, so we were going to try and leave them some clues about what to do.

## WHAT WAS PEPPER'S ROLE IN THESE GAMES?

When we created Pepper, we created a monster. We didn't realize how popular he was going to be. He had resonated with kids really well. There are a lot of adults in LEGO Island. There are the police, the Brickolinis, and then there's Pepper, who's the kid, and where all the kids'

attention went. They wanted to be with the kid who was like them. He was funny and would get into trouble, and it was great.

There was no way we were leaving him behind, so he was going to feature in every single one of these games. He definitely had a place in the underwater game. We were going to be doing things like building submarines, and he was going to be out there free-diving and doing all this stuff. Pepper was going to be a part of all of them, but none of them got as well developed as Sea Challenge. LEGO had seen it, they liked it, and we were going to do it when Mindscape pulled the plug on everything. As far as the other games were concerned, we were always working in parallel. It was the way Wes and I worked because we would come up with ideas, and we would say "Oh, this is actually a better idea for the other game." Because we had all of these things in different pots, we were able to throw things into them where they seemed most relevant. Everything got fleshed out at the same time, but we really concentrated on Sea Challenge. That was the one that seemed like it was going to be the most exciting for us.

### A LEGO CASTLE GAME WAS ALSO IN THE EARLY PLANNING STAGES. ANY IDEA WHERE THAT ORIGINATED?

[The LEGO Group] had kits that they were starting to put out, and one of them was a castle kit. We wanted to piggyback on some of their kits as they were coming out. I think the kit was pre-release—we knew what LEGO was going to be making in the next year or so, so we had an insight into what was coming up, and the castle was kind of fun. It was spooky. There were lots of ghosts and things swirling around. LEGO was starting to get a little bit looser about their requirements. They were working in the background on some of their movies, and that was with Conny Kalcher as well. They were starting to do things that we were told we could not do, like moving the elbows and knees, so we could see there was going to be a little more leeway perhaps. That gave us the idea of doing ghosts and things in the castle, and the castle was going to be a spooky-type thing.

### HOW ABOUT THE CANCELED LEGO SPACE: UFO INVADERS GAME?

[The LEGO Group] put out a lot of interesting kits, so we knew that there was going to be a big space adventure. I think the game was going to head out into the solar system, but I don't remember exactly. I remember that we planned to include the space shuttle and things like that in the game, as they were going to come out as kits. [The LEGO Group] are definitely still into the outer space type thing, which fits them, and aligns with their innovative history.

### PIVOTING BACK TO LEGO ISLAND, DO YOU HAVE ANY STORIES YOU'D LIKE TO SHARE THAT PROVIDE INSIGHT INTO HOW THE GAME CAME TO BE?

We were always going out and partying with each other. During the creation of [the game], we had a bar down the street from us. On Fridays, we'd go down there and drink some beers, and come up with lots more ideas. By Monday, a lot of them would have dissipated, but we just lived LEGO for those two years. It was just a great team. We were always having fun, and making fun of each other, but it was always good-natured. There was really no conflict. As long as you stayed out of the management part of the building, everything was fine. Management

was just going crazy pulling their hair out because they did not understand what a 3D game was.

We all knew this was a very unique situation that was unlikely to happen again, which is why we really wanted to go straight into Sea Challenge. It really is a crime that Mindscape put the kibosh on that. It's just not that easy to get teams like this together.

## CAN YOU REMEMBER ANY PLANNED FEATURES FOR THE GAME THAT DIDN'T MAKE THE FINAL RELEASE?

The game became quite packed, and we reached a point where we couldn't add anything more to the disk. We wanted to enable players to enter houses and such, which would have been fantastic. There were plans for more customization of the island as well. Nowadays, if we were to release the game, we wouldn't have been constrained like we were back then. We could have included more of those things. On the other hand, it was a significant achievement to complete something in just two years and have a finished, cohesive story that worked. Could we have added more? Absolutely. Wes, Paul, Dennis, and I were idea fountains, and during our 'yes' meetings, many ideas emerged. Unfortunately, they couldn't all be incorporated into the same game, so some had to be left out.

## LASTLY, LOOKING BACK AT THE GAME, IS THERE ANYTHING YOU WOULD HAVE DONE DIFFERENTLY?

Well, I think when we look back on these things we often realize that there are aspects we could have approached differently. In particular, we thought we could time it better. We knew that computers would get faster and faster, and that the game would start running faster and faster. That's something that we wanted to be able to slow down somehow. That would have allowed the game to be still as playable on today's computers as it was back then. Right now, everything's going too fast. You can't keep up, you can't respond well, and there's just no way to really slow it down.

I think that if we could have done what we wanted with the talent, we would have had a lot more talent, and we would have had a lot more music from bigger names. As it turned out, the music was really great and it was very creative. Could we have brought more people into the fold if we'd had Aerosmith? Maybe. Could Brook Shields have brought more people into the game? I don't know. Those are people that we wanted to be in it that were kept out because of management. That's kind of rare when you call somebody up cold and find them saying yes, we'd love to do a song or voice work and we'll do it for half of our regular price. It's because of LEGO; it was because it's such an incredible brand.

As for the gameplay itself, I think we could have made the races a little more challenging. They were aimed at a younger group and I think that was okay, but I think that if they had been a little more challenging kids would have grown into it. One of the things we heard from kids is that the races were not as much fun after they'd played them a few times. I can attest to that, having played that stupid jetski race a million times. [laughing]

So, there are some things that we might have done a little better, but in terms of the things that we did, I think that that was really nicely thought out. The idea of kind of sneaking in the educational aspects without anybody knowing was also really tricky, but I think we did well with that. Kids were learning words like "sesquipedalian." Ultimately, I'm not sure we could have done a lot more. At the end of two years, we had done exactly what we set out to do, and were only two weeks late on a two-year project, which is astonishing.