



# FILM, TV & GAMES CONFERENCE 2015

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## **Session 4: The LEGO Franchise** **Tom Stone, Managing Director, TT Games** *with* **Dr Jo Twist, CEO, UKIE**

This report summarises a session that took place at the BSAC Film, TV & Games Conference 2015.

Tom Stone provided a Keynote about the history and the development of the LEGO video games franchise.

In a guided conversation, led by Jo Twist, they discussed the relationship between LEGO and the various movie franchises that the different games in the LEGO games series were based upon, and how TT Games ensured that it struck a balance between remaining true to the ethos of both brands.

*Summaries of other sessions from the day and a complete report of the Conference are available from [www.bsac.uk.com](http://www.bsac.uk.com)*

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## THE LEGO FRANCHISE

**TOM STONE, MANAGING DIRECTOR, TT GAMES  
WITH DR JO TWIST, CEO, UKIE**

**Jo Twist** provided some factoids about the games industry. Despite being one of the most innovative, creative and disruptive economic sectors, it was easy to forget just how young the games industry was: Ian Livingston, of Eidos fame, often made the comparison that the games sector was today at about a comparable level of development to that which film had been at in the 1930's.



The games industry was now worth about \$90 billion dollars globally and was predicted to achieve well over \$100 billion dollars globally in terms of revenue by 2017; there were 33.5 million people in this country who played games regularly, 52% of whom were women; and the average gamer was in their mid-30's. There were also now lots of older people playing games over tablets and smartphones. Today, games made some of the biggest entertainment products in the country and, as well as being absolutely part of mainstream entertainment and culture, were an economic powerhouse.

She provided some facts about LEGO, a company that had now been in existence for 83 years. There were 86 LEGO bricks for every single person on the planet and, if laid end to end, these would encircle the globe 12 times. The main LEGO factory in Denmark currently manufactured 36,000 bits of LEGO every minute and, by numerical output, LEGO was also now the biggest producer of tyres in the world, having made 381 million in 2012.

She was delighted to welcome Tom Stone, who would be telling the story of how LEGO had become digital, and not least because the LEGO games, particularly *LEGO Indiana Jones*, were among her favourite video games.

She introduced him by showing a trailer of the upcoming *LEGO Jurassic World* game, which would be released in June to accompany the eponymous film release.

**Tom Stone** said that LEGO was an amazing product with which everybody had an emotional bond, due to having played with it as a child. When combined with some serious adult intellectual property, this had ended up with something that was incredibly powerful and serious and which offered the potential to make unbelievable entertainment. This had been a major factor underpinning the success of the brand over the past decade.

LEGO had been founded in 1932 by Ole Kirk Christiansen, and the company was still owned by the Christiansen family. Ole had originally made wooden toys, and the name had come about in 1934 when somebody had put together the Danish words for 'play' and 'well.' Since then, LEGO had grown to become the largest toy company in the world and had been awarded the accolade of 'Toy of the Century' by the British Association of Toy Retailers.

However, between 2000 and 2005, LEGO had been through a rough patch and had almost gone out of business. This had been because they had struggled to deal with the rise of digital entertainment, and in particular, a significant part of their core audience of young boys – while LEGO appealed to both genders, sales to young boys accounted for the majority of their revenues – had migrated to playing video games.

He had first started working with LEGO in 2001, when he had been invited by the then head of the company, Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen, to help develop a way of expressing LEGO as a video game or piece of interactive content while still remaining true to the company's core values.



The first LEGO game that he had worked on had been *LEGO Star Wars*, which had been developed with a brilliant team of developers from Manchester, called Traveller's Tales. They had approached the game from the perspective of asking, 'If I was a Jedi Knight and there was a pile of LEGO bricks in the corner, and I could use The Force to build them into anything that I wanted, what would I do?' They had built creativity and innovation into the heart and soul of the gameplay and this

approach had lent itself perfectly to the spirit of the LEGO brand. The success of this meant that this lens had subsequently been applied across all of the subsequent games in the LEGO franchise.

He had also been very keen to include a sense of fun throughout and there was a rich vein of humour throughout the games. One of his favourite moments from *LEGO Star Wars* had been a point where Chewbacca could convince a fairly stupid Stormtrooper to unlock a door by donning a Stormtrooper helmet and talking to him via a video camera. They had used similarly inventive and humorous solutions to problems throughout all of the LEGO games. Equally important had been – as with the appeal of LEGO as a whole – the ability to deconstruct the environment, and the game had been particularly designed so that an 8 year old could run amok with a lightsabre and still have a great time.

After making *Lego Star Wars*, he had initially been afraid that he had not managed to get the game play experience quite right, but these fears had been allayed as soon as he had given a copy to his children and their friends – within minutes, he had been amazed to hear peals of laughter, and had realised that he had something remarkable on his hands.

One of the key underpinnings of the LEGO games franchise's appeal was the social aspect of the game, which had partly been designed to encourage players to interact with each other, but also intended to allow parents to play alongside their children, something that would increase their comfort levels towards gaming as an activity. When making *LEGO Star Wars*, TT Games had designed a new feature to facilitate this, called 'Drop In/Drop Out,' which allowed additional players to join and leave the game for short bursts.

Of the 150 million LEGO games sold by TT Games since 2005, he had been amazed to learn that 30% of the players had been adults. This had also prompted them to explore the possibility of working on darker franchises, albeit with a healthy dose of humorous parody, examples of which included the *LEGO Batman* game.

In 2000, the British Association of Toy Retailers had named LEGO the toy of the century, and today, having overtaken Mattel, LEGO was now the largest toy company in the world, which was something that he would never have predicted when TT Games had first started their relationship with them back in 2005. Even more amazingly, LEGO had just been voted by Forbes Magazine as the world's most powerful brand. This had been an incredible journey, and one that he had been delighted to have played a part in.

One other facet of TT Games' work, and one with particular relevance to today's Conference, had been that after making the *LEGO Star Wars*, *LEGO Indiana Jones* and *LEGO Batman* games, he had had a meeting with Kevin Tsujihara, now CEO, Warner Bros. Kevin Tsujihara had been so impressed with the way that film franchises had been translated into LEGO games that he had decided to take the concept in the other direction by making a movie based on the LEGO world. *The LEGO Movie*, released last year, had been an incredible success and Warner Bros. had now committed to making another three LEGO films. He was overjoyed that his games had helped make this amazing partnership possible.

**Jo Twist** felt that it was incredible that TT Games had got to work with so many different franchises and with so many different expressions of LEGO. While the appeal was clearly driven by the emotional bond, she asked how much creative freedom and risk Tom was allowed to take with the games, and what his relationship with the original franchise creators was like. There were clearly hilarious moments of parody throughout the games, and she asked if it had been difficult to get permission to include these.

**Tom Stone** said that, in terms of brand values, LEGO itself was probably the most powerful and consistent brand that he had ever encountered. Their entire philosophy was underpinned by the idea that children were their role model and inspiration, and they always sought to encourage free expression and creativity without preconceived ideas.

While he was always careful not to breach any brand guidelines, his experience was that there was less concern around whether the LEGO versions of Harry Potter could play with Gandalf than one might fear. He had also found that content creators were usually much more flexible than some of the corporate brand police. For example, he had shown a scene from the *LEGO Star Wars* game which featured three General Grievouses on the screen at the same time – all waving their light sabres around and

going absolutely mental – to the head of Lucas Films, who had thought that this was wonderful and had burst out laughing. The LEGO ethos of encouraging expression, freedom and creativity gave a lot of scope to be imaginative.

**Jo Twist** felt that the freedom to solve problems was an inherently magical aspect of games. She asked how challenging this was to achieve, particularly noting that two recent LEGO game projects had not come to fruition. She asked if there been something about these that had not fitted with the special magic and the sense of humour of LEGO.



**Tom Stone** felt that these projects had probably not come to fruition because the large companies that owned the rights had lacked confidence in their brand and therefore worried about what might happen to them. The appeal of interactive entertainment and games was that there were no restrictions on what you could do; this was obviously a good fit with LEGO, which was also a toy with limitless opportunities for creativity.

**Jo Twist** asked if there were ever any issues around working with fan communities and managing their expectations. For example, fans of *Star Wars* were quite infamous for their protectiveness towards the universe.

**Tom Stone** had found diehard fans at events, such as Comicon or other fanzine shows, to be some of the most appreciative of the slant that he and LEGO had placed upon their worlds. Before attending these, he had never before had the experience of people asking him to sign copies of one of his games.

**Jo Twist** asked if there were any franchises where the relationship had not worked out as well as hoped, and if there were any that he especially hoped to make a game for in the future.

**Tom Stone** said that *Star Wars* would always have a special place in his heart, partly because this had been the first LEGO game that he had ever made, but also because he just loved the combination between being a Jedi Knight and playing with LEGO. He had also loved the exploring the creative potential that Batman's utility belt and Harry Potter's magical abilities had offered. However, he also enjoyed meeting the challenges that different worlds offered; for example, the *LEGO Hobbit* game had been notably darker than many others in the franchise, but had still received acclaim from fans and demands for a sequel. His biggest regret was that he was unable to make as many games as he wished.

**Jo Twist:** asked how closely the TT Games team worked with the production team of the films, and what their relationship was like.

**Tom Stone** explained that this relationship was extremely close and, while the games all had original scripts, their design process was tightly integrated with the films. For example, TT Games were currently working on a *LEGO Marvel Avengers* game to accompany the upcoming movie release, and their team had been invited to visit the film set in Guildford and to meet everybody that was working on the production to get an idea of what they were doing.

**Jo Twist** noted that the original LEGO games had not included any speech – the characters had made ‘ooh’ or ‘aah’ sounds, but it had always been obvious what the characters were saying. Now that the games had started incorporating dialogue, she asked if there had ever been any creative tensions or conflicts around the script writing processes.

**Tom Stone** had never encountered any problems around this. He suspected that this had been in part because of the history and emotional bond that people had with LEGO, which meant that there was generally a degree of trust in the game maker’s good intentions – and also many content creators were also quite happy that their children would be playing a LEGO video game instead of something else. TT games were always respectful of the IP that they were working with, and if, for example, they were to make an *Avengers* game then they would never take the mick out of Iron Man or make Thor look like a little boy. His experience was that other creatives understood and welcomed what they were trying to do, which was fantastic.

*LEGO Batman* had been the first game with dialogue, but this had been a really successful development. He also felt there had been something particularly cool about seeing a LEGO Gandalf speaking with great authority.

**Jo Twist** asked if the LEGO games were granted access to the same voice actors as in the films.

**Tom Stone** said that they were; sometimes they would pluck the voice stems or sometimes they would record original scripts. They had often found that many of the actors were delighted to be working on a LEGO game and were fascinated to see how they would end up being portrayed.

**Jo Twist** observed that one of the big differences between the games industry and the film industry was that games tended to release globally, and did not have the same array of gatekeepers. She asked how international releases worked and also if there were international differences in the treatment of well-known IP, and, if so, how these were managed.

**Tom Stone** observed that Germany was the most successful territory for LEGO per capita, but that the view on video games there was quite different from that of the UK, and German parents were considerably more restrictive in limiting what their children could play. In addition, some franchises, particularly *Star Wars*, were not nearly as well known in Germany as they were in North America.

Consequently, there were some big differences in the sort of games that were successful; for example, *LEGO City*, which had not been based on an external franchise, had been the most successful LEGO game in Germany.



Another interesting territory was China: this had a huge games industry, which was based entirely on a free-to-play or micro-transaction model, predominantly played over smartphones. They also had a totally different set of popular franchises, which were often just as prominent over there as *Star Wars* was in the USA. LEGO had not yet released a game in China, and he considered that it would be necessary to link with a Chinese IP holder if he were to successfully launch a LEGO game in China.

**Jo Twist** was surprised that China was not interested in the LEGO games franchise. She had always found the creative industries in general, and games in particular, to be especially interested in releasing their work in China and South Korea. She asked Tom why he had not tried to take the IP and get it socialised so that it would be familiar to these markets.

**Tom Stone** explained that China was not a huge territory for LEGO – although LEGO now regarded China as one of their biggest territories to establish themselves into. This was in large part because of the Chinese political system, which placed a number of limitations over which products could be sold into the country.



**Jo Twist** observed that the LEGO games were released across all platforms. She asked if TT Games had found differences when working between these, and if they had a preference for working with any in particular.

**Tom Stone** said that the sort of action-adventure games that he made were well suited to lots of button pressing, which was something that consoles were perfectly suited for. In addition, the

bigger screens made cooperative play easier to run.

One game that he was currently following with interest was *Minecraft*. This had a lot of similarities with LEGO, in that it was based around building a world and limited only by the player's imagination. *Minecraft* had been amazingly successful at developing a control mechanism that worked over tablets and smartphones, and it was interesting to see where this might lead.

**Jo Twist** thanked Tom Stone and invited questions from the audience.

**Jonathan Broughton, IHS** asked if Tom Stone had any plans to release any content for VR.

**Tom Stone** said that he would not be looking at VR until a platform had established itself. Current systems tended to make players feel nauseous, and until this was resolved then he would not be looking at moving into this space.

**Jo Twist** noted that TT Games had made some moves into the physical world with *LEGO Dimensions*. She asked Tom Stone if he could talk about this and explain how it worked.

**Tom Stone** regarded the ability to directly tie a physical play experience with a digital play experience as being akin to the Holy Grail. He described how *LEGO Dimensions* worked: players would buy and build a 'LEGO Portal' kit, which they could plug into their console. This contained an RFID reader, which could be used to identify a number of LEGO figurines, which would be sold to accompany it. Players could assemble parties of physical LEGO figures, either individually or with their friends, and scan them through this LEGO Portal, which would allow them to upload and play with the characters in the game – it would be possible, for example, to get Gandalf to drive around in the Batmobile. TT Games were negotiating a number of IP tie-ins for this and would be announcing these over coming months. *LEGO Dimensions* was a movement towards the development of the ultimate digital physical experience.

**Jo Twist** asked if there were any plans to do something the other way around, and for TT Games to make a move into augmented reality rather than virtual reality.

**Tom Stone** thought that this would be great, but declined to comment.

**Paul De Carvalho, ImagineAsia Entertainment** asked if TT Games had made a game to accompany *The LEGO Movie*; and if so, how the relationship with the VFX animation company had worked.

**Tom Stone** said that the relationship with the producers of *The LEGO Movie* had been very good, but explained that *The LEGO Movie Videogame* had been one of the most challenging games to make. The reason for this had been that, in all of the preceding LEGO games, it had been possible to disassemble, manipulate and reassemble every item that was made out of LEGO, but that most of the landscapes had been made out of natural graphics, which had placed a number of limits upon what players could do. However, the entire world of *The LEGO Movie Videogame*, as with *The LEGO Movie*, had been constructed out of LEGO bricks, meaning that it had to be possible to deconstruct and rebuild the entire world. Creatively and from an entertainment point of view, this had been a fantastic experience, but it had made it quite a difficult game to make.

**Oliver Diamond, Bob & Co** observed that the LEGO games franchise had not been particularly prominent on mobile phones. Given the explosion of smartphones across Asian markets and Tom Stone's previous comments about looking to expand into China, he asked if there were plans to expand into this field.

**Tom Stone** responded that this was partly due to TT Games' business model and ethos. Most mobile games operated a freemium business model, where they were free to initially download and play, but where players could subsequently pay to download additional content or character upgrades. He did not consider that this would be a direction that he wanted to move the LEGO games towards, due to the potential damage to the brand that would result if stories of irate parents, complaining that their children had run up hundreds of pounds worth of bills while playing a LEGO game, were to be splashed across the media.

He fully accepted that people should be free to spend their money as they chose, and that there was a need for parents to take some responsibility for their children's internet usage, such as by setting PIN codes on their phones. However, he also felt

that brands, such as LEGO, that were very much aimed at children had a duty to act responsibly around these sorts of things.

**Jo Twist** asked if LEGO was almost a free-to-play model itself, in that children had to keep buying add-on packs in order to do more things.

**Tom Stone** agreed that this was the case, but observed that the public perceived this differently.

**Kimberley Ferguson, GFM Films** asked if there were risks around video games addiction over mobile devices, and also whether excessive gaming was harming the ability of children to develop social skills.

**Jo Twist** strongly disagreed with this claim. Games were highly social systems and all of the evidence showed that they could help therapeutically with social behaviour. There was also no such thing as game addiction, just very well designed and compelling games.

**Tom Stone** felt that this attitude originated from a generational divide, and that the younger born digital generations had a much better understanding of this space. There had always been a view that some children spent too much time alone in their bedrooms, but that the negative effects of this were exaggerated. He further observed that people notably never complained if children were spending their time reading books.

Newspapers such as the Daily Mail always printed ridiculous exaggerations based on zero fact as a way of generating sales, but in this case, this was totally untrue.

**Jo Twist** thanked Tom Stone and brought the session to a close.

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