Tom Donaldson Transcript

Tom 00:00:00 We're announcing something called LEGO SmartPlay, and the reason we're announcing it at CES is it's bigger than just a product drop. We're announcing what we call a new dimension in LEGO System in Play. So we're bringing interactive physical play to the entire LEGO brick world. It's a LEGO brick that is really responsive to how kids play, but builds into existing LEGO models; it extends the building play that we know and love to be much more interactive and physically responsive for kids.

Matt 00:00:28 To thrive in a rapidly evolving landscape, brands must move at an ever-increasing pace. I'm Matt Britton, founder and CEO of Suzy. Join me and key industry leaders as we dive deep into the shifting consumer trends within their industry, why it matters now, and how you can keep up. Welcome to *The Speed of Culture*.

We're here live in Las Vegas. And up today, we are thrilled to welcome Tom Donaldson, the Senior Vice President and Head of Creative Play Lab at the LEGO Group. Tom is a global leader in innovation, overseeing the company's product development and R&D efforts. He's led the charge on groundbreaking initiatives like LEGO SmartPlay and is driving the future of LEGO play experiences.

Tom, so great to see you today. Thanks for joining.

Tom 00:01:10 It's really great to be here. Thanks for taking the time.

Matt 00:01:12 Absolutely. You know, when you think about CES, LEGO traditionally has not been a brand that comes to mind. They're analog physical toys that kids play with, but the world is changing so fast. And I know LEGO made a big announcement here at CES. We'd love to start off by just hearing about it.

Tom 00:01:28 Yes. We're announcing something called LEGO SmartPlay, and the reason we're announcing it at CES is it's bigger than just a product drop. We're announcing what we call a new dimension in LEGO System in Play. So we're bringing interactive physical play to the entire LEGO brick world. It's a LEGO brick that is really responsive to how kids play, but builds into existing LEGO models; extends the building play that we know and love to be much more interactive and physically responsive for kids.

Matt 00:01:54 So what does it mean? Like, how does it work?

Tom 00:01:56 I mean, ultimately, it's a 2x4 brick that has a ton of sensors in. It also has some audio and some lights. And also, it comes with some tags and some minifigures that it can detect and respond to. So you build models, you put the brick in, you also put these tags and minifigures around a model. And depending on how you move your models—depending what the models do between each other, what the colors are with the bricks around them, and also

the tags and the minifigures it interacts with—it responds, becoming a creature, you know, becoming a vehicle.

Matt 00:02:29 Make sounds?

Tom 00:02:30 It makes sounds, absolutely, and lights. And those sounds could be anything: they could be an elephant's trumpet noise, they could be an airplane engine noise. It's a synthesizer in there, so they're not just pre-recorded sounds; it's actually generating new sounds in response to how kids are playing and the space of possibilities.

Matt 00:02:42 Absolutely. So if you put one of these smart bricks in a car that you're building, it could have a horn honking.

Tom 00:02:50 It can have a horn. What we showed was some key-click noises for the unlocking. We can have a siren. It can have an engine that, the faster you move the car, the faster the engine revs. If you skid around a corner, it skids.

Matt 00:03:01 I mean, that's a huge innovation.

Tom 00:03:01 It's huge. It's...

Matt 00:03:02 Well, you brought it to life, really.

Tom 00:03:05 That's the entire plan. The entire plan is to take all of the different LEGO models and, at least potentially, let them come to life, but come to life in a way that enhances kids' imaginative play. So not doing the stuff for the kids, but actually letting the kids play, get feedback, try stuff out, be surprised by the way it responds, and just really enjoy themselves, to be quite frank.

Matt 00:03:26 So what goes behind an idea like that at LEGO? Because, obviously, you have a brand that has a lot of nostalgia, huge heritage globally, and now you're making a little bit of a pivot. Not a pivot because you're not going to a different business, but the way that kids, I imagine, look at LEGO and interact with them after this becomes successful will really never be the same. So, like, what goes behind the decision to go in this direction, and then what does the R&D process look like?

Tom 00:03:52 Well, taking those two questions... that's quite... I mean, in terms of the decision, we really think of it as a new dimension. What we've really tried to say is we're not in any way doing less of the LEGO bricks and LEGO models and LEGO play that you know today, but we are adding a dimension. We are adding this fact that your model changes. The fact that if you do something, it responds, and the fact that it can be more social because the models can kind of work together. So we think of it as a deeper layer that sits on the existing LEGO models rather than a pivot into a kind of alternative way of things.

I think, ultimately, there's a few things behind that kind of decision. It is driven by the opportunity. We do spend a lot of time listening very carefully to kids and understanding the opportunity. And we know that kids want to be more and more social all the time. We know that kids love that sense—that when you play with something and come back to it a day later, it's changed. There's something new to see. And we love the fact that they really want some agency—that when they do something, it matters and something changes.

And so we really saw that opportunity to layer that in. The way we think about the type of change is a little bit like the minifigure. If you have a LEGO minifigure, it doesn't make the bricks any different. It's a layer of additional play that you can bring—the roleplay, the characters that you can bring on top of the models—but it's not a... when we had minifigures, we weren't pivoting away from brick build. We were just adding a layer of play. And we see this adding a new layer. So it's really driven by what we see as a tremendous opportunity, particularly an opportunity in physical play and in making physical play kind of even more exciting in some kind of new way.

Matt 00:05:18 And to give the company conviction to go in this direction, what does testing look like? And what are some things that you learned along the way in terms of the use cases that maybe you didn't expect?

Tom 00:05:27 I mean, this has been a very long program. We've been running for many, many years, and so conviction-building has been in a number of different areas. Even some of the technology we've put in are really, were they possible at all? But as you say, exactly how do we know that this is exactly what kids want? So we've done a ton of testing all the way along, from week-by-week little moments testing ideas with kids to putting our sets in kids' homes for four months at a time, unsupervised, and just seeing what the response was.

And conviction is built brick-by-brick, if I'm really honest, in the early days. In the early days, it's senior leadership setting a dream. And I'm a big believer in demo and prototype to just kind of capture the magic. You have to be able to show that there's some little bit of magic there that, if we could just pour a little bit of organizational fuel on it, it would grow. But, ultimately, yeah, there's a lot of conviction building from the technology, from working with kids, and also from the business perspective—really understanding this might be great, but it also has to be good business at the end of the day.

Matt 00:06:25 Absolutely. One data point that kind of surprised me is that one of the fastest-growing consumer segments of LEGO is grown-ups. It's not kids. Why do you think that is, and what does that say about today's consumer that they would gravitate toward something like LEGO?

Tom 00:06:41 If I'm really honest, I think there's always been that opportunity. I think we're just, as a business, we're finding new opportunities and new spaces to grow into. I think probably there was quite a lot of latent desire for LEGO products, not just from those who have had them as kids and grown up, but that way of relaxing, that way of enjoying yourself very

physically, we feel has been out there for quite a while, and we're just finding new ways to tap into new audiences with ultimately the same proposition that we've had for many years.

Matt 00:07:07 Yeah. So I talk a lot all around the world about AI's impact on the consumer and the workforce, etcetera. And, obviously, one element I believe that's gonna become increasingly important in the age of AI is creativity. And we'd just love to hear from you, with all the changes we're seeing in the professional landscape with AI: what role does creativity play moving forward, and how do you think it's gonna evolve as this technology continues to grow in its potency?

Tom 00:07:34 Yeah. And I think this is something that everybody needs to spend some time thinking about. From my side of things is the human is at the heart. I don't really see AI as really an intelligence. I see it as a sort of collective human consciousness in some sense because we're just taking data from loads of humans and providing access to it. But I see it from that perspective. It's very powerful access. You could do some very cool things, but ultimately, it's the human that has the values, it's the human that has the curiosity, the human that knows what they want at the end of the day as the output.

And, yes, I think creativity is a massive part of that because at the end of the day, things that are quite predictable go down in value as AI can do things. Things that are not yet predictable because you're creative, because you've got a spark of imagination, aren't. And so I do see the importance of creativity thriving with AI. I also see AI supporting creativity, and I think that's something that I would love to see a little bit more of is, rather than AI being seen as a sort of replacement, how is it an intellectual superpower? How is it something that really helps people be even more creative? And we see that in the sort of manifestation loop: if you can have an idea and actually make it, then your ideas get better quicker. And that's how, you know, I would love to begin to see AI being used more broadly as driving human creativity.

Matt 00:08:45 It's interesting because, you know, you have a lot of people that are in, you know, the ad agency world, for example, that pride themselves as artists that make great creative work, whether it's TV spots or billboards, what have you. And the reality is, over time, I think AI is gonna become increasingly adept at creative output. Meaning, like, if I say I wanna have a video of a child pulling a red wagon down the street in London, I can create that. And I can continue to optimize it until I have the exact right shot I want. And the fidelity is only gonna grow of that. The notion of creating that scene—finding, going to do the site location and all—that used to be a lot of what it took to be someone successful. Now, I think, and it's more true every day, that's less important. But to your point, you still have to have the actual idea of "I wanna have the little boy pulling a wagon down the street." But that is a different side of creative because it's more about knowing the problem you wanna solve versus knowing how to solve the problem, if that makes sense.

Tom 00:09:45 It makes a lot of sense. I still think to come up with great problems to solve, you as humans also need some idea of what it takes to solve it. So I think we will still see scientists

who can look at an AI-generated proof and say, "Hang on. That's not quite right." In the same way, we'll see creatives who look at output and say, "You're nearly there, but, actually, let's tweak this pixel and tweak that pixel." I don't personally think it just becomes sort of writing the brief. Creativity doesn't become writing the brief; it becomes attention to detail. But I think for me, it's more like everybody becomes a creative director.

Matt 00:10:17 But will everybody become a creative director is the question.

Tom 00:10:20 Yes. I mean, I think that's an open question for anyone. My belief is yes. My belief is the more you give people access to tools and the learning for those tools, the more creative they become. I know that sometimes we think about, "Yes, there's a few brilliant creatives and everybody else," but I would like to think that creativity is something we can teach or at least help people learn for themselves. And I think that's very true to the LEGO brand—that it's about unleashing creative potential.

Matt 00:10:44 For sure. LEGO brand.

Tom 00:10:45 So, certainly, that's how I think about things—that it's about giving people the ability to be even more creative than they have.

Matt 00:10:51 Yeah. What's interesting is, like, if you look at education and how kids are taught, to date, a lot of education has been around memorization and regurgitation. Right? Like, cram in as much information and then participate in the test—just prove that you memorized it. But that isn't creativity. So I think in order for people to become more creative, they have to... it starts at early ages. And, obviously, LEGO then... we could talk about whether LEGO should have a bigger role in schools. But I think the reality is that needs to change, because I think the way that kids are taught isn't really congruent with where the world is headed.

Tom 00:11:24 I think it's a great hypothesis. It's not an area of my expertise. I mean, broadly speaking, I think that, again, the human element in how you grow and how you inspire kids and how you give them curiosity... I think there's still an incredible role for great teachers. But I also know that, for my own family, that sometimes producing lesson plans and some of these sorts of things is time-consuming and takes away from great teaching. And I also know that becoming a kid or an adult with a growth mindset—where you care about your own learning—is also a super important part of being highly creative. And I think AI can help everybody become... have a growth mindset. Because if you're minded to learn, it's increasingly easy to learn stuff through videos, through all the access to stuff. And I think, hopefully, it will also enable educators of all forms to do what they do best and optimize their own kind of creative influence on creative folks. So that would be my personal view. I'm very optimistic about this.

Matt 00:12:17 We'll be right back with *The Speed of Culture* after a few words from our sponsors.

Let's talk about your path because, obviously, you are in a creative role. How did you end up where you are today? What do you think some of the key, I guess, milestones or even focus areas that you've dove into along your career journey that put you in the seat that you're in today?

Tom 00:12:37 I mean, that's one of those ones I don't know if I'll ever have a good answer for. My career has been quite meandering. I did a lot of kind of startup work in the tech industry. I actually come from quite an engineering and sort of deep-tech kind of background. I had an AI startup back in the late nineties, for example... before, yeah. It's been through a few winters, but I come from that then. And up until about ten years ago, I was working in the tech industry doing consumer electronics products more from their research and development end. And the journey into the LEGO Group was a fascinating one. It was one where I really saw the purpose of the brand, the values of the brand, and the people, and the opportunity to make a really positive impact as something that was part of my personal growth journey. And perhaps not just about deepening technology, but also broadening my understanding of things like leadership, of things like creativity. So that's my sort of very rough journey into it—maybe a slightly different part. I'd like to think I've always been creative, usually from the more technology-led creativity, sort of inventiveness. Those types of things, patent writing, you know, coming up with those types of ideas. And, obviously, within the LEGO Group, I've learned to broaden that beyond the pure technology kind of creative.

Matt 00:13:43 And what is your role today? What takes up the pie chart of your day, so to speak, and what do you hope to accomplish with the brand here in 2026?

Tom 00:13:51 I mean, the pie chart of my day is leadership; it's building culture. And what I really love about the LEGO Group that is slightly different than maybe the way technology industries work, is: when you work for something like the LEGO Group, there's no right answer. It's not that this toy works or this doesn't work or this play experience works. It's either great and people love it, or it's not quite so great and they only sort of love it. And that's actually a different type of outcome than "this rocket got off the ground" or "this rocket didn't get off the ground."

Matt 00:14:18 Much more binary.

Tom 00:14:19 Yeah, much more open-ended. And that means that, actually, how you stimulate individuals' creativity—and the importance you lend to individuals' and teams' creativity—becomes ever more important because that's how you get to those types of really brilliant results. So most of my time is figuring out... and some mentoring, which I absolutely love doing, one-on-one mentoring... but more how we build teams that can take risk, how we create a culture that can take risk, that can do the unknown, think about the impossible, and supporting that. And then, obviously, funding or securing the organizational support for activities that are ambitious, and deciding when to do that. So that really is the bulk of my day, one way or the other. I love to tinker, but that's not something I do so much in the day job.

Matt 00:15:02 And when you are building your teams, what are some of the hallmarks of a great future—we have the younger listeners here on the podcast—what are some of the hallmarks of a great future leader where you see someone, and you're like, "I need to invest in this person. I need to mentor them because I think they have what it takes to become a leader themselves one day."?

Tom 00:15:18 Super question. I mean, I think curiosity is... you know, and curiosity for others. I see some of the best teams doing the most challenging work. Where they struggle is, if I'm a super expert in my area and you're a super expert in your area, I can sometimes imagine that I know... I can be sort of overconfident about my knowledge beyond my area, and you can be over knowledged, overconfident about your knowledge beyond your area. And you sometimes get friction in the middle where people who are very, very talented in their own area—the gap between them can become a source of team dynamics. Let's put it that way.

And I think for me, curiosity—not just about your own field, but curiosity about other people's fields—is a superpower for growth. If you're an artist, being curious—even if you don't understand the quantum physics or whatever it is—asking questions and genuinely being curious in a way that allows you to connect with other people. Because I think going forward, collaboration is where creativity is gonna come from. And we've seen this in the sciences for years: it's not just the physicist; it's when a physicist gets together with a biologist, or the sociologist with the what have you, where you start to see some really interesting kind of collaborations come together. So I think curiosity—and in particular, curiosity for people outside your domain and topics outside your domain—is really important.

Resilience is really important. Nothing that got done that was worth doing was easy. And it's easy to say resilience is... "we all need resilience," but resilience is something that takes a lot of hard work to build. Honestly, doing something knowing that there's a good chance that six, nine, twelve months of your work will be completely wasted, and doing that with relish, is a superpower, and it's something that I always also look for.

And I think values are super important. If I'm honest, I want people that have a sense of what it means to be positive in the world, and we can all take our own views about that. But I think being values-driven and wanting to see outcomes that you believe in—and wanting to put your work towards outcomes that you really believe in and find folks to work with who share those beliefs at least to some extent—I think that's also something I like.

Matt 00:17:23 It's interesting about resilience. So I have a two- and four-year-old at home. My four-year-old builds these incredible LEGO creations, and then my two-year-old will come and knock it down. He'll just come and swat it. And I'll say, "Okay, we'll just build it back up again. Don't go in your room and pout. This is what's gonna happen in life, too." And I think that is almost a microcosm of being resilient at younger ages, and I think that involves creativity. "Okay. This happened. I have to be resilient. And how can I be creative? Maybe take what I

learned in the first castle I built and make the second castle better because I have a chance to start over again with those learnings."

Tom 00:17:57 Yes. And sometimes what you see as a mistake or a problem is the source of the next solution.

Matt 00:18:01 Yeah.

Tom 00:18:01 We know this in the art world. We know this in the science world. Right? That actually, not everything that looks like a problem at first blush is a problem at the end of the day. Sometimes it's the insight that gives you an entire...

Matt 00:18:13 Never feels that way, but in the rearview mirror, you always see it.

Tom 00:18:16 Exactly.

Matt 00:18:16 Yeah. I think it's interesting because right now, unlike you and I, you know, you have kids that are growing up in the social media era, and they're staring at their phones and seeing all these other people, quote-unquote, "killing it" and doing so well, and you only see their highlight reels. And I think that does take away a lot of younger people's patience and resilience because they just wanna get it now. And you and I both know that's just not how life works. But I think growing up in this era is hard for younger people to really have that wherewithal to understand that it's gonna be a long journey—a bunch of ups and downs—and it's never just up and to the right.

Tom 00:18:52 I think that's true. When I grew up, my creative superpower was boredom. If I really wanted to be creative, I just stopped doing anything. And when I got really, really bored enough, I put it in different ways. Sometimes I talk about the creative inner voice, and you just have to sort of, for me personally, quieten the influence of the world around you so you can hear your creative inner voice.

Matt 00:19:13 That's why we get great ideas in the shower. Right? Because they're not on their phones—or they take long walks.

Tom 00:19:16 Exactly. And so for me, deliberately becoming bored has been part of my creative process. Because I know that, you know, if I just hang on long enough, the ideas will start flowing. But that's mine. And I think the reality is everybody has their own creative process, and finding what yours is versus somebody else's. But, yes, I don't think you can take an off-the-shelf set of stimuli and set of things from Instagram or wherever it happens to be and immediately, that's creative. I think you have to find your own way of listening to the world and your own way of seeing it before you will start to create material that is different than what you've seen. But you're right. Also, you also need to know what you want and when. When what you want is defined by other folks that can create challenges of its own.

Matt 00:20:00 For sure. So, shifting gears as we wrap up here, I wanna just talk a little bit more about the business. I know on top of the innovation that you've been working on with LEGO SmartPlay, you've also worked on LEGO Star Wars, which is a new innovation. We'd love to talk about the importance of partnering with intellectual property like Star Wars and how that comes to life for the brand.

Tom 00:20:19 The first point about the partnering is the companies that you partner with are super important, in the same way with teamwork. And I think the partnership with the Star Wars brand and the folks there is one of a real mutual mindset of a joy of innovation, a real desire to do great storytelling, to really give the kids and the fans a truly incredible high-quality experience, and to be brave about what it takes to go there and push there. And I think that's the heart of any great collaboration is a mutual desire to do something special. And I think we've seen that in the twenty-five years that we've been working with Star Wars in LEGO Star Wars. That's a great collaboration. LEGO Star Wars is where we're launching LEGO SmartPlay. It's the first outcome of that, and it's been a tremendous collaboration working with the team there to bring to life in physical sets the galaxy. That's been really fun and a really creative journey there.

Matt 00:21:10 Absolutely. So wrapping up here, CES, obviously, a really great way to start the year, and there's so many incredible innovations. Is there anything outside of LEGO here that is really capturing your attention that you wanna learn more about, just based upon all the incredible evolutions we're seeing across the technological landscape?

Tom 00:21:29 There's a lot. I haven't had time for it yet. I think there's a quantum physics stream here for the first time ever, so I'm super excited to see what's happening in that side of things, the geeky side of things. And we've talked a lot about sort of software AI for many years, but I suspect at CES this year, we're gonna see quite a lot of sort of physical robotics. And I think there's some fascinating opportunities—both in terms of technology, but also in terms of industrial or home or... you know, all the different ways that robotics can begin to be a fantastic influence. I'm really excited to see what people are thinking about that.

Matt 00:22:01 Do you think in our lifetime, we're gonna see a world where somebody can build a LEGO creature and then talk to it because AI is in it? And, like, is LEGO SmartPlay the start of a robotics stream? Because when you put the brain of AI inside the body of anything—whether it's a cardboard box or a LEGO design, it could come to life.

Tom 00:22:22 We believe in things coming to life, and I think that over time, it'll become richer and richer about how they come to life. Whether that's AI or whether that's just designers doing a really good job, I think, is an open question. And also, whether it's AI or designers doing a good job, it's the why and the how of the product is also super important. We would want the kid interacting with that creature coming to life to be an incredibly big part of that play experience, and not feel that they were just given a creature and there you go, but they are engaging. So I'm sure something like that will come to pass in the medium or far future. Exactly

what the technology is, I don't know—whether it's AI or not. And I think that, ultimately, the key thing is: why are we doing it? What are we doing it for? And is it about imagination, creativity, and deepening the human aspects of life? That's what I would love to see.

Matt 00:23:14 Yeah. So finally, Tom, here: we ask our guests to wrap up the pod if there's a saying or mantra that comes to mind that helps kinda encapsulate the career journey. What comes to mind for you?

Tom 00:23:23 The one that I like to use is "magic works in lo-fi," by which I mean, we can get very, very sort of caught up in, you know, "you have to do an incredible amount of work before it's worth doing." But you see something special very early on when you just make it out of Post-it notes and cardboard. Or if it's a story, it's a few bullet points. You see the magic very early in the journey.

Matt 00:23:44 Not everybody else does, but you do.

Tom 00:23:46 You do. Exactly. And I personally feel finding the magic early—that's the trick. Find something that you really believe, even when it's barely started. I can see it. I can feel the magic. That's what carries you through difficult programs.

Matt 00:24:00 I've had a lot of experiences like that. And I think a lot of things we talked about today—and it's been such a great discussion—come into play because you need to have resilience. You need to have conviction. Because when it's lo-fi, other people aren't gonna get it. They're not gonna see your vision, whether you're a four-year-old that's building a castle or whether you're building a software product that's right out of college. And if you believe it and you feel the magic, you just have to go and lean into your intuition because that's how you're gonna get there.

Tom 00:24:24 Yeah. But the programs where people... they don't really see the magic, but "let's just pour on the resources and see if it comes," they can sometimes be the ones that people look back and think, "I wish we'd done something different a little bit earlier."

Matt 00:24:34 Right. Absolutely. Well, thanks again for joining. It's been a fantastic discussion here at CES in Vegas. I'm wishing you nothing but a successful 2026 with LEGO.

Tom 00:24:42 Thank you so much. Been a great discussion.

Matt 00:24:44 On behalf of Suzy and Adweek, thanks again to Tom Donaldson, Senior Vice President and Head of Creative Play Lab at LEGO Group, for joining us today. Be sure to subscribe, rate, and review *The Speed of Culture* podcast on your favorite podcast platform. Till next time, see you soon, everyone. Take care.

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