

The Lego Group Is Revolutionizing the Iconic Toy With Screen-Free Interactive Play

The Lego Group arrived at CES 2026 with more than an announcement: Lego SmartPlay represents a major evolution, blending physical and digital interaction while keeping imagination in control.

In this episode of The Speed of Culture, Matt Britton sits down with Tom Donaldson, senior vice president and head of the Creative Play Lab at the Lego Group, to discuss the new platform powered by Lego Smart Brick technology that allows Lego creations to respond to how they are played with.

From years of R&D product development to kid-led testing and early prototyping, Tom shares how the Lego Group builds conviction, protects creativity, and advances interactive play without screens at global scale.

With a background in engineering, deep technology, and early artificial intelligence work, Tom brings a unique perspective on creativity and AI leadership. At the Lego Group, he enables his teams to take thoughtful risks, turning early ideas into play experiences that resonate with kids, families, and lifelong fans.

Key Takeaways:

[01:33] Lego SmartPlay CES 2026 Adds a New Dimension to System in Play – Tom frames Lego SmartPlay as more than a product moment. It is a new dimension added to the Lego System in

Play, where pieces respond to how builders move, combine, and imagine with them. Play becomes more alive. Models change, react, and surprise based on what builders do, making play feel social, expressive, and open-ended while imagination stays firmly in charge.

[02:01] How Lego Smart Brick Technology Works – At the center of Lego SmartPlay is the Lego Smart Brick technology, a familiar 2x4 brick filled with sensors, sound, light, and an onboard synthesizer. Tom explains how it senses movement, color, Smart Tags, and Smart Minifigures, then reacts instantly. Move faster and engines rev. Slide a corner and sounds shift. The experience feels physical and responsive, creating interactive Lego play without screens that rewards exploration rather than instructions.

[03:58] A Layer, Not a Pivot, in Lego System in Play Innovation – Tom is careful to explain that Lego SmartPlay does not change what Lego play is. He compares it to the introduction of the Lego Minifigure, which added storytelling without touching the core of building. SmartPlay follows the same philosophy. It layers responsiveness on top of classic play, letting builds interact and evolve while keeping the simplicity, freedom, and creativity that define the Lego System in Play.

[05:32] Lego R&D Product Development Built Over Years – The work behind the R&D product development for SmartPlay stretched across many years. Tom describes a process shaped by constant learning, from early technical questions to long in-home play tests where kids used the sets freely for months. Early demos helped leaders feel the spark quickly. What followed was patient validation of play value, technology, and business fit. Conviction did not arrive all at once. It was earned gradually, one experiment, one insight, and one brick at a time.

[07:39] Creativity and AI Leadership With Humans at the Center

– When Tom talks about creativity and AI leadership, he brings the conversation back to people. He sees AI as access to shared human knowledge, not a substitute for imagination. As routine work becomes easier to automate, the value of curiosity, intent, and taste increases. AI helps shorten the distance between an idea and making it real. What remains human is deciding what matters, what feels right, and when something is truly finished.

[15:23] Leadership Traits That Drive Lego Innovation

– Asked what he looks for in future leaders, Tom points to curiosity that extends beyond one's own expertise, resilience built through long periods of uncertainty, and values that guide decisions when outcomes are unclear. Strong R&D product development depends on collaboration across disciplines and a willingness to invest effort even when success is not guaranteed. For Tom, leadership means creating conditions where people feel supported taking meaningful creative risks.

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