13_Punks As Told By CryptoPunks: Hans Ulrich Obrist & Larva Labs

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SUMMARY

Hans-Ulrich Obrist interviews Matt Hall and John Watkinson, co-founders of Larva Labs and creators of CryptoPunks, discussing the intersection of gaming culture, digital art, and blockchain technology. They explore how their backgrounds in video games influenced the creation of CryptoPunks and the significance of rules and chance in generative art.

- *Over 3 billion people play video games globally, influencing the creators' work and the collector culture.*
- *The CryptoPunks project was inspired by traditional collectible cards, emphasizing the joy of collecting and the importance of rarity.*
- *Blockchain technology allows for immutable ownership and decentralized systems, which were essential for the authenticity of digital collectibles.*
- *The generative art aspect of CryptoPunks involved setting initial conditions and allowing chance to play a role in the final output.*
- *DAOs (Decentralized Autonomous Organizations) exemplify how blockchain enables community organization and participation around shared interests.*
- *The creators view blockchain as a "world computer" that ensures transparency and permanence in ownership, akin to a published book.*
- *Digital permanence has both advantages and challenges, particularly regarding the inability to correct mistakes once a project is launched.*
- *The ethos of CryptoPunks reflects a countercultural movement, emphasizing DIY principles and independence from traditional systems.*

Yeah, hi everyone. I'm Hans-Ulrich Obrist. I'm a curator, I'm the artistic director of the Serpentine, and also the founder of the interview project. Hi, I'm Matt Hall, one of the co-founders of Larva Labs and co-creators of CryptoPunks along many other things, but that's probably our most well-known one. And I'm John Watkinson, co-founder of Larva Labs and co-creator of CryptoPunks as well. Thunderbirds go. Yeah, we just had a long conversation here in New York City.

John and Matt about CryptoPunks, about the history, but also actually about the beginnings, about about gaming, about video games. And year for the first time more than 3 billion people in the world played video games. So, that's more than a third of the world population. And it was fascinating to hear how really everything you do grew out of your involvement with video games. Yeah, I think that's part of what's been so interesting to us, seeing it as an interactive piece. Like it was conceived as something, but then became what it is now through people interacting with it, which is, you know, kind of a video game in a sense, you know, certainly how we see

things.

Yeah, and I think yeah, it it'll be cool in the book to that talk with like the earliest days, like as kids getting into video games and just seeing how that culture, you know, is what drove really kind of our not just us, but the whole kind of collector generation, that that's what that's what sort of was the cultural sort of moment that kind of led to to CryptoPunks and and crypto art in general, and and you just even the appreciation that there is for digital art now, and and what that means to people all kind of grows out of that sort of Gen X video game culture. The conversation also had a lot to do with actually your beginnings in terms of the CryptoPunk project being inspired by printed matter. It started kind of in Canada with little cards of hockey players.

Yes, that's true. Yeah, and and collecting things, and and that feeling you get from collecting things, from completing a set, from finding one that's rare, and but then also with our our our hockey cards for example, finding out later that you thought they were worth so much money, and then they had printed a whole bunch of them, and you didn't know that. And so, how how can some how can there be a way in which that can't happen, you know, that you know how many hockey cards there are or whatever it is. Yeah, that package is there.

Yeah. But yeah, definitely grew out of that sort of collector culture, and and even just seeing the next generation, you know, seeing our nieces and nephews and they collecting things, whether you know, whether cards or toys, and it kind of rekindled in us our joy of collecting, especially as as as as kids. So, that was definitely a a driving force to the to the creation of the project. We spoke also about rules of the game, no? And I was very curious in terms of, you know, the blockchain, how what role instructions plays there, and you mentioned it actually Sol LeWitt, who of course as an artist wrote a lot of instructions was was an inspiration.

So, it could be great, I think, to hear a little bit more about that, and also kind of about the instructions, because you you obviously fed these instructions into the generator. chance played a big role, but it is an instruction piece in a way. Yeah, it's a it's a generative art piece in that way in which there are chances and probabilities, and we set sort of the initial conditions, but didn't know what the result would be.

So, there's rules to the generator, there's rules to the what's on the blockchain about how people can own them, what it means to own it, how what are the rules for selling, for buying, for transferring. So, it's really like a couple different sets of rules that sort of interact in that way, which is I think what makes it interesting when people do start interacting with it. That's when we see sort of what people find valuable, what traits they like, what, you know, they can express that through, you know, any number of ways.

And it was fun, yeah, to dig in on the generator. I think we we really went into detail on the on the generator, I think, more than we have in whenever we've talked about it in the past. I think we went into more detail this time than ever ever before. What's the role of chance? Is it chance or controlled chance? Yeah, controlled chance, but yeah, certainly there was chance in Yeah, I think we had mentioned that we could run the generator so many times and then adjusted probabilities and, you know, and exclusions, you know, if this trait appears and this one can't because they don't work together or whatever, and then once we ran it that final time, we were we were just in such a routine of running it, we didn't even look at it. We just published it. So, even we didn't know

what what was what was going to be there, and and there were some surprising results. You know, I you know, I don't think that you know, there every run had a seven-trait CryptoPunk had I don't think so. There ended up being actually fewer aliens than expected. You know, there's there's a bunch of weird things that came out of that, and yeah, in hindsight really, we didn't even look at it.

So, there was a lot of chance for us, too. We didn't even know what we were getting with that when on the on that final sort of fateful run of the generator. You know, the DAO, and I was kind of curious about DAOs, and what role DAOs play in relation to to your work. I think what's just, you know, DAOs sort of in specific, but in general, just the way blockchain allows people to self-organize around things.

And there's And again, there's rules in place there, and DAOs are a certain set of rules for how you can vote and what means how many votes you get and things like that. But even, you know, an NFT project or a, you know, an art project that you all own and have some say in and can promote or just sort of profess your your your love for is all sort of something that seems to the blockchain really enables beyond The Internet.

It enables some of that, but the blockchain allows it to be like done by a rule systems that really sort of take it to the next level, it seems. So, so DAOs are sort of maybe one particular sort of expression of that, but a lot of these rule systems are sort of like operating in it around that kind of mechanism. Yeah, it feels almost like the CryptoPunks community, you know, is a DAO in a way. It's not like the formal textbook definition, but it is a bunch of people coming together around a a smart contract rule system and and interacting and participating in it, and and having like a shared sort of vision and goal.

Yes, so in 2017 I spent a a morning with Vitalik Buterin, and we had a a long conversation on on Ethereum, and he basically, when I asked him to to define Ethereum, and that's the definition from 2017, he said, "If I had to put it in two words, it's a world computer. If I had to say it in slightly more words, it's a global decentralized system that is designed to implement a set of rules." So, we're back to the rules, and which is designed to ensure that everyone can participate in the system, and the way people interact with each other will always be processed in the exact way people expect it to be." So, I was curious why you chose Ethereum, also what for you the blockchain technology can do what other tools can't do, because you've both experimented since the '90s with so many different technologies. You worked early on with video games, you worked early on in the '90s with AI. It was a very productive moment in AI, so you moved on.

what what does blockchain have the other tools don't have? Yeah, and really we we were looking for a solution, right? Like we were we were really interested in digital collectibles, but we just didn't feel like that could that could be strong enough, you know, if you just had an app, for example. If we had made an app, and that app allowed you to own something, and you could, you know, do all the trading and everything, and but just the the app told you what you owned. That just didn't feel like enough, and so we had even put the whole idea on hold for a while and until until Ethereum came along, right? And and and once, you know, or or really once we came upon Ethereum, and and it just clicked. That's like this is this is the environment this world as he says, this world computer is it's as if everyone has a single computer that tracks who owns what and everything.

There's no question of authority of of of who owns what. It also is this long-living thing, it's uncorruptible. After we make the project, we can just, you know, it can just operate on its own. We no longer have control. We can't say, "Oh, we're going to make more CryptoPunks, or we're going to give your CryptoPunk to that person." there just something really clicked and felt right about that programmability of Ethereum was was was was perfect. So, yeah, really, it was it was our search for a solution that led us to Ethereum.

I think it's Yeah, it's a weird like that's maybe even a tension in blockchain itself. Like it's there's sort of an anarchy to it where anybody can run a node, anybody can verify transaction, anyone can submit a transaction, start an app, do whatever. But the rules are immutable and and inviolable. Like you have to follow them once they're set out in place, and everybody is, you know, working to to validate that. So, in some sense, it's permissionless, do whatever you want, but then once you've sort of set out the rules of the game, you have to follow it. So, I think that's sort of appealing to us, at least. Like we wanted to operate in a world like that where you just had you didn't have to submit something to an app store, you just could put it online, and that could be part of this whole world. Yeah, and especially at 2017 when we came to you know, crypto and started to really delve into it, that felt like the culture, you know, it was very definitely a counterculture of people trying to break out of the system, build their own systems, their own you know, very DIY process. Yeah, I want to run my own node. I want to manage my own finances and and I want to yeah, create a new way of interacting with the world.

You know, for me that's that is the essence of punk that inspired us to call it cryptopunk. Yeah. Yeah, so one of the thing we also discussed is basically the idea of if any mistake happens, it's then it's impossible to kind of edit it. You talked about the the mistake at the beginning with V1 which then, you know, forced you to do V2. And and that that made us think in a way and made me think that it's actually more like a book because in a book if a mistake occurs, when somebody realizes there is a typo or there is a page missing, once the book is printed, so it's actually more it made me think that it's more like a book than a website.

Yeah, and I think I agree. I think it's more like not a lot like a book, but it's probably more like a book than a website, you know, because there's nothing there's basically no other software like this, you know, where you publish it and it's just out in the world and and you can't touch it. You can't change anymore. That is a complete you know, the we were saying the only maybe remotely similar thing was the Apollo moon missions, you know, where it's like, all right, the thing's on the moon. We can't change it anymore.

Whatever it's going to do, it's going to do, you know, like maybe that software was similar in terms of that you had to just hope it worked, you know, and but yeah, so it was yeah, it it was a it was a really rapid education in writing software for for blockchain where you have to get it right. You have to be completely you have to have a completely paranoid mindset which is probably the similar mindset when they're doing the final edits or or test prints of a book where it's like, you have to be completely sure that everything's right because you you're not going to get another chance.

Yeah, it's a kind of an interesting illustration too of what digital permanence is because you say that and you like, yeah, okay, fine. But then it has downsides to it. It has like it brings certain unpleasant realities to it. Like

it's interesting for art because that's the property we want. We want it to live forever. But then if there's a mistake, well then the mistake lives forever. So, it has these these you know, properties we don't know how to replicate another way. So, they're really interesting, but it has these downsides too that are really difficult to mitigate.

But it's still sort of worth it overall. Like that digital permanence permanence is so key, you know, and that decentralization that you know, I wouldn't want to change it. You know, there are there are ways of adding hooks in if you wanted to to say, oh, this contract can be upgraded by this this address has the rights to make to make a new one and sort of but we would never do that. Most projects you know, don't want that, you know, that's so it's it's it's challenging. It's it's you know, it's a real trip to try to write that that that kind of software, but it's it's so worth it, you know, it's it's worth the result.

Thank you so much for for this long conversation. Yeah, it's great. Thanks for the insightful questions. Yeah, we really enjoyed it.