

A Proposal for



LEGO Studies **Examining the Building Blocks of a Transmedial Phenomenon**

Edited by:

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PROSPECTUS

Since the “Automatic Binding Bricks” that LEGO produced in 1949, and the LEGO “System of Play” that began with the release of *Town Plan No. 1* (1955), LEGO bricks have gone on to become a global phenomenon, and the favorite building toy of children, as well as many an AFOL (Adult Fan of LEGO). LEGO has become a medium into which a wide number of media franchises (including *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Batman*, *Superman*, *Marvel Comics*, *Lord of the Rings*, and more) have adapted their characters, vehicles, props, and settings, and also an artistic medium, as evidenced by the sculptures made by fine artists including Nathan Sawaya, Sean Kenney, Nannan Zhang, Ryan McNaught, Cole Blaq, Henry Lim, and Jonathan Lopes. The LEGO company itself has become a multimedia empire, including LEGO books, movies, television shows, video games, board games, comic books, theme parks, magazines, and even an MMORPG, *LEGO Universe* (2009). As such, it deserves an examination in Media Studies, and this will be the first academic book devoted to it.

The essays in this collection look at a variety of topics related to LEGO, as both a medium, into which other franchises can be adapted, and a transmedial franchise of its own, with extensions in most of the media in existence today. Although each essay looks at a particular aspect of the LEGO phenomenon, topics such as adaptation, representation, paratexts, franchises, and interactivity intersect throughout these essays, and suggest that the study of LEGO as a medium and a media empire is a rich vein which has barely been touched upon in Media Studies.

This book is a collection of essays which begins with a look at LEGO as art and culture, including two essays by two of the world’s thirteen Certified LEGO Professionals. Artist Nathan Sawaya looks at LEGO at the “imperfect art tool”, and Duncan Titmarsh and Ed Diment describe how LEGO art has engaged audiences and created media attention where it has been used. Next, Lars Konzack examines the cultural history of the LEGO brick and its aesthetics. Broadening out to LEGO’s status as a toy, the playset logic of LEGO is discussed in Robert Buerkle’s essay, which is followed by my own essay looking at the adaptation of the Death Star into LEGO. Bob Rehak’s essay continues examining the connection to *Star Wars*, and LEGO’s place in transmedial franchises. Modularity and structure is also discussed in Christopher Hanson’s essay on programmability and LEGO Mindstorms, and in Mark Sample’s essay on serial structure, narrative blocks, and modular control. Characters within the LEGO world are examined next, in Jessica Aldred’s essay on LEGO avatars and movie-game characters, and Sheila Murphy’s essay on minifigures. Identity is discussed in the following essay, Derek Johnson’s look at industrial design cultures and gendered construction play, and the transmedial remixing of mythic material is the

topic of Lori Landay's essay. The perspective broadens even more to the virtualization of LEGO, in Kevin Schut's essay; and in Seth Gidding's essay, the impossibility of studying all the ways LEGO is played with by children. Jason Mittell's closing essay then questions how LEGO Studies relates to the academy, commenting on the other essays in this collection. Finally, the book ends with an Annotated Resource Guide for LEGO Scholarship, a list of books, films, websites, and other media that scholars of LEGO might find useful.

COMPETITION

Currently there are no academic books examining the phenomenon of LEGO. There are some journalistic books, a few history books, and many popular general-audience books about LEGO, but nothing from university presses, and nothing with such an academic and scholarly outlook.

AUDIENCE & MARKET CONSIDERATIONS

The book is designed to appeal not only to scholars, but to be accessible to a general audience interested in popular culture. The interdisciplinary nature of the topic suggests that there ought to be an academic audience for the book in a variety of fields, including Popular Culture Studies, Comparative Media Studies, Video Game Studies, and other branches of Media Studies, as well as other areas such as American Studies, studies of toy industries, studies of play and interactivity, and so forth. The writing style, while academic, is still accessible enough for a college-educated audience, and lively enough to engage readers outside of a classroom, and the Appendix should be useful as well.

Institutions whose members the book might interest:

Society for Cinema and Media Studies (SCMS)
Popular Culture Association (PCA)
Modern Language Association (MLA)

STATUS OF THE BOOK

The authors have all begun their essays, and a year's time ought to be enough for the completion of the book (in Spring of 2014). I have suggested that essays be around 5000-8000 words in length, so for 15 essays, this comes to between 75,000 to 120,000 words total, plus front and back matter. I have also included enough essays so that should one drop out of the project, there will still be enough material for the book to go ahead as planned.

POTENTIAL REVIEWERS

The following academics would be qualified to comment upon this book:

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LEGO Studies

Examining the Building Blocks of a Transmedial Phenomenon

Introduction

Mark J. P. Wolf

LEGO: The Imperfect Art Tool

Nathan Sawaya

LEGO is the perfect medium for the **artist** because it is imperfect:

- finite number of colors
- finite amount of sizes
- finite amount of shapes
- does not blend
- does not bend
- not malleable
- cannot be carved or chiseled
- difficult to get in quantity (not accessible)
- all right angles and sharp corners
- restrictions on size of sculptures, reality of gravity

These restrictions give the artist purpose. The artist takes these restrictions as a challenge. The artist must work through these restrictions to create the art resulting in art the takes LEGO someplace it is not typically - from the playroom to the pedestal.

LEGO is the perfect art medium for the **viewer** because it evokes emotion. This imperfect medium stirs an unexpected emotional connection in the viewer, such as nostalgia and perspective. Examples are:

- perspective to see curves
- a relationship with viewers that is defined by their personal perspective; that perspective which allows the viewer to see the right angles as curves.

The artist cannot make unlimited shapes but with skill and determination can trick the viewer to see any shape. Viewer sees what they want to see, even if the curves or colors are not actually there. Even given all of its restrictions, the emotional connection to the toy provides a personal connection to the art which allows them to fill the void and inject what is missing. And, in addition, there is a deep rooted nostalgic feeling for the medium... and then, thus, also for the art. In the end, LEGO art gives both the artist and the viewer purpose.

Nathan's story of becoming a lawyer and then an artist will be woven throughout the narrative. In summary: Nathan wanted to be the perfect son and man - so he did was he thought society expected... he became a NYC lawyer. It was only after Nathan rebuked society and followed his true passion to become an artist that he finally achieved his potential.

Nathan is the perfect LEGO artist because he (like the medium) had restrictions:

- He didn't go to art school
- He didn't have a mentor
- He was \$100k+ in debt with student loans from law school
- He didn't have resources, supplies or tools to create art

What he had was perspective and emotion.

LEGO Art Engages People

Duncan Titmarsh & Ed Diment

LEGO bricks have long been used as an artistic medium and design tool, beyond mass appeal as the World's favorite toy. In an increasingly competitive market brand recognition is vital, but how can this be achieved? LEGO is such a strong draw that organizations employing LEGO art as a promotional tool often out-perform expectations in terms of public engagement and media coverage. LEGO displays can draw large crowds and in turn mass media, even more so when utilizing public interaction in the build, typically resulting in positive press stories, mass blogging and mainstream press and TV coverage for even relatively modest LEGO

events. This article looks at how professional LEGO art has helped some of the World's leading brands improve visibility and public perception. It concludes that LEGO appears to have a unique pull on customer imagination and enjoyment that shows no signs of diminishing. LEGO art lives.

The Cultural History of the LEGO Brick

Lars Konzack

This essay is about the cultural history of the LEGO products. I will discuss the LEGO brick according to central aesthetic theories and cultural developments in the 20th century and early 21st century. I will compare the idea of the LEGO brick to Bauhaus aesthetics and see how the postmodernist cultural development influenced the modernist LEGO brick, turning them into specialized bricks often playing on vague cultural references and the hyper-modern LEGOLAND. The latest development moves away from the postmodernist view and towards storytelling and geek culture with video games, board games in fantastic settings and with subcreations such as the Star Wars universe, Batman Universe, and Tolkien's Middle-earth.

Playset Logic: The Paratextual Design of the LEGO Video Games

Robert Buerkle

Following the runaway success of *LEGO Star Wars: The Video Game* in 2005, game studio Traveler's Tales has given the Lego treatment to a wide variety of Hollywood franchises, including *Indiana Jones*, *Batman*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Harry Potter*, and, most recently, *The Lord of the Rings*. This essay examines the relationship between these videogames and the narrative franchises from which they are adapted.

Video game tie-ins typically follow one of two routes: they straightforwardly rehash the narrative from which they are adapted, or they depart from the primary narrative altogether by telling some alternate story. The LEGO games are unique in that rather than simply "retell" the stories of their source franchises, they self-consciously re-enact them in a manner that acknowledges and rewards the player's familiarity (rather than punish it with redundancy). This is largely done through parody, pantomime, and abstraction, and resultantly, the stories can be unintelligible to those unfamiliar with the originals. These games are an example of what Jonathan Gray, borrowing a term from Gerard Genette, calls a "paratext": a creative work that is designed to function adjacent to an original text, providing a richer experience through the interplay of multiple media parts. Using prior work in parody, convergence, nostalgia, and retold stories, this paper examines the manners by which the Lego games satisfy two parallel audiences: fan communities (for whom the parody is a source of celebration rather than deconstruction) as well as children (for whom narrative retelling plays a significant developmental role).

Ultimately, this paratextual design is made possible by the "playset" logic afforded by the Lego brand. Unlike other tie-in video games, Luke Skywalker or Harry Potter are not presented as traditional characters, but as plastic toys enacting those pre-established roles, and as such, the player is not diegetically positioned behind an avatar so much as reflexively addressed as a child "playing with" the components of a narrative franchise. Players can escape the diegetic logic of the original texts by importing alternate characters into familiar scenes and are permitted to wander from the narrative path to access the areas "just off screen," allowing the sort of narrative experimentation common to action figures and other branded toys.

Adapting the Death Star to LEGO: The Case of Set #10188

Mark J. P. Wolf

When one of the world's most famous toymakers decided to license one of the world's most popular media franchises, a successful new line of products perhaps seemed inevitable. The first LEGO set based on the *Star Wars* galaxy appeared in 1999, and since then, over 200 different sets have appeared. Most of the work found in Adaptation Studies considers the adaptation of a narrative from one medium into another (novels to films, films into television shows or video games, and so forth), but in the realm of transmedial franchises set in imaginary worlds, we also find adaptation into toys and playsets, through other kinds of media, such as LEGO bricks. Adaptation into a physical playset is qualitatively different from narrative adaptation between audiovisual media, since it involves not the adaptation of a narrative, but rather the settings, objects, vehicles, and characters from which a narrative can be interactively recreated and re-enacted by the user. At the same time, this kind of adaptation still shares many of the same issues and processes and can be discussed in relation to them (for

example, video games also deal with adaptation into interactive form, and the narrative recreation made possible by a particular playset may still require the adaptation of the original narrative on which it is based).

The adaptation of the Death Star from the *Star Wars* movies into LEGO set #10188 (released in 2008) provides a good example of such an adaptation, and reveals many of the concerns involved in the processes involved. This essay looks specifically at set #10188 which combines the two Death Stars from *Star Wars* Episodes IV and VI, and recreates various interior sets from them in miniature, while also representing the overall spherical form of the Death Star, complete with surface gun towers and the superlaser crater. It will also consider adaptation from traditional media such as film to interactive media, particularly the playset, and the way franchises and narratives are adapted to them, using the Death Star as an example.

Lucasfilm and LEGO: The Building Blocks of Transmedial Franchises

Bob Rehak

In 1999, the *Star Wars* franchise became the first intellectual property to be licensed by LEGO in over three decades, with sets based on both the original and prequel trilogies becoming best-sellers over the next decade and a half. During that same period, LEGO licensed additional franchise properties such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *Batman*, and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*, signaling a new industrial alliance within transmedial storytelling systems and convergent media forms of fantastic blockbuster culture. This essay uses the LEGO/*Star Wars* history to examine shifts in the fortunes of both companies and their product lines, emphasizing the ways in which LEGO's modularity and near-infinite adaptability harmonized with Lucasfilm's efforts to expand and extend the *Star Wars* property through its own "modularization" of production, including prequelization, the recasting of key characters, and the eventual conversion of iconic characters, settings, and vehicles into animated forms such as the *Clone Wars* series (2003, 2008-present) and video games set in the world of LEGO. LEGO thus emerges as both the prototype and future of transmedial franchise building, exposing underlying industrial logics of substitution and recombination of fantasy assets, and marking a negotiated succession between analog and digital media culture.

Brick by Brick: Modularity and Programmability in Mindstorms and Gaming

Christopher Hanson

LEGO's educational "Mindstorms" products invite consumers to build robotic devices and automatons which incorporate programmability as a central feature. As with traditional LEGO sets, the "hardware" of Mindstorms sets may be assembled into many configurations by attaching blocks and components to one another; these modular elements may include optical sensors such as cameras and motors which can enable movement and autonomic actions. Furthermore, Mindstorms kits include a "Brick" computer which may be programmed by the user to control the motors, sensors, and other such parts. This Brick and its associated electromechanical components are physically built into the hardware model, but operate as a unique interface between programmable software and hardware modules.

Mindstorms occupy a space within a range of texts and practices historically associated with frivolity which instead repurpose play for more "serious" endeavors (such as the recent Serious Games movement). LEGO Mindstorms are also representative of practices of games which incorporate programming or pseudo-programming as part of a core play mechanic. Earlier games such as *Robot Osyssey* (1984) and *Carnage Heart* (1995) employ sequences in which the player must author simplified programming code in order to accomplish game objectives; in the case of these two games, the player must "program" robots in the game to perform specific tasks such as successfully navigating hazardous arenas of play.

The "programming" that a player authors in such games and in building Mindstorms is a highly simplified form, often employing a visual mode which uses symbols such as virtual computer chips (each for a specific task), which a player may place in different sequences in order to achieve distinctive goals. In the case of Mindstorms, the modularity of LEGO pieces is echoed in the software code which enthusiasts use to program Mindstorms Brick computers—the primary programming languages employed in the sets emphasize simplicity for those without backgrounds in computer programming. This paper will explore the programmability and modularity of Mindstorms and similar games which employ this game mechanic, along with the associated visual modes of representation which these software toys employ to render programming more legible and approachable. Finally, I will examine the ways in which these practices operate at the intersection of software studies and game studies.

Building the LEGO Classroom: The Global and Local Management of Motivation and Engagement in LEGO Robotics Pedagogy

Michael Lachney

This essay examines the classroom management discourses that are used to transition educators from a traditional classroom structure to one that supports dominant LEGO Robotics activities, lessons, and curricula. These discourses of classroom management are useful for analyzing emerging pedagogical frames that address the student motivation and engagement problem in United States STEM education. At this local school level, global competition emergence through an intertextual web of statements that constitute how teachers should manage the “extraordinary levels of motivation and enthusiasm” that are discursively positioned as absent from traditional STEM classrooms, but found when students work through project-based activities with LEGO Robotics (Gura 2011, 35). I argue that this transition is represented on multiple levels, as the discourses on the management of motivation and engagement in the classroom, scale up to the management of motivation and engagement in global STEM competition and especially at FLL competitions. To begin, I situate LEGO Robotics within a frame of national interest to foster functionalist literacies that aim to help the United States compete for innovation in STEM fields. Next, First Lego League international competitions are shown to be sites where the quest for innovation is globally managed through the organization’s propagated value and original term “Gracious Professionalism.” Finally, I demonstrate how the discursive structures of LEGO Robotics programs scale between the global and the local to constitute particular types of classrooms, educators, learners, and pedagogies that function within a learning culture of flexible self-directed problem solving, which prepares youth for the 21st century workplace. Here, I critique the functionalist literacies of LEGO Robotics and use a Freireian approach to pedagogy to speculate on the idea of a 21st century critical robotics education in after school LEGO classrooms.

Serial Structure, Narrative Blocks, and Modular Control in LEGO Video Games

Mark Sample

Video game mashups between the LEGO brand and blockbuster adventure and fantasy franchises have been a winning combination for all involved: for Nintendo, Sony, and Microsoft and their respective video game platforms; for the privately held LEGO Group, based in Denmark; and for the franchises whose narratives have been reassembled in colorful block form—*Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, *Indiana Jones*, *Batman*, *Lord of the Rings*, and so on. While the first LEGO video game dates back to 1997 (*LEGO Island*, PC), it has been, beginning in 2005 with *LEGO Star Wars*, these franchise-based games that the LEGO name is best known for with respect to video games. These games mirror LEGO’s emphasis upon recognized narrative brands in its physical construction sets, but in this essay I argue that there is a greater significance to the franchise-based LEGO video games. The games do not merely correspond to LEGO’s overall marketing strategy. Rather, in games such as *LEGO Harry Potter* and *LEGO Indiana Jones* there is a suggestive alignment between the combinatory nature of LEGO bricks, the serial structure of the narratives in question, and the broader technological platform of video game consoles.

Underlying all three cases (bricks, narrative, and platforms) is the principle of modularity, which itself is a hallmark of late 20th and early 21st century life. Alternating between a close reading of several LEGO video games and a media archeological exploration of the concept of modularity, I argue that LEGO video games reveal less about their specific narrative origins and more about the prevailing narrative paradigms of the 21st century.

LEGO My Avatar: Abstraction, Convergence, and the Contemporary Movie-Game Character

Jessica Aldred

This essay examines the blocky stars of Traveller’s Tales’ LEGO video games (including *LEGO Star Wars*, *LEGO Indiana Jones*, *LEGO Batman*, and *LEGO Harry Potter*) as rare examples of film characters that have been turned into effective video game characters. Building on Mark J. P. Wolf’s (2003) analysis of early video games and Scott McCloud’s (1993) work on comics, I argue that the slightly more abstract appearance of *LEGO* avatars (created, as they are, out of digital versions of the beloved building-block children’s toy) produces a gap between character and realist representation into which players can more successfully project

themselves. This essay considers movie-licensed game characters are “doubled avatars”—figures who must strike a difficult balance between being effective avatars for their players *and* accurate stand-ins for their movie source material. Most movie-game characters prioritize this latter role as franchise IP, striving to be “indistinguishable”, photorealistic avatars of the film characters on which they’re based, though often at the expense of quality gameplay. By taking the opposite approach and maintaining only the most iconic similarities to their big-screen selves, LEGO characters may foreground user action and “playfulness” within the franchise storyworld instead.

As digital game characters now come to resemble their cinematic counterparts, industry wisdom suggests that these similarities will ease the consumer transition from film to game. By focusing on LEGO movie-game characters for how they problematize this assumption, I challenge more idealized forecasts for media convergence, demonstrating how fictional characters do not so much “flow” from one medium to another as they point up the remaining obstacles to such translation, placing extraordinary demands on media producers and consumers in the process.

MINIFIG: Abstraction, Visualization, Narrativation, or the LEGO Grand-Brand Narrative

Sheila C. Murphy

For many adults, LEGO bricks and products evoke profound nostalgia, yet the primary-colored LEGO bricks that adults and Gen-Xers remember barely resemble the LEGOs found in today’s toy stores, websites, LEGO brand boutiques, Targets, department and museum stores of today. While it would be too ambitious to chart LEGO’s complete trajectory from producer of generic plastic brick blocks (and, via those blocks, purveyor of open-ended story strategies by the children and adults who played LEGO in the past) to its current and popular products that are connected to multiple blockbuster franchises, including *Star Wars*, *Harry Potter*, *Lord of the Rings*, both Marvel and DC superheroes, *Toy Story*, *Cars*, and *Spongebob Squarepants*, this paper charts out how LEGO became both an iconic visual style and a brand partner via the increased use of LEGO humans or miniature figures in LEGO products. While I will discuss LEGO’s industrial and cultural relationship to certain multi-platform blockbuster media franchises, my primary concern in this presentation are LEGO mini-figures or “minifigs”: the seemingly generic yet specific humans who populate the LEGO toys, as well as LEGO software and games. Embracing both stereotypical and universal elements and often marked by narrative specificity (as in the Harry Potter minifig’s iconic glasses and scarred forehead), LEGO minifigs ironically signal their “universal” abstractness and uniformity at the same time inviting children and adults to identify with them through acts of play and imagination. Minifigs are not us but stand in for us. They are at the center of the LEGO iconographic system that transforms everything from Middle Earth to Frank Lloyd Wright’s Fallingwater into a series of carefully connected, interlocking pieces.

By examining how the LEGO minifig and block visual strategy transforms blockbuster sites of filmic and video game representation into part of the LEGO universe, I understand LEGO as more than a brand or company and instead as visibility that now extends beyond official licensed products. Through LEGO we witness another approach to the now familiar logic of media convergence: by official and unofficial LEGO efforts that now include homemade LEGO bricks, minifigs, and art, LEGO visibility has become a way to mashup and translate other popular narratives into the decidedly nostalgic, maker, geek code of LEGO.

Chicks with Bricks: Building Creative Identities Across Industrial Design Cultures and Gendered Construction Play

Derek Johnson

The 2012 introduction of the “LEGO Friends” theme —construction sets that targeted young female consumers via pastel-colored bricks and “mini-dolls” in lieu of the ubiquitous “mini-figure”— called into relief the LEGO Company’s uneasy position within gendered industrial marketing and production cultures. Many consumers and cultural critics alike approached the new product line with healthy suspicion towards its limited, binary view of gendered play, looking back nostalgically at historical marketing campaigns in which LEGO had instead positioned its bricks for non-gender-segregated play. Some questioned the legitimacy of the industrial design practices behind the “Friends” theme as well, sometimes outwardly devaluing the designs on the basis of their feminization compared to other LEGO themes, but other times accusing LEGO marketers of having problematically equated girl appeal with dumbed down construction dynamics compared those for their core market of boys. With the Campaign for Commercial-Free Childhood labeling “Friends” as a candidate for “The

Worst Toy of the Year”, both LEGO’s industrial marketing and the creative ideals by which it was devalued were repeatedly defined by the politics of gender identity.

This chapter therefore considers this controversy over gendered construction play to explore how the industrial design and production of culture is made meaningful through gender, and specifically, how “creativity” functions as an identity marker tied intersectionally to social and cultural hierarchies. Drawing from media production studies paradigms (Havens, 2007; Caldwell, 2008; Mayer, 2011), this essay seeks to understand the beliefs, rituals, and identities that underwrite patterns of media industry and work; unlike much production research, however, this chapter triangulates producers’ mediated claims about creative work with competing popular discourses that render industrial practices and logics alternatively meaningful, considering how the gendered imaginations of worker, consumer, creativity, and market are all mutually intertwined and co-constituted. After briefly reviewing the industrial economies behind LEGO’s gender-defined appeals, this chapter examines the popular discourses that surrounded the announcement of the theme and its initial product releases. This reception was not just a response to product, but also a mediated attempt to position the production process within (or in opposition to) imaginative frames of gender, marketing, and creativity. From here, the essay considers the managed self-disclosures of LEGO workers themselves, examining promotional statements—and silences—that legitimated the production of LEGOs for and by girls, particularly insofar as creative identities were deployed to describe both professional work and young girls’ building practice. Just as consumers situated LEGO marketers and designers within a gendered imaginary of creativity, so too did LEGO’s production narratives position LEGO play in those terms. Ultimately, this LEGO case study offers insight into how the creative identities of cultural production are marketed and imagined in gendered terms, as well as how the gendered creative work identities we seek to understand in production research might be equally located in amateur sites of play as in industrial sites of labor.

Works Cited above: Caldwell, John (2008), *Production Culture: Industrial Reflectivity and Critical Practice in Film and Television*. Durham: Duke University Press. Havens, Tim (2007), “Universal Childhood: The Global Trade in Children’s Television and Changing Ideals of Childhood,” *Global Media Journal* 6.10, <http://lass.purduecal.edu/cca/gmj/sp07/gmj-sp07-havens.htm>. Mayer, Vicki (2011), *Below the Line: Producers and Production Studies in the New Television Economy*. Durham: Duke University Press.

Myth Blocks: How LEGO Transmedia Configures and Remixes Mythic Structures in the Ninjago and Chima Themes

Lori Landay

Ninjago, the successful LEGO theme that debuted in 2011, offers a fictional universe in which ninjas and senseis battle evil skeletons and snakes with weapons empowered by the four elements Fire, Ice, Earth, and Lightning. The carefully constructed history and geography of Ninjago, like the narratives underpinning the Legends of Chima, the LEGO theme introduced in early 2013, takes aspects from Chinese and Japanese myth and legend and shapes them into pieces of mythic structure as if they were the mythic manifestations of LEGO blocks, “myth blocks” which can be reconfigured in various ways in the narratives. This essay examines the mythic structures formed by the myth blocks in the cartoon series, books, games, and toys, and explores how the different transmedial articulations of the mythic structures both encourage and limit play.

LEGO, like many other companies, develops both toys and narratives about the toys. This has been the trend since the 1984 deregulation lifted the Federal Communication Commission’s ban on program-length commercials, and toys and cartoons, with accompanying fictional worlds, were produced simultaneously, or with the toys in advance of the cartoons. In today’s transmedial marketplace, the narratives are told through cartoons, card games, board games, mobile apps, on-line games, video games on every platform, books, posters, information on the website and LEGO magazine, music and music video, character guides, as well as the through the play possible with the toys (which, having specific shapes and purposes, are not as open-ended as the original LEGO blocks) and fan-created animations, wikis, and other forms. Ninjago and The Legends of Chima borrow freely from Chinese and Japanese myth, legend, and belief systems to tap into deeply resonating ideas that both complement and challenge “Western” heroic tropes.

The Virtualization of LEGO

Kevin Schut

What is a brick when it is only an image of a brick? LEGO has long been popular as a physical toy, but today is almost as famous for its video game versions. Although LEGO-branded games date back to the late 1990s, those paired with blockbuster movie licenses like Star Wars and Indiana Jones have enjoyed huge sales and critical acclaim. But what happens to a toy when it becomes a game—and especially a computerized game? This chapter applies the insights of media ecology theory and game studies theory to consider the implications of the video game medium on the potential meanings of LEGO. Specifically, the chapter will focus on the virtualization of physical toys, and the overlay of well-known plots on playthings that have little inherent linear narrative.

Bright Bricks, Dark Play: On the Impossibility of Studying LEGO

Seth Giddings

It is universally recognized that the pleasures of LEGO do not end once the instructions in a particular set have been followed and the model depicted on the box is accurately realized. Generations of children have – just as the manufacturers intended – pulled apart the pristine model and begun again, making new vehicles, environments and creatures. The new set joins the larger box of LEGO already owned, and is mixed and hybridized. This hybridization has become particularly evident in recent decades where licensed and themed sets (space, homes, Star Wars, Harry Potter, etc.) and their specific colors, decals, and shapes get jumbled and repurposed.

But if the vast majority of time spent playing with LEGO does not follow the instructions, how can it be studied? These emergent worlds are almost never preserved, displayed, or photographed. Their dynamics are often as much to do with the play of construction, the narratives or scenarios the children conjure up as bricks are connected and moved. Moreover, this kind of play is more likely to be pursued without adult attention – once any necessary help with the instructions has been offered, adults will happily leave children to their engrossed activity, paying little or no attention to the nature of this play. Like the dark matter that constitutes the bulk of the universe, but which cannot as yet be detected or examined, this dark play constitutes the reality of LEGO as lived and played. This chapter will acknowledge the impossibility of fully accounting for LEGO play, but it will offer some approaches to it, some hints at this lost multitude of transitory gameworlds and constructions. Through ethnographic studies of contemporary play and memory-work with older children and adults, it will trace particular instances of the interactions between the materiality of LEGO and the phantasmagoric worlds of play it affords.

D.I.Y. Disciplinarity: Assembling LEGO Studies for the Academy

Jason Mittell

LEGO is an inherently unstable object of academic analysis, able to be fashioned and rebuilt to fit into a number of contexts. While the last thing the academy needs is another subfield of “Something Studies”, thinking about how the study of LEGO fits into and spans across various disciplines highlights the importance of tackling new cultural objects to keep boundaries fluid and scholarly muscles limber. In this reflective piece, the author reads the range of essays in this volume through the lens of academic disciplines, asking what do various interdisciplinary fields like media studies, game studies, childhood studies, and object studies —not to mention more traditional disciplines like history, economics, and sociology— bring to the table in our understanding of LEGO. Through this exploration of the various ways to approach the topic, Mittell argues that ordinary, but flexible, cultural objects like LEGO provoke an essential rupture in disciplinary thinking, highlighting why such topics are so valuable to proving the worth of thinking across academic boundaries, methodologies, and traditions.

Appendix: Annotated Resource Guide for LEGO Scholarship

This annotated guide lists books, websites, videos, and other resources useful to the scholarly investigation of LEGO and all its attendant history and phenomena.

About the Contributors

Jessica Aldred is a postdoctoral research fellow at the Université de Montréal, where she holds a grant from Canada's Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council. Jessica's research focuses upon digital character animation, the growing intersections between cinema and video games in the age of media convergence, and what is at stake when characters are translated from cinema into digital games. Her work has been published in *Animation, An Interdisciplinary Journal*, *Games and Culture*, and *The Oxford Handbook for Sound and Image in Digital Media*.

Robert Buerkle is a professor at Chapman University and the University of Southern California, and has previously taught at the University of Pittsburgh, Loyola Marymount University, and Columbia College Hollywood. He received his doctorate from USC, where his dissertation examined the discursive role of avatars in video game narration. He has additionally written for *The Escapist*, worked with EA Games, and worked in feature film post-production.

Ed Diment has been an avid fan over LEGO for nearly 40 years. Prior to joining Bright Bricks as co-owner and Director, he had pursued a career as an analytical consultant for fifteen years. During this time, Ed was also renowned as a LEGO artist, builder, and fan both in the UK and Internationally. Even before joining the company, Ed's LEGO creations had been to dozens of shows and displayed around the world, with breathtaking models often of epic proportions. Ed has a reputation for building big, but at the same time paying attention to detail. Ed joined Bright Bricks in August 2011 and moved to being full-time with the company from April 2012. Since then, Ed has taken the lead on such projects as the Giant 3m Osprey Handbag, the Minifig Scale model of the Polarcus Alima oceanographic research ship, and the working Rolls Royce Trent 1,000 jet engine using over 150,000 LEGO bricks and with a 1.5m diameter fan disk. Ed's motto is: "if it exists in reality or in your imagination, we can build it out of LEGO!" Ed's educational background is in business, IT, and finally, statistics. Ed lives in Hampshire with wife, and fellow LEGO enthusiast, Annie and their two cats.

Seth Giddings teaches theory and practice of digital media in the Department of Creative Industries at the University of the West of England, Bristol. He is co-author of *New Media: A Critical Introduction*, (2nd edition: 2009), and editor of *The New Media and Technocultures Reader* (2011), both from Routledge. [seth.giddings@uwe.ac.uk]

Christopher Hanson is an Assistant Professor of English at Syracuse University and he teaches courses in new media, television, games, and genre. Chris previously worked as a Visiting Lecturer in the Screen Arts and Cultures department at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor. He received his MA and Ph. D. in Critical Studies at the University of Southern California (USC) School of Cinematic Arts and his work has appeared in *Quarterly Review of Film and Video*, *Film Quarterly*, and *Spectator*.

Derek Johnson is Assistant Professor of Media and Cultural Studies at the University of Wisconsin – Madison. His research focuses on media production cultures, with a particular interest in how creative identities are constructed, managed, and imagined in opposition to dominant cultural hierarchies. He is the author of *Media Franchising: Creative License and Collaboration in the Culture Industries* (NYU Press, 2013) and the co-editor of *A Companion to Media Authorship* (Wiley-Blackwell, 2013).

Lars Konzack is an Associate Professor at The Royal School of Library and Information Science in Denmark. He has an M. A. in information science and a Ph. D. in Multimedia. He is working with subjects such as ludology, game analysis and design, geek culture, and sub-creation. He has, among others things, published "Computer Game Criticism: A Method for Computer Game Analysis" (2002), "Rhetorics of Computer and Video Game Research" (2007), "Video Games in Europe" (2007), and "Philosophical Game Design" (2008).

Michael Lachney is a doctoral student in the Science and Technology Studies department at the Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute. His research and pedagogical practices focus on the intersections of new media literacies, STEM education, popular culture, and critical pedagogy. Michael's recent work has been featured on the DMLcentral blog and in the 2012 edited collection *Fan Culture: Theory/Practice*.

Lori Landay, Professor of Cultural Studies at Berklee College of Music, is an interdisciplinary scholar and new media artist exploring the making of visual meaning in twentieth- and twenty-first-century culture. She is the author of two books, *I Love Lucy* (2010) and *Madcaps, Screwballs, and Con Women: The Female Trickster in American Culture* (1998), and articles on virtual worlds, digital narrative, silent film, television culture, and other topics. Her creative work includes animation, graphic design, creative documentary, machinima, interactive virtual art installations, and music video. Her current project combines critical and creative work to explore subjectivity, presence, and the “virtual kino-eye” in interactive media, continuing the inquiry begun during her NEH Enduring Questions Grant for “What is Being?” in 2010-2012.

Jason Mittell is Associate Professor of American Studies and Film & Media Culture at Middlebury College. He is the author of *Genre and Television: From Cop Shows to Cartoons in American Culture* (Routledge, 2004), *Television and American Culture* (Oxford University Press, 2009), and *Complex Television: The Poetics of Contemporary Television Storytelling* (New York University Press, forthcoming), and co-editor of *How to Watch TV* (NYU Press, forthcoming). He writes the blog *Just TV*.

Sheila C. Murphy is an Associate Professor of Screen Arts and Cultures at the University of Michigan. Her scholarly work focuses upon new media, especially video game history, Internet culture, and media convergence. She is the author of *How Television Invented New Media* (Rutgers UP, 2011).

Bob Rehak is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Film and Media Studies at Swarthmore College. His scholarship has appeared in the journals *Film Criticism*, *Cinema Journal*, and the *Journal of Fandom Studies*, as well as in the edited collections *The Video Game Theory Reader*, *Videogame/Player/Text*, and the second edition of *The Cybercultures Reader*. His book-length study of special effects in transmedial blockbuster franchises is forthcoming from NYU Press, and he is currently researching a follow-up project on fantastic-media objects.

Mark Sample is an Associate Professor in the Department of English at George Mason University. His research focuses on contemporary fiction, electronic literature, and videogames. He is the co-author of *10 PRINT CHR\$(205.5+RND(1)); :GOTO 10* (MIT Press, 2013).

Nathan Sawaya is a New York-based artist who creates awe-inspiring works out of some of the most unlikely things. His art focuses on large-scale sculptures using only toy building blocks: LEGO bricks to be exact. Sawaya was the first artist to ever take LEGO in to the art world. For years, Sawaya’s touring exhibition, *The Art of the Brick*, has entertained and inspired art lovers and enthusiasts. Now, with multiple exhibitions touring North America, Asia, and Australia, Sawaya is inspiring millions around the globe. Each exhibition focuses on LEGO as an art medium. The creations, constructed from nearly one million pieces, were built from standard bricks beginning as early as 2000. In 2011, CNN named *The Art of the Brick* one of the top 12 must-see exhibitions in the world. Born in Colville, Washington, and raised in Veneta, Oregon, Sawaya’s childhood dreams were always fun and creative. He drew cartoons, wrote stories, perfected magic tricks, and, of course, also played with LEGO. His days were filled with imagination. When it came time for college, Sawaya moved to New York City and attended NYU. He attended NYU School of Law and became an attorney. But soon he realized he would rather be sitting on the floor expressing himself with LEGO bricks, than sitting in a boardroom negotiating contracts. It was then that Sawaya rediscovered his beloved LEGO bricks and indulged his inner child to create what many believe is a new art revolution using LEGO as an art medium. Today Sawaya has more than 2.5 million colored bricks in his New York art studio. His work is obsessively and painstakingly crafted and is both beautiful and playful. Sawaya’s ability to transform LEGO bricks into something new, his devotion to scale and color perfection, the way he conceptualizes the action of the subject matter, enables him to elevate an ordinary toy to the status of fine art. Sawaya’s art form takes shape primarily in three-dimensional sculptures and oversized portraits. He continues to create daily with the brick medium while accepting commission work from around the world. Lately, Sawaya has been leaving his mark with his own form of street art. Dubbed “Hugman”, Nathan has placed hundreds of these 15-inch tall LEGO figures hugging such things as sign posts, bicycle racks, and park bench legs around the world. For more information about Nathan Sawaya and his artwork, visit www.brickartist.com.

Kevin Schut is an Associate Professor in the Department of Media + Communication at Trinity Western University in Langley, British Columbia, Canada. He received his Ph. D. in Communication Studies at the University of Iowa in 2004, with a focus on Media Ecology theory, Social Construction of Technology theory, and critical cultural studies. His research interests are the intersection of culture, technology, faith, and history, and he finds that computer and video games are a perfect place to investigate this. He has published *Of Games and God: A Christian Exploration of Video Games*, as well as articles and chapters on fantasy role-playing games and masculinity, mythology in computer games, Evangelicals and games, and the presentation of history in strategy games. He has also dabbled in game production, guiding groups of students who have produced *Label: Rise of Band* and *DyeWorks: A Commerce in Colour*. He grew up thinking space was populated bright yellow tube-headed plastic people.

Duncan Titmarsh has been a fan of LEGO all his life. He became the UK's first and only LEGO Certified Professional in 2008 and formed Bright Bricks to pursue his goal as LEGO artist. Prior to 2003, Duncan had served in the Royal Air Force as well as working for Honda and in the construction industry. As his professional LEGO business grew, Duncan approached Ed Diment to join the business to make the most of the opportunities for a LEGO business. Duncan is now the Managing Director of a company with a growing client list and strong reputation for LEGO art, LEGO events, and all things LEGO related. Duncan has overseen the creation of some of the most iconic LEGO models of the past few years. For Christmas 2011, Duncan led the Bright Bricks team that produced the World's largest LEGO Christmas Tree out of 600,000 LEGO bricks and measuring 12m in height! Positioned in St. Pancras Station, it captured the public's imagination as well as sparking a media frenzy. This only spurred Duncan on to greater things, following up in 2012 with the monumental LEGO advent calendar in Covent Garden. This epic LEGO work of art measured 3m tall and 5m wide and weighed in at nearly 2 tons. The model included a full set of 24 openable windows, each with a beautiful and detailed Christmas-themed model inside. The reputation of Duncan's business is such that he has now won work that has seen him travel to Dubai, the US, and Denmark, as well as producing LEGO works of art for clients in Brazil, Finland, and France. Duncan lives in Surrey with his wife Sharon and two daughters Emily and Betsie.

Mark J. P. Wolf is a Full Professor and Chair of the Communication Department at Concordia University Wisconsin. He has a B.A. (1990) in Film Production and an M.A. (1992) and Ph.D. (1995) in Critical Studies from the School of Cinema/Television (now renamed the School of Cinematic Arts) at the University of Southern California. His books include *Abstracting Reality: Art, Communication, and Cognition in the Digital Age* (2000), *The Medium of the Video Game* (2001), *Virtual Morality: Morals, Ethics, and New Media* (2003), *The Video Game Theory Reader* (2003), *The Video Game Explosion: A History from PONG to PlayStation and Beyond* (2007), *The Video Game Theory Reader 2* (2008), *Myst and Riven: The World of the D'ni* (2011), *Before the Crash: Early Video Game History* (2012), *Building Imaginary Worlds: The Theory and History of Subcreation* (2012), *The Routledge Companion to Video Game Studies* (forthcoming), *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood* (forthcoming), *Video Games Around the World* (forthcoming), and two novels for which he has begun looking for an agent and publisher. He is also founder and coeditor of the Landmark Video Game book series from University of Michigan Press and the founder of the Video Game Studies Scholarly Interest Group within the Society of Cinema and Media Studies. He has been invited to speak in North America, Europe, Asia, and Second Life; has had work published in journals including *Compar(a)ison*, *Convergence*, *Film Quarterly*, *Games and Culture*, *New Review of Film and Television Studies*, *Projections*, and *The Velvet Light Trap*; is on the advisory boards of Videotopia, the International Arcade Museum Library, and the *International Journal of Gaming and Computer-Mediated Simulations*, and is on several editorial boards including those of *Games and Culture* and *The Journal of E-media Studies*. He lives in Wisconsin with his wife Diane and his sons Michael, Christian, and Francis.