

8. “Everything is Awesome:” Spreadability and *The LEGO Movie*

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Abstract

This essay addresses *The LEGO Movie* as a transmedia text that references or includes a remarkable collection of characters and “bits” from other films and TV series. As I argue, the movie is assembled with a kind of cynical humour reminiscent of the exhausted irony described by David Foster Wallace, and effectively short-circuits possible critiques of the LEGO company itself, while presenting a Trumpian dictator who is plotting the end of the minifigures’ world. The essay also discusses the economy of transmedia storytelling and its characteristic diversification which mirrors LEGO’s own corporate strategy, thus making the LEGO business model cute and entertaining.

Key words: LEGO; money; finance; irony; transmedia storytelling

A Nobel prize, a piece of string
You know what’s awesome? Everything
[...]
Rocks, clocks, and socks, they’re awesome
Figs, and wigs, and twigs, that’s awesome
Everything you see or think or say is awesome

Introduction

The high-spirited affirmation that “everything is awesome” – the hook from the *LEGO Movie’s* (2014) academy-award-winning theme song – is a message that itself could mean just about “everything” and anything. From “rocks, clocks and socks” to “wigs and twigs,” the lyrics express not only one minifigure’s

Fehrle, J. and W. Schäffke, *Adaptation in the Age of Media Convergence*, Amsterdam University Press, 2019

DOI 10.5117/9789462983663_CH08

positive attitude toward work, but also the seemingly random, recombinatory mechanism behind the plot, its construction which relies on intermediality and media convergence, and the narrative's very self-conscious intertextuality. At the same time, the movie offers what I will argue is a complex, self-reflexive view of many of the current global predicaments with which we are confronted on a daily basis. The larger implication is that, while it is goes without saying that *The LEGO Movie* concept derives from various media, including the interlocking bricks, and borrows characters from any number of other narrative franchises, it also foregrounds the kinds of monetary and economic systems through which the film was produced and disseminated.

Importantly, while the film does all of the aforementioned, it also holds up a comedic view of labor and creativity to contemporary Western neoliberalized audiences that remains, as I want to suggest, profitably and productively ambiguous in the film.¹ As I will argue in detail below, then, *The LEGO Movie* promotes the company and its products while at the same time autoreflexively ironizing the various ways in which transmedia storytelling practices, and indeed LEGO bricks, purport to encourage creative freedom while expanding potential markets. In so doing, the film offers numerous points of entry or engagement for a wide range of viewers from children and adults who are already enthusiastic fans, to argumentative academics who might be somewhat skeptical about the film's feel-good message. Therefore, by making fun of LEGO itself, as well as various industries with which the company is complicit in ways that I will elaborate below, the film neatly ensures that consumers and viewers will continue to enjoy LEGO.

The Plot

In order to illustrate how *The LEGO Movie* signifies through the toys and the industry that produces them, as well as through the multi-platform economic

1 The way that the film adapts other narrative franchises and toys while foregrounding the kinds of monetary and economic systems through which it was produced and disseminated, is also discussed in my work on the *Ocean's* film series, finance, and gambling. (Joyce Goggin, "Casinos and Sure Bets: *Ocean's Eleven* and Cinematic Money." In *Money and Culture*, ed. Fiona Cox and Hans-Walter Schmidt-Hannisia (Bern: Peter Lang, 2008), 285–297; "From Remake to Sequel: *Ocean's Eleven* and *Ocean's Twelve*." In *Second Takes: Approaches to the Film Sequel*, ed. Caroline Jess-Cooke and Constantine Verevis (New York: State University of New York Press, 2010), 105–121; "Qu'est qu'on réadapte? *Ocean's Eleven* et l'esthétique de la finance," in *De la page blanche aux salles obscures: Adaptation et réadaptation dans le monde Anglophone*, trans. Ariane Hudelet, ed. Ariane Hudelet ad Shannon Wells-Lassagne (Rennes: Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2001), 49–59.)

models that subtend it, I need first, briefly, to synopsise the plot. *The LEGO Movie* recounts, in 3D animation, the story of Emmet Brickowski (Chris Pratt), a completely ordinary LEGO minifigure who celebrates his mundane life as a cog in the wheels of industry by singing about the awesomeness of performing repetitive tasks in a faceless workforce. Emmet is, however, unaware of a nasty plan being hatched by the evil, obsessive-compulsive President (aka Lord) Business (Will Ferrell), Tyrant of Bricksburg and the LEGO Universe, as well as Company President of the Octan Corporation. Along with his Micro-Managers, President Business plans to freeze the LEGO universe permanently on a deceptively celebratory day, which he has declared "Taco Tuesday." At that time, all of the figures in Bricksburg will be forever cemented in place with "Kragle," a superweapon that is actually a tube of Krazy Glue on which the "z," the "y," and the "u" have worn off. So, although President Business tells his employees that on Taco Tuesday everyone will get a free snack and his love, the viewer is made privy to the knowledge that Taco is really spelled T.A.K.O.S.; wherein "the 's' is silent"; and wherein the letters stand for "Tentacle Arm Kragle Outside Sprayer," hence what actually awaits the minifigures is being set permanently in place, rather than a Mexican treat.

As the story unfolds, Emmet discovers Wyldstyle (Elizabeth Banks), an appropriately named female minifigure, nosing around on his construction site. Having been instructed by his employer to report "anything weird" immediately, Emmet goes to investigate and falls into a hole where the missing cap to the Kragle is located. This cap, known to freedom fighters as the "Piece of Resistance" and the only thing that can prevent President Business's plan to "end the world on Taco Tuesday," becomes stuck to Emmet's back.² His contact with the glue cap causes Emmet to hallucinate and, when he regains consciousness, Emmet finds himself in the custody of President Business' bipolar henchman, Lieutenant Bad Cop/Good Cop (Liam Neeson). Emmet is then rescued by Wyldstyle, who takes him on a journey through various LEGO playsets on the way to meeting Vitruvius (Morgan Freeman), a wizard who has prophesized that a person to be known as "the Special" will find the Piece of Resistance and put an end to President Business' dastardly plot. Therefore, with Vitruvius' recognition of the über-ordinary

2 While the notion of a "Piece of Resistance" might conjure up thoughts of Foucault in the minds of many, it is also one of the clever plays on words and languages in the film. Hence, "Piece of Resistance" is a play on "pièce de résistance," just as "nail pol-EESH" and "Q-TYYPE" – two more of President Business' secret weapons – are Gallicized versions of "nail polish" and "Q-Tip." I read this wordplay in the film as part and parcel of the kind of recombinatory, trans-everything dynamic that informs *The LEGO Movie*, in this case at the level of the signifier.

Emmet's "specialness," the mundane minifigure has greatness thrust upon him along with the missing cap to the Kragle. He is henceforth known as "the most talented, most interesting, and most extraordinary person in the universe," by all of the characters in the film – albeit with some reservations.

Thick as a Brick: Building Storyworlds

There are perhaps few films that self-consciously celebrate the mechanics of transmedial storytelling with as much gusto as *The LEGO Movie*. Quite obviously, the film incorporates characters from other possible worlds and story franchises such as Batman who helps Emmet on his quest, along with a galaxy of other characters including Superman, Wonder Woman, Michelangelo the Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtle, and Millhouse of *The Simpsons* fame. The film also features "real-world" characters like Michelangelo, the Italian renaissance artist, and Shakespeare, the 16th-century English playwright, as well as stock characters such as cops, cowboys, banditos, LEGO's 1980s "retro space guy" minifigure, and so on. By incorporating a colorful cast of real-world and storyworld characters rendered as minifigures, *The LEGO Movie* comes together through the kind of freewheeling, trans-storyworld cherry picking for which Emmet and the other freedom fighters in the film strive to clear the way. Therefore, the implication is that by thwarting Lord Business' plan to glue all of the LEGO minifigures permanently into playsets "the way they're supposed to be," the bricks are set free by the close of the movie to be reconfigured according to the imagination of anyone who plays with them, ensuring maximum creativity.

Having been blithely following the rules and believing that everything is totally awesome with no inkling that Taco (T.A.K.O.S.) Tuesday really spells disaster, Emmet rapidly finds himself in serious need of being brought up to speed on the film's central conflict, and asks Wyldstyle to catch him up. Her reply is understood by Emmet as, "Bla, bla, bla proper name, place name, backstory stuff, I'm so pretty, I like you but I'm angry with you for some reason," indicating that Emmet has stopped listening because he is, predictably enough, attracted to the messenger. At the same time however, this voice-over assumes viewers' familiarity with various mechanisms of storytelling while suggesting that characters ("proper name") are simply interchangeable linguistic markers for what Greimas would have called "actants."³ This speech also suggests that

3 Algirdas Julien Greimas, *Sémantique structurale: recherche de methode* (Paris: Larousse, 1966). Structural semanticist and semiotician Algirdas Julien Greimas famously synthesized

any setting could be inserted ("place name") from any other story or medium, and indeed the characters move seamlessly from one playset *mise-en-scène* to the next throughout the movie. "Backstory stuff" similarly alerts viewers to the notion that the storyline will contain generic plot elements that can be substituted for one another at will, like so many LEGO bricks. Moreover, Wyldstyle's voiceover (focalized through Emmet), signifies that she is angry with Emmet "for some reason," which is irrelevant because, as viewers will know based on their familiarity with Hollywood conventions, the story will find its resolution in the formation of a heterosexual couple after many misunderstandings and misadventures. Likewise, the inclusion of cues in the form of intertitles with temporal indicators ("10 seconds later") presumes that viewers are knowledgeable about historic cinematic conventions.⁴

As Stephen Keane has noted, albeit in the context of disaster movies, generic story elements such as those just mentioned signal large quantities of information to viewers, making it possible to produce films with minimal backstory, while (partially) eliminating the need to develop characters.⁵ Hence, in the present case, much of the Batman humor in the film presupposes previous knowledge of at least one of the many outings of the character across multiple media platforms (the comic books, the 1960s TV show, the movies, and so on). Familiarity with the worlds of Batman is therefore what sparks viewers' knowing chuckles when his alter ego, "Bruce Wayne, CEO of Wayne Enterprises" arrives on the scene and the Caped Crusader

the seven spheres of action and character identified in Vladimir Propp's *Morphologie du conte*, a systematic study of folk tales. Greimas distilled Propp's breakdown into categories of actants, which form what is known as the actantial model. These categories are (1) the subject, (2) the object, (3) the sender or instigator, (4) the receiver, (5) the helper, and (6) the opponent. These are then the basic story actants and may be fleshed out and interchanged as the storyteller chooses.

4 While it is tempting to cite many such moments at which the movie anticipates viewers' familiarity with narrative conventions, and particularly industrialized narrative conventions, the scene in which Wyldstyle concludes the monotonous, formulaic, in-movie TV Series *Where Are My Pants?* is quite remarkable. Here she manages to turn the one gag that informs the entire show into the final episode, by walking onto the set and exclaiming, "Hey! Guess what? Found your pants! Series is over!" which points to viewer fatigue, while foregrounding precisely those conventions that produce jaded viewers. Although there are labels to describe various sorts of irony (i.e. flat hyper-aware irony or de-historicized nostalgic parody or pastiche) my purpose here is not to try to pin down exactly what kind of self-conscious irony is operative in *The LEGO Movie*. While there are indeed many forms of irony in this film, my intention is to discuss how irony works together with transmedial storytelling in this particular case. The irony presented in the film does however have much in common with David Foster Wallace's notion of the debilitating effects of "postmodern irony and cynicism" that typifies TV shows and commercials since the 1980s (171). On this point, more below.

5 Stephen Keane, *Disaster Movies: The cinema of catastrophe* (London: Wallflower, 2001), 5.

casually remarks “Bruce Wayne? Uh... who’s that? Sounds like a cool guy.” And while this is just one example, it goes without saying that the same applies to virtually all of the other characters in the film, whether borrowed from other story franchises, or pirate lore that dates back to the 17th century and sideways to *Pirates of the Caribbean*.

Clare Parody has proposed a model for thinking about transmedia storytelling that relies both on the convergence of various media, as well as on adaptation. As she argues, adaptation is “fundamentally sympathetic to the aims and protocols of franchise storytelling” as well as an “efficient way of getting maximum use out of a fictional creation” such as a particular character or story franchise.⁶ And just as stock characters may migrate freely across storyworlds, Julie Sanders has followed Roland Barthes in arguing for the infinite adaptability of “mythic templates and outlines [for] storytelling purposes,” given that the simple elements of myth are constantly (re)appropriated and “persistently relocated in [...] new cultural geograph[ies] at each occasion of adaptation and appropriation”.⁷ Quite obviously, *The LEGO Movie* exploits several such interchangeable storytelling templates, and Emmet and the other minifigures embark upon their quest precisely to ensure that “templates” – in this case playsets – will once again be as open to reapportion and relocation as they were before President Business “erected walls between [playset] worlds and became obsessed with order and perfection.” As Wyldstyle explains, under President Business’ reign of surveillance and paranoia the minifigures are compelled to “follow the rules,” and to “make everything look like it does in the instructions.” Before this oppressive era, the minifigures supposedly enjoyed a golden age in which they were “free to travel and mingle, and build whatever they wanted,” in any setting from Outer Space to the Old West. In other words, like myth, or very familiar, simple allegorical stories and plot structures, *The LEGO Movie* seems to permit and even promote endless (re)combinatory possibilities and ludic, narrative freedom to create new stories across platforms. Or, as Jenkins has explained, transmedia stories like the one in *The LEGO Movie* are based on “complex fictional worlds which can sustain multiple interrelated characters and their stories,” and should, one might think, be open to infinite disaggregation and reconfiguration.⁸

6 Clare Parody, “Franchising/Adaptation,” *Adaptation* 4, no. 2 (2011): 211.

7 Julie Sanders, *Adaptation and Appropriation* (London: Routledge, 2006), 63–64.

8 Henry Jenkins, “Transmedia Storytelling 101,” *Confessions of an Aca-Fan. The Official Weblog of Henry Jenkins*, 22 March 2007, accessed February 15, 2019, http://henryjenkins.org/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html.

Herein however, resides an irony so blatant that I mention it only for the sake of advancing my argument, namely that, beginning as early as 1955 when LEGO released the "Town Plan" marketed as a toy system, the company itself has steadily introduced measures to "Kragle" the bricks into play systems or themed sets. Indeed, it was LEGO that invented the playset and LEGO that began marketing their bricks increasingly in play systems and sets with instructions for structured, correct play from the 1960s onwards. Moreover, it was only in response to customer complaints about not being able to buy spare parts that the company began marketing buckets of bricks on occasion, including "Creative Bucket 10662," advertised as offering "a world of unlimited building fun."⁹ Here again, however, the set contains instructions for specific scenarios, guiding child "master builders" in their selection of themes and configurations. So while LEGO constantly promotes itself as encouraging out-of-the-box thinking, it is evidently more cost-efficient and profitable for the company to sell their bricks in boxed sets, so that even the creative bucket is ultimately another building system that invites children to follow instructions, and to produce prefabricated scenarios and constructions.

The implicit self-conscious irony of holding out a kind of prescribed, supposedly unlimited freedom to create anything and everything that actually serves to regulate creative play is staged repeatedly throughout *The LEGO Movie*. Hence, we watch as the characters move fluidly from the generic Bricksburg cityscape, to the Old West, to a nautical setting and so on, which really amounts to moving from one set of rigidly defined parameters and clearly stipulated contents – "Middle Zealand. A wondrous land full of knights, castles, mutton, torture weapons, poverty, leeches, illiteracy, and, um... dragons" – to the next. This answers to Maaïke Lauwaert's description of how toy manufacturers like LEGO configure the "user and uses" of toys and set the parameters for user action. Therefore practices – what you can do with a toy like LEGO – are inscribed into its technical make-up, along with "norms and values," and "rules and requirements" that are "embedded into the design and promote specific user behavior."¹⁰ In other words, *The LEGO Movie* trades on what I read as a cynical form of irony that invites

9 On this point, see *CNN's* coverage of Chinese artist and political activist Ai Weiwei's tussle with LEGO that began in October 24, 2015, when the company refused to sell him a large quantity of bricks without his disclosure of the "thematic purpose" of a project that would require ordering in bulk. LEGO later claimed that they "do not censor or ban creative use of LEGO bricks". "Everything awesome again? LEGO changes guidelines for bulk orders." *CNN*, January 14, 2016, accessed March 1, 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2015/10/26/arts/gallery/lego-artists/index.html>.

10 Maaïke Lauwaert, *The Place of Play: Toys and Digital Cultures* (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP, 2009), 13.

uncomfortable, or perhaps knowing and self-satisfied, smirks aroused by the film's promotion of something like Derridean "free play," while really offering a way to construct yet one more predictable, themed mini-environment.¹¹

At the same time, on what one might call the macro-scale of meaning, the film follows the logic of a market in which it is important to hail as many viewers as possible, hence the film's short-circuiting of a number of the most plausible critiques of itself.¹² This is to say that the film seems to criticize and satirize LEGO's own market-driven propensity to claim that the bricks offer children unlimited creative potential and a workout for their young imaginations, while marketing their products in themed sets, with instructions that also act as affective scripts for directing play. Given that modern media companies, like those that produced *The LEGO Movie*, "are horizontally integrated [and] hold interests across a range of what were once distinct media industries," media conglomerates have "an incentive to spread [their] brand[s] or expand [their] franchises across as many different media platforms as possible" (Jenkins 2007, "Transmedia 101").¹³ Moreover, this is accomplished, at least in part, by maintaining

11 See Jacques Derrida, *Structure, Sign, and Play in the Discourse of the Human Sciences*, trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1978), passim. This contradiction has been commented on in the area of video games by many, including Jenkins, who is cautiously optimistic about the claim to "complete freedom of movement" made by *Die by the Sword* in 1998 (Henry Jenkins, "Complete Freedom of Movement: Video Games as Gendered Play Spaces" in *From Barbie to Mortal Combat: Gender and Computer Games*, ed. Justine Cassell and Henry Jenkins (Boston: MIT Press, 2000), passim). Martti Lahti ("As We Became Machines: Corporealized Pleasures in Video Games" in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York and London: Routledge, 2003), 157–171) and James Newman (*Video Games* (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 120–130) have been much more critical about such radical claims.

12 Much of my argument here resembles "E Unibus Pluram," David Foster Wallace's 1993 critique of television and US fiction, particularly when he writes that "[t]elevision's managed to become its own most profitable critic" (157), or that television "must somehow undercut television-watching in theory [...] while reinforcing television-watching in practice" (164), or again how TV "has become able to capture and neutralize any attempt to change or even protest the attitudes" (171) that it requires to continue passively viewing (David Foster Wallace, "E Unibus Pluram: Television and U.S. Fiction," *Review of Contemporary Fiction*, 13:2 (Summer 1993)). That said, Wallace's essay deals specifically with TV and American fiction of over two decades ago and I believe that *The LEGO Movie* has raised the ante somewhat in the various ways that the present essay seeks to illuminate.

13 On this point see also Parody, who writes that franchise-based storyworlds are "fundamentally driven by corporate desires to colonize and capitalize upon media outlets," and furthermore that "what franchise adaptations adapt can [...] be conceptualized as a brand identity, the intellectual property, advertising language, and presentational devices that cohere, authorize, and market the range of media products that together comprise the franchise experience" (Parody, 213, 214).

a firm grip on the franchise and policing its limits so that everything is *not* possible. Jenkins' observations as to how narrative franchises work through contemporary media companies therefore help to explain the clever irony behind *The LEGO Movie* and how it resides in pointing, in true postmodern, self-conscious fashion, to storyworlds as agglomerated fictional universes, imaginatively extended and developed through transmedia storytelling.

"Arr, thaar be too many micro-managers!!"

As I have been arguing, *The LEGO Movie* both exemplifies and autoreflexively ironizes the various ways in which transmedia storytelling practices seem to promote creative freedom, while expanding potential markets for their properties by offering different points of entry for various audience segments. In this case, those market segments include children who play with LEGO bricks and playsets, and who will enjoy watching their favorite toy through an alternative media platform, AFOLs (Adult Fans of LEGO), viewers familiar with the storyworlds like *Batman* and *Star Wars* that the film incorporates, and so on. At the same time, I would argue, the film makes an effort to entertain viewers like myself who are skeptical about the industrial creativity-and-freedom message that the movie potentially communicates, and this, I believe, is done by means of the kind of self-conscious humor that I have just outlined. *The LEGO Movie*, then, is a slick, slyly self-conscious film, based on an enormously popular toy and the industry that produces it, as well as the multi-platform economic models that subtend it, featuring figures such as the neoliberal, paranoid, obsessive-compulsive Lord Business and his micro-managing henchmen. And what's wrong with that?

To begin answering this question I refer to Octan, the supposedly fictional company at the center of *The LEGO Movie* run by Lord Business, that "make[s] good stuff: dairy products, TV shows, coffee, surveillance cameras, all history books, [and] voting machines." This description, of course, loosely describes many of the "big ten" multinationals, and enormous, highly diversified corporations like LEGO, so it is not without significance that Octan is lampooned in the film as a patently evil, despotic corporate dictatorship. Importantly, moreover, Octan made its first appearance in various LEGO sets beginning in 1992, whereas before 1992, LEGO used the logos of real-world oil companies Esso, Shell, and Exxon in their boxed playsets. While LEGO dropped the Esso and Exxon logos sometime thereafter due to negative associations that consumers might have with these companies, it continued to use the Shell

logo until 2014, when the company announced that it would not renew its marketing agreement with Shell under pressure from Greenpeace.¹⁴

It seems safe to conclude, then, that LEGO is well aware that many potential customers freely and eagerly consume fossil fuel in multitudinous forms including LEGO bricks, yet they might see the companies that extract and distribute it as being evil.¹⁵ In other words, by making fun of an industry with which LEGO is complicit, the film offers a thinly veiled attempt to ensure that consumers and viewers who are concerned about the environment will continue to enjoy LEGO toys, the movie, and possibly the video games or a trip to a LEGO Land.

This same in-film criticism is also applied to the neoliberal, highly diversified corporate model represented in *The LEGO Movie*, run by President Business and his Micro-Managers. Key to President Business' approach to management is the constant use of Octan's surveillance cameras to ensure that everything be rigid and proceed according to the rules, hence Emmet's frequent objections that he cannot do anything that is "against the instructions." Yet while foregrounding corporate business models and the kinds of generic, interchangeable worker subjectivities it shapes, the film also features a hero whose very conformity ironically helps him to subvert the oppressive order. Likewise, in spite of having a face that is so generic that it matches every other face in the database and cannot be identified by President Business' surveillance cameras, Emmet nonetheless becomes attached to the "Piece of Resistance" and is henceforth known as The Special. Here again, by holding a business model very similar to that of LEGO up to ridicule, along with the conventions of transmedial storytelling as a cynical means of extending popular brands and storytelling franchises, LEGO and the companies that produced the film have short-circuited a number of possible critiques while increasing their viewer and fan base.¹⁶ This layer of irony makes it possible for viewers who might be critical of neoliberal

14 Alanna Petroff, "Lego ditches Shell after Arctic oil protests." *CNN*. October 9, 2014: 8:07. Accessed March 1, 2016, <http://money.cnn.com/2014/10/09/news/companies/lego-shell-greenpeace/index.html>.

15 It is perhaps worthy of note here that the LEGO Group is one of the world's leading tire manufacturers. "7 things you might not know about Lego," *CNN*, accessed March 6, 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/videos/showbiz/2014/02/17/orig-7-cool-things-about-lego-npr.cnn>.

16 LEGO's business model is a frequent topic of CNN feature stories, such as "Lego boss reads *The Opposable Mind*" in which LEGO's CEO, Jorgen Vig Knudstorp, explains how the company attempts to incorporate or co-opt a variety of points of view and connect them, much as LEGO bricks can potentially be combined in various configurations, to produce winning concepts. "Lego posts 25% revenue jump, profits up 31%," *CNN*, accessed March 1, 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/search/?text=lego>.

management schemes to sit back and enjoy the film, just as feminists who might be irritated by the dearth of female characters in the movie may be assuaged by the inclusion of Wyldstyle as a "liberated," albeit post-feminist, action figure.

Goldbricking

I believe that there is a deeper argument to be made here, which I would like to begin to unfold that argument by concurring with Fredric Jameson that there is a cultural logic to late capitalism, and with David Harvey who argued that it "should be possible to consider how [...] the changing experience of space, time and money has formed a distinctive material basis for the rise of distinctive systems of interpretation and representation" just as "money and commodities are themselves the primary bearers of cultural codes".¹⁷ So if money – and the ways in which it circulates in capitalist systems – both bears and lends its logic to culture, I think it is instructive as well to revisit Georg Simmel's work on the role of money as the great leveler, based on the observation that it creates commensurability between widely dissimilar commodities. Writing at a key juncture in economic modernity late in the 19th century, Simmel theorized money as the autonomous manifestation of the relationship of exchange that transforms "desired objects into economic objects and establishes the *substitutability* of objects."¹⁸ As an agreed-upon signifier of value, money provides "the means to be exchangeable for something else [...] by sublimating the relativity of things," which makes money "similar to the forms of logic which lend themselves equally to any particular content, regardless of that content's development or combination."¹⁹ For Simmel, then, money is a sort of ur-LEGO form, which serves an equivalency, uniformity, and exchangeability function just like the bricks, which no doubt also "bear" the cultural logic of money.

More recently, and in the context of full-blown late capitalism and postmodern finance, Mark C. Taylor has synthesized the work of various thinkers on the topic of money, from Aristotle to Marx, in writing that

17 David Harvey, "Time Space Compression and the Postmodern Condition." *The Condition of Postmodernity*, 284–308 (Oxford: Blackwell, 1991), 299.

18 Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, trans. David Fisby (London and New York: Routledge, 2004), 119 (emphasis added).

19 *Ibid.*, 121, 441.

“[s]tandardization allows money to be a unit of account and durability” which makes it particularly amenable to use as a medium of exchange.²⁰ Moreover, quoting Simmel, Taylor concludes that money is “the condition of possibility of a structure” and therefore “must retain a certain neutrality that, in Simmel’s [sic] terms, is “completely adaptable to any use. As a result of this neutrality money can take many forms; it is, in other words, polymorphous, polyvalent, and, some would insist, perverse.”²¹ In other words, if I may gloss both Simmel and Taylor, money “legofies” our lifeworlds by collapsing difference and rendering all things commensurate and exchangeable, just as a building, scene, or person may be rendered in identical, interchangeable LEGO bricks.²²

In the current, neoliberal capitalist paradigm, money shapes our lifeworlds perhaps somewhat more openly and profoundly than it has at any juncture in the past. While there are many reasons as to why this might be the case, probably the most salient is the progressive deregulation of the market over the past several decades, which has entailed the lifting of restrictions concerning what constitutes ethical trading practice and what banks are able to do. One of the consequences of banks and lending institutions becoming ever freer to self-regulate is a tremendous shift from the backing of solid assets in favor of using money to create more money through the development of various instruments of credit, exposure to risk and numerous trade mechanisms, all of which have led to what Randy Martin famously called the financialization of daily life. Moreover, with the growing importance of finance capitalism and the economic developments that I just noted, the role of large corporations has also changed so that, where they were once “chartered to serve both their *shareholders and society as a whole*” including employees

20 Mark C. Taylor, *Confidence Games: Money and Markets in a World without Redemption* (Chicago and London: The University of Chicago Press, 2004), 59.

21 Taylor, 60; Simmel, 441.

22 It would be interesting to connect LEGO, which got its start in 1932, to many cultural and economic developments typical of “modernism” and “structuralism,” of which Simmel’s thought is representative. Such a study would take into account the early days of the science of management and Max Weber’s notions concerning “the administered” world, Saussure’s model of the signifier, and architectural modernism of which Frank Lloyd Wright, who played with an early German construction toy called Froebel Blocks, is the vanguard. His mother purchased the bricks at the Centennial Exposition in Philadelphia 1876, and Wright wrote in his autobiography “the maple wood blocks [...] are in my fingers to this day. These primary forms and figures were the secret of all effects [...], which were ever got into the architecture of the world” (J. Froebel-Parker “The Influence of Friedrich Froebel on Frank Lloyd Wright,” Froebel Web: An Online Resource, accessed March 4, 2016, www.froebelweb.org/web2000.html).

and customers, the Business Roundtable of the United States officially changed its mandate in 1997, stating that "the notion that the board must somehow balance the interests of other stakeholders [than shareholders] *fundamentally misconstrues the role of directors.*"²³ While this trend was already developing in the 1980s, it led to massive downsizing and staffing/cost reductions, which were put in force as a way to boost share prices, based on the assumption that layoffs would increase shareholder confidence, in turn having a positive impact on prices. So, as shareholders' profits have come to "trump all other considerations" including any concern for "society as a whole," managers have found that the easiest way to increase profits in the short term is through constant restructuring, which invariably results in mass layoffs and, ultimately, the end of the ideal of lifelong careers and all of the psychological and social stability that goes with such a concept.²⁴

Furthermore, while market deregulation has often led to massive downsizing, deregulation has also produced a pronounced market dependence on derivatives. Briefly, derivatives amount to a disaggregation of assets to be reassembled in (partially) new configurations so that, whereas in the past industry and the market attempted to build,

tightly integrated commodit[ies] that [were] more than the sum of [their] parts, financial engineering play[s] this process in reverse, disassembling a commodity [or company] into its consistent and variable elements and dispersing these attributes to be bundled together with elements of other commodities of interest to a globally oriented market for risk-managed exchange. Each of these moveable parts is reassembled by risk attribute so that they become worth more as derivatives than their individual commodities, leveraged as they are for the further purchase of credit instruments.²⁵

This model, according to Martin, is structured by the logic of the derivative, and it works in much the same way as LEGO's bricks, the company's business model, and its many transmedial outputs. As one business-blogger wrote under the heading of "The Legofication of Business," "the key to [the] LEGO block is the simple and consistent interface. Doesn't matter what the shape

23 Barbara Ehrenreich, *Smile or Die: How Positive Thinking Fooled America & The World* (Croydon: Granata, 2009), 109 (emphasis added).

24 Ibid.

25 Martin, 89.

of the block is, the fact that every block has the same interface allows them to be connected” and disconnected in profit-generating ways (ObjectSharp Blog).²⁶ Moreover, derivatives’ supposed purpose, namely to distribute risk as a means of hedging against failure, equally applies to *The LEGO Movie*. This is to say that little imagination is required to see how this kind of derivative, recombinatory logic applies to an inherently complex film like this one, put together through the decentralized dynamics of culture that operate along the lines of shifting connections between various storyworlds and, significantly, I would add, between human and non-human actors.

What kind of Minifigure am I? Subjectivity, Affect, Cuteness

The Daily Mash recently published a piece entitled “LEGO ‘promoting unrealistic body image’” in which Julian Cook, a father of three, reportedly complained, “LEGO is promoting an aesthetic standard that is simply not achievable for human beings.” He went on to explain that his “12-year-old daughter spends all her time trying to make her body shorter and stockier, and her nose disappear completely.”²⁷ While this is obviously a fictional spoof on very legitimate concerns surrounding Barbie, appropriate body shape, and the ostensibly negative influence that such dolls have on girls’ self-images, the piece is not without significance in the present context. Indeed, if Henry Jenkins is correct in arguing that transmedia texts do “not simply disperse information” but rather provide sets of “roles and goals which readers [and viewers] can assume as they enact aspects of the story through their everyday life,”²⁸ and if, according to Randy Martin,

26 “The Legofication of Business”, Object Sharp Blog, posted August 13, 2012, accessed February 15, 2019, <http://blogs.objectsharp.com/post/2012/08/13/The-Legofication-Of-Business.aspx>.

Here one might argue that the term “legofication” as it appears in this title to the blog entry I am quoting fails to take into account how LEGO, as a cultural form, is itself an epiphenomenon of an economic base. Were this the case, the suggestion would be that legofication is simply a reverse logic whereby commoditized culture informs economic structures and practices. That said, however, I use the term “legofication” as more than simply a metaphor based on similarities between capital and LEGO, and intend it to refer to the logic of the neoliberal practices that I have been at pains to bring to light in this essay. My goal is to look at the cultural and economic significance of LEGO in order to illustrate how a brand can become an underlying phenomenon, or at least partially inform the underlying systems of management and production which in turn inform and rely on culture, while also taking their cue from cultural production.

27 “Lego ‘Promoting Unrealistic Body Image’”, *The Daily Mash*, posted June 18, 2015, accessed March 2, 2016 and February 15, 2019, www.thedailymash.co.uk/news/society/lego-promoting-unrealistic-body-image-2015061899397.

28 Jenkins, “Transmedia Storytelling 101.”

"derivatives are not essentially economic but feature in all manner of social relations, sites and forms," then the legofication of industry, the market, and entertainment commodities may have a serious impact on us as subjects.²⁹ In other words, as lightly as one would like to take this fictional account of parental heartbreak over the need to explain to children that their "hands will never come to resemble half-eaten Hula Hoops, nor will [their] head[s] develop a circular growth onto which various hats and hairstyles can be clicked," it is nonetheless true that children's stories, games, and toys mold us as children in ways that stay with us into adulthood.

As I have been arguing, the current economic order favors the progressive legofication of businesses, corporations, and public institutions and deals in mass layoffs, constant restructuring, and the loss of job security. This model both requires and shapes a specific kind of legofied subjectivity; that is, people who are separate yet interchangeable and perform much like minifigures who can figuratively click on whatever hat or hairstyle they need to move from job to job, or contract to contract, having given up on the notion of a professional calling or lifelong career. This kind of postmodern subject was first referred to by Deleuze as a "dividual" – that is, constituted from a mixed bag of "sub- and trans-individual arrangements of intensities at the level of bodies-in-formation."³⁰ According to Appadurai, this kind of subjectivity comes into sharp focus in what he refers to as our current "predatory" capitalist mode, wherein,

[n]umbers are attached to consumer purchases, discrete interactions, credit, life-changes, health profiles, educational test results and a whole battery of related life events, so as to make these parts of the individual combinable and customizable in such ways as to render moot or irrelevant the idea of the "whole," the classic individual.³¹

The upshot is a world of "dividuals" whose information, the substance of who we are, can then be "further searched, combined and re-aggregated" to increase profits, and thoroughly legofied worker subjects capable of snapping on a different hat as they move from one temporary contract to the next, taking on legofied work-packages that amount to a parcel – a brick – of

29 Randy Martin, "After Economy? Social Logics of the Derivative." *Social Text* 114. 31.1 (Spring 2013): 83–106, 85.

30 Anderson, 165.

31 *Ibid.*, 109–110.

what would formerly have been an entire job, performed by an *individual*. And this constant precarity, this failure to achieve what only a few decades ago was considered the norm, is what we are constantly enlisted, through various media in various places, to understand as freedom, recasting upsets as success. In short, we are invited to believe that disappointment, or what may be construed as failure (i.e. the failure to achieve what was formerly the mark of even a moderately successful career such as tenure or a permanent contract) should be reframed as an opportunity to succeed. Hence, by never “letting a good crisis go to waste,” by never giving in to low-grade depression and anxiety that might affect our performance at work, we are constantly incited to tell ourselves “everything is awesome!”³²

Seen in this light, the opening sequences of *The LEGO Movie*, in which we watch Emmet as he goes about his morning ablutions, are particularly revealing. Upon waking, Emmet immediately consults his copy of *Instructions on How to Fit in, Have Everybody Like You, and Always Be Happy!*, a twenty-one-step program that includes:

Step 1: Breathe, Step 2: Greet the day, smile and say: Good morning city! [...] Step 11: Obey traffic signs and regulations, [...] Step 13: Park between the lines, [...] Step 15: Always root for the local sports team (Go sports team!), Step 16: Always return a compliment, Step 17: Drink overpriced coffee, Step 18: If you see anything weird report it immediately [...], Step 20: Always obey President Business, Step 21: Go to sleep, wake up in the morning and repeat the instructions.

Quite obviously, this is a mock-up of the multibillion-dollar motivational products industry that has informed American culture at least since Ben Franklin published his pithy advice manuals in the 18th century, and since the publishers of Norman Vincent Peale’s *Power of Positive Thinking*

32 One of the best examples of what I am describing may be observed in the progressively privatized contemporary university, wherein entire programs are now regularly disaggregated, merged and course offerings recombined, often seemingly randomly, producing bizarre interdisciplinary grab-bags aimed at reducing teaching staff. Such management practices supposedly allow students greater interdisciplinary freedom, while euphemisms such as “reducing tenure density” or “career-change opportunities” have been coined to describe the practice of rendering the lion’s share of faculty “adjunct,” “independent,” “freelance contractors,” who receive no benefits or research time. In this model, the elimination of tenure is held out as offering teachers and researchers the “freedom” to chase part-time, legofied contracts, composed of disaggregated courses for which adjunct faculty are paid low, flat rates, from one university to the next. On this point, see also Randy Martin’s rather more hopeful “Taking an Administrative Turn: Derivative Logics for a Recharged Humanities,” (*Resources*, Vol. 116, no. 1 (Fall 2011): 156–176), *passim*.

urged executives to "give the book to employees. It pays dividends!"³³ So while the opening scene of *The LEGO Movie* is an excellent portrayal of the transparent monetization of the human psyche that drives the self-help and motivational industries, it is clear that Emmet is being coached to fit in, like a faceless cog in the wheel who obeys the rules and contributes to maximum productivity, while performing surveillance for the company on the side (Step 18), and consuming the overpriced products of other large corporations while smiling (Step 17).³⁴

This last point is, at least tangentially, connected to developments such as those noted by Barbara Ehrenreich that involve "about thirty million full-time American workers [who] lost their jobs in corporate downsizings" between 1981 and 2003.³⁵ One particularly disturbing result of this trend of downsizing as a means of increasing share prices has been the growth of the self-help industries who dole out advice to the newly unemployed, and those (still) employed who suffer from ever-greater intensification of work. Likewise, these developments have also spawned a massive team-building industry as the answer to deteriorating employment conditions. The irony is of course that, "just as layoffs were making a mockery of the team concept, employees were urged to find camaraderie and a sense of collective purpose at the micro level of the 'team'".³⁶ And these industrial developments are all, of course, reflected in Emmet's careful and enthusiastic adherence to the instructions for everything from work to personal hygiene (Step 4: Take a shower, Step 5: Brush your teeth [...], Step 7: Comb your hair, Step 8: Wear clothes), and yet more volubly in the movie's theme song "Everything is Awesome." This is Emmet's favorite song which he "loves listening to over and over again" while becoming indoctrinated into the notion that "everything is cool when you're part of a team!" In other words, the film cynically follows management trends aimed at "helping" workers to accept greater job precarity and shrinking opportunity with a smile, rather than actually doing anything about the larger, macroeconomic problems that give rise to worker precarity in the first place.

33 Ehrenreich, 100. Various aspects of the happiness industries and happiness culture are increasingly the target of criticism by authors like Sara Ahmed, Lauren Berlant, and William Davies. Sara Ahmed, *The Promise of Happiness* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2010); Lauren Berlant, *Cruel Optimism* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2010); William Davies, *The Happiness Industry: How the Government and Big Business Sold Us Well-Being* (London and New York: Verso, 2015).

34 While the overpriced coffee moment in the film is quite clearly a poke at Starbucks, it equally advertises the franchise, however implicitly.

35 *Ibid.*, 114.

36 *Ibid.*, 120.

Such strategies and models were first referred to by Hardt and Negri as “affective labour,” that is, labor that is immaterial “even if it is corporeal and affective, in the sense that its products are intangible: a feeling of ease, well-being, satisfaction, excitement, passion – even a sense of connectedness or community.”³⁷ Affective labor feeds into “affective capitalism,” through which sensational and sensorial products and services are produced that distract us from the real, serious problems entailed in the neoliberal economic order in which we must now operate. Affective practices (including everything from cute company mascots to wellness initiatives and office fun, to various kinds of commercial coping strategies for customers of various services and venues such as comfort animals) embrace subjects who have been rendered precarious through operations such as downsizing or generalized economic attrition, with manufactured warmth and care in order to extract more labor and mental resources from an increasingly exhausted work force. One excellent example of this kind of affective strategy is President Business’ Taco Tuesday. As he tells the multitudes of LEGO workers, “don’t forget Taco Tuesday’s coming next week! That’s the day every rule-following citizen gets a free taco and my love! Have a great day everybody!” Indeed, affective strategies including Emmet’s company-supplied, self-help manual are presented throughout *The LEGO Movie* with such overwhelming cynicism that even Vitruvius blithely admits that the film’s central, heart-warming message was just made up, “because the only thing anyone needs to be special is to believe that you can be.” This is immediately followed by the wizard’s admission that he knows “that sounds like a cat poster,” at which moment we see just such a motivational poster in the background featuring a kitten and a single word: “Believe.”³⁸

The LEGO Movie’s motivational cat poster brings me to one last aspect of the current economic paradigm that I have been endeavoring to sketch out, and which is a key feature of the film, namely the enormous role that cuteness has come to play in our daily lives, particularly in the form of cute cats, from the endless cute cat videos that infest our waking lives as we tap into social media, to Princess Unikitty of the film, who recalls Kitty White of Hello Kitty fame. As recent work on cuteness invariably

37 Hardt, 96.

38 Note that *The LEGO Movie* “Commitment Hanging Kitten Motivational Poster” is also available for purchase at many outlets, including amazon.com. While the film’s cat poster may be a parody of Fox Mulder’s famous, “I Want to Believe” poster, it also reiterates the cynically fake moral of this story, namely that even an ordinary person like Emmet can be a hero if only he believes in himself.

points out,³⁹ there has been an astonishing proliferation of cute aesthetics over the last few decades; an aesthetic and affective agent that was first taken seriously by ethologist Konrad Lorenz in his 1943 study, "The Innate Forms of Possible Experience" [*Die angeborenen Formen möglicher Erfahrung*] (1943). Here Lorenz advanced the Darwinian notion that, as a result of natural selection, most infants have an innate quality that prompts caring in adults. Lorenz then broke this quality down into an "inborn schema of the infant [*das Kindchenschema*]," with which he mapped out a number of cute [*herzig*] characteristics that act as innate releasing mechanisms in adults, including smallness as well as a "large head, predominance of the brain capsule, large and low-lying eyes, bulging cheek region, short, thick extremities, a springy elastic consistency, and clumsy movements".⁴⁰

While quite obviously not all LEGO products tick all of these boxes, it is equally evident that the company has both promoted and profited from cuteness since its beginnings, trading on cute aesthetics and affects, just as cuteness has come to sugarcoat increasingly vast expanses of our daily lives.⁴¹ Cute aesthetics are then supposed to induce profitably cuddly affects from emotionally and psychically self-regulating subjects always caught in the labor of self-improvement like Emmet, beginning every morning with the 21 steps to happiness. Cuteness aids in co-opting resistance by rebranding various forms of disappointment (i.e. loss of employment and opportunity) as success, and then acts as an affective veneer that insulates us as precarious, financialized subjects with puppies, kittens, and emoji as emotional anchors. In other words, we are invited to "amuse ourselves to death," to borrow Neil Postman's felicitous phrase, and to consume cute products as we witness the constant erosion of social safety nets, shrinking opportunities for youth, increased precarity in the work place, and so on.

Importantly, all the fun and cuteness of LEGO also inspires or encourages "playbor," a term coined to describe the increasing trend to "gamify" labor with the goal of fooling workers (as in "Taco Tuesday") into believing that they are having fun. The term playbor refers to labor performed, most often free of charge, by fans, bloggers, and other interactive media users who

39 Examples include Sianne Ngai's *Our Aesthetic Categories: Zany, Cute, Interesting* (Harvard: Cambridge University Press, 2012) and Christine Yano's *Pink Globalization: Hello Kitty's Trek across the Pacific* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2013).

40 Lorenz, 276–277.

41 Many of these problematics are explored in Joshua Paul Dale, Joyce Goggin, Julia Leyda, Anthony P. McIntire, and Diane Negra, *The Aesthetics and Affects of Cuteness* (New York and London: Routledge, 2016).

generate content for companies like LEGO.⁴² Hence, as the wiki *TV Tropes* points out, “a lot of the film’s humor comes from jokes that can be done with LEGO Toys, like the similar *LEGO Adaptation Game* series (which even has a game based on this film)” (“Western Animation”). Therefore, as Maaik Lauwaert has explained, “[b]y incorporating peripheral, many-to-many activities and practices within new products, these activities and practices are commodified [...] [and] work penetrates play. The result is a partly commodified geography of play in which certain divergent user practices are ‘harvested’ and commercially used”.⁴³ True to Lauwaert’s description, this same blogger goes on to explain that the

“LEGO Adaptation Game” has become a catch-all term for a loosely-connected series of Multi-Platform VideoGames made by Travellers’ Tales, based on combining the license for LEGO with that of another work, generally a film, as tie-ins to licensed toy lines based on the same films LEGO is producing and selling around the same time. These games [...] consist of LEGO interpretations of previously licensed work, with tongue-in-cheek, often parodical [sic] cut-scenes poking fun at both those works and the fact that they are made out of LEGO bricks.⁴⁴

In other words, the labor of fans who have long produced “jokes that can be done with LEGO Toys” and short films on YouTube become both consumers of the bricks and producers of content based on the bricks. A portion of that content is then appropriated by LEGO and ultimately feeds an organizational form that rehashes “previously licensed work,” and maintains control over storyworlds for the corporate generation of enormous profits.

But again, what is the big deal if everyone is having a good time? How seriously should one take a light-hearted toy and film that, we are told, is all about people being “inspired by each other, people taking something you made and making something new out of it,” or making “whatever weird thing that comes into your head and building things only you can build”? First, as

42 For a detailed discussion of playbor in various media, see Julian Kücklich, “FCJ-025 Precarious Playbour: Modders and the Digital Gaming Industry,” *The Fibreculture Journal*, Vol. 5 (2005), and Joyce Goggin “Playbour, Farming and Leisure,” *Ephemera: Theory and Politics in Organization*, Vol. 11, no. 4 (2011): 357–368. See also S.C. Bolton and M. Houlihan “Are we having fun yet? A consideration of workplace fun and engagement.” In *Employee Relations*, Vol. 31, no. 6 (2009): 556–568, on employee “fun.”

43 Lauwaert, 69.

44 “The Lego Movie” on TV Tropes, accessed February 15, 2019, <http://tvtropes.org/pmwiki/pmwiki.php/WesternAnimation/TheLEGOmovie>.

I intimated above, toys mold us as children into the adults we become – as the existence of the term AFOL would imply. In a related essay on *World of Warcraft*, Scott Rettberg has commented on how toys and games prepare us as adults for the labor market and how the game

serves as a tool to educate its players in a range of behaviors and skills specific to the situation of conducting business in an economy controlled by corporations. The game is training a generation of good corporate citizens not only to consume well and to pay their dues, but also to climb the corporate ladder, to lead projects, to achieve sales goals, to earn and save, to work hard for better possessions, to play the markets, to win respect from their peers and their customers, to direct and encourage and cajole their underlings to outperform, to become better employees and perhaps, eventually, effective future CEOs.⁴⁵

While this is the view of an academic, it is important to note that it is shared by IBM who published a report on games and entrepreneurship in 2007, in which we read, “[i]f you want to see what business leadership may look like in three to five years, look at what’s happening in online games,” claiming that video games, of which LEGO has produced many, train leaders to deftly navigate the motivational, emotional and social needs [...] in a highly competitive, distributed, virtual environment.”⁴⁶

Perhaps it is equally important to view the transmedial spread of narrative as an industrialized process “where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience” while generating profits.⁴⁷ If we connect this thought to Thomas Elsaesser’s observation that narratives and games “‘rehearse’ life at the same time as they replay it” and that narratives and storytelling serve as “collective memory, as problem-solving mechanism, as imaginary resolution to real contradictions, as ordering principle of contingent events, as therapy for life’s traumata, as consolation and agent of redemption,” then the implications are vast.⁴⁸ To point to just

45 Rettberg, 33. It is something of a truism that play shapes us as children; hence Wallis Simons’ piece entitled “Why Lego is ruining our kids’ imaginations” for CNN news (CNN, accessed March 2, 2016, <http://edition.cnn.com/2014/12/01/opinion/lego-imagination-opinion/index.html>) in which he argues that “play is a vitally important part of a child’s development, and toy manufactures are uniquely placed to influence their lives – for the better or for the worse.”

46 “Virtual Worlds, Real Leaders.”

47 Jenkins, “Transmedia Storytelling 101.”

48 Elsaesser, 309.

one example, consider the contemporary role of authors and how they are now required to tell and sell their stories in a market hungry for transmedial spreadability. In Simone Murray's work on *The Adaptation Industry*, she explains how the ways in which storytelling has become part of the "creative industries" make it desirable for authors to engage in "twin-track writing," simultaneously producing novels and screenplays, and eventually game scenarios, while they "acknowledge that content proliferates across multiple platforms, often simultaneously and frequently with print its subsequent not its initial incarnation".⁴⁹ This is just one of the many ways that transmedia storytelling reflects the economics of media consolidation and convergence, or what industry observers call "synergy," rather than the free play of the signifier, the random combination of story elements, or the potential products of just anyone's imagination – unless these can be co-opted as playbor.

Conclusion: Freedom Friday or T.A.K.O.S. Tuesday?

In Mark Wolf's essay on *Star Wars* and LEGO, he explains that the adaptation of a film "into a physical playset is qualitatively different from narrative adaptation between audiovisual media," at least in part because "[t]he design [of LEGO playsets] has a way of compartmentalizing the film's action, even though [...] a number of locations are adjacent" as they were in the film, and then rendered in brick sets.⁵⁰ These observations capture the double message of *The LEGO Movie* and indeed, of the LEGO enterprise more generally, namely its acknowledgement, use, and self-conscious critique of the constant oscillation between the poles of free play and corporatized fun. LEGO negotiates inherent contradictions such as those entailed in promoting the creation of random "weird dorky stuff," as the characters in the movie call it, in playworlds in which "everything is thought out," or in following "the rules [to an] inter-locking brick thing" and "embrac[ing] what is special about you." So, as Lauwaert pointed out, there are rules and requirements that

49 Simone Murray, *The Adaptation Industry: The Cultural Economy of Contemporary Literary Adaptation* (New York and London: Routledge, 2012), 93, 95. Note that, at the time of writing, a quick trip to amazon.com will yield any number of spin-off products and titles from *The LEGO Movie*, including children's books and novelizations of the film with titles such as *The LEGO Movie: Junior Novel* by Kate Howard, *The LEGO Movie: Calling All Master Builders!* by Helen Murray, *The LEGO Movie: Meet Unikitty!* by Shari Last and *The LEGO Movie: Emmet's Awesome Day*, by Anna Holmes.

50 Mark J.P. Wolf, "Adapting the Death Star into LEGO: The Case of LEGO Set #10188," in *LEGO Studies: Examining the Building Blocks of a Transmedial Phenomenon*, edited by Mark J.P. Wolf, 15–40 (New York and Oxon: Routledge, 2014), 15, 28.

are "embedded into the design and promote specific user behaviour," hence claims made by toys and games companies about offering complete freedom of movement can only ever be partially true.⁵¹ As Clare Parody has likewise suggested, "convergence culture may even be conditioning consumers to actively want to see" particular characters and storyworlds in various media.⁵² Given that we all know that narrative and game worlds are structured by rules and delimited by specific parameters, it would appear that we are destined to repeat Hamlet's lament: "Oh God, I could be bounded in a nutshell and count myself a king of infinite space, were it not that I have bad dreams".⁵³

Moreover, because totally "free play" is both a heuristic and a utopian notion, the issues I have just mentioned have plagued thought on play for centuries; at least since Kant and Schiller were writing about play in the 18th century. So how is the current paradigm any different and how does transmedia storytelling bring such irksome issues more sharply into focus? In part, the answer resides in the increasing complicity between play and industrialization at a historical juncture and in an economic paradigm in which notions such as the "creative industries" have become thoroughly naturalized. If this is coupled with Jenkins' argument that "the encyclopedic ambitions of transmedia texts often results [sic] in what might be seen as gaps or excesses in the unfolding of the story [...] so that readers [...] have a strong incentive to continue to elaborate on these story elements, working them over through their speculations, until they take on a life of their own," the implications are many and serious.⁵⁴ But here again, as anyone who works in the area of literary hermeneutics and gives much thought to how readers are interpolated when a text is activated will tell you, this is nothing new. What is different is the injection of technology and the immediacy that the internet affords fan culture to participate in storyworlds while also having considerable parts of their own worlds reciprocally shaped by narrative franchises. Coupled with the economic developments I have been at pains to sketch out here, the idea of spending time in LEGO Land takes on new resonance.

Likewise, I would concur with those scholars who argue that "there is one characteristic of modernity [...] emphasised by intellectuals since the eighteenth century: modernity is 'disenchanted,'" while also considering that, in the present era of financialization, what mystifies and enchants is

51 Lauwaert, 25.

52 Parody, 216.

53 *Hamlet* 2:2.

54 Jenkins, "Transmedia Storytelling 101."

finance itself.⁵⁵ As Appadurai has argued “even a simple housing mortgage is a mysterious thing,” structured as mortgages are on “immeasurably complex” derivative packages whereby “unlimited distances” separate “the instrument [of credit] and underlying commodity,” such that they become “opaque quantitative forms that are illegible to the average citizen.”⁵⁶ In other words, as Mark Hanna (Matthew McConaughey) so aptly explains to Jordan Belfort (Leonardo DiCaprio) in *The Wolf of Wall Street*, finance is a “fugazi, a fugazi. It’s a wazy. It’s a woozie. It’s fairy dust.” And this is where we now find our enchantment – and perhaps excitement, horror, and entertainment – namely, in the vicissitudes and functioning of the market, upon which the story at the heart of *The LEGO Movie* is built, and of which the film and the company provide such excellent, animated, toy illustrations. If we then connect this with recent work on myth and the market, along with my earlier observations about myth and simple story templates, and view both through the notions of narrative spreadability and transmedial profitability, then we finally begin to get a fuller picture of where contemporary enchantment comes from, namely the financial market and the way it structures imagination and creativity, and disseminates narrative today.⁵⁷

And, given all of this, I feel compelled to conclude that one can only look on in awe at the cheeky corporate cleverness of a film that closes by suggesting that T.A.K.O.S. Tuesday will be superseded by “Freedom Friday.” This, once again, ties into the larger argument of this essay about how laying open and poking fun at the very mechanisms that structure our capitalist realities and the LEGO franchise’s increasing spread across media in a world-weary defeatist “amusing ourselves to death” fashion manages to boost the very sale of the movie and the larger franchise. One shudders to think what form of Kragle will be created to cement such a motivational tradition in place.

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55 Michael Saler, *As If: Modern Enchantment and the Literary Prehistory of Virtual Reality*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2012), 8.

56 Saler, 101, 107.

57 On myth and the market, see the introduction to Miriam Meissner, *Narrating the Global Financial Crisis* (London and New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2017), 1–20.

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