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# “How Do Those Danish Bastards Sleep at Night?”\*: Fan Labor and the Power of Cuteness

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Joyce Goggin<sup>1</sup>

## Abstract

This article considers LEGO’s fans and how their labor was mobilized to create *The LEGO Movie*. Many aspects of this film make it a compelling case study for ludic economies, such as the film’s self-conscious humor that suggests an awareness on of the company’s brand-growing strategies. My argument will address fans’ response to how LEGO has farmed their labor and the lack of resistance encountered in the extraction thereof. I will suggest explanations as to why this is the case, including the kinds of affect generated by LEGO and LEGO narratives as they are transmediated across platforms, from bricks, to animation shorts, to *The LEGO Movie*. This investigation will include a discussion of LEGO’s staying power in light of one particular aesthetic—cuteness—that contributes to the affective bonds people form with the bricks and the impact of this bond on consumer subjectivities.

## Keywords

LEGO, fans, labor, freedom, cuteness

I am not an adult fan of LEGO—that is, an AFOL—which I think should be made clear from the outset. I would add, however, that my grown-up lack of enthusiasm

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\*This quote is taken from The Daily Mash. (2015)

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for this premier Danish toy is not only a function of middle-aged curmudgeonliness but is also based on impressions held over from hands-on childhood experience. My recollection of LEGO play is intimately associated with the bricks' sharp corners that hurt when you step on them, their unrelenting rigidity, and the aggravating difficulty required to separate them once conjoined. But apart from the physical properties of the bricks themselves, I found—and still find—the LEGO Playset concept similarly rigid and uncompromising and, as a child, I never felt inspired to build sets such as the LEGO “Town Plan” or “Auto Repair Shop,” which seemed boring and industrial to me. I have, therefore, never bought into the notion that LEGO inspires young imaginations, and I continue to find the product somewhat limited and limiting where what one might like to build is concerned.

As it turns out, my feelings on the matter align me with one of the two camps into which LEGO scholarship may be roughly divided, namely, those who understand the toy as supporting and sustaining imagination and creativity and those who find the LEGO concept rather more rigid and controlling than inspirational. Giddings (2014) has discussed this tension in LEGO studies and in the company's marketing at length, outlining two camps that each celebrate the LEGO concept, although one sees it as having been compromised by themed sets, instructions, and media franchises, while another camp produces “anxious accounts of LEGO's openness and ‘free play’ being closed down or at least limited through the incremental introduction of themed and franchised sets” (p. 245).

In what follows here, I want to align these conflicting points of view concerning LEGO—both the company and its products—with current work on fan studies that similarly tends to fall into two camps in ways that strike me as having much in common with the LEGO scholarship just mentioned. This is to say that, on the one hand, there are scholars like Henry Jenkins who see fan production as a potentially subversive or at least productive form of cultural “poaching” and even as having the potential to disrupt the workings of capitalism.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, there are numerous scholars who worry that fan labor is frequently just another name for unpaid labor, or creative work for which fans receive scant rewards, while large corporations such as LEGO appropriate fans' intellectual property and creative capital with which they realize enormous profits.<sup>2</sup>

With these tensions informing both LEGO and fan studies firmly in mind, I want to explore issues that congregate around the notion of open-ended creativity versus control, and free-spirited fan intervention versus unpaid labor through *The LEGO Movie*. First, where the movie is concerned, I will comment briefly on the self-conscious, autoreflexive irony that informs the plot and relies on a cynical parody of LEGO's own business model, precisely where the marketing of playsets is concerned and the supposed freedom to build anything one can imagine. Second, I will discuss the degree to which fan labor was co-opted in order to make the movie, such as stop-motion films using LEGO bricks, as well as the fans who are flattered or honored when their intellectual property is picked up by one of the many industries that contributed to the production of the movie and through which corporate profits

were generated. By way of conclusion, I also want to discuss the aesthetic appeal of LEGO—its cuteness—and the role that it plays in creating affective bonds with the product.

### *Anything for a Laugh*

In order to open a deeper exploration of the issues just raised and how they meet in *The LEGO Movie*, I will provide a quick summary of the plot, highlighting some of the irony around which the film is built. *The LEGO Movie* tells the story of Emmet Brickowski (Chris Pratt), an 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. A dupe to the ambient corporatized “awesomeness” drilled into the workers of Bricksburg through repetitive pop songs and a self-help program entitled *Instructions on How to Fit in, Have Everybody Like You and Always Be Happy!*, Emmet is unaware of a nasty plan being hatched by the evil, obsessive-compulsive, President Business (Will Ferrell). Head of Octan Corporation and Tyrant of Bricksburg—“Lord Business,” as the president likes to be called—plans to cement the LEGO universe permanently in place with the help of his micromanagers, and “Kragle,” a superweapon that is actually a tube of Crazy Glue on which the “z,” “y,” and “u” have worn off.

Emmet is awoken to reality when he finds female minifigure Wyldstyle (Elizabeth Banks), snooping around on his construction site. Having been instructed by Octan to report “anything weird” immediately, Emmet goes to investigate and falls into a hole containing the missing cap to Lord Business’ Kragle. Importantly, this glue cap is known to Wyldstyle and the Bricksburg 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,” on which day he claims that “every rule-following citizen gets a free taco and [his] love!”<sup>3</sup> The cap gets stuck to Emmet’s back causing him to lapse into a dream state from which he awakens in the custody of President Business’ bipolar henchman, Lieutenant Bad Cop/Good Cop (Liam Neeson). Emmet is rescued by Wyldstyle who takes him on a journey through LEGO Playsets on their way to meeting Vitruvius (Morgan Freeman), a wizard who prophesizes that a person to be known as “the Special” will find the Piece of Resistance and put an end to Lord Business’ evil plot. Having this new role as liberator thrust upon him, Emmet is henceforth known as “the most talented, most interesting, and most extraordinary person in the universe” and goes on a predictable, blockbuster style quest to live up to his calling.

Here, I want to highlight how *The LEGO Movie* foregrounds freedom and creativity while presenting viewers with highly predictable twists and turns, that culminate in cliché closure involving a sentimental success story for the freedom fighters, and the romantic union of Emmet and Wildstyle. To borrow a term from Julie Sanders’ book on the adaptation industries, one might call such predictable, standard plot features “mythic templates and outlines [for] storytelling purposes” (p. 63-46). Mythic

storytelling templates are distinguished by their infinite adaptability, which lends them to “persistent relocation in [...] new cultural geograph[ies] at each occasion of adaptation,” in this case from a narrative/textual model (freedom fighter on a quest), to toy, amateur animation, blockbuster movie, and so on, with relocations occurring in multiple directions (p. 63). Given this, Sander’s observation is a particularly apt description of *The LEGO Movie* and how it openly exploits the interchangeability of storytelling templates as well as LEGO’s own playset concept, while incorporating characters from other story franchises such as Batman, Superman, Wonder Woman, and Millhouse of *The Simpsons* as well as “real-world” characters like Michelangelo and Shakespeare, generic characters such as cowboys, banditos, LEGO’s own “1980s retro space guy,” and so on.

While trans-storyworld cherry-picking is nothing new, it is important to keep in mind that *The LEGO Movie* self-consciously lauds the practice, heralding it as the core value behind the minifigures’ fight to thwart Lord Business and his plan to glue them all into playsets “the way they’re supposed to be.” As viewers are reminded, the minifigures strive to maintain creative freedom by unleashing the bricks to be endlessly reconfigured, thereby maintaining the LEGO story templates’ openness to reapportion and relocation as they were before President Business “erected walls between worlds and became obsessed with order and perfection,” forcing the minifigures to “follow the rules,” and “make everything look like it does in the instructions.” In other words, *The LEGO Movie* promotes the company’s message of infinite (re)combinatory possibilities and ludic, narrative freedom to create new stories across platforms, all of which is packaged with a feel-good message and a touch of romance. The film therefore provides a textbook example of Henry Jenkins’ celebration of transmedia storytelling that develops “complex fictional worlds which can sustain multiple interrelated characters and their stories,” and should, one might surmise, be open to infinite disaggregation and reconfiguration.<sup>4</sup>

Herein however lies a striking irony. Since 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 and themed sets. LEGO also invented the playset in 1960s, at which time the company began marketing their bricks with instructions for structured, correct play. It was only in response to customer complaints that the company began occasionally marketing buckets of bricks, including “Creative Bucket 10662,” advertised as offering “a world of unlimited building fun,” although the set contains instructions for specific scenarios, guiding child “master builders” in selecting themes. Of course, one might object that reception is everything and that child builders might choose to follow the instructions or ignore them, develop their own modes of (divergent) play, or break up sets and add the bricks to their stockpile. However, while the tension between freedom and constraint should perhaps not be overstated, it is the central struggle in the film so that, ironically enough, while LEGO promotes itself as encouraging out-of-the-box thinking, it is clearly cost-efficient and profitable for the company to sell their bricks in boxed sets with instructions for guided play.

The irony of offering prescribed, yet supposedly unlimited freedom to create anything is staged throughout *The LEGO Movie* in various ways as we watch characters raging against control and Taco Tuesday while fluidly moving from the Bricksburg cityscape, to Fabuland, to the LEGO Pirate set, to LEGO Friends, to the Old West, and so on, all of which amounts to moving from one set of defined parameters and stipulated contents to another. This double-sided message—promoting freedom within fixed parameters—is not simply reducible to how one frames the narrative or to different notions of what constitutes freedom and creativity. Given the nature of LEGO as a toy with which people form deep, lifelong emotive bonds and the toy’s oft-touted pedagogical value, the film’s freedom message is significant. This is because, as Maaïke Lauwaert has explained, toy manufacturers like LEGO configure “user and uses” of toys, setting parameters for user action. Practices—what you can do with LEGO—are inscribed into its technical makeup, along with “norms and values” and “rules and requirements” that are “embedded into the design and promote specific user behavior” (Lauwaert, 2009, p. 13).

Seen in this light, I would argue that *The LEGO Movie* trades on a remarkably cynical form of irony, inviting uncomfortable or self-satisfied, smirks triggered by the film’s promotion of something like Derridian “free play,” while the toy trades on predictable themes and guided play.<sup>5</sup> Of course, all toys and games guide and educate players, and numerous scholars have written on the pedagogical function of play from Schiller through Huizinga, and more recently, Martin (2002) discussed the role of toys in grooming children to become financially literate, fiscally responsible subjects for the neoliberal age.

Briefly here however, and in more detail below, what sets the use and characterization of toys in *The LEGO Movie* apart in terms of cynical, self-conscious irony is akin to what David Foster Wallace (1993) called “pop-conscious” postmodernism in “E Unibus Pluram.” In this essay, Wallace argues that postmodern television and contemporary American fiction have become their “own most profitable critic[s]” (p. 157), undercutting their own premise in order to reinforce that premise (p. 164), and trading on the “vapidity of U.S. culture” (pp. 166–167). This has resulted in these media’s ability “to capture and neutralize any attempt to challenge or even protest attitudes of passive unease and cynicism” in order to be “commercially and psychologically viable” (p. 171). In other words, while much of what I am arguing could be said of all toy and play systems to a certain degree—the imposition of certain limitations on creativity while claiming to stimulate the same; the dissimulation of the tacit goal of subject formation—*The LEGO Movie* does so explicitly, with gusto, and to great effect, in ways very similar to those described by Wallace.

### *Somewhat Less Funny*

While I have just discussed some of the implications and mechanics of the irony on which *The LEGO Movie* trades, it is important to keep the macro signifying implications in view as well. As Henry Jenkins wrote, 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,” so that media conglomerates have “an incentive to spread [their] brand[s] or expand [their] franchises across as many different media platforms as possible,” while appealing to as many viewers as possible.<sup>6</sup> In this regard, *The LEGO Movie* both exemplifies and makes light of transmedia storytelling, promoting creative freedom by controlling the brand message while expanding markets. In order to do so, the film addresses diverse market audience segments, including children and people familiar with storyworlds like *Star Wars* and *The Simpsons*, while exploiting the intergenerational appeal of LEGO by addressing adult fans who enjoy watching the toy animated in computer-generated imagery. Where this last group is concerned, the film may also, as Wallace (1993) suggested, “elicit the yearning that accompanies nostalgia [. . .] yok[ing] purchases of products with what for yuppies is a lost era of genuine conviction” (p. 174).<sup>7</sup>

The need to include as many target groups and viewer sectors as possible perhaps also explains why the movie satirizes LEGO’s own claim that the bricks offer limitless creative potential, while everyone knows that they actually market their product in sets with instructions that act as affective scripts for directed play. This is to say that by means of self-conscious irony, the film reaches out to the company’s devoted fans *as well as* viewers who may be skeptical about an industrial creativity-and-freedom, feel-good message. In this way, *The LEGO Movie* flatters people like academics and other “informed” audience members by inviting a possible reading of the film as a slyly self-reflexive commentary about a popular toy and the industry that produces it.<sup>8</sup> And what’s wrong with that?

The answer to this question resides in how LEGO draws in customers and fans, and the ways in which the film’s ironic address has made it seemingly invulnerable to critique. What one might want to critique are various key economic developments with which both company and film are complicit and which have shaped markets and lives in dramatic ways, while constituting a good portion of the film’s plot. I refer to the financial system that underwrites the plot including how money, in the current neoliberal paradigm, shapes worlds through practices and policies such as market deregulation, through which restrictions on ethical trading and banking practice have been lifted. While yielding steady growth in the financial or investment banking sector, deregulation has resulted in increased exposure to risk in numerous other sectors of the market and led to what Martin referred to as the financialization of daily life.

One other significant impact entailed in the growth of “finance capitalism” is a corporate shift from serving shareholders as well as society as a whole, to pleasing shareholders almost exclusively through massive downsizings, restructurings, and layoffs. This policy has put an end to the once common notion of the lifelong career, while massive downsizing creates derivative dependency. This dependency comes about as the result of the constant disaggregation of companies and their assets, which are then reassembled in partially new configurations and conglomerates.

Therefore, according to Martin (2013), whereas in the past industry and the market attempted to build,

tightly integrated commoditie[s] that [were] more than the sum of [their] parts, financial engineering play[s] this process in reverse, disassembling a commodity [or company] into its constituent and variable elements and dispersing these attributes to be bundled together with elements of other commodities [for] a globally oriented market for risk-managed exchange. (p. 89)

This kind of derivative logic works much like LEGO in ways both analogical and metaphorical, and here I refer to the bricks and the corporation, as well as to its transmedial outputs in the form of fictional narratives, which are “*already* composed of fictional characters [from] highly” recognizable, popular narratives and entertainment franchises (Wallace, 1993, p. 153). Hence, as one business blogger observed under the heading “The LEGOfication of Business,” “the key to LEGO block is the simple and consistent interface. Doesn’t matter what the shape of the block is, the fact that every block has the same interface allows them to be connected” and disconnected in profit-generating ways. *The LEGO Movie* is a prime example of this kind of derivative, recombinatory logic as a complex film, constructed through the decentralized, derivative dynamics of culture that shift between storyworlds and their characters. But again here, is this necessarily a problem?

In answer, I turn to a satirical piece entitled “LEGO ‘promoting unrealistic body image’” from *The Daily Mash* (2015).<sup>9</sup> Here, a father is quoted as complaining that “LEGO is promoting an aesthetic standard that is simply not achievable for human beings.” He goes 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.” While this is clearly a parody that plays on the assumption that popular culture straightforwardly determines subjectivity, the piece is not without significance in the present context. Indeed, if Henry Jenkins is correct in arguing that transmedial 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” and if, according to Martin (2013), “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 well have a serious impact on us as subjects (p. 85).<sup>10</sup> Moreover, as lightly as one might take this fictional account of children’s heartbreak because their heads will never “develop a circular growth onto which various hats and hairstyles can be clicked,” toys do shape us as children in ways that remain into adulthood as evidenced by Adult Fan of Lego subculture.

As just noted, the current economic order that favors the LEGOfication of businesses, corporations, and public institutions while taking institutions and companies apart brick by brick, so to speak, also leads to mergers and mass layoffs, constant restructuring, and the loss of job security. This world order requires a specific kind of

LEGOified subject; namely, persons who are interchangeable and perform like mini-figures who can click on various hats, moving from contract to contract, having given up on the notion of a professional calling. Deleuze referred to this kind of subjectivity as the “dividual,” constituted from “sub- and trans-individual arrangements of intensities at the level of bodies-in-formation” (Anderson, 2010, p. 165). For Appadurai (2016), this kind of subjectivity comes into focus in our current “predatory” capitalist mode, wherein:

Numbers 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. (pp. 109–110)

This a world of “dividuals” whose information can be searched, combined, and reaggregated for profit, as LEGOified subjects move precariously between jobs, taking on LEGOified work packages that amount to a parcel or “brick” of what would formerly have been an entire job, performed by an *individual*. All the while we are guided in understanding precarity and the failure to achieve what a few decades ago would have been the norm as “freedom” and convincing ourselves that “everything is awesome!”

### *Whose Creativity? Fan-Generated Content and Corporate Profits*

Thus far, I have discussed selected aspects of LEGO’s business model and how that model relates to the greater finance-driven economy. I have also referred to how *The LEGO Movie* is constructed, in ways that reflect the greater economy, around intertextual relationships with other story franchises across platforms, from bricks to movie, and I have noted how the film’s self-conscious irony derives from the LEGO Group’s business model as well as from the impact that living in a finance-driven economy has on people’s lives. I now want to zoom in on the link between the bricks and the movie, a link that has been forged by fans and filled with the amateur videos or “brickfilms” they create, which have been subsequently picked up by the LEGO group as the brand grows and develops along with its fans.

The first Super 8, stop motion animation brickfilm entitled *Journey to the Moon* [*En rejse til månen*] was created by Lars C. Hassing and Henrik in 1973 and released on YouTube in May 2013. The second, *LEGO Wars*, was made in 1980 by Fernando Escovar and released on YouTube on April 2, 2007, and the third brickfilm, *The Magic Portal*, was made between 1985 and 1989 in Perth, Western Australia, by Lindsay Fleay and featured LEGO bricks, plasticine, cardboard characters, and objects in stop motion animation and live action. While there were initially issues with The LEGO Group, *The Magic Portal* was eventually released, but perhaps the most significant moment in early brickfilms was a music video for the UK dance act

Ethereal and their song “Zap” on Truelove Records produced and released in 1989. That brickfilm was shown throughout the MTV network and on other music channels, marking an important moment for The LEGO Group which began officially commissioning brickfilms in 1987.

In the late 1990s, digital cameras facilitated the production of brickfilms while the Internet made it possible for brickfilmmakers to distribute their work more rapidly and to wider audiences. The founding of Brickfilms.com in 2000 consolidated the brickfilming community, linking pages where the films could be downloaded or streamed. At the same time, LEGO Studios boxed sets were released with which children could make their own brickfilms, since which time The LEGO Group have openly and actively encouraged the production of fan brickfilms to help the company advertise new themes. More concretely, fan labor was tapped in the making of *The LEGO Movie*, to which end LEGO set up a contest later publicized in a video in which Chris Pratt (Emmet Brickowski), explained the following:

It’s truly amazing how many LEGO fans there are around the world who love to create short films using LEGO bricks. The film makers of *The LEGO Movie*, Chris and Phil, thought it would be fun to challenge the rebrick community—that’s LEGO’s official social media platform—to come up with an original brickfilm between fifteen and thirty seconds with the winning entry being featured during the *LEGO Movie*. Just to make it a bit more challenging, entries had to incorporate the theme of a LEGO minifigure changing up their environment to fight off the bad guy. Well, the rebrick community went to work and created some really fun and really incredible minimovies. Entirely made out of LEGO Bricks. (Warner Bros UK, 2014, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=XSSZJxDsjew>)

Other contests launched by the LEGO group and the film’s directors included one for children aged 7–12 to build a Lego vehicle that looked like something else, for which the winner was awarded US\$1,000 and a spot for the vehicle in the movie. There was likewise a contest for the creation of Lego minifigures that appeared in the film’s official trailer, and “The Emmett Awards” was the title given to a group of contests that ran for half a year with a new contest each month, such as one for which children were challenged to build the “biggest, wildest, and most awesome spaceship model ever!” Given the simple plot of the movie (i.e., a LEGO minifigure changes up his environment to fight off a bad guy) and the number of contests that fed the film with fan-made characters and scenarios, it is clear that much of the intellectual property from which *The LEGO Movie* is created was something of a “labor of love.”<sup>11</sup>

Jerry Seinfeld, who complained that *The LEGO Movie* “used one of his jokes as the colorful building blocks of its Superman/Green Lantern dynamic,” was one of the very few who felt ripped off by the film, which made US\$69.1 million in its opening weekend (O’Neal, 2014).<sup>12</sup> The generalized unproblematic acceptance of company practice has, moreover, contributed to The LEGO Group’s desire to

become a “lifestyle brand” that people will want in numerous aspects of their lives. According to David Buxbaum, marketing director of LEGO, the movie is not about selling more LEGO sets but about “deepening engagement” through branded extensions such as T-shirts and video games because “kids like having [LEGO] as part of their everyday life.”<sup>13</sup> The movie also indirectly promotes a strategy that grew the company into the most powerful brand from 2015 to 2017 and about which business bloggers wax poetic, enthusing that LEGO’s user-generated content strategy affords direct product development, as well as free Twitter, YouTube, Niche, and Influencer marketing.<sup>14</sup> Most recently, these goals have been advanced through LEGO Ideas, a platform where fans post product development ideas and hope, in the allotted amount of time, to garner 10,000 supporters who can also leave feedback and ideas. If an idea passes the LEGO review, it is made into a product and sold in stores, where the fan who created it can buy one for herself. In this way, LEGO has

created a place where passionate fans give them product ideas; made fans promote the product before it’s even made; had new user-generated content created about them online with no effort; inserted themselves into niche markets with little effort [. . . and] only pay a reasonable percentage of actual sales.<sup>15</sup>

If we consider LEGO’s active cultivation of deep fan and consumer engagement with the product, together with the section above concerning the current neoliberal economic paradigm and its propensity to shape people as precarious dividuals, the notion that an enormously profitable blockbuster film was produced in large part with unpaid or modestly rewarded fan labor is concerning. If we connect these observations with *The Daily Mash*’s comic piece on how LEGO promotes an unrealistic body image among children, the implications are no longer so funny. In other words, while *The LEGO Movie* disseminates transmedia narrative properties generated through their toys, it also requires, cultivates, and shapes a certain kind of viewer to which one might refer as a LEGOfied dividual, that is, the kind of subject who, like Emmet Brickowski, cheerfully labors for scant wages, or even voluntarily, while enjoying the “creative freedom” to move between LEGOfied contracts, all the while humming “Everything is Awesome!”

One might equally argue that, given the lucrative links and resonances between LEGO’s supposed ideological transcendence from capitalism as a function of the product’s unique creative potential and its embedding in everyday life, its interchangeable System of Play, instructions for models, and the relationship of these factors with transmediality, carried through to the exploitation thereof in the brickfilm, the “Everything is Awesome” motto is actually apposite to both LEGO’s marketing message and the attitude of its fans. And here again is an excellent example of Wallace’s (1993) notion that avant-garde irony and rebellion have become “dilute and malign” because the very potential of irony to exploit “gaps between what’s said and what’s meant, between how things try to appear and how they really are” has been “absorbed, emptied, and redeployed” to lull us into

compliance with the brand's financial goals (pp. 182, 184). Hence, although the film's message might go against the grain of what the company promotes and what fans like to believe, it is simply absorbed as a familiar type of commercial, post-modern irony.

### Why We Love LEGO

I now want to return to my childhood perceptions of LEGO bricks as being unpleasantly rigid and unyielding, and the playsets imagination-killing, in order to conclude on the topic of memory and affect. As with every point raised thus far, many childhood material memories are also connected to the "limitless creativity versus control" issue. Giddings has recorded a number of observations and memories from people who played with LEGO as children, of which one of the most salient comes from Grayson Perry who brought a box of LEGO to a Reith Lecture, shook it for the audience, and then explained that he had done so because for him, this "incredibly evocative sound [. . .] is the noise of a child's mind working [. . .] almost creativity in aural form" (p. 256).<sup>16</sup>

Quite obviously, for people who are not necessarily fans of LEGO, the sight and sound of the bricks will probably not evoke memories of unhampered creativity. As one such nonfan, however, I must confess that I do indeed own or have owned many LEGO items such as USB sticks, jewelry, fridge magnets, and key chains. So why do I own such items and continue to purchase them if I didn't and still do not enjoy playing with LEGO? Because I find the LEGO aesthetic—the bold colors, the little minifigures, and their diminutive vehicles—super cute, and herein I would like to argue, lies one more important aspect of LEGO's effectiveness in marshalling our attention and putting play to work, namely, cuteness.

Current scholarship on the topic of cuteness—its aesthetics and affects, its psychic and economic impact—finds its beginnings in the work of ethologist Konrad Lorenz and his (1943) essay, "Innate Forms of Experience" [*Die angeborenen Formen möglicher Erfahrung*]. In this inaugural study of cuteness, Lorenz (1970) argued for the existence of a "inborn schema of the infant [*das Kindchenschema*]" that could be deduced from feelings associated with objects that bear neotenous or babyish traits, including a large head, a predominant brain capsule, large and low-lying eyes, bulging cheeks, short, thick extremities, clumsy movements, and smallness. Such traits, according to Lorenz, act as "innate releasing mechanisms" that awaken caring instincts and produce emotional bonds in subjects responding to cuteness.<sup>17</sup>

Lorenz's work has been the springboard for more recent scholarship on cuteness, such as Gary Cross's (2004) *The Cute and the Cool*. Cross's insights into how, once aroused, the emotions that cuteness releases can motivate consumers to buy and collect cute items is of particularly interest here. For example, in his explanation of how cuteness evolved into a key economic driver beginning in the 19th century, Cross shows how cuteness came to shape "the modern image of the child" (p. 51; see

also Noxon, 2006, pp. 35–36). By the late 19th century, Cross (2004) writes, “cuteness itself, even separate from the child, became desirable as the look that we want to purchase and possess. The cute became a selling point [...] and an occasion for impulse spending” for adult consumers and a permanent feature of what entices us to buy things (p. 44). At the same time, children began to be seen as (future) financial actors who support “modern consumer culture” and therefore as appropriate targets for advertising (p. 44).<sup>18</sup>

Although LEGO evidently trades on cuteness, one might argue that the bricks and minifigures do not necessarily tick all of the boxes of Lorenz’s cuteness schema. Yet as Stephen Jay Gould (1979) explained in his essay on Lorenz, Disney, and Mickey Mouse, the iconic rodent began his career as a nasty character, with pointed features and a shrill voice until Disney softened his sharp corners and made him the cute, neotenous character he is today. Similarly, with the arrival of minifigures and particularly the LEGO Friends set for girls, much of what LEGO produces, including spin-off products, has come increasingly into line with what one might define as classic cuteness.

This is important where fans’ creative input into *The LEGO Movie* is concerned because it involves two other features of cuteness that potentially produce deep emotive connections with the product in consumers. First, as Sianne Ngai has pointed out, cute “objects present themselves as entirely available, as their commercial and erotic connotation make explicit” (Ngai, 2012, p. 18). This semblance of availability and closeness also contributes to the experience of cuteness in the manner described by Mary Ann Doane, as a “strange constriction of the gap between consumer and commodity” that shrinks the distance between consumer and product, indexing the “affect of empathy” on which those who want to harness the power of cuteness rely (Ngai, 2012, p. 67). Cultural anthropologist Anne Allison has likewise commented on this aspect of cuteness, arguing that it feeds “a business of enchanted commodities” and “a consumer fetishism” that gives off on “an aura of fancy and make-believe,” instrumental in establishing a “closeness” between product and the imagination of the person who consumes it (Allison, 2006, pp. 16, 17). In turn, these potentialities of cuteness contribute to commodity fetishism’s fantasy of animation, which Ngai (2012) borrows from Marx’s “almost cutely or preciously anthropomorphizing ‘story-time’” presentation of the commodity from the second chapter of the first volume of *Capital* (p. 61). According to Ngai (2012), Marx does this to stress commodities’ “animate personhood” and to make commodities speak “precisely in order to make them confess the illusion of animation they promote” (pp. 61–62).

In making a similar argument, Richard Dienst (2011) references “Marx’s great undiscovered masterpiece,” namely, his stories about enchanted toys recounted by his youngest daughter Eleanor who described how her father “entertained the family during their long walks around London” (p. 135). The hero of these stories, Hans Röckle (2011), is a magician and toyshop owner with many debts who is forced to sell his toys who, however, always find their way back to Röckle’s shop (p. 138). Importantly, in Marx’s stories, “the toys seem to be the primary narrative actants,

serving as both the subjects and objects of their peculiar destinies and “are thus doubly marvelous: not only do they duplicate the world outside in playful form, but also they proceed to function within that world in the most serious way, even ultimately triumphing over it” (pp. 140–141).

What I am suggesting by citing these passages is both simple and obvious, namely, that toys, for whatever reason one chooses to accept, seem to have a life of their own wherein we imagine them becoming animated and acting of their own volition. It is this uncanny quality of toys in general which makes them particularly apt carriers of story and narrative or instruments for what Stig Hjarvard (2004) has called “imagarization.” LEGO has understood this well hence, as one business blogger wrote, *The LEGO Movie* is a prime example of “story telling done right” for brands, so that by creating “something with meaning, depth, and purpose,” the company has gotten “far ahead of the storytelling curve.”<sup>19</sup> Moreover, the power of toys and narrative is reinforced with cute aesthetics that arguably act as an affect releasing mechanism making LEGO bricks and minifigures highly desirable as commodities to which we become deeply cathected.

The illusion of animation along with the storytelling properties inherent to toys, cute aesthetics, and powerful marketing techniques have made LEGO the world’s strongest brand. As trade publications so often boast then, the company has and continues to encourage children to imagine LEGO minifigures as animated beings in storyworlds as a means of harvesting user-generated content from fans who submit storylines, product development ideas, promote products before they are even made, and then continue to enjoy LEGO movies and buy more product.<sup>20</sup>

## Conclusion

The issues that I have raised in this essay come together in *The LEGO Movie* in numerous ways, some self-conscious, some uncomfortable, but all undeniably profit generating. This is to say that, while *The LEGO Movie* lampoons the kinds of corporate profit-generating strategies for which the LEGO Group is known—that is, unabashed commercialism, the marketing of bricks in playsets—the film also generates profits from what it criticizes. Likewise, the movie makes fun of the kind of drudge labor from which it was at least partially produced, as well as its own lame theme song, and concludes with Vitruvius admitting that he made up the film’s heart-warming message—“the only thing anyone needs to be special is to believe that you can be”—and that it “sounds like a cat poster.” Here again, the movie relies on affective connections, stimulated by cute aesthetics, rather than “real value” in the form, for example, of personal and productive pedagogical outcomes. In other words, the film is knowingly largely the product of unpaid fan labor produced by people who love the toy and all things LEGO because of their affective attachment to the cute, brightly colored hard plastic tube and groove interlocking bricks.

So while the nefariousness of unpaid fan labor is a hard reality of the LEGO Group’s business strategy, I also hope to have highlighted various qualities of their

toy that encourage fan identification and have given rise to a ludic economy in which few seem to balk at the notion of not being paid or being only slightly remunerated. In so doing, my goal was to point out the importance of looking at ludic economics, along with emergent neoliberal notions of what kinds of labor should or need to be remunerated, and the two kinds of fans who provide them with creative content: Those who are happy to have their craft appropriated by LEGO and those who may find the practice somewhat less than awesome.

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### Notes

1. For authors who present both camps, see Andrejevic (2008), Crogan and Kinsley (2012), Jenkins (2006), and Sesselmann (2015).
2. See, for example, Botoric (2015), Chadwell (2015), Kücklich (2005), Levin (2009), Lobato, Thomas, and Hunter (2011), Lothian (2009), Scholz (2012), Varul (2014), and Zwick, Bonsu, and Darmody (2008).
3. The full film script is available here: [https://www.springfieldspringfield.co.uk/movie\\_script.php?movie=the-lego-movie](https://www.springfieldspringfield.co.uk/movie_script.php?movie=the-lego-movie). Accessed December 12, 2017.
4. [http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia\\_storytelling\\_101.html?rq=multi%20interrelated%20characters](http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html?rq=multi%20interrelated%20characters) Accessed December 12, 2017.
5. By “Derridian free play,” I refer to Derrida’s (1978) “Structure, Sign, and Play,” in which he puts forward a version of play that would be free of “the concept of structure,” a stabilizing center, or “fundamental ground” (p. 279).
6. See Jenkins (2007): [http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia\\_storytelling\\_101.html](http://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html)
7. “[Lego’s] appeal spans generations; as well as the creative freedom it gives children, the brand appeals to the nostalgia of adults.” See Kauflin (2017), <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jeffkaufin/2017/02/14/the-most-powerful-brands-in-2017/#1ceffcfcf1f8> Accessed December 12, 2017.
8. One remarkable example is “*The LEGO Movie* is the Most Biting (sic.) Criticism of America’s Present Politic and Economic System I Have Seen in a Mainstream Film,” in which the blogger manages to overlook The LEGO Group’s complicity with the “present political and economic system” and concludes “I seriously recommend watching the film, it’s very subtle and clever, and you can bring your kids.” [https://www.reddit.com/r/socialism/comments/1y9xky/the\\_LEGO\\_movie\\_is\\_the\\_most\\_biting\\_criticism\\_of/](https://www.reddit.com/r/socialism/comments/1y9xky/the_LEGO_movie_is_the_most_biting_criticism_of/). Accessed December 12, 2017 (Rayman8001).

9. See <http://www.thedailymash.co.uk/news/society/lego-promoting-unrealistic-body-image-2015061899397>. Accessed December 12, 2017.
10. See Jenkins (2007) [http://henryjenkins.org/2007/03/transmedia\\_storytelling\\_101.html](http://henryjenkins.org/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html). Accessed December 12, 2017.
11. Castleberry (24 June 2014). LEGO fandom, cyber feudalism, and convergence culture in Classic-Castle.com. In *Media Res* Retrieved from <http://mediacommons.futureofthebook.org/imr/2014/06/24/LEGO-fandom-cyber-feudalism-and-convergence-culture-classic-castlecom>. Accessed December 12, 2017.
12. See O’Neal <http://www.avclub.com/article/jerry-seinfeld-is-pretty-sure-the-LEGO-movie-stole-107697>. One other claim that LEGO stole content is made here: “LEGO Stole My Idea!!!” YouTube, uploaded by John Chadwell, 1 March 2015, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4dxwDOD20\\_w](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4dxwDOD20_w). Accessed December 12, 2017.
13. See Snoad (2011) <https://www.marketingweek.com/2011/12/01/lego-chases-lifestyle-status-through-movie/>. Accessed December 12, 2017.
14. On LEGO as the most powerful brand of 2017, see Kauflin (2017) <https://www.forbes.com/sites/jeffkauflin/2017/02/14/the-most-powerful-brands-in-2017/#1ceccffcf1f8>. Accessed December 12, 2017. On LEGO’s use of user-generated content, see <https://medium.com/@devumi/learn-how-LEGO-mastered-user-generated-content-86735044b43c>. Accessed December 12, 2017. See also Garrity (2016), <https://www.sprinkl.com/the-way/user-generated-content-strategy-tips/> Accessed December 12, 2017.
15. See Devumi (2016) <https://medium.com/@devumi/learn-how-LEGO-mastered-user-generated-content-86735044b43c>. Accessed December 12, 2017. Fans receive “1% of the total net sales of the product (this includes projects featuring original models based on third-party intellectual property such as a game, TV show, or movie). All payments shall be free and clear of any and all taxes, duties, levies, fees or other charges, except for withholding Danish taxes. Ten complimentary copies of your LEGO Ideas set. Credit and bio in set materials as the LEGO Ideas set creator.” See <https://ideas.lego.com/guide/lines#rewards>. Accessed December 12, 2017.
16. This view is also popular among business bloggers who understand that LEGO is in it for the money but also insist that the company has a “bigger purpose—one of challenging the minds of people young and old to create, imagine, and go beyond what they believe is possible. In fact, LEGO doesn’t sell ‘blocks’ at all, they sell possibilities.” See “The Best Example of Brand Storytelling Ever: *The LEGO Movie*” <<https://www.thesaleslion.com/brand-storytelling-example-lego-movie/>>. Accessed December 12, 2017 (Sheridan, 2017).
17. Note that Wallace (1993) makes a similar point concerning prettiness as an insipid yet effective commercial televisual aesthetic when he writes that, on TV “everybody we seek to identify with for six hours a day is pretty, [. . . so] prettiness becomes a priority for us, [as] the pretty people on TV become all the more attractive, a cycle which is obviously great for TV” (p. 173).
18. See also Goggin (2017).
19. See “The Best Example of Brand Storytelling Ever: *The Lego Movie*” <https://www.thesaleslion.com/brand-storytelling-example-lego-movie/>. See also Giddings (2014, pp. 253–254) and Lauwert (2009, pp. 60–61).

20. See Devumi (2016), “Learn How LEGO Mastered User-Generated Content,” <https://medium.com/@devumi/learn-how-lego-mastered-user-generated-content-86735044b43c>. Accessed December 12, 2017.

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