

# Brick-olage and the LEGO/Brand Axis

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On February 7, 2014, Warner Bros. Pictures and Village Roadshow Pictures released *The LEGO Movie* to significant acclaim, and it would gross almost \$500 million in its theatrical run. The animated film features a hapless LEGO Land citizen named Emmet, who teams up with a rebellious band of misfits from franchises like *The Lord of the Rings*, the *DC Universe*, and *Star Wars*. The group hopes to stop Lord Business from completing the Piece of Resistance, a device that would kill creativity in the world by gluing LEGO sets together.

The film explored tensions between civic life and consumer culture and the valuing of material wealth over things like family and friendship. The film also inspired spinoffs and products like toys, video games, clothing, and even additional movies. While the film's visual style and themes merit critical exploration, the noteworthy focus for this research project is that it merges multiple brands owned by different vertically integrated conglomerates, an aspect facilitated by properties of LEGOs I call "brick-olage."

I use two examples of modern LEGO media products, *The LEGO Movie* and the video game *LEGO Dimensions*, to unpack three unique qualities of brick-olage and their effect on branding in this era of vertical integration and transmedia storytelling. I then discuss a few possible directions future research may go.

## Background

LEGOs are small plastic bricks and other interlocking modular construction toys manufactured by The LEGO Group, a privately held, family-owned Danish company. Unlike most other toys, these small plastic components are interchangeable and interlockable with each other. Instead of a single genre and artistic design, LEGOs are a collection of components and reducible to the individual brick, with LEGO model sets traditionally organized around a generic location (like a city) or archetype (like pirates) creatable out of the individual

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elements. Thus, the LEGO brand's core can be understood not as a style like with Barbie and the Barbie World but as individual shapes whose combinability creates utility among the discrete pieces.

The proportions of the pieces, the size of the studs (the LEGO bumps on the top of the brick), and the thickness of the plates (the skinny LEGOs that stack three high to make a classic brick) are uniform and independent of the model or brand translated to LEGO. This means different sets of LEGO toys are completely compatible, allowing the owner to create practical, experimental, avant-garde, or bizarre assemblages from sports cars or cyborg badgers to hair salons complete with day spa and lava monsters.

In 2015, *Brand Finance* magazine named LEGO “the World’s Most Powerful Brand,” (Tovey). Starting in the 1970s and accelerating in the late 1990s and early 2000s, LEGO shifted its emphasis from building with bricks to playing with bricks once assembled into playsets (Landay 56). Instead of only the “generic” LEGO universe of cities, pirates, and castles, in recent years LEGO has contracted to produce toys based on brands like the *Marvel* and *DC* universes, *Minecraft* video game, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *Star Wars*, and *The Simpsons* among many others.

The company’s move away from LEGO-exclusive branding to become heavily associated with comic book, video game, film, and television franchises forms a key component in this rise of brand power. LEGO leveraged the synergies afforded by vertically integrated media conglomerates like Time Warner and the Sony Group to convert their franchises to LEGO and that cross-demographic appeal has accounted for much of The LEGO Group’s recent financial and brand success. LEGO builds its brand by having other media brands use the aesthetic form of their bricks.

As Wolf notes, the development of the themed LEGO playset has been crucial to its success as a toy brand (16). As a recent iteration, *The LEGO Movie* has not only kept the toys on the minds of consumers, but it epitomized LEGO’s multi-franchise formula with iterations of nearly all associated toy universes (toddler toy Duplos, *Lord of the Rings*, *Batman*, *Star Wars*) that make appearances or play key roles in the film. The *LEGO Dimensions* video game is an extension of the brand-universe derived from *The LEGO Movie*; both are structured around what players can do with the assembled pieces.

Since brands function as cultural goods, they “yield a profit in distinction, proportionate to the rarity of the means to appropriate them, and a profit in

legitimacy, the profit par excellence, which consists in the fact of feeling justified in being (what one is), being what it is right to be” (Bourdieu 228). That is, brands become legitimate once they are understood as distinguishable from other brands. This legitimization arises in the economic and psychological realms, with currency in both. The conversion of other brands to LEGO benefits both the “parent” conglomerate and the LEGO Group by emphasizing the status of each as a “premiere” brand.

### Academic Work on LEGO

Landay describes LEGO as a “multiplatform ‘supersystem’ of transmedia intertextuality” (56). Much scholarship on LEGO focuses on its status as a brand and its relationships with other brands coded through intellectual properties and play, often through the lens of adaptation or transmedia studies. In one of the most comprehensive looks at LEGO and brand, Hills explores *Doctor Who* as transformed into the video game *LEGO Dimensions*. Hills argues that this example of transbranding co-opts transgressive play and channels it into branded play, following the logic of the parent brands and aligning it with intellectual property and brand licensing and play socialization. Hjarvard argues that LEGO has been infused with media branding to the point where the representations and extensions of it in different brand/story worlds and narratives have gained primacy over its physical presence (“Bricks to Bytes” 43). Wolf uses adaptation studies to examine the transformation of *Star Wars*’s Death Star from a movie set to a LEGO set, noting that part of LEGO’s recent success as a brand results from the combining of building sets and playsets into a single product (“Adapting the Death Star” 16). Baker argues in creating the *Lord of the Rings* toy-line that “LEGO’s lack of realism... differentiates it from other 3-D, licensed products” and this lack of realism allows for LEGO to facilitate world-building (52). Ultimately, much LEGO research argues for a coherent vision of LEGO as a branded product.

Analysis of LEGO benefits from addressing the qualities of the bricks themselves. Hills’s noting of transbranding and *LEGO Dimensions* does not explore deeply what it is about LEGO toys that allows for the analysis to hold. The mashup in the analysis derives more from the LEGO brand and less from properties of the toy. For Wolf the critical approach considers LEGO to have the

unique properties of combining building sets and play sets, but it does not engage what it is about the toys themselves that capture both qualities ("Adapting the Death Star"). Landay's take on transmedia intertextuality assumes the modularity of the LEGO bricks. For this project, what makes LEGO distinctive as a brand are physical properties of the individual LEGO brick; LEGO toys themselves contain properties that distinguish them from other types of product capable of incorporation into transmedia storytelling. This inherent modularity of the toy represents an important opportunity for further exploration in the critical research on LEGO.

### Brick-olage

For this project, I argue the properties of the brick form the fundamental or atomic unit of the toy and by extension the brand, which means that the functional success of the transmedia logic of LEGO is an extension of the implicitly understood modularity of the toy. I suggest seeing LEGO as containing unique properties answers a question of what allows them to be protean within the media landscape. For instance, the activity in *LEGO Dimensions* is more than an authorized set of skin mods, meshes, and audio files for a video game; it is a locus of otherwise distinct brands transformed into a play world made up of LEGO atoms.

These unique properties of LEGO and the resulting LEGO brand conversion allow the user to create a "brick-olage" of models, shapes, and worlds like de Certeau's notion of bricolage, a "making do" with raw materials and castoffs at hand to give meaning and sense to the world or of experience within it (29). The LEGO bricks themselves combine the play set and the building set in a traditional play experience. A person using pieces from the various sets she owns can create a racecar from those other components without ever having bought a racecar set. The user plays with the toys to create a new toy from already existing materials, made do with the use of imagination. The finished product therefore can be a mosaic or *mélange* of pieces originating in other sets, reconstituted by the play-labor of the user.

Brick-olage has three primary aspects. First, the LEGO pieces and sets have cross-brand compatibility. Because all LEGOs are compatible, all brands become compatible. Second, the pieces and sets permit or encourage creative flexibility.

Like a scale model, a given set comes unassembled. The constituent elements (bricks, plates, etc.) must be put together to finish the model, but no rule says the set on the box is the only allowable configuration. Third and most important for this paper, traditional lines between sets and brands become blurred or even break down through creative assembly in the process of translating a brand's intellectual property to LEGO. Almost all non-LEGO toy franchises have proportions, dimensions, and styles unique to their own line. Because all LEGOs are compatible, these franchises literally are compatible through brick-olage, with brands con-fused with other brands' signifiers. A player who wishes to disregard brands' traditional boundaries may choose to do so.

Although LEGO has always retained the first two components of brick-olage (compatibility and creativity), what makes modern LEGO unique is the addition of non-LEGO branded sets blurring brand lines, a recent change in LEGO's intellectual property. With the expiration of the last of The LEGO Group's patents in the early 2000s, the company began to protect its intellectual property through lawsuits involving trademarks and copyrights, pursuing lawsuits alleging trademark or patent infringement in the United States, Canada, the European Union, and China, and losing nearly all suits on various grounds ("LEGO loses patent suit"). For the most part The LEGO Group's suits failed because the shape of the bricks serves a functional purpose and are therefore not a trademark or copyright. Consequently, numerous similar-to-LEGO products flooded the toy market.

The LEGO Group has been more successful in protecting the shapes of the minifigures and their associated franchises, because the shape itself is not a part of the function of the toy. As a result, while other pseudo-LEGO brands may incorporate the shapes and proportions of the bricks, LEGO's minifigures and their branding have become integral in brick-olage. By translating established intellectual property into the LEGO universe, LEGO as a corporation has an added layer of legal protection and recourse and made the brick-olage a key part of its arsenal, rolling creative play into that brand world.

This franchising to LEGO "converts" different media brands to LEGO-style toys and dissociates them from their origins. The smallest unit becomes the individual atomic brick, not the gestalt of the playset or model. When rendered to LEGO, the brand signifiers (e.g. Batman, the *Millennium Falcon*, Shaquille O'Neal) both retain and lose aspects of their distinctiveness through pastiche and a mixture of styles. The LEGO Marty McFly figure has qualities that resemble the

Michael J. Fox character such as the jeans, the orange vest, and button-up shirt, but they also lose aspects of Michael J. Fox's body, like relative height and eye-color. Significantly, in modern brand conversions the color palette of the parent brand persists (replacing the bright primary colors of the traditional LEGO bricks), including branded LEGO figurines that retain the skin color of the actors, unlike the traditional generic yellow skin of non-branded LEGO sets.

The process reduces the converted-to-LEGO brands' legitimacy as brands to a few key elements, much like a caricature which retains only key elements of the subject, with others warped or exaggerated in a specific style. A series of brand signifiers converted to LEGO results, reduced to key distinctive components but fully compatible with other toys within the LEGO-style universe, LEGO-ness par excellence.

### Breaking Down Brick-olage in *The LEGO Movie*

*The LEGO Movie* epitomizes the freedom one gets from using LEGO bricks in a freewheeling, brand-independent way: a LEGO character crosses brand-worlds with a team of renegades to stop the evil Lord Business from gluing branded sets together. In the mid-act two crisis we discover that the entire film is the imaginary play-world of a little boy named Finn who is playing with his father's LEGO sets, creating an overt parallel event.

The film offers a script for playing with and using LEGOs that corresponds strongly to brick-olage. First, the premise of the film requires cross-brand compatibility. The pieces from one world work with another, and as we learn in a getaway scene, even pieces of the characters' bodies can be removed and are compatible with the world, with Emmet using part of his body as a wagon wheel's axle. As they continue their quest to put the Piece of Resistance on the Kragle and stop Lord Business, Emmet encounters individuals from other genre-worlds like Gandalf from *Lord of the Rings* and Batman from the *DC Universe*, and he finds that the key component of a LEGO-lifestyle is transcending the instructions and becoming a "Master Builder" in which sets, style, and brands mix. Key turning points in the film require LEGO compatibility, including escaping from Bad Cop in the Wild West, the destruction of Cloud Cuckoo Land, and infiltrating Lord Business's tower. The LEGOs from the Wild West World fit perfectly with the ones from the Pirate World. The Batman set LEGOs work with bricks from

Emmet's home. Metalbeard is a cybernetic pirate built from pieces of LEGO pirate ships, and the team built a smuggling craft out of the Cloud Cuckoo Land's detritus.

As per the second quality of brick-olage, the film shows that in exploring this cross-brand compatibility creative expression and new discoveries can be found. Seen through the eyes of Finn and as experienced by the main characters, the most complex and rich worlds are ones where genres and brands are broken down. The idea of LEGO play is not only to follow the instructions but also to follow your muse.

Emmet's character development pivots on the discovery that the most fun derives from creative assembly breaking down barriers between brand worlds and traditional rules, exemplifying the third aspect of brick-olage. The villain in the film seeks the Kragle (a misreading of "Krazy Glue"), a liquid that will make it impossible to separate the bricks and force them to stay on-brand. As Mittell notes, the Kragle is the villain of the movie, since it brings stasis to the toy, a world-ending weapon (272). The film's dramatic tension is resolved when the father figure realizes that the brand-set matters less than the brick-olage. To glue the LEGOs into static models runs counter to the toys' purpose and violates the rules of brick-olage. The greatest crime in *The LEGO Movie* is not that users are unfaithful to brand-worlds, but that the power of brick-olage is taken away from LEGO itself, locking play in to a specific brand's intellectual property and limiting creativity. The film proposes that LEGOs must retain the properties of brick-olage to make playing with LEGOs fun. To glue pieces together and to limit models to their original brands and design is to defeat the creative energy or even the purpose of LEGOs.

Seeing LEGOs and LEGO-play in this brand-unfaithful way dissociates elements of each brand. In getting converted to LEGOs, the brands take on an aspect that surmounts key elements of the parent brand. The film relies on ironic humor and ironic play. The brands retain their distinctiveness, and the humor derives in part from a recognition of the contrast of surfaces: these brands don't normally go together. When Bad Cop goes into the Old West and when Emmet and team are saved there by Batman, the incongruity is ironic and humorous. Vitruvius, Gandalf, and Dumbledore all know of each other and in a self-reflexive moment the other characters confuse them for each other. Importantly, they all are aware of those stories and recognize the similarities. Batman self-reflexively refers to specific aspects of his character as if they exist outside himself,

something that will be developed in a later film. *The LEGO Movie*'s themes emphasize that an essential part of LEGO-ness is the breaking of genre boundaries and the diversity of the LEGO experience.

In a uniquely synergistic way, The LEGO Group produced toy sets, video games, and other content from *The LEGO Movie*, pulled together and realized via brick-olage. LEGO toys derived or inspired by *The LEGO Movie* reflected and reiterated the inter-brand compatibility of the toys. Instead of releasing sets unique to brands (e.g. *LEGO Movie* Batman sets, *LEGO Movie Lord of the Rings* sets), toy sets from the film exemplified the brick-olage of the film. The Batman set comes with Super Angry Kitty; Emmet, Wyldstyle, and Executron are all a part of the Cloud Cuckoo Land Palace set. As with all LEGO toys, these sets are compatible, meaning players can blur the brands even further, putting brand elements together that were not in scenes in the film. Couple this with the compatibility of all LEGOs, and any LEGO-styled brand can be incorporated into the film brand or vice-versa.

### Breaking Down Brick-olage in *LEGO Dimensions*

A key synergistic off-shoot of the film was the toys-to-life (or TTL) video game *LEGO Dimensions*. The toys-to-life video game genre blurs the typical lines of distinction between virtual world and "real world." Instead of a video game played exclusively with a controller and screen as the interface and a toy being something that you can hold and play in space, the TTL video game genre requires physical possession of components that are generally purchased separately from the game and used to unlock virtual content in-game. They require specialized hardware (chips in the toys and chip-reader expansions connected to the console) and specific software (in the form of the games) to "play" with the toy. This playability factor with the toy is often limited in "real life" because the toy is usually an unmovable miniature figurine like an ornate board game piece.

*LEGO Dimensions* is one of the most popular video games in the toys-to-life genre. TTL video games constitute the world's most profitable video game category, with over 100 new toys released in the fourth quarter of 2015 alone ("*LEGO Dimensions* is the latest"). The genre experienced a 19 percent increase



in spending from 2014 to 2015, and new franchises entered the market, including *Star Wars*, LEGO, and TOMY toys.

The game starts with the evil Lord Vortech in search of the basic components of the LEGO universe, the Foundation Elements. Portals from Foundation Prime connect to the worlds that contain the Foundation Elements. Vortech recruits villains in each of those worlds to search for them and imprison heroes transported to that world. Batman, Gandalf, and Wyldstyle are pulled into the same vortex as they pursue Robin, Frodo, and Metalbeard, who have been captured. The game consists of entering various worlds, seeking missing elements, freeing new heroes, and recruiting them to join the player on their quest. New side-worlds, equipment, and heroes can be unlocked and downloaded with additional, separately purchased *LEGO Dimensions* expansion packs.

*LEGO Dimensions* retains the properties of LEGO brick-olage as a video game. Meeting the first criterion, the “real life” components of the game are literally LEGO toys, fully compatible with each other and independently usable apart from the game, a key function and brand difference from other toys-to-life video games. The game pieces come unassembled and without an instruction manual. The player must load the game and unlock the instructions to be able to build the set, and the virtual manual looks exactly like all LEGO instruction manuals' layout and art design, complete with pages and animated page turns. Styled in the same manner as previous LEGO games and on-brand with the movie, the video game combines aspects of multiple brand franchises with a highly ironic and self-reflexive approach to its storyline. The game-world is constructed out of LEGOs, but the cross-brand compatibility means that the player may manipulate characters, engage villains, and use devices from the various licensed franchises simultaneously. Moreover, the different franchises' characters interact in a way that suggests they are aware of the other brands. For example, when the Doctor from *Doctor Who* meets Homer Simpson, he says he would offer Homer a Jelly Baby, but Homer would eat the whole bag. The game's irony and self-consciousness derive largely from a play of surfaces (i.e. “See how it looks when Gimli shuts down Homer's nuclear power plant”) and ahistoricity (i.e. “See how characters from today's *LEGO Movie* interact with the original space-set LEGO character from the 1970s”).

As Consalvo and Miller note “games' construction and circulation within the media industries” make it essential to define games as media: “Games are different from other forms of media, and different platforms can create different

experiences and limitations. Yet online games are increasingly part of cross-media empires. Large-scale branded productions that create universes for individuals to live in through films, books, television shows, interactive Web sites, online games, and other forms of participation” (181). TT Games, a subsidiary of Warner Bros., produced *LEGO Dimensions*, with many of the story worlds of the video game a part of Warner’s vertically integrated universe. The main set includes figures from *The LEGO Movie*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *DC* franchises immediately playable. Expansion packs include further toys and figures from *The LEGO Movie*, *Lord of the Rings*, and *DC Universe*, as well as *Doctor Who*, *Ghostbusters*, *Back to the Future*, *Wizard of Oz*, *Jurassic World*, and many other franchises owned by or licensed to LEGO by Warner Bros. Each set unlocks additional content in-game, from characters to entire brand-worlds. In this sense, the *LEGO Dimensions* video game and toys continue the cross-franchise mélange introduced in *The LEGO Movie*.

*LEGO Dimensions* maximizes the brand synergies empowered by brick-olage. Gibson and Kong point out that digital convergence unlocks components of political economy in important ways: “Convergence upon the digital medium has been mirrored by a political economy of creative production, as corporate interests in the arts, popular culture, telecommunications and broadcasting have merged, amalgamated, or entered into joint ventures” (545). In the toys-to-life video game, LEGO-style post-modern irony fuses with the immediately recognizable brands of various television, film, and video game franchise-brands. “Such manoeuvres create links between cultural producers of ‘content’ (the music or film), and manufacturers and suppliers of information technologies, the ‘hardware’” (545). The hardware in this case includes the LEGOs parts of the TTL interface, the essential bridge between toy and video game.

While one may recognize intellectual properties from the *Batman* franchise in the game, the fusion of Batman and LEGO packs a stronger, distinctive one-two punch. Each expansion pack for *LEGO Dimensions* focuses not on what it can do for players in the game, but on which franchise inspires the toys, and the in-game content reflects the themes, tone, and circumstances epitomized by the original or parent intellectual properties, albeit with brick-olage derived lenses. The game is rife with pastiche, a stylistic technique that “cites references from other texts solely as style or as surface image” (Mason 30). A consumer can buy a *Ghostbusters* set and a *Doctor Who* set and in-game have Venkman and the Doctor try to help Marty McFly get back to the future, but the franchises

themselves are not mixed with the toy set in-box. In fact, the only cross-branded toys are in the original, required starter pack, which as mentioned earlier comes with Wyldstyle, Batman, and Gandalf. In this case, all three were characters in *The LEGO Movie* and as such are already branded together; moreover, all three are owned by Time Warner and financially maximized because of that conglomerate's brand synergy. These brand boundaries are also extra-textual; for example, there are no *Star Wars LEGO Dimensions* sets despite the existence of LEGO Star Wars sets and the franchise's appearance in *The LEGO Movie*, in part because *Star Wars* is a part of the *Disney Infinity* line of toys-to-life video games.

Like the film, the video game negatively portrays the locking-in of the bricks and brands with glue or some sort of permanent solution. LEGO's brick-olage drives the player to overcome obstacles in-game. To succeed at a mission or story world, the players break up complete objects to collect their pieces and later use these pieces to unlock aspects of the game, building new "sets" as they go. Unlike the film which positively portrays creative problem solving, the game tends to treat puzzles as solvable only using a specific move or strategy, a narrower view of LEGO's possibilities for play.

### Putting Brick-olage Together

Both the game and the film act as scripts for optimal LEGO use, and that ideal behavior puts the emphasis on brick-olage. Consequently, LEGO players, users, and audiences are situated by the toys to epitomize *flaneurs*, individuals who play "with and celebrate the artificiality, randomness and superficiality of the fantastic mélange of fictions and strange values" (de Certeau 98; Featherstone 16). Contrasting and collapsing branded words or simply turning a LEGO set ostensibly purchased as a toy police car into a model Dalmatian puppy may not just be enjoyable but the purpose or logical outcome of LEGO's brick-olage. Emmet's willingness to create absurd LEGO inventions like a double-decker couch show the fruits of that labor when he becomes a "Master Builder." *LEGO Dimensions* players are rewarded by breaking apart LEGO obstacles or finding LEGO pieces laying around the game zones that they can assemble to free or unlock in-game content, in the same way real LEGO pieces can be pulled from a toybox and assembled to an airplane.

In these two story-worlds, older or pre-branded LEGO toys are shown as primitive. In *The LEGO Movie*, the 1980s style Benny the Space Man character moves more simply and obsesses about what he can make with his (more limited) palette of bricks, perpetually trying to build a spaceship. 1990s-style NBA LEGOs are introduced with 2 Unlimited's "Get Ready for This" from the *Space Jam* soundtrack. Even though older LEGOs work with newer sets, LEGO media treats them as if they are out of date.

Older intellectual properties can be rehabilitated, however. Newly converted-to-LEGO brands benefit from brick-olage, portrayed as fresh and interesting. While LEGO no longer sells generic space sets and the NBA branded characters, the *Wizard of Oz* expansion pack for *LEGO Dimensions* has a hipness and ironic tone when converted via brick-olage and portrayed in the game. The cycle of releasing expansion packs and their levels in *LEGO Dimensions* keeps it from getting stale or repetitive. Unlike other TTL franchises which release new versions of the game with older components incompatible, all expansions in *LEGO Dimensions* are compatible with the main set and game, much like old LEGO toy sets remaining compatible with new LEGOs, including the recent multi-set *LEGO Batman* movie line.

*The LEGO Movie* and *LEGO Dimensions* celebrate this superficiality of the parent brands, but importantly they take the LEGO brand seriously. Each new set expands the territory of the LEGO universe and reduces the possibilities for off-brand imitators. The worlds shown and "created" in these media are LEGO, through and through. No off-brand LEGO-compatible toys like Brictek, Tyco Super Blocks, or Mega Block exist in LEGO media. All computer-rendered LEGOs in *The LEGO Movie* correspond to actual LEGO shapes and proportions. Each world seen in the film literally could be made from plastic LEGOs. Although it has yet to happen, The LEGO Group could release *LEGO Dimensions* toy sets using scenes or possible scenes from the video game.

The film and video game align to prompt the player-flaneur with preferred scripts or usage of the LEGO bricks, and that preferred way encompasses brick-olage. Both the film and video game present deconstructing brands favorably and refashioning pieces as the best way to have fun. Through the course of the film, Emmet transforms from a person who simply wants to follow the instructions to a person freed to use his creativity. The father in the film threatens the very existence of LEGOs with Crazy Glue. His realization of this problematic changes the entire direction of the story, with him becoming a liberating force. Instead of

cordoning off brands, the film and video game show the irony and fun of brands intruding on other brands and breaking barriers between them. The game rewards this intrusion by unlocking content through additional purchases, furthering the blending of brands and opening new brand-worlds to explore. With the addition of ever-expanding intellectual properties' conversion to LEGO, creative play becomes transformed into a set of consumption practices involving new intellectual properties: add these new LEGOs to your already existing LEGO toys if you wish to see these surfaces at play, the new "creativity" of transmedia, intertextual branding.

Ultimately, the brands transformed in these media gain distinctiveness from presence in a popular toy brand. Brands monetize their distinctive iconography and get the cultural cache of being a part of the LEGO universe. In that sense, what players do with the pieces afterward is irrelevant to them. That said, the brands' presence at all is at minimum a form of rich and deep product placement, with the specific worlds normalized through ironic humor. As epitomized by the ever-increasing set of *LEGO Dimensions* expansion sets, the trend may be to develop entire LEGO worlds, with less emphasis on modularity and creativity, removing some of the brick from brick-olage as The LEGO Group seeks to preserve as much of its intellectual property as possible, and that property involves the transformation of other identifiable brands and likenesses.

## Conclusion

I explored how form can transcend brand identities by examining a different model for brand interaction. Qualities of the brand allow it to integrate with or incorporate (that is, literally forming the body of) with other brands. Through brick-olage, the rules of play include compatibility with the discrete toy elements. Properties of brick-olage allow LEGOs to shape and be shaped by other brand styles, and so the toys epitomize a kind of postmodern play: a mosaic of brands and styles that, when converted to LEGOs, become subordinate to the rules of the toy.

This discussion of LEGO brick-olage suggests brands and their intellectual properties are malleable or able to be atomized. Additional research in transmedia storytelling using a lens of brick-olage may identify other brand-worlds that have basic, atomic units. The brand form affects content, but the container shapes the

brand identity. Seen in this way, brands can cooperate or work together, contained by other brands. What distinguishes LEGO from other examples is that the form of the LEGO is also a part of the LEGO brand itself. Brick-olage is LEGO's brand.

Further research could move in many different directions. For example, the fact that LEGO is a toy with a target market that includes children seems important. How might LEGO brick-olage influence children's understanding of brand? Research could explore how brand loyalties and brick-olage are connected; they may be reinforced or fractured. What does brick-olage say about brand distinctiveness, and how do the qualities of the original brand that are retained in conversion reveal qualities of the parent brand?

The notion of brick-olage may not be unique to LEGO. Surely the other modular brick toys come close, with tensions over minifigures suggesting a new area to explore regarding intellectual properties and modular toy systems. Research could also aim at identifying other brands or products that have qualities of brick-olage. What do they reveal that this exploration does not show? Further research could also compare how brick-olage is affected by or portrayed in *The LEGO Batman* film and *LEGO Dimensions* Batman accessories following their release. Additional explorations of LEGO's use of brick-olage could look at other LEGO content, including other video game lines, direct-to-video content, and books. To what extent do they show brick-olage, and how does that align with what is argued here? It seems possible that we can see what really constitutes a brand by the qualities that are retained by brick-olage

Since the LEGO Group is a private, family-owned business, it is possible that the company acts more liberally with whom it partners and in its ability to draw in multiple, competing brands. However, its relationship with Warner's TT Games suggests the "freedom" allowed a brand like LEGO has its limits. If the LEGO Group is bought by a conglomerate with toy and media holdings, the scope of brick-olage may become another technique used by that conglomerate to leverage its own brands at the expense of others. While that future would not be covered by Kragle glue, it might be a bit more focused and less diverse, with LEGO just another brick in the conglomerate's wall.

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