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## MYTH BLOCKS: HOW LEGO TRANSMEDIA CONFIGURES AND REMIXES MYTHIC STRUCTURES IN THE NINJAGO AND CHIMA THEMES

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Ninja defeating ancient evil by tapping into the power of natural elements, and talking animals battling to preserve and share chi, the world's energy force: this is what happens in the imaginary worlds of LEGO Ninjago and Chima. As my twin sons became increasingly interested in Ninjago, then Chima, and now again the rebooted Ninjago, I was struck by the mash-up of elements from different Asian cultures. As I looked at the Ninjago transmedial world manifesting in toys, cards, television series, books, and in the *LEGO Club Magazine*, it was as if someone had broken apart mythologies into parts and they had landed in the toy box, myth blocks there to be configured however one wished. At first, I perceived the mash-up as appropriation, but as I researched and thought more deeply about mythology and transmedial world-building in the Ninjago and Chima original intellectual property themes, I found a far more interesting story, revealing much about how an imaginary world can be created transnationally, distributed globally, and experienced transmedially, all shaped by the LEGO Group's "System of Play" and the practices that have followed—and deviated—from it.

Mythic structures and other components of mythology and folklore are used in Ninjago and Chima as if they were "myth blocks", pieces available to be snapped into place in various recombinations. To be sure, this is similar to influential ideas about narrative structure, from Russian folklorist Vladimir Propp's structuralist analysis of Russian folktales, to how the "monomyth" or hero's journey Joseph Campbell used to describe a universal pattern common to every human culture expressed with particular variations has been adopted as a prescriptive formula for contemporary Hollywood screenwriting. Both realistic and fantastical fictional worlds in a range of media from literature to comic books, movies, and 3-D graphical environments in which people can play games are

characterized by infrastructures filled with remixed bits and pieces from various world mythologies. What's interesting about how LEGO has done this in its original intellectual property imaginary worlds is how mythic structures have become both a part of and a metaphor for the LEGO "System of Play". LEGO's use of "myth blocks" in constructing its imaginary worlds, and people's participation and extensions within them, are aspects of cultural practices of transmedial experience that exemplify a remix culture.

Seen in a certain way, LEGO is a precursor of remix culture. In the LEGO "System of Play", every brick can be used with every other brick; even though they may have different shapes, colors, and other properties, they all click together. In the almost 60 years since Godtfred Christiansen, the grandson of founder Ole Kirk Christiansen, realized that instead of standalone toys that could be built by bricks, the LEGO bricks should be the foundation of a scalable (both for producers and consumers) building and playing system, the System of Play has expanded to a system of creativity and culture. As LEGO moved from its core of making construction toys into other kinds of toys and onto other media platforms, the System of Play changed into a developed into a multiplatform "supersystem" of transmedia intertextuality<sup>1</sup> with not only brick toys and non-brick toys, but also video games on many platforms, animated television series, movies, books for a range of reading levels, graphic novels, magazines, websites, trading cards, merchandise, theme parks, board games, and more.

LEGO has also extended the principle of pieces that can and should be configured and recombined beyond bricks to cultural materials in a metasystem that encompasses not only play and learning, and transmedial world-building, but also creativity and culture. As if they were LEGO bricks, pieces of mythic structure and elements of mythology and folklore from a wide range of sources are compiled and remixed. These "myth blocks", or units of mythic source material, are not only drawn from traditional cultural expression and popular culture, but also, and increasingly, from LEGO's own mythos-making about play and itself, often grounded in research into childhood development, neuroscience, and play, but nevertheless shaped into a narrative. In particular, this essay explores how myth blocks function in the imaginary worlds of the themes of Ninjago and Chima, available transmedially across multiple media platforms. It uses an interdisciplinary approach that combines research from the fields of cultural studies, video game studies, education, and marketing with primary source material from LEGO playsets, graphic novels, chapter books, character encyclopedias and official guides, sticker books, activity books, books that come with minifigures, websites, games, television series, and other facets of LEGO transmedia, including the company's own documents and its representatives' public statements. I use the material from LEGO, especially the reports on research published online by the LEGO Foundation (previously The LEGO Institute), as a source where the values and concepts at the core of the LEGO ideology, its own myth blocks, are articulated. The LEGO Foundation owns 25 percent of the LEGO Group, and

supports its teaching, education, and research activities. My approach to LEGO material is not uncritical, but I seek to analyze both the rhetorical strategies it presents as well as interpret implicit meanings.

In framing my ideas, I also draw on informal observations of children playing with LEGO and engaging with the Ninjago and Chima imaginary worlds transmedially, mostly my own twin boys and their friends, in both organized after-school LEGO activities and at home. I have no doubt that playing with LEGO bricks can foster learning and creativity and aid a constructionist approach in my own work and teaching, and I would enroll my kids in the new LEGO-funded International School of Billund if it were possible. I would classify myself as an AFOL (Adult Fan of LEGO), I have dabbled in making art with LEGO, and I have enthusiastically enabled and encouraged my children to play first with DUPLO, then with the smaller LEGO bricks, and more recently with themed playsets. Although I limit “screen time”, LEGO animated shows are among the media they can watch, and along with *Minecraft* (2010) (described by one of them as a “computer world made up of LEGO bricks”), they play some of the LEGO games on the iPad and computer. Recently, they’ve been making stop-motion animation with the LEGO Movie Maker app on the iPad. I’ve been particularly fascinated with the way kids use LEGO since I witnessed a staggering deployment of necessity and invention in my son’s kindergarten classroom; because there were no cannons or other weapons available for the battleships some boys were building during their free play time, they used LEGO pants (or legs) and coined the term “pants shooters”. Even a piece as particular as a part of a minifigure can be used for another purpose, if imagination and interest are involved. Nevertheless, when faced with the shelves of themed playset boxes in the LEGO Store or in the catalog, I wonder if the specific object has to be built and then, as it inevitably is, returned to the pile of bricks from which it came, before the full value of the brick comes into play.

Although pants shooters were not foreseen when LEGO launched the System of Play in 1955, that they can be used in that way is the result of the system, and this indicates one of the tensions between the original LEGO philosophy and the increasingly conflict-based dramatic premises and narratives of children’s toys and media across the children’s culture industries, with which LEGO must compete. In many ways, the story of how we end up with myth blocks in Ninjago and Chima is the story of how the System of Play evolved into a supersystem (to use Marsha Kinder’s term for a children’s transmedial franchise) as LEGO adapted to changes in how children’s toys were being used and bought.

The System of Play evolved into “a system within a system” designed by Godtfred’s son Kjeld Kirk Kristiansen to differentiate product ranges for children of different ages in 1978, and the concept of systems has remained central rhetorically and organizationally, as evidenced by the research on Systematic Creativity<sup>2</sup> now under the umbrella of the LEGO Foundation. In the 1990s, when LEGO shifted away from the “brick-related attributes of the LEGO brand” and

toward “the main LEGO value of ‘creativity’ and its related values of ‘limitless’, ‘fun’ and ‘pride,’”<sup>3</sup> the “System of Play” became a more all-encompassing system of creativity supported by the education and research unit of the company, and the kind of play afforded by LEGO was more explicitly expanded to include not only construction play but also pretense play.

The LEGO Group’s ambitious push to pursue an entirely new set of consumers—the two-thirds of kids who told researchers they’d rather plug into an Xbox (and the like) than play with construction toys—led to that all-out effort to think beyond the brick and fan out in entirely new directions, not only with digital toys but also with physical toys that were easier to build with because they had bigger, chunkier pieces. Above all, LEGO set its sights on developing turn-on toys featuring amped-up, good-versus-evil story lines.<sup>4</sup>

The entire shift during this time was toward a more “meta” paradigm; as Esben Karmark concludes, “From the mid-1990s, LEGO’s top management began considering the LEGO brand, rather than the product, as the company’s strongest asset”.<sup>5</sup> Toys introduced from the mid-1990s to 2004:

focused heavily on playing with the construction once it was finished. The preformed elements shortened the building process and thus the journey to the projected play practice with the finished construction. Looking at LEGO brochures introducing the new LEGO toys during this period, we see the discourse changing from bricks to action, from construction to narrative, from process to product.<sup>6</sup>

This undermined the idea that all LEGO bricks were interchangeable:

Many of the new products were, for example, not compatible with the System of Play. Preformed elements were often only useful in the context of one single LEGO set. These preformed elements frustrated modular, expansive, open-ended forms of LEGO play and restricted the projected uses and users.<sup>7</sup>

*The LEGO Movie* (2014) can be seen as an articulation of how the company, and what it means to be LEGO, has rejected the strategies from the earlier time period, refocusing on the original spirit of creativity, imagination, and possibility achieved through remixing, and in the January/February 2014 *LEGO Club Magazine*, that emphasis is stronger when compared with issues from 12 to 24 months ago.

The company was over-extended and in financial trouble by 2004 when Jørgen Vig Knudstorp refocused the company on core building experiences with

bricks. As David Robertson summarized, “Thinking ‘outside the box’ almost put Lego out of business; it regained its footing when it began to think once again inside the box. Or in this case, the brick”.<sup>8</sup> Knudstrup reinforced the LEGO mission when he commented on LEGO displacing Mattel as the top toy company in the world, “We think we are changing children’s lives forever when they play with Lego”.<sup>9</sup> LEGO still refers to its “System of Play”, but the LEGO Foundation material now refers to a “LEGO System for Learning” (2012), or uses “system” more comprehensively as in the fascinating report “Systematic Creativity”, which asserts that “LEGO is one of the few systems capable of channeling both [creativity toward solving problems and artistic expression]”. Or, as the Senior Manager of Open Innovation and Technology Innovation at the LEGO Group writes, “The LEGO System has evolved into a means of creative expression handed down through several generations making it one of the world’s most recognized toys and the LEGO brand one of the most loved”.<sup>10</sup> Therefore, in 2014, the System of Play has evolved and expanded beyond how the bricks interlock physically, practically, to how the bricks function ideologically within a research-based theory of how play fosters learning, development, creativity, and culture. It may be harder to see all that in a random brick, rather than how it will connect with all the others with studs; but that is where the mythos, and the myth blocks, come in.

As systems, the transmedial imaginary worlds of Ninjago and Chima rely on three kinds of myth blocks: from cultural sources, from other toys in children’s culture, and from LEGO’s mythologizing of LEGO, which can be remixed in media platforms to greater or lesser degrees. Myth, as part of the infrastructure of imaginary worlds, is integral to Ninjago and Chima because of the process of “mediatization” that had already occurred in the 1990s and 2000s, when the LEGO playsets were, to use Stig Hjarvard’s terminology, “imaginarized, narrativized, and virtualized”. Imaginarization, he writes:

is a process by which the symbolic content of the toy comes to refer to an imagined world, rather to an existing reality (present or historical). The physical brick is still at the center of the play, but it is used to create non-realist fantasy universes. Narrativization is understood as a process through which the bricks, due to their physical design, marketing, or an accompanying text, motivate play with narrative qualities. . . . Virtualization is understood as a process by which the bricks lose their physical and tactile sensory form and become represented in virtual universes.<sup>11</sup>

As Hjarvard concludes, “The bricks may still be around, but they are profoundly different from the bricks of earlier days. The physical bricks have been circumscribed by the imaginary world of the media industry and the physical bricks of today’s LEGO are only one manifestation of the brick icon that circulates on all sorts of media platforms in all kinds of imaginary worlds and narratives”.<sup>12</sup>

Ninjago and Chima were made after LEGO, as well as the children's culture industries in general, had already successfully mediatized toys. Even though in the LEGO mythos, building and the brick were reasserted as the central focus of the brand and the play experience, the imaginized, narrativized, and virtualized horse had already galloped its way out of its transmedial barn.

Moreover, I would add a process of concretization, when mythic elements are made manifest in bricks and other objects; *The LEGO Movie* winks at this tendency with "the piece of resistance", but perhaps the best example is in Chima, in which the transformative energy (the "Chi") that changed beasts into the bipedal talking, culture-making, tribally-organized animals (and is the life force over which the tribes battle), is expressed narratively and visually as a physical element of flowing water that forms into energy orbs. The animals hold the orbs to their chests so they can "Chi-up", and temporarily become infused with tremendous physical power. Chi is concretized in the playsets as special LEGO pieces, literally myth blocks, as an elongated stud with rectangular protrusions for chi crystals, not seen as such in the animated series or in print, where chi is represented as water or orbs. In many imaginary worlds, energy or power is manifested in objects or liquids; what is different here, the concretization, can be seen in the large figure that, in the description of the figure, affords you the ability to "Transform Laval into a buildable CHI-powered warrior!" *CHI Laval* (set #70200) is not a model of what the Chi-ed up lion looks like in the television series, or in the online game (see Figure 4.1), which are temporary energy projections of glowing blue energy represented as a second body while the character experiences the power of chi, that look and act much like the tornadoes in Ninjago.

The CHI Laval set is one of the ball-and-joint "construction"<sup>13</sup> action figures, larger (over seven inches tall) and more posable than the minifigure, that the child assembles and then plays with like any other action figure, which emerged during the time LEGO was pursuing the child who wasn't interested in building. As an object that makes the power state of the Chi-up visible and tangible, the toy *concretizes* an imaginary element best perhaps represented pictorially and kinetically through digital imaging rather than plastic. In manifesting what chi can do to the little minifigure by making him a huge and fierce creature more like a mecha than an embodiment of energy, the concepts of power, chi, and transformation are also concretized, represented, and experienced as less abstract. To connect the buildable figure to the other parts of the transmedial world, there is a video section on the website where you can choose two opponents and watch a video of them fighting; they are animated versions of the toy (not how the characters look in the animated series or graphic novels), but infused with energy-laden blue light, a hybrid of the physical and digital versions. They only fight for 20 seconds without a narrative frame, which is often how I've observed boys playing with the action figures, enacting exciting actions with little or no story dramatization. To increase the number of toys available and



**FIGURE 4.1** Lions in Chima. Left column, from top down: *Legends of Chima* animated series, 2013; the story of the Legend Beast, Laval riding the Legend Beast, the Legend Beast easily thwarts a Chi-ed up Croc, and the temporary Chi-up state. Middle column, top: *Lion Legend Beast* playset #70123, Lagravis speedor from *Royal Roost* #70108; middle: Laval in iPad game *LEGO® Legends of CHIMA: Speedorz™* (2014); bottom: Chi-up in *Chima Online*; right column: choosing avatar in *Chima Online*, multiplayer play in *Chima Online*, bottom: *CHI Laval* (set #70200).

appeal to older kids who are more interested in the fierce, articulated buildable action figures than the minifigures, designers draw on the mythic structure of the imaginary world, but in a way that freely remixes its myth blocks.

In order to better understand the transmedial experiences afforded by Ninjago and Chima, and how they are shaped by myth blocks, it is helpful to consider Ninjago and Chima as *transmedial imaginary worlds*. When we focus on imaginary worlds, world-building becomes our lens rather than storytelling, which yields more insight into how a transmedial phenomenon can be experienced when it is based on objects that also are the characters, settings, and things in the narrative. Mark J. P. Wolf carefully delineates the relationships between the process and product of world-building, what Tolkien termed “subcreation”: “Subcreation, then, involves new combinations of existing concepts, which, in the building of a secondary world, become the inventions that replace or reset Primary World defaults (for example, new flora and fauna, new languages, new geography, and so forth).<sup>14</sup> He also develops the idea that each medium in transmedial

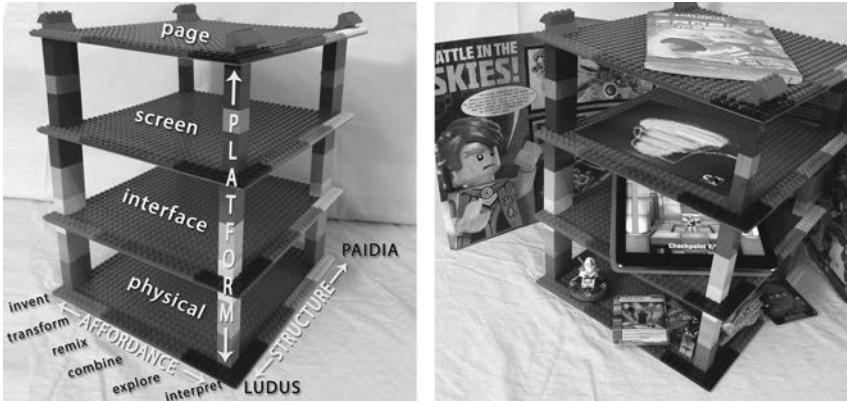
world-building has distinct properties that makes it like “a window that reveals an imaginary world”.<sup>15</sup> The five windows on the world he details are words, images, sounds, interactions, and objects. In thinking through Ninjago and Chima as transmedial imaginary worlds, we can consider how the properties that those windows offer on the world—and each other—shape experiences that occur on particular media platforms that are on the one hand distinct but can also be interrelated and mutually informing.

To illustrate, here is a story. When my then-five-year-old twin sons and I saw *The Adventures of TinTin* (2011) in a theater soon after its theatrical release, they had already repeatedly pored over and read the Hergé graphic novels on which it was based. The original form provided one kind of context, but Jason had an interesting response when there was a scene in the movie that was the same as a scene in the iPad game, (*The Adventures of TinTin – The Game*, Gameloft, 2011), in which the player controls the characters. As he watched Snowy dig under a fence, an action from the game he had played, Jason said, with wonder and recognition, “I *did* that”.

His transmedial experience of being a spectator of the movie in that moment was already shaped by his participatory action in the game. The plot point of Snowy digging wasn’t only familiar to him as part of the narrative, or a place in the imaginary world, but as an action to be performed, that was already part of his experience. Thinking about his response, the jolt of unexpected fusion of what he did while playing as Snowy the dog, what he made the dog do, and what the movie dog was doing on the screen, led me to think about transmedial experience as a process comprised of individual but connected media experiences; sometimes the experiences are nested, or fused, or sometimes the experiences are diachronic, adding or changing someone’s understanding of the transmedially-experienced imaginary world. As Jason and his twin brother Sammy, now eight, have continued to have transmedial experiences in imaginary worlds, especially Ninjago, which they read, play, watch, build, and sing, I’ve witnessed similar moments when the whole of the transmedial world coalesces not necessarily through the transmedial window on the world of the current experience, but because of the other windows, the other platforms, the other user functions or affordances that were part of the transmedial experience. Moreover, his focus was on his actions, which is what his play with the toys he builds out of LEGO most often entails. For my children, and others I’ve observed, mostly boys, it is not so much the narrative of the imaginary world they enact, but the exciting actions and dramatic conflicts from them; what the characters do in the series, what the playsets afford.<sup>16</sup>

In order to better to describe and visualize *transmedial imaginary world experiences*, I embarked on my own constructionist project and built a model (out of LEGO!) It is three-dimensional, with three axes (see Figure 4.2). Ideally the model would be dynamic, interactive, or animated, but that will have to be a future iteration, so that the platforms could move around rather than be fixed, or pathways between the experiences could be traced.





**FIGURE 4.2** Transmedial Imaginary Worlds Experience (model and photographs by Lori Landay). Ninjago images in the model (from top): Ninjago book; tornado in animated series; iPad game; cards, minifigures, and spinner. For these and other images, see <http://lorilanday.com/lego>.

On the first axis, moving vertically, are platforms or windows that indicate where the experience is made manifest; the physical world is at the bottom, the foundation, with the medium of physical LEGO bricks and objects; moving upward, we move up an axis of increasing representation and decreasing simulation (to use Gonzalo Frasca's terms), with the second platform as interface, the third as screen, and the top as page.

The second axis is a spectrum of what the person can do in that experience (affordance or user function, embellishing on Aarseth<sup>17</sup>), moving from interpreting, to exploring, combining, remixing, transforming, and inventing.

The third axis represents level of structure, the poles of which can be by Roger Caillois's foundational terms of *paidia* and *ludus* for respectively, turbulence and rules, "a primary power of improvisation and joy" and "the taste for gratuitous difficulty"<sup>18</sup> but informed by an understanding of how structure and agency can "mutually constitute each other".<sup>19</sup>

The model is best imagined, though, as a model of a space of performance possibilities through which any transmedial experience connects different platforms and affordances. The performative aspect of transmedial imaginary worlds means that even watching Snowy dig under the fence can connect to an action, an action performed as Snowy in the game, but put another way, Snowy digging in the movie, for Jason, was not only an animated and cinematic adaptation of a character from the page, or even deinteractivation from game to film,<sup>20</sup> but an indexical representation of his experience, with his game-playing self as the referent. "I *did* that!" Suddenly the movie fused with his experience of agency; he recognized in Snowy's actions his own performance. There is more to this than can be explored here, but the model offers a descriptive tool for trying to understand experiences of fusion across transmedial platforms.

The media platforms, however, are not as distinct as perhaps they once were, with pathways forged between them to enable people to shift between or fuse them. For example, the Chima buildable figure web video fight match-ups mentioned earlier encourage a fusion of interactive screen, screen, and physical manifestations. To go from the Chima comic “TRAPPED!” in the *LEGO Club Magazine* to the choose your own adventure webpage, which, although the links take the reader to online PDFs that look like page proofs, are still affording exploration in that the reader is making choices among three alternatives, is not only an interactivization (to use Wolf’s term), but an entry into the website which scaffolds digital versions of every other platform. Or, to use the card that comes with *Legend Beast Lion* (set #71023) is to use a mixed-reality technology; instead of entering a code, as one has done in the past, to activate online content that can only be “unlocked” with a physical purchase, the card itself is pressed to the tablet screen, and we move ever more seamlessly through the loop between the actual and the virtual in the transmedial experience. The speedor races that are exciting to watch in the animated series, with the music, editing, and animated manifestations of speed and energy, are fun to enact in the iPad app *LEGO Legends of CHIMA: Speedorz* (Warner Bros., 2013). With the added motivation of beating the non-player character Laval, who my sons tell me, “is the best”, the competition set up in the series becomes part of gameplay. In the MMO *LEGO Legends of CHIMA Online* (Warner Bros., 2013, iOS app 2014), choosing a tribe (one of the “good” ones), customizing appearance, and selecting a name for the avatar, as well as being able to play with friends against the non-player characters (with different levels of chat options controlled by parents), LEGO is again creating a virtual world, although not as open as the still-missed MMORPG *LEGO Universe* (2010–12) (and will again with *LEGO Minifigures Online*, coming in 2014).

The practices of play have changed because of children’s transmedial experiences; they can easily fuse virtual, physical, textual, and screen experiences because they do not seem as disparate to them as to perhaps their parents or previous generations. The LEGO Foundation’s impressive 2009 “Systematic Creativity in the Digital Realm” explores play and creativity in the context of digital media and communications, arguing that “children today see play spaces as fluid and connected between bricks and bits, or physical and virtual environments. Children know what is real and what is not, but they perceive the boundaries as more fluid and full of connecting links”.<sup>21</sup> They conclude: “the digital realm can augment play in different ways, and that the more compelling play scenarios are those where the virtual and physical each play a part in enriching the experience.”<sup>22</sup> They drew on research that studied how “young people actively juxtaposed consequences for actions in-game and in-world”.<sup>23</sup>

Other research also makes interesting and complex connections between in-game and in-room activities. In an essay based on observations of his sons playing an in-room game shaped by their experiences playing the video game *LEGO*

*Racers* (1999), Seth Giddings finds continuities that the boys actively created between digital and physical realms and play. Giddings writes:

Not only were the images and actions of the computer game being played out with real toys, but *the ways* the boys played with their actual Lego blocks was now quite different from how it had been before their experience of the computer game. The boys were not only continuing the game of racing Lego cars begun on the computer screen (its characters, scenarios, and dramas), they were also playing with actual Lego as if it *were* a video game. They were, on one level, *playing at playing a video game*.<sup>24</sup>

He concludes:

Through play these boys shifted across these two spaces [virtual and actual] with ease, their play adapting to the different environments, environmental resources, and the capabilities and possibilities they afforded. The virtual space in this event of gameplay was neither an ideological illusion, nor a transcendence of the everyday and embodied. The virtual and the actual were each contained within the other, intertwining, each inflected by the other.

This correlates with the children who form the strongest basis for my ideas, my twin sons, now almost nine years old. Their own imaginary constructs of Ninjago and Chima are shaped by the media representations and simulations created by LEGO, although, like the *Minecraft* Ninjago objects, they may not have the same aesthetic or realism in their imaginations as the more fully-rendered and detailed official design does. And it is in their imaginary constructs that they play when they play with the toys they've built, swooshing them through the air.

## The Use of the Elements in Ninjago

In the Ninjago imaginary world, for example, the characters, their objects, and conflicts are coded through mythology, which plays a central role in Ninjago and Chima, as it does in any imaginary world. The mythology of Ninjago is structured around four elements: Fire, Ice, Earth, and Lightning. Each element is connected to a “Golden Weapon”: the Dragon Sword of Fire, the Shurikens of Ice, the Scythe of Quakes, and the Nunchucks of Lightning, which were used by the First Master of Spinjitsu to create the land of Ninjago, and then hidden by his son, Sensei Wu, so that no one person could ever wield the power to create and destroy. The elements are also expressed through the design of the minifigures and playsets (with which any original LEGO IP begins) with color and symbols; red for fire, white for ice, black for earth, and blue for lightning.

As Wolf explains in a useful framework for understanding how mythology fits into the subcreated world as one of several “infrastructures” (along with maps, timelines, genealogies, nature, culture, language, and philosophy), in an imaginary world, mythologies “provide historical depth, explanations, and purpose to the events of a world”.<sup>25</sup> Wolf concludes his discussion of mythology by connecting it to philosophy:

Mythology helps to create a sense of historical depth, connecting present characters and events with ancient ones, and the juxtaposition of the two eras may reveal differences which imply changes that have taken place in a world. The hierarchy of supernatural or mythical beings, as well as the models provided by ancient figures and the value placed on traditions of the past (or the lack of them), can also tell us something about the world-views inherent in a secondary world, as mythology becomes an embodiment of philosophy.<sup>26</sup>

The mythic structures that underpin the world-building of Ninjago are assembled from myth blocks, disparate aspects of traditional Japanese and some Chinese mythology and folklore, reshaped into uniform sizes that can interlock with others. Ninjago freely combines Japanese and Chinese elements. The ninjas and much of the visual aesthetic of the buildings, costumes, and the iconic ninja eyes all draw from historical medieval ninjas, and the Ninjago design team took a

weeklong reconnaissance mission to Japan, where the LEGO designers and marketers traveled three hours north of Tokyo to visit the Iga Ninja Museum. As they walked through a fifteenth-century ninja dwelling, with its revolving walls and hidden compartments, the LEGO designers soaked up the telling details that might bring a ninja-related theme to life.<sup>27</sup>

Sensei Wu is connected to Chinese cultural references: the term “wu” means “shaman” in Chinese,<sup>28</sup> Wu is a common Chinese family name, his clothes and long beard are like stereotypical wushu masters, and the Wu Xing is the five-part conceptual structure that includes, but is not limited to, the Five Elements of Wood, Earth, Fire, Water, and Metal. Although the four Ninjago elements are not the same as the Wu Xing movements, they seem inspired by such a structure, as well as other mythic structures. The Stone Warriors seem closely related to the Terracotta Army of the First Emperor of China (c. 200 BC).

There is an acknowledgement of the source of the Ninjago snakes, for example, in world mythology, available to fans willing to “drill” down into one of the many paratexts of the Ninjago universe. An online LEGO Club Inside Scoop story, “The Source of the Fangpyre!” details the sources of Fangpyre, the two-headed Serpentine snake villain. The feature begins, “Now the Serpentine are slithering over the World of Ninjago, we take a look at the real snakes and ancient stories that inspired their design!” and continues:

There are stories in Buddhism and Hinduism of the Naga, snake deities that often had several heads. These sculptures are echoed by the Snake tombs of Ninjago! Roman & Greek Mythology feature the Hydra, a sea-serpent with many heads that guarded the Underworld. Ancient Egyptians also believed the entrance to the afterlife was guarded by Nehebkau, a fierce two headed [*sic*] serpent.<sup>29</sup>

Since they are located across several traditions of cultural expression rather than in one specific one, whether the connections to the various multi-headed snakes of different mythological traditions were the direct inspiration for the LEGO characters is impossible to say; original IP worlds have even more heads than the Fangpyre. For example, RVHM (the creative team of Ricardo Viramontes and Hector Muelas) lists LEGO Ninjago as one of the intellectual properties it developed, explaining on their website: “We named the property, built the characters and the main storylines, assisted in the product design, created the game’s mechanics, outlined a transmedia content strategy and a global launch, and generated new ways to enhance the playing experience (on- & offline interaction, modifiable narratives, etc).”<sup>30</sup> Dan and Kevin Hageman, now best known as the screenwriters for *The LEGO Movie*, write the animated series; according to Dan, “LEGO came to us with a very simple approach: four ninjas, Sensei Wu, and a bad guy. What LEGO did well is that they understood that this was a toy commercial, but if we’re just writing a toy commercial, there’s no fun in that.” Kevin adds,

So we came in and we wanted to bring a *Star Wars* quality of mysticism and magic and really make it a world, a universe. So we said, this isn’t about ninjas collecting weapons, it’s about a brother saving his sister. And we brought the emotion into the story.<sup>31</sup>

The cultural reference points that underpin Ninjago and Chima, from the design of buildings based on Chinese and Japanese architecture to the inclusion of the concept of chi, even as concretized, may account for the appeal of those themes in the Asia-Pacific market. Although the North American and European markets remain primary to LEGO, with 72 percent of 2011 LEGO sales in North America and Western Europe<sup>32</sup> and 70 percent of sales in 2012,<sup>33</sup> LEGO’s corporate strategy for growth includes expansion of their 30-year selling history in Asia. In 2013, LEGO sales to Asian consumers rose by 35 percent. Sales have grown by 70 percent in China, 35 percent in South Korea, and 20 percent in Singapore. China is the world’s second-largest toy market and is likely to eclipse North America in 2014.<sup>34</sup> The factory LEGO is building in Jiaxing, China, is intended to supply 80 percent of the LEGO products in the Asian market when it is fully operational in 2017.<sup>35</sup> LEGO products have a 95 percent global standardization with only a 5 percent variation in its boxes, mainly in packaging, but in 2013, LEGO “adapted an existing dinosaur set and repackaged it as a commemorative Year of the Snake special edition” only sold in China.<sup>36</sup>

Moreover, in an age of globalized transnational transmedia, in which media are manufactured, marketed, and consumed across cultures, cultural specificity is not always a result, or even a goal. Koichi Iwabuchi argues that globally popular cultural exports like Pokémon are part of *mukokuseki*, “the unembedded expression of race, ethnicity, and culture”.<sup>37</sup> Despite the association of Pokémon and Japaneseness, it is not accurate “to say that this cultural influence and this perception of coolness is closely associated with a tangible, realistic appreciation of ‘Japanese’ lifestyles or ideas”.<sup>38</sup> Derek Johnson argues, “A transnational approach to the global flows of franchising, therefore, asks how global media institutions generate more complex forms of culture and cultural production than can be contained within a singular national frame”.<sup>39</sup>

An approach to culture, and by extension, mythology and folklore, as material to be configured and transformed is a foundational idea behind much of the rhetoric from the LEGO Foundation, the research and education unit of the LEGO Group, according to the summary from the LEGO Foundation’s Cultures of Creativity website:

Cultures develop when people find ways to play, make, and share. This report describes how human cultures can be characterized by their similarities rather than their differences, and emphasizes the importance of recognizing playfulness and creativity to develop societies prepared to accommodate the rapid changes associated with technology and globalization.<sup>40</sup>

Not everyone agrees with the philosophy expressed above, and perhaps another reason why there is less cultural specificity in Ninjago and Chima may be found in the interesting backstory to the relationship between LEGO intellectual property (IP) and traditional cultural expressions that resulted in LEGO agreeing to work with the Maori to set up a code of conduct under the umbrella of the World Intellectual Property Organization, for guidelines on using traditional knowledge in making toys. Bionicle was the LEGO Group’s first IP and transmedial imaginary world, and it evolved into more of an imaginary world than the LEGO designers first intended. In 1999, Christian Faber, an art director for the Advance Advertising Agency, set to work on background visuals for the “Voodoo Heads” action figure advertisements (which eventually became Bionicle). “Faber was captivated by the opportunity they presented. Instead of drawing static backgrounds for ads, he decided to push beyond the Voodoo Heads characters and instead illustrate an epic, multipart adventure such as Star Wars, which would amp up his client’s revenues for many years to come”.<sup>41</sup> “The story played out in a microscopic world, but for its ‘part-organic, part-machine’ inhabitants, the scale was sweepingly vast. Faber provided visual depictions of the island and its inhabitants and also suggested to his colleagues at LEGO a name for the new toy: Bionicle, a combination of the words biological and chronicle”.<sup>42</sup> First, there

was Faber's rich depiction of the Bionicle universe, with its tropical island topped by a massive volcano. "For me, every fantasy story starts not with the characters but with the location", he recalled. "You've got to give kids a compelling place to play."<sup>43</sup> Undoubtedly, understanding the importance of world-building was a key component of the success of LEGO's first IP, as well as action figures bigger than minifigures that used ball-and-joint articulation, affording children more realistic movement and poses in their play. In creating the nature, culture, language, mythology, and philosophy that form the infrastructures of an imaginary world,<sup>44</sup> Faber and other designers drew on Maori and other South Pacific cultural expressions.

The New Zealand Maori, represented by lawyer Maui Solomon, protested that the appropriation of the Maori language and other traditional cultural expressions like traditional tattoos, myths, clan systems, and rituals in Bionicle products trivialized and commercialized their culture.<sup>45</sup> According to a BBC News article, "Mr Solomon and the groups he represents objected to the inappropriate use of Maori words, and the way the game mixed together strands of many cultures".<sup>46</sup>

Although LEGO responded admirably to the Maori complaint, sending a representative to New Zealand, agreeing to stop using Maori language, and deciding to work on the code of conduct (which needed four more corporations to join LEGO and subsequently stalled), Maori activists staged a cyber attack on the fan-site BZPower.com (not officially affiliated with LEGO) in order to bring their concerns directly to the consumers. The denial of service (DOS) attacks resulted in a series of counterattacks on a Maori activist site, and also discussion about cultural appropriation, some of which engaged with the ideas behind the original attack, and some of which was primarily angry. Overall, the Maori/LEGO/BZPower.com conflict is a fascinating example of how communities have become involved in global transmedia through digital technology.

Interestingly, the issue of cultural appropriation in Ninjago recently flared again on BZPower.com; a poster called "Octodad" raised on the LEGO Discussion board with a topic "The Problem with Ninjago":

Ninjago would be nothing without the Western appropriation of Japanese culture. That's it, plain and simple. The very concept is ripped and mangled straight from Japanese history books, and molded with assorted junk into a line that seeks to please the desire for faux-Asian products in the West. . . . Ninjago has stomped upon Japanese culture and ground it into something malleable for Westerners who want to make a quick buck off of it.<sup>47</sup>

The discussion that followed devolved (as often happens) and was summarized and mocked across the web (as often happens), but there are interesting points about intentionality and appropriation. Leaving aside the question of whether it is good or right for an individual, group, or corporation to use cultural material from a tradition not their own, and of how that material should or should

not be used, we can certainly say that the sampling, synthesizing, and remixing that formed Bionicle is characteristic of cultural production today.

The music in the Ninjago animated series echoes the cultural remix approach of myth blocks. American composers Jay Vincent and Mike Kramer combine traditional orchestral composition with what they term “ethnic colors” and modern film scoring sampling techniques to create a hybrid soundscape. For example, within the overall division of wind instruments for the heroes and strings for the villains, Vincent and Kramer use the dizi and xiao, both Chinese flutes as well as the South American quena flute and the Armenian duduk. The result is a soundscape that incorporates culturally-specific instruments and musical elements within a compositional framework familiar from established film scoring conventions.

The Ninjago theme song, however, is fully American pop music, aurally and thematically celebrating what Roger Caillois termed *ilinx*, “an attempt to momentarily destroy the stability of perception and inflict a kind of voluptuous panic upon an otherwise lucid mind”<sup>48</sup> through vertigo. Caillois derives *ilinx* from the Greek word for whirlpool, which he writes is broad enough to cover “a disorder that may take organic or psychological form”. Written and performed by the Chicago band The Fold, the lyrics of the show’s theme song “Weekend Whip” exhort you to “Jump up, kick back, whip around and spin!” In the mythology of Ninjago, spinning creates a tornado of energy fueled by the Spinjitzu Master’s element. The Tornado of Creation, which combines all four elements into the power to create something out of nothing, was how the First Spinjitzu Master created Ninjago. The tornadoes also obscure violence and conflict by making it metaphoric; as Dan Hageman explains, “What’s fun about *Ninjago* is that they fight inside these tornadoes, so you can’t really see anyone, I don’t know, tearing out a jugular”.<sup>49</sup>

The spinning in the animated show or video games is fused transmedially with toy spinners, that have a play mechanism of their own separate from building, and that could be used for competitive gameplay based on specific rules in homes, on-line, and in coordinated competitions. When the development team was working on Ninjago, they wanted to incorporate an element of “schoolyard currency”, something “competitive and cool”.<sup>50</sup>

Competitive battles with complex systems of powers and damages were not new to kid culture, of course, any more than ninja were. Ninjago draws on the popularity of competitive spinning top toys like Beyblades as well as collectible Pokémon card battles and Disney’s Club Penguin’s Card-Jitsu, as well as previously popular boys’ transmedia like and *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. Dan Fleming argues that the popularity of martial arts in US and European cities coincides with the popularity of ninjas and TMNT: “The *Ninjitsu* system has come to epitomize this tensions [between individualism and collective discipline].”<sup>51</sup> Fleming continues, “the *ninja* and *kung fu* imagery in general, with its ideal of freely-chosen group-based discipline, condenses different ideas and sentiments according



to the context, balancing as it does the individual and the collective and allowing each to escape some aspects of the other".<sup>52</sup>

Spinjitzu, the spinning martial art the Ninjago ninja learn from Sensei Wu as they master their element and tap into their true potential, alludes to Ninjitsu. According to the *Character Encyclopedia*, Spinjitzu "allows any Master of it to spin so quickly that he becomes a tornado of energy. Spinjitzu Masters usually control one of the four Elements": Ice, Fire, Earth, and Lightning.<sup>53</sup>

Ninjago Spinjitzu tops have objects, trading/playing cards, characters from the imaginary world who use the spinner or speeder, and codes that unlock extra content in online versions of the games. The competitive game has many shared elements with Pokémon and other kids' transmedial worlds that organize and categorize its inhabitants and objects as knowledge and practices for kids to master, exchange, and share. As Buckingham and Sefton-Green conclude in their study of structure and agency in Pokémon as media consumption that requires activity:

The diversity of media and activities enable it to fit in isomorphically with many of the spaces and routines of children's everyday lives. . . . the texts of Pokémon are not designed merely to be "consumed" in the passive sense of the word. On the contrary, they are designed to generate activity and social interaction. Indeed, they positively depend upon it. This is the case not only in children's immediate encounters with the text(s), but also in what happens beyond this. The computer games are obviously designed to be "interactive", in the sense that you have to make choices and predictions, remember key information, plan ahead, and so on, if you are to succeed. However, this kind of active engagement is also required by the phenomenon as a whole: in order to be part of the Pokémon culture, and to learn what you need to know, you must actively seek out new information and new products – and, crucially, engage with others in doing so. There is a level of cognitive activity required here, but also a level of social or interpersonal activity without which the phenomenon would not exist.<sup>54</sup>

Ninjago, and Chima, seek to engage children in similar activity in the imaginary world through various transmedial platforms that span and connect experiences that occur on the page, on the screen, in an interface, and in the physical world. If we return to my model, the spinners manifest on each platform, with different properties of representation, affordances, and degrees of structure. Manifested on the physical platform with LEGO toys, if played according to the rules that accompany the spinner playsets, there is a ludic structure for the competition in which players can develop mastery of the spinners, with points and properties that feed into the kind of extensive knowledge base that made Pokémon successful. Or kids can just spin the toys, making up their own rules, in a more paidial kind of play, or can use the figures as part of dramatic or pretense play

that may or may not be competitive, and may or may not be based on the characters and narrative elements from the animated series; depending on how they use the toys they could explore existing frameworks, combine existing elements in different ways, or transform the toys into play objects that do something other than Ninjago. How they play with the toys would be shaped by experiences they'd had on the other platforms, whether they had narrative information, for example, from *LEGO Club Magazine*, or were engaged in the unfolding story in the television series, or involved in reading and writing their own fan fiction (perhaps a gender-switching story that reimagines the ninja as female), or had played video game versions, or had spent recess spinning around themselves in a playground game. Each experience can be described in terms of where it occurs on a media platform, and how it is bounded by a level of structure and the affordances of the medium. And each could be fused with, or understood through, the transmedial window of other experiences, as if there were chutes and ladders between the platforms. And they are intended to be gateways from one experience to another; non-building toys offer “a low-intensity building experience” that, according to LEGO’s Michael McNally, “was about recruitment, and it worked, and that’s why we’re doing Chima”.<sup>55</sup>

The myth blocks remixed in the Ninjago spinners, from cultural sources, children’s culture, and the mythos of LEGO, provide contexts in which competition, or dramatic actions or stories can be played out, but it seems like many of the themes are focused on conflict. The willingness to foster “conflict play”, a term for acting out aggression and hostility in play I found in a document entitled “Fighting Machines: Good vs. Evil in Conflict Play” on the LEGO website, is a deliberate shift. The undated document can be placed around 2005–6 because it ends with a discussion of the new (and unsuccessful) IP theme EXO-FORCE, and explains that in order for a toy that facilitates conflict play “to earn the LEGO name, it first has to set a stage where children can become heroes”, and that LEGO aims “to develop conflict play scenarios where children can experience the benefits of cooperation”.<sup>56</sup> The document explains when (developmentally) and how children differentiate between good and evil, and between television violence and real life violence, and lists skills that children develop through conflict play, ending with reassurance, “So, go ahead, it can be beneficial to let children be the heroes of their own stories—even if it requires a little rumble”.<sup>57</sup>

I was more than skeptical when I stumbled across this document early in my research. It sounded to me like a justification for the aggressive faces, general pointiness, proliferation of missiles and other projectiles, and all the other post-Transformers power-crazed tendencies I see in boys’ toys. However, as I learned more about the history of boys’ culture in the American 19th and early 20th centuries (with, for example, its inclusion of hostile physical combat, throwing stones at each other, and hunting and trapping small animals and birds,<sup>58</sup>) I was glad that if my boys are going to dramatize their desires to dominate in play,



FIGURE 4.3 Castle sets from 1986 and 2013.

that they do it with LEGO. It's understandable that they want action-hero characters who have a lot of agency, who have mastery over their bodies, the environment, their circumstances, and even physics. However, when I recall the pants shooters from kindergarten, I'm not sure that they need to have such specific objects with which to play that out.

The proliferation of representations and simulations is a part of transmedial production, and as LEGO's commitment to action figures has led them away from sets based on locations and toward sets that facilitate conflict play, more emphasis is put on characters, with accompanying props that are often weapons. We can see this in the example of two castle playsets, one from 1986 and the other from 2013 (Figure 4.3).

The way the 2013 figures are set up in opposition visually, with strong diagonal lines exacerbated by pointy spears and projectiles is in sharp contrast to the smiling minifigures of the past, none of whom make conflictual eye contact with each other.

Yet minifigures have also changed over time, as we can see from the castle set illustration. Instead of the generic minifigure, which only had a yellow smiling face from its introduction in 1975 until 1989, there is an abundance of minifigure characters with increasingly diverse facial expressions, to include negative expressions such as anger, hostility, and fear in addition to the smile. A study of minifigure facial expressions found a complex range of expressions:

Our cluster analysis shows that toy design has become a more complex design space in which the imaginary world of play does not only consist of a simple division of good versus evil, but a world in which heroes are scared and villains can have superior smile [*sic*].<sup>59</sup>

Although it is not simply the facial expressions on the minifigures, the study does include the observation that “the themes that LEGO is producing subjectively appear to become increasingly aggressive”.<sup>60</sup> To return to my model, manifest on each platform from simulation to representation, with each instance

shaped by the productive relationship between structure and agency, there has been ever more explicit focus on conflict: from the minifigures' facial expressions, the pictorial representations on the boxes that dramatize conflict, the interactive media in which choices are based on, for example, conflict over Chi, to the stories represented onscreen or in print, where there is conflict play based on action figures thought to appeal to boys.

As Jacob Kragh, who led concept design team efforts that resulted in the Galidor action figures, explained, "The driving force behind the action figure category, more than anything, is about triggering boys' imaginations through role-play. . . . And role-play, more than anything, is about having strong characters".<sup>61</sup> The "strong" characters are placed in situations with high conflict, which is often dramatized through aggression, competition, "battles" (to use one of LEGO's recurrent words), and violence. Marsha Kinder, a pioneer of understanding transmedia especially in children's culture, argued that violence functions as a "source of *empowerment*" which is "linked to *transformability*".

What distinguishes the Ninja Turtles and Power Rangers from other more traditional protean superheroes (such as *Batman*, *Superman*, and *Wonder Woman*) is that they provide a choice of several characters for identification so that spectators can move fluidly from one to another and thereby quadruple their own transformative power. . . . This empowering plasticity is appealing not only to youngsters as a commodified form of growth but also to adults as a means of survival in a global culture that is rapidly being restructured by economic and technological changes and that increasingly puts a high premium on transformative processes like recycling, retraining and masquerade.<sup>62</sup>

Ninjago offers a range of characters with whom to identify as well, with four original ninja, plus the Green Ninja who is younger, smaller (with shorter minifigure legs), but more powerful as the master of all four elements, and Nya, the sister of the Fire Ninja Jay, who is revealed to be a powerful samurai. There are also the teacher/father characters, an absent mother who returns, and a large number of villainous skeletons, then serpents, and now in the Ninjago 2014 Reboot, cyborg nindroids. All the main characters and many of the minor ones transform; for example, from regular people into ninja, or into tornadoes of energy, and once they overcome their emotional obstacles and unlock their true potential, into Masters of their element with glowing bodies. Or in the case of Lord Garmadon, Sensei Wu's brother, there is a transformation from bad to good; and in 2014, even Sensei Wu is captured by the Digital Overlord and turned into an evil cyborg, Tech Wu, whom the ninja must liberate.

But even more specific than the wider context of boys' play culture and media, LEGO has its own internal mythologizing of types of boys that it uses in the development process:

The effort began when the Slizer team, working from published research on boys' behavior and especially their play lives, created detailed profiles of four different consumers, each with an alliterative name. There was Agent Anthony, who loved action movies and adventure stories. Systematic Siegfried was fascinated with technology. Artistic Arthur would probably grow up to be a craftsman. And then there was Bully Bob, easily distracted and the loudest kid in the room—hardly the typical LEGO consumer and one whom the company had never seriously pursued.

Each of the archetypes informed Slizer and helped shape Bionicle, but none more so than Bully Bob.<sup>63</sup>

Robertson and Breen explain that Bully Bob, later referred to as “Bionicle Boy, a dynamic trendsetter with a short attention span, a kid who likes to multitask and desires instant gratification” was the archetype of the LEGO customer for whom the team designed, someone who is social and competitive, a focus that ultimately led to the development of the Ninjago spinning top toys, Spinjitsu.<sup>64</sup>

Those four types of playing boys sound a lot like the four ninjas of Ninjago, with Kai as Bully Bob, Cole as Agent Anthony, Jay as Artistic Arthur, and Zane as Systematic Siegfried. The initial storyline of Ninjago is overcoming Kai's reluctance to train to be a ninja, to delay gratification, and commit to the discipline of training. The mythic structure that LEGO designers created to understand their customers became part of the mythic structure of the imaginary world they created for those boys to play in, which shapes definitions of character types in a popular and influential children's transmedial imaginary world, undoubtedly influencing how boys define themselves in relation to the characters. Playing with the minifigures either as pretend play or the more ludic and *ilinx*-laden Spinjitsu battles means choosing a ninja to control and play as; in the web game *Ninjago Rebooted* (2014), in Endless Mode, the player chooses which of the four ninja to have as an avatar. The online interactive fiction affords following Nya, Kai, Zane, or the team of Cole and Jay through the branching narrative, *THE RISE OF THE NINDROIDS!*<sup>65</sup> There are many popular Message Board posts on LEGO.com under headings like “What ninja are you?” and quizzes on the topic on other boards on the web, as well as fan fiction and role-play.

Chima, even more than Ninjago, celebrates transformative power through character. The concretization of Chi as energy into water, then orbs that give the characters temporary power-ups that follow system dynamics familiar from many video games, are reinscribed as game objects and behaviors in the game world, and portrayed in a dizzying flow between different transmedial platforms of the imaginary worlds.

Children are transformed into warriors, friends into enemies and then back again, beasts into self-aware culture-makers, plenty into scarcity, peace into war.

If drama can be reduced to conflict, then the *LEGO Club Magazine* effectively communicated to my kids the essence of the Chima situation before they ever saw the toys or the series: the battle over Chi. Conflict over possession, familiar in children's everyday life, is transformed into myth in "The Great Story" when Laval, the lion hero, has his Chi stolen by an attacking Croc. In Chima, when youngsters come of age, they receive their first orb of Chi, which they put in their chest and, like the ninja, their bodies are transformed and enhanced by an empowering energy force.

There are four kinds of lions in this episode, all versions which are transformations of each other. The father, a Warrior who is the leader of the Lion tribe who allocates Chi fairly, tells the story of the Legend Beasts (who did not drink from the Chi water and become bipedal) and gives Laval his first orb. Young Laval, the hero, drops his orb, which is stolen by his former friend Cragger, and almost drowns in the Gaspig Creek. He is saved by the third kind of lion, the Legend Beast, strong and pure, who roars instead of talking. After Laval rides back to the Lion temple on the back of the Legend Beast, and inserts his orb into the harness on his chest, he transforms into the fourth kind of lion, when he "Chis-up". The power-up familiar from video games becomes part of the narrative, and then is concretized in the CHI Laval buildable figure, as discussed earlier.

The brick is also transformed, and is an item for transformation in the virtual world of *Chima Online* (2014), where it is currency. But it is more than only currency (although without a successful business model which includes in-game purchases and paying memberships). As in other LEGO video games, objects in the game world break apart into virtual bricks and studs, and in *Chima Online*, like in *Minecraft*, you smash stuff to get at its components. This is satisfying in an ilinctic way; it is tumult, and a kind of mastery over the environment, to be able to reduce it to parts and harvest them. Although not everything is made of bricks, many things, including houses or tents, are, and there is a building menu and ability that I'm not far enough along yet to access.

It is here, where the brick is virtualized and stands for value, that the mythology of LEGO is apparent: that the brick is, like chi, what will enable a child to transform; where we see how mythology has been made into bricks, which have been mediatized; and finally, what is virtual is made manifest physically again in the brick. The mythology of LEGO is a set of myth blocks that becomes part of every build—whether it is in puns like using LEGO's term "clutch power" (for how the bricks stick together) as the name for the hero Clutch Powers in animated movies; or the brilliant meta-narratives of productive tensions between individualism and collaboration, structure and agency, and *paidia* and *ludus* in *The LEGO Movie* (2014); or the chi that everyone needs to save the world—LEGO, the play system that fosters creativity, reinscribes itself in the construct.

## Notes

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# 5

## CHICKS WITH BRICKS: BUILDING CREATIVITY ACROSS INDUSTRIAL DESIGN CULTURES AND GENDERED CONSTRUCTION PLAY

*Derek Johnson*

As a film that narratively celebrates unlimited construction play, yet economically supports the sale of construction toys differentiated in the marketplace by single imagined uses, *The LEGO Movie* (2014) must engage in a careful ideological balancing act. The “creativity” it idealizes must account for the freedom and agency implied by that term, yet in a way compatible with the packaging and marketing campaigns that encourage users to build what they see on the box then purchase new sets instead of reconfiguring what they already have. The ideological bargain struck in the film, therefore, depends on defining creativity in relation, rather than strict opposition, to the practices of following the instructions. The first act focuses on Emmet, an animated LEGO construction worker minifigure who dutifully follows instructions for everything from combining bricks to fitting in socially. Although “Master Builders” like Wyldstyle and Batman shun instructions and rebuild the world around them in virtuosic ways, Emmet eventually schools these individualistic builders in the value of instructions as a platform for teamwork. And when the final act shifts to a live-action struggle over use of LEGO bricks between an order-minded father and his more chaotic but innovative son, the resolution of father and son learning to play together comes from a compromise between instructions and free play. While the father eventually embraces his son’s penchant for reconfiguration and foregoes a plan to use Crazy Glue to permanently fix instruction-built models, there is little suggestion that his son’s master building will come at the cost of entirely abandoning the instructions. The creative model and father–son collaboration settled upon in the film’s conclusion melds the two approaches, where builds made first by the instructions can later be creatively reconfigured. “Master building” in the film is rarely the creation of something from nothing, but the rearrangement of pre-existing, pre-designed things.

While this idea of creativity growing from conformity supports the pleasures of the film narrative as well as LEGO's build-by-instructions market, it takes on added cultural and political significance in relationship to the company's marketing of construction play to girls. Similar ideologies underwrote the 2012 launch of the LEGO Friends theme that targeted construction sets to young female consumers via pastel-colored bricks, feminized narrative settings, and the replacement of the ubiquitous four-centimeter LEGO minifigure with new taller and slimmer "minidolls". Here, in addition to instruction booklets, feminized frames provided LEGO consumers with what Ellen van Oost and Mary Kearney term "gender scripts", in which differentiation of cultural technologies on the basis of gender governs and disciplines their use.<sup>1</sup> The creative engagement of girls with LEGO toys is limited, regulated, and essentialized through design, marketing, and packaging in accordance with gender scripts that provide *de facto* instructions for approaching construction play in feminine ways. And though LEGO provided these scripts, it could simultaneously suggest that creative use of the product might be enabled, rather than limited, by them. Congratulatory features in the business press offered an opportunity for LEGO to present itself as reluctantly embracing gender stereotypes in order to connect girls with the enriching possibilities of construction play.<sup>2</sup> This uneasy position within the marketing of popular culture calls into relief the way in which ideas about creativity, production, and "preferred use"<sup>3</sup> of LEGO products cohere in intersection with assumptions about gender differences and the values placed upon them. LEGO Friends offers a unique opportunity to examine how the creativity of industrial production and design at LEGO, as well as the creativity of consumers using the product through play, accrues legibility and meaning through conformity to the cultural instructions of gender scripts.

LEGO Friends represents a cultural struggle over creativity and its construction through gender (and less explicitly—but no less importantly—class and race, given both the expense of the product and, as I have examined elsewhere, the post-racial politics of LEGO's supposedly "universal" appeals).<sup>4</sup> Creativity is mobilized both in opposition to and defense of gender scripts in the idea of "free" play with LEGO products. At stake are concerns about who is encouraged to be and recognized as "creative", in what ways, as determined by perceived differences between girls and boys and their play patterns. Following the initial 2011 announcement of the Friends theme, many critics responded with healthy suspicion toward its limited, binary view of gendered play, looking back nostalgically at historical marketing campaigns in which LEGO had endorsed comparatively non-segregated play and more gender-neutral (but still white, middle-class) models of creativity. A firestorm of unrest from parents, feminists, and fans contested the meanings of creativity on offer in this new product line and accompanying claims made by the LEGO Group. While concerned with the design of the new girl-targeted construction toys, many detractors also critiqued the industrial practices behind Friends, making claims about the work