

Praxis

How digital remix and fan culture helped the Lego comeback

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[0.1] Abstract—*The LEGO Movie*, the highest-grossing animation film of 2014, surprised and impressed children, adults, and critics worldwide. The film's transfranchisal approach and its clever merchandising helped the Lego Group become the world's biggest toymaker in the following year. In order to provide context for understanding the Lego comeback, we first address the corporate history of the Lego Group and how its product range has developed over the years. Next, we take a closer look at adult fans of Lego (AFOL), in particular a German fan club that considers Lego building to be a form of art. The final part of our paper deals with brickfilming as a cultural practice bringing together fans, the brand, Lego-building, and filmmaking. Taking *The LEGO Movie* and the overwhelmingly positive response to it as a starting point for cultural analysis helps to deepen our understanding of contemporary media production and resulting (trans)formations of fan phenomena. Furthermore, investigating Lego allows us to tackle some of the key rules and mechanisms underlying cultural participation and creativity today. Ultimately, the difficult past and current success of the Lego brick may attest to the often challenged yet sometimes reaffirmed status of tangible objects in a now predominantly digitally mediated era.

[0.2] Keywords—Analog culture; Digital culture; Fandom; Film industry; German fan culture; Hollywood; Lego franchise; Media franchise; Toy industry

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1. Introduction

[1.1] When *The LEGO Movie* was released in 2014, some wondered why anybody would go to the cinema to see a film about plastic bricks, and many expected it to be hardly more than a feature film-length commercial ([note 1](#)). However, cinemagoers were in for a surprise, because—in the words of Susan Wloszczyna (2014) of RogerEbert.com—the film proved to be "a smartly subversive satire," "a highly entertaining and, most surprisingly, a thoughtful one with in-jokes that snap, crackle and zoom by at warp speed." Wloszczyna's formulation bears references to a breakfast cereal's cartoon mascots (Kellogg's Snap, Crackle, and Pop) and the Star Trek franchise (with the faster-than-light warp speed), a very fitting choice of words for a film itself full of references to everyday consumer culture and other media franchises. As we will explain in the following, the case of *The LEGO Movie* is an interesting example of popular branding and media culture, catering to and profiting from various kinds of user engagement.

[1.2] In this paper, we present our thoughts and findings concerning a number of factors and

phenomena tied to the Lego success, which peaked unprecedentedly in 2014 and is still going strong in 2017. First, we will explain our methodological approach. Then, the paper is structured into four sections: In order to provide context for understanding the Lego comeback, we address the corporate history of the Lego Group and how its product range has developed over the years. In a second step, we take a closer look at adult fans of Lego (AFOL), in particular a German fan club that considers Lego building as a form of art. After assessing motivational and institutional factors that shape these fans' practices, we consider Lego as the ultimate analog pixel that invites endless recombination, a notion that the film's visual style and its underlying message about cultural production and copyright seem to support. The final part of our paper deals with brickfilming as a core reference of *The LEGO Movie* and a cultural practice that potentially involves all aforementioned aspects: the company and brand, the fans, the bricks, and filmmaking.

[1.3] We chose some of our examples from German Lego fandom to shed light on cultures less investigated and less represented in fan studies and studies of LEGO-related phenomena. However, although they may represent niche culture, this does not mean that we consider them culturally marginal. On the contrary, they represent exactly the kind of niches that corporations like the Lego Group invite and actively sponsor. Taking *The LEGO Movie* and the overwhelmingly positive response to it as a starting point for cultural analyses of user engagement and brand communication, we argue, helps to deepen our understanding of contemporary media production and resulting (trans)formations of fan phenomena. Ultimately, investigating Lego allows us to tackle some of the key rules and mechanisms underlying cultural participation and creativity today.

2. Methodology

[2.1] While bibliographic research brought to light many of the historical and industrial facets of the success of *The LEGO Movie*, we used a blended ethnographic/netnographic approach in order to gain more insight into cultural and social contexts, investigating fan cultural phenomena tied to Lego. For this part of our research we drew largely on the guidelines formulated in Robert Kozinets's book *Netnography. Doing Ethnographic Research Online*. Netnography is an ethnographic approach "based in online fieldwork" (2010, 60), a method that "uses computer-mediated communications as a source of data to arrive at the ethnographic understanding and representation of a cultural or communal phenomenon" (2010, 60). Kozinets stresses the importance of a blended approach toward certain social phenomena, namely whether meaningful interactions in focus are taking place both in digital and in face-to-face surroundings: "A 'blended' ethnography/netnography would be a combination of approaches, including data gathered in face-to-face as well as online interaction" (2010, 65).

[2.2] The social spheres we encountered were blended worlds, indeed: members of the Lego forum *Brickboard.de* mainly interacted online, yet there was also occasional offline interaction, for example at annual brickfilming festivals. Equally, the German Lego fan club we investigated, *Schwabenstein 2x4 e.V.* (e.V. means registered association)—like many German fan clubs—has a strong tradition of meeting face-to-face on a monthly basis. German Stammtisch-culture is an important factor here, meaning an established group of people (German: Stamm) meeting regularly at a table (Tisch) in a bar where they drink and discuss matters of common interest. Yet, Schwabenstein also hosts a Web site and a Facebook page that document their offline activities on a regular basis.

[2.3] Our respective entries to the research field differed. During his teenage years, Felix had been a brickfilmer and frequent contributor to Lego fan sites like *Brickboard.de*, gaining experience he could draw on throughout our research. Sophie had written her PhD thesis on online fantasy fan cultures. Through her new Lego-related research, she came across one of her former interviewees, Daniel, who used to be very active in the fandom for the works of J. R. R. Tolkien back in 2012 and had in the meantime turned to Lego. We observed his fan club's Web site *Schwabenstein.com* and its Facebook group closely over a period of several months, from July to November 2015. They had only recently

been founded, and we were interested in them as social sites where crucial interaction happened in an emerging German fan group. We also visited the blog *Brickverse.com*, the German Lego forum *Brickboard.de*, and a number of YouTube channels featuring brickfilms over the same period, yet less regularly, often leaning on the archival function of these sites when trying to understand the social phenomena that the reaction to *The LEGO Movie* represented. Apart from our interviewee, we did not interact online with any of the Web sites' participants (though Felix later did a full participant observation with *Brickboard.de* for a university course assignment). Instead, we used information gained through lurking for identifying and understanding frequent topics, terms, and practices.

[2.4] As we had many questions that the Web sites and documented online interactions could not answer, we decided to interview Daniel, who has been active in fandom for many years and can be seen as a key gatekeeper in German Lego fandom as well as an expert on the legal and organizational matters concerning German fan club organization. We were very interested to get more background information on *Schwabenstein 2x4*, which had caused a bit of a media stir in 2015. We interviewed Daniel on July 17 in a face-to-face setting regarding his Lego-related fan cultural activities. We obtained his written consent to use his statements in our scholarly work and have kept in touch with him regarding his fan cultural engagement. Our interview with Daniel was semistructured; prepared questions concerned the purpose and structure of the fan club, the implications of its legal nonprofit status, and the cooperation with LEGO and other fan groups, as well as Daniel's and his fan group's assessments of *The LEGO Movie*. From Daniel's answers, a couple of further questions arose, which we followed up during the interview, and we also talked about his previous fan cultural engagements in fantasy fandom. In addition, we analyzed a couple of interviews that he and his cofounder Andreas had given on television, interviews that were posted on the *Schwabenstein 2x4* Facebook page.

3. The company: Hitting the bottom, breaking the ceiling, bringing the analog to the digital sphere

[3.1] The last 15 years have seen many successful film and transmedial franchises, and it seems reasonable to place and analyze the Lego success alongside them, because like the producers of *Star Trek* or *Harry Potter*, the Lego Group has opened up numerous strands of revenue. However, with Lego it is important to keep in mind that—like with the *Transformers* franchise—the toy came before the film, and thus official production and related cultural practices unfolded differently than with franchises that were built around a book series or film adaptations.

[3.2] While Lego's plastic bricks have become big players in multimedia entertainment, the brand was not always as successful as it is today. In the following section we will take a look at the development of the brand and its product range over the years in order to help understand the changes that were necessary to achieve its current standing, changes that also attest to the often challenged yet sometimes reaffirmed status of tangible objects in a predominantly digitally mediated era.

[3.3] 2014 was without doubt a year of resounding success for the Lego Group. While the Danish company made a total profit of 7 billion Danish kroner (roughly 940 million Euro) ([note 2](#)), a rise of approximately 15 percent in comparison to 2013, what really blew the framework was the outstanding performance of *The LEGO Movie* in theaters worldwide. The film returned a worldwide gross of \$469,160,692 (Box Office Mojo 2015). Notable critics positively reviewed Lego's latest brainchild, overtly lauding its complexity and richness of (at times self-mocking) references (see e.g., Lane 2014; Berardinelli 2014; Orr 2014; Travers 2014). Audiences also clearly loved the film. Successful film-related merchandising helped Lego to finally triumph over fellow toymaker Mattel, making the company the world's most valuable toymaker that very same year (Koch 2014).

[3.4] Fifteen years earlier, however, the situation could not have been more different. At the turn of the millennium, Lego had hit the bottom in every conceivable way—drowning in debt and with a less than

promising outlook. The company was an investor's nightmare for several reasons. In 1998 the last patents of the Lego Group had expired, which resulted in the company losing its monopoly position. Multiple copycats swamped the toy market with cheaper imitations—like Mattel Inc.'s *Mega Bloks* or Korean toymaker Oxford's *Kre-o* construction toys—that were compatible with Lego bricks, and these imitators claimed significant market share. Lego lost several lawsuits in different countries trying to defend its copyright (Robertson and Breen 2013, 52). Also, when the era of computer games dawned, providing exciting and interactive alternatives to existing analog toys, Lego seemed to become redundant in children's rooms around the world (Konzack 2014, 5). Against the sparkling digital wonders on the screens, Lego's analog toys, so it seemed, could only lose out. The company's management attempted to face the crisis head on. From 1994 to 1998, the toymaker tripled its product portfolio, but to no avail. As the expansion increased, so did production costs for new sets, eating away financial reserves while profits still staggered (Robertson and Breen 2013, 53). It became quite clear that if Lego wanted to thrive again, profound changes would be necessary.

[3.5] Lego's survival mainly depended on two major business decisions, which helped bring the bricks to the digital sphere: Licensing and selling transmedial stories. In 1999, despite strong resistance from some members of its board of directors ([note 3](#)), Lego closed a deal with Lucasfilm, acquiring the licensing rights for Star Wars—just in time for the release of *Star Wars: Episode 1—The Phantom Menace*. In his study *Powerplay: Toys as Popular Culture*, Dan Fleming raises the important issue of narrativization within the toy industry. From a historical perspective, he traces how in "the 1960s the toy industry became increasingly dependent on cinema and, especially, on television for play-worthy objects that could borrow the popularity of a screen character or story. Such objects then came with a narrative attached" (1996, 102). Naming Star Wars, G. I. Joe, Transformers, and the Ninja Turtles as prominent examples, Fleming states that while earlier marketing of narrativized toys had "encouraged children to play out scenes and stories from the originals," the "new narrative contexts had multiple narrative possibilities deliberately built into them from the beginning," such as a basic set of characters and story structures that invited playful extensions with children's "own variations" (102). Licensing the hugely successful series was Lego's first attempt to achieve higher recognition through cooperation with other brands, a strategy that would prove successful on all levels. While the Star Wars franchise had faltered after the release of *The Return of the Jedi* in 1983, entering what has become known in Star Wars fandom as the dark ages between 1985 and 1991, the franchise entered a "second phase" of success when Bantam Books was granted the license to publish Star Wars novels that extended the existing storyline (Proctor and Freeman 2016, 225) and breathed new life into the ailing franchise. The Star Wars renaissance gained traction with further merchandising deals (227), all of which culminated in Lucas's decision to film the prequels.

[3.6] In Lego's product portfolio, Star Wars sets became what one would call long runners—products that would sell even in times when no installment of the Star Wars reboot featured in cinemas. Not only could Lego draw on children as potential consumers, adult fans of both Star Wars and Lego could be relied upon as customers too, indulging in their fandom with yet another product ([note 4](#)). Thus, acquiring the rights for Star Wars equipped Lego with a powerful weapon in the competition for market share. Lucas's saga was a presold property in the best sense and "the best way to predict new success," as Jenkins, Ford, and Green formulated it in *Spreadable Media*, "is to build on past success" (2013, 199), an observation reminiscent of Merton's (1968) Matthew Effect. Exciting audiences since its first release in 1977, the Star Wars franchise had built a strong international fan base, and Lego was ready to skim off the profits.

[3.7] The approach was an intergenerational one: Children could play and reenact the films; adult fans could collect. Every subsequent licensing agreement, be it of Harry Potter, The Lord of the Rings, or The Simpsons franchises, was built upon this formula ([note 5](#)). Yet, while licensing was a clever idea in increasing sales and fostering Lego's reputation, a considerable sum of the revenue created with licensed products returned to the license owners. In 2004, the first year in which Lego disclosed such

figures, turnover proceeds amounted to DKK 6.7 billion, while Lego had to pay DKK 224 million for using intellectual property—4 percent of the total revenue ([note 6](#)).

[3.8] Although licensing existing franchises had proven successful, Lego was also in need of a strategy that would see them ready for an increasingly digitizing world while yielding a profit larger than the one they could achieve with licensing deals. The firm had learned from their experiences with Star Wars that creating toys bound up with a good story would increase their appeal with customers and in turn boost sales. Capitalizing on an existing transmedial phenomenon did indeed work. So why not come up with a world of their own, redeeming them from the necessity to buy themselves into the intellectual property of others? The Bionicle line was born.

[3.9] While thematic sets had existed before, the idea behind Bionicle was, according to Fonnesbaek and Andersen, "to create an ongoing epic story in which the Lego products could act as the lead characters" (2005, 32). With Bionicle, Lego created its own mythical storyworld of heroic biomechanical beings, based on the universal theme of good versus evil. The Danish company developed a product that held appeal across cultural boundaries, ensuring its potential to sell internationally with a strategy often used with cultural products, namely by further reducing, in terms of design and narrative characteristics, "any traits that could be perceived as culturally specific and as markers of identity" (Hediger 2013). What is more, however, with Bionicle, Lego bridged the gap between analog and digital.

[3.10] While not being their first attempt at creating a product that was integrated digitally, Bionicle was strongly tied up with digital products as no other product line had ever been before. Four animation movies and five video games complemented the transmedial approach (Fonnesbaek and Andersen 2005, 35–36; Wolf 2014, 283–84). Yet, the centerpiece of Bionicle was a custom-made Web site that published new chapters of the story each month, a piecemeal tactic binding customers to the product, while Lego's marketing division kept a close eye on all marketing media referring exclusively to the online presence (Fonnesbaek and Andersen 2005, 36–38). Eventually, Lego also turned the tables on the intellectual property front. Becoming a licensor in its own right, the company huddled with businesses like Nestlé and McDonald's, allowing them to buy into their property, hence increasing awareness for the Bionicle campaign (Fonnesbaek and Andersen 2005, 38). The new line would become a huge success and a sheet anchor in turbulent times (Robertson and Breen 2013). Subsequent product lines such as *Ninjago: Masters of Spinjitzu* and *Legends of Chima* have followed in the Bionicle campaign's footsteps.

[3.11] With Bionicle, Lego had also realized for the first time that the key to survival in the digital age was selling transmedial stories rather than simple toys. In a sense, *The LEGO Movie* was the direct result of this insight. Numerous franchises were woven into a coherent and unique narrative of its own, killing two birds with one stone, so to speak. Against this backdrop, *The LEGO Movie* can be theorized with Dan Hassler-Forest's concept of transmedia world-building. According to Hassler-Forest, the following principles are key to the concept: It "takes place *across* media," it "involves *audience participation*," and it "is a process that *defers narrative closure*" (2016, 5, emphasis in original). All three are represented in *The LEGO Movie*: In 2017, the initial film has already made way for a sequel, focused on one of the main characters (Batman), with another spin-off already in the making. Games and analog toy-sets and the ensuing and ongoing discussions on fan Web sites and forums are testimony to the emergence of a world across media in which audience participation is not only a driving force behind this genesis but subsequently may act as inspirational fodder for the corporate producers to extend this universe even further. Finally, *The LEGO Movie* defers narrative closure not only by ending with a cliffhanger but much more so thanks to the fact that the world in which the events of *The LEGO Movie* unfold knows no such thing as a closure. Hassler-Forest notes that "world-building shifts focus from the linear narrative to the environment that surrounds and sustains it" (2016, 8). In the case of *The LEGO Movie*, this environment is partially made up of the

numerous franchises, which themselves verge on the edge of narrative infinity, thus defying attempts to draw clear, closing borders.

[3.12] Lego's other franchises are then pivotal when it comes to understanding *The LEGO Movie*. As Wolf notes, "Lego isn't just transmedial, it is also transfranchisal" (2014, xxiii), a concept in line with Hills's definition of transbranding, the grouping of "multiple intellectual properties...all of them mediated through LEGO as a unifying dimension" (Hills 2016, 8). Addressing both adult fans and children, the film became a hotbed for a transmedial franchise of unprecedented scale, stretching into the realm of the digital with an interactive Web site and a video game (note 7). Nevertheless, *The LEGO Movie* also represents a partial rectification of the company's orientation as a toymaker, as it turned away from the "play over construction" objective that Lego had introduced with the Bionicle line (note 8) and now concentrated again on the idea of systemic play, which had been the company's philosophy from the beginning.

[3.13] It should be pointed out, however, that while the Lego Group obviously has found functioning and profitable strategies for making the leap into the digital age and to thrive under intensifying market conditions, they seem to have adopted a waiting attitude as regards a full embrace of the digital world in terms of bringing systemic play fully to the digital sphere. While various video games pervade their product portfolio, Lego has only one "virtual manifestation" aimed at digital constructing, the *LEGO Digital Designer*, which can hardly be considered a game and which is mainly used by fans (Schut 2014, 233). Interestingly, it was not Lego but the eminently successful *Minecraft* franchise that demonstrated that a translation of systemic play to the digital world is indeed possible, a move that was then answered by the Lego Group acquisition of licenses for their very own *Minecraft* toy lines (see LEGO Minecraft) (<https://www.lego.com/en-gb/minecraft>).

[3.14] Having examined Lego's product range and marketing strategies, we will now turn our attention to the people addressed by the mentioned sets, games, and *The LEGO Movie*. The following section will concentrate on Lego fans, those users who invest more time and money into Lego building, playing, or collecting than does the average Lego user, aiming to gain insight into common forms of engagement with the brick and its brand.

4. The fans: A kidult brand community

[4.1] Looking at Lego's variety of products over the years, it becomes clear that the customers envisioned seem to have elaborate taste and more than just pocket money to spend. Some Lego sets are so complicated, with up to several thousand pieces, or very expensive, like the *London Tower Bridge* model or the *Ultimate Collector's Edition Millennium Falcon*, that it seems obvious they address adults rather than children. And, in fact, in organized Lego fandom, adult fans are the most active. Drawing on an example from German Lego fandom, the following section will present a number of key AFOL activities and discuss organizational and motivational factors of such engagement.

[4.2] There are a number of registered German Lego fan clubs, in Berlin, Cologne, Munich, and Stuttgart. When referring to them as registered Lego fan clubs, the word *registered* can mean two different things that attest to different kinds of institutionalization: One is the international registration with Lego as an (R)LUG—a registered Lego user group. The other is the registration as an association in accordance with the German civil code. Both are important factors of German Lego fans' activities. We had the opportunity to interview Daniel, the founder of the Stuttgart fan club *Schwabenstein 2x4* (which translates into Swabian Brick 2 times 4, referring to the studs of the most popular Lego brick) who provided insight into organizational matters.

[4.3] Daniel explained to us that in order to be recognized as a Lego user group, it is necessary to meet

certain demands, for example, to have a minimum of 20 group members and to organize at least three Lego-related events over the course of a year. According to the company, these groups can appear in the form of a "Physical LEGO User Group" or an "Online LEGO User Group" (Lego 2014, 3).

"Becoming a Recognized LEGO User Group qualifies the group to gain access to various community support programs" (Lego 2014, 3), such as, for example, an extensive and yearly allotted free package of Lego bricks or free sets, as Daniel reported. In April 2015, together with his friend Andreas, he founded *Schwabenstein 2x4*, at the same time applying for LUG status, which was granted in 2016.

[4.4] Even before applying for LUG-status, *Schwabenstein*'s founders made sure to register the group as a legal association, a German Verein, in a step the group considered necessary in order to reduce liability risk. From his engagement with other fan groups, Daniel knew that with larger projects, the risk of failures and resulting disputes over financial or legal responsibilities could increase, all too easily resulting in a decrease of members' commitment. German fan clubs often get registered by their members under the Law of Associations, which implies that the Verein itself is a legal actor. In cases of legal prosecution, only the organization's financial means can be touched; no individual will be held responsible or have to cover any costs. As German copyright (Urheberrecht), for example, does not have an exemption as clearly phrased as the American concept of fair use or English fair dealing, German fans in general are concerned about possible legal prosecution (see Einwächter 2015a, 23). Registering a Verein makes it necessary to formulate statutes explaining the organization's aims and to follow a protocol that requires a steering committee, official membership meetings for decision making, and a thorough form of legal documentation. Having established all of the aforementioned, Daniel went to great lengths to achieve nonprofit status for the group now legally registered.

[4.5] In Germany, being nonprofit means that an association can accept tax-free donations and only needs to file their tax declaration every third year, which is a great administrative relief. Nonprofit organizations can also claim tax exemption for certain kinds of services or buyable objects (Burhoff 2014). To meet the demands of the Associations Act, Daniel and his friends had to carry out a formal founding meeting, in which they agreed on carefully phrased statutes. They also negotiated with the local fiscal authorities concerning their group's purpose. The reason why no other German Lego fan group had achieved nonprofit status before was that the fiscal authorities would normally interpret Lego collecting, building, and showcasing as a commercial activity, opposing the very idea of nonprofit. The Lego Group, however, is very open about the fact that they want LUGs to be promoters of their brand. In the online application form for Lego User Groups, Lego describes one of the events that it expects registered user groups to organize, as follows: "a formal assembly of AFOLs and TFOLs [Teen Fans of Lego] that spans across multiple days to allow discussion about, and action on, promoting the LEGO® hobby. In addition to offering various activities to registered attendees (such as presentations, workshops, and seminars) time is allocated to promote the LEGO® hobby to a public audience" (2017, 9).

[4.6] Such openly addressed commercial orientation and marketing goals would normally have hindered a LUG from achieving nonprofit recognition in Germany. However, Daniel was lucky and was able to talk to a tax inspector who actually showed an interest in what the group did. They had recently built a miniature of the Stuttgart city library with Lego bricks, as well as the parliament of Baden-Württemberg. The tax inspector concluded that such portrayal could be considered art and that under this label, it would not be difficult to receive the wanted status as an association furthering artistic culture and expression. Even more welcome, the inspector stated, was the national, often even regional focus of their projects. Daniel took this advice to heart very much. So much, in fact, that the group's Web site presents art-related quotes by philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche ("Kunst ist mehr wert als die Wahrheit." — "Art is more important than the truth," translated by S. E.

www.schwabenstein.com) and artist Peter Weibel ("Die Aufgabe der Kunst besteht darin, Türen zu öffnen, wo sie keiner sieht." — "Art has the task of opening doors where nobody saw there were any," translated by S. E.). Also Daniel himself has become quite accustomed to using the rhetoric of a

curator and promoter of the arts. Asked about his group's goals, he says, "The fact that LEGO is art and culture has not yet sunk in with people. And that is why I consider it important and the right thing to do that we founded this association, in order to make people aware of the fact that Lego is not just a toy, it is a means to transform your thoughts into buildings" (translated by S. E.).

[4.7] With this proposition, Daniel found his unique selling point, his marker of distinction with regard to other German Lego fan organizations like the Munich group that successfully organizes the large and very popular convention Bricking Bavaria. "They want to make money," he says, "and that is not necessarily the case with us. We'd rather raise awareness that you can express emotion and ideas not only with music, film, with a novel, or with painting, but just as well with Lego bricks" (transl. by S.E.).

[4.8] Over the last 10 years, formats of cooperation between the Lego Group and educational institutions, like the LEGO Learning Institute or LEGO Serious Play, have emerged, promoting "LEGO as kind of tool to support thinking and collaboration" (Gauntlett 2014, 189). There are also artists like Nathan Sawaya of BrickArtist.com whose preferred art tool is the Lego brick, praising its potential to "evoke emotion" as well as its "clean" and "neat" features and reusability compared to other, "messier" art tools (2014, 207). It is thus not quite clear whether the fan group picked up this rhetoric or came to a similar conclusion by themselves, when stressing the merits of Lego as an expressive medium.

[4.9] It is evident that Daniel's new and well-advised approach of Lego as art continues to help the fan group's activities legally and financially. But it is important to see that it also influences the group ideologically and pragmatically as it prioritizes certain fan undertakings, like building regional architecture with Lego, over others and provides a clear-cut framing for all ensuing activities. The group's statutes state concrete goals of the group: Lego exhibitions with a regional focus, construction competitions and workshops aimed at children and teenagers, and stimulation of creativity through regionally inspired new Lego creations. Through these statutes, and in addition to the LUG agreement with Lego, the group thus obligates itself in a legally binding way to stick to promotional activities.

[4.10] Considering the great administrative efforts by fans like Daniel and Andreas, dealing with tiresome legal and organizational issues, how can we explain the motivation underlying adult Lego engagement and investment? Motivational psychology differentiates between extrinsic and intrinsic forms of motivation that can be brought to bear in the Lego fan community as well: Motivation is extrinsic; if one does something for a certain outcome of an activity, a reward, gratification, or recognition, something external to the self (Deci and Ryan 1985, 5). An activity is intrinsically motivated if a person does it for its own sake, when enjoyment or perceived success does not hinge on a certain outcome (5). Playing or building with Lego certainly has such an effect on many who like getting lost in playing, winding down after a hard day of work. For many AFOLs, thus, engaging with Lego is an intrinsically motivated, private matter. However, whenever collecting or building assumes a public dimension, extrinsic forms of motivation play an important role as well. As an extrinsic factor of active Lego fandom, we can consider the community-related status gain that some fans achieve by building and showcasing complex architectures, demonstrating their skills and vast knowledge in the presence of their peers and an interested public. With the official LUG status and the German nonprofit status that fan clubs can apply for and that each grant certain rewards, we also discussed two extrinsic factors of Lego fan activity that we think critically shape fans' activities on a pragmatic level. Furthermore, these factors influence how fans approach Lego and how they conceive of themselves as fans.

[4.11] Adult fans of Lego (AFOL) invest a lot of time and money in their hobby; some possess unbelievably large collections of bricks, which can cause storage problems. Andreas, the cofounder of *Schwabenstein 2x4*, for example, rents an extra apartment solely for Lego storage and building ([note 9](#)). His wife rarely sees him when he is occupied with his Lego MOCs (my own creations), and he

jokingly uses the abbreviation LSP—Lego-stressed-partner—when talking about the social side effects of his fan cultural engagement. It is apparently a rather known term in his smaller community of Southern German Lego AFOLs ([note 10](#)), but it also represents a playful extension of fan cultural slang. Abbreviations play an important role within Lego fandom; AFOLs are especially fond of acronyms (some official, some unofficial), ranging from ABB (automatic binding brick) to BURP (big ugly rock piece) to SHIP (significantly huge investment in parts) to the very necessary WIP (work in progress) ("List of LEGO Abbreviations" n.d.). Within a fan cultural context, we can consider the knowledge of such terms and their meaning to represent a form of fan cultural capital. Sirpa Leppänen has pointed out—albeit in the context of fan fiction communities—that the "acquisition of the appropriate uses of language...[is crucial to] becoming a legitimate participant" in certain fan cultural activities (2009, 79), an observation that certainly also holds true for Lego fandom. Like in other fan communities, common slang is also of bonding value here; specific terms get invented, played with, jokingly altered, or abandoned in the Lego fan community.

[4.12] Among the intrinsic factors of Lego engagement, nostalgia and sentiment play an important role. For many adult fans—even if they never stopped engaging with Lego—plastic bricks are associated with their childhood because that was often when they first encountered them. Lincoln Geraghty notes in his book *Cult Collectors: Nostalgia, Fandom, and Collecting Popular Culture* that it is an important aspect of adult fan collecting that keeping things that were liked in the past helps the collector to preserve and perpetuate a younger identity, to relive and remember fond memories (2014, 137). He suggests describing the personal dimension of collecting in the words of Baudrillard: "what you really collect is always yourself" (Baudrillard 2005, 97). Geraghty also stresses the transformative aspect of Lego-related nostalgia: "transforming the original use for Lego, from childhood to adulthood, and transforming the experience of the toy as it passes from one generation to the next" (2014, 164). While Geraghty's nostalgic reading of fan collecting may certainly not apply to every AFOL (also collecting, playing, and constructing may be perceived as quite different activities by many fans in the first place), the notion of emulating a younger self through acts of consumption and play has been driving marketing campaigns for a long time; selling products that make people feel younger is certainly not a new but a reliable strategy. In her article "Nothing Sells Like Teen Spirit," Karen Brooks noted that through "particular modes of production and imagery, corporate society harnesses the essence of youth and sells back to the adult culture an anti-aging formula. By targeting those euphemistically referred to as the young at heart, a range of products is skewed towards the 25–50-year-old demographic so that they may relive their youth" (2003, 3). While Lego may not make the same promises as lifestyle products like makeup and fashion, it certainly speaks to the consumer's inner child (and with the AFOL that means a child with an income to spend) ([note 11](#)). Furthermore, Daniel mentions intergenerational exchange through Lego as an important factor of his engagement with the toy and brand. One of the reasons that he is now less involved within fantasy fandom and more occupied with Lego is that he perceives it to open up more possibilities of interacting with his own child. It is also important to note that in fan cultural collecting, archival practices and social practices often come together productively, as individuals and communities of interest actively preserve what matters to them and what may not be kept and represented by official heritage institutions (see Einwächter 2015b).

[4.13] Throughout our article we have been zooming in from the larger economic framework of Lego production to organizational and cultural endeavors by fans, and now we will take a look at the brick itself, as it will lead us back to a discussion of *The LEGO Movie*.

5. The brick: Open innovation with "analog pixels"?

[5.1] We consider the Lego brick an interesting subject for discussions about aspects of today's media culture as it possesses both analog and digital features—features that in public discourse, especially in technology product marketing, often get addressed as opposing qualities with the digital being

regarded as superior (Schröter 2004, 7–8). German media professor Jens Schröter points out that with the advent of the CD, dichotomies like real/analog versus hyperreal/digital (meaning more-than-real, but, potentially also nonreal) proliferated (16). The actual Lego brick is undoubtedly a physical and tangible object accounting for certain degrees of realness. It is built from plastic that gets warmed up until elastic (to a temperature of 230 to 310° Celsius) which is then pressed into form (LEGO Education n.d.). Schröter has noted that media historiography often presents the analog as predigital and in some form indexical (2004, 25), as a causal reference to a real object ([note 12](#)). If we were to accept the Lego brick as some form of medium or mediating object conveying meaning, the bricks' molded status would be in line with such an argumentation.

[5.2] However, even physical Lego possesses digital qualities that can be addressed in reference to another important dichotomy, namely that of continuous/analog versus cascaded/digital as used in data transmission. Like pixels, bricks represent the smallest discrete units of a cultural object, and every digital picture could be translated into a Lego representation (given that the bricks of the needed colors were available) ([note 13](#)). Understanding the Lego brick as the smallest discrete unit within a range of larger, composed objects stimulates further musings, as the smallest unit—be it pixel or brick—can be put together in myriads of combinations, each time resulting in something completely new. Novelty, here, and quite in accordance with economic innovation theory (Schumpeter 2006, 158), comes not from creating something new from scratch but from the arrangement of already existing resources to new ends.

[5.3] Another analogy between Lego and digital media content is that in remixing the digital, there is hardly any quality loss. Analog remixing—think of a paper collage, a celluloid film roll glued together from individual film strips, or an old VCR fan video—often physically harms the involved original media (e.g., paper) or works with copies that already differ slightly from the originals (e.g., VCR). However, in remixing digital content—because of the possibility of identical reproduction—the original versions of the mixed material do not get destroyed or altered—they are just reproduced in another shape. Lego bricks possess this digital feature as well. Every construction consists of many separate pieces, but the shape is usually not bound to persist. It can be disassembled and given an entirely new form as often as one pleases, without a perceivable loss of material taking place (except, perhaps, for the situation where one vacuums up a brick with the vacuum cleaner or chews on a brick—as children sometimes do—leaving bite marks). What is more, in the Lego universe it is not only single bricks that are being constantly remixed—it is wholly different sets, entire narrative universes that are thrown together to create something new, a principle that was also played out in *The LEGO Movie*. In Lego's franchised world, it is possible that Darth Vader meets Lord Voldemort over tea at Homer Simpson's house to discuss how they could get rid of Gandalf, while Batman indulges in a round of hide-and-go-seek with the folks from Bionicle who hang out on a pirate ship. The potential combinations are nearly infinite.

[5.4] It requires a certain cultural expertise and freedom to be able to arrange cultural fragments skillfully to new ends. This is reflected in *The LEGO Movie*, where the most prestigious characters are so-called masterbuilders, people who have the actual ideas for new arrangements and who can build their own creations (MOCs) without instructions. Interestingly, the crime of the film's villain consists of gluing Lego bricks together so they can no longer be used by someone else or for different purposes. The narrative can thus be read alongside popular critiques of copyright like the one undertaken by Lawrence Lessig (2008) in his book *Remix* where he states that cultural production has always depended on the usage of existing material and that current copyright and trademark legislations increasingly hinder cultural participation. The glue in the Lego film's narrative can thus be interpreted as a copyright not flexible enough for creative and out-of-the-box-thinking, a threat to the masterbuilders of our culture ([note 14](#)). While subtly criticizing a copyright not fit for the digital age of remixing, *The LEGO Movie* pays homage to older media and to the tangibility of Lego bricks through analog cues.

[5.5] It is, however, difficult to determine whether the film's message is merely the result of a progressive script written by cunning industry-scriptwriters or whether the Lego Group explicitly asked for specific aspects to be included in the story in order to shape their public image, perhaps to avoid a negative portrayal of their brand. Only hints are available, but they suggest a strong influence of the Lego Group: Jill Weifert, at the time of the film's release Lego's vice president for global licensing and entertainment, emphasized that the Lego Group always kept a close eye on the film's development. "For us," Weifert said, "this was always about building the Lego brand." (quoted in Gillette 2014). The film was financed by Warner Bros. in cooperation with Village Roadshow, but the Lego Group acted as a producer with seemingly considerable influence on the final outcome. Although the Group was, according to Gillette, contractually not entitled to enforce changes, the filmmakers seem to have granted them substantial latitude in shaping nearly every aspect of the filmmaking process.

6. The film: Analog reminiscences

[6.1] Arguably, one of the many reasons why the film was so successful with adult Lego fans was its visual style. For instance, users on the German brickfilm forum *Brickboard.de* explicitly praised its visual qualities and adherence to typical Lego qualities (2013). Daniel took a lot of enjoyment in a scene that showed gunfire in the form of a flower stem piece that had been recolored from green to red and emerged from pistols. So much attention had obviously been paid to detail, like the broken helmet of the spaceman figure or its overall scratched front that made it look tangible, like an item that had been touched and fallen to the floor many, many times. In online forums, people enthusiastically reported how they used to have this Lego spaceman figure and how its helmet would always break in exactly that place.

[6.2] When the trailer came out in 2013, Lego fan blogs like *Brickverse* dissected it frame by frame, quickly noting that in the scene showing Emmet getting dressed, "in four consecutive frames, parts are switched around as if it being done with real Lego pieces" (2013). In some shots, there are fingerprints marking the figures' surfaces, inspiring further musings about the film's supposed computer-generated imagery. The film's lighting further added to this confusion because, if these images were computer generated, why would there be lens flares that normally originate from light falling on an actual camera lens in a certain angle? ([note 15](#)). Craig Welsh, the film's supervisor of virtual lighting, confirmed in an interview that this buzz was consciously stimulated and carefully monitored:

[6.3] as evidenced by the many comments out there on the internet...[there were] sometimes furious debates over whether or not the film was filmed stop motion or was fully or partially CG, with all sorts of theories buzzing around. To generate that level of debate and to have people genuinely question the technique, but all uniformly agree that the visuals were spectacular and brought the film to another level, was a great experience. (quoted in Workman 2014)

[6.4] The film, in fact, was produced digitally and is a hybrid—apart from the final scenes, in which human actors take to the scene, most of it is computer animated. Visually mimicking stop-motion technology (Welsh 2014), Warner Bros. picked up a practice long in use with Lego fans: brickfilming. A still rather underresearched aspect of Lego fan culture (a history of brickfilming remains to be written), brickfilms constitute a genre of films whose *mise-en-scène*, that is, its visual design, is—to a greater or lesser extent—solely created with Lego bricks. While brickfilmmers, as those active in brickfilming refer to themselves, unanimously agree that a brickfilm needs to be created with Lego and should generally not include any other objects, the line between what still counts as a brickfilm and what does not is blurry and a continual topic of fierce debate among those involved. Mostly created with the traditional stop-motion technique, brickfilms are not limited to certain topics or genres but largely mirror what is available in contemporary cinema, starting with thrillers through to

experimental films and in some cases even porn (although this category is normally disliked by a majority of brickfilmmers). While the bulk of available brickfilms orientates itself along mainstream lines, there are frequent exceptions, and varieties are endless. Today, stop-motion animation remains the prime mode of production; however, just as other amateur filmmakers have, brickfilmmers have in recent years, thanks to the greater availability of the necessary technology, increasingly relied on computer-generated imagery (CGI) and quite sophisticated visual effects to create and improve their films.

[6.5] Brickfilming as a fan activity intersects with other aspects of Lego fan culture. However, boundaries between brickfilmmers and creators of MOCs are fluid. Some of them are actively involved in typical Lego fan activities, while others create brickfilms without having a close connection to other fans of Lego. It should also be noted that while brickfilmmers are often Lego fans, not all brickfilms are necessarily Lego fan films. Sometimes Lego is just used for pragmatic reasons, as a handy tool for stop-motion animation, as it is easier to handle than other materials. Since the early 2000s, the field has also seen a trend of increasing professionalization. Successful brickfilmmers have cooperated with the Lego Group to create promotional films for new product lines (e.g., BrotherhoodWorkshop) (<https://www.youtube.com/user/BrotherhoodWorkshop>), a development received with mixed feelings by many brickfilmmers. While some greeted the increased attention from both the media and the Lego Group with enthusiasm, others despised a perceived mainstreamization of their activity. As the animation of brickfilms is incredibly time consuming, the number of active brickfilmmers is, as far as we can tell from our observations, comparatively small. Larger local or regional networks of brickfilmmers or the association of individual brickfilmmers in clubs or other registered groups is rare. Given their widespread dispersion, brickfilmmers heavily rely on the Internet to organize themselves, to learn from each other, and to bond with likeminded individuals. Social platforms, above all YouTube, play an important role for showcasing their work.

[6.6] With its digitally produced, deliberately placed imperfections, *The LEGO Movie* thus pays tribute to two important sections of its audience: to anyone engaged in the field of brickfilming, and to nostalgic Lego fans who still care about Lego in its tangible form, presenting Lego as a brand that is well aware of its analog and digital components. The Lego comeback has profited a lot from kidults and grassroots brickfilm-making, and it received a boost from platforms like YouTube, where people from various fandoms turned to Lego as an expressive medium. The film seems to praise their creativity, but the message of free cultural exchange is not necessarily consistent with the company's own policy.

[6.7] The company's way of dealing with fan creativity has sparked controversy in the fan cultural sphere. In early 2015, fan Sergio shared his disappointment online because Lego was producing the design of a Ghostbusters firehouse he had handed in at the Lego ideas Web site, a customer innovation platform, and did not give any credit to him (TheBrickPal 2015). Lego responded that the design in question had already been in the pipeline when the fan handed in his idea of it and stressed that overlaps like this were likely to happen under the given circumstances. The designs do look strikingly similar. And of course this could be because the Ghostbusters films served as a common reference to both official and unofficial creators while the possibilities to represent such an iconic architecture with simplifying means like Lego bricks may necessarily be limited, thus leading to unavoidable similarities in the firehouse representations. Still, the fan's irritation with this incident is understandable given the timing of the two creations, and the unequal distribution of power underlying any fan-corporate interaction becomes obvious. In order to find out more about the independent, subversive potential of Lego-related fandom (and to check whether it is in general more brandom than fandom), we may need to more actively seek out such clashes and fan activities that contradict the brand community logic, activities that find and promote ways to uncouple play from purchase.

7. Conclusion

[7.1] When, in January 2015, *The LEGO Movie* did not receive an Oscar nomination in the animation category, people were surprised; after all, the film had been the highest-grossing animated movie of the year! Phil Lord, codirector and cowriter of the film, finally reacted by tweeting a photo of an Oscar built of simple yellow Lego bricks, stating: "It's okay. Made my own!" picking up the rhetoric of individualistic do-it-yourself counterculture he had also helped write into the film. In addition to being a fitting and charming reaction to a perceived setback, this combination of almost-defiant individual creativity in the context of an undeniably large-scale economic success is an important ingredient of the film and of Lego fans' self-perception; however, in none of these cases does it necessarily represent a subversive act. Heather Havrilesky of the *New York Times* sarcastically sums up the film's message that also seems to reverberate in Phil Lord's statement: "All of those sophisticated constructions and celebrity minifigures and universes within universes are nothing...compared to a simple box of (non-cross-platform promotional) colorful plastic blocks...That box of blocks proves that, even though you might feel average and empty-headed, in fact you are 'the most important, most talented, most interesting, most extraordinary person in the universe'" (2014).

[7.2] Lego hands to its diverse following of users a long list of reasons to engage with the brand, an engagement in which mainstream and counterculture, art and commerce, the winner and the underdog are invited to find a place. While with multimedia products, like Bionicle or the recently introduced video game *Lego Dimensions*, the corporation appeals to Web- and gaming-savvy audiences, Ben Fogle rightfully stresses that Lego still resembles "the antithesis of the high tech world" to parents who are "desperate to wean [their]...little ones away from the tablets and into the bricks" (Espinoza 2016). One could also attest a strategy known from investment banking: In simplified terms, Lego's method of addressing different audiences is a form of portfolio diversification ([note 16](#)). To hedge against potential losses and to spread risk, investment funds often acquire a range of different assets, assuming that they will never default at the same time.

[7.3] In addition to being a very entertaining postmodern film, *The LEGO Movie* proves an interesting case for discussions about contemporary transfranchisal film production and marketing, about analog and digital aspects of animated filmmaking, and about convergence between niche and mainstream culture(s). The film can be read as homage to fan cultural practices and to the cultural conditions necessary for free cultural participation (for example, a copyright flexible enough to allow individual creativity instead of fixing original works into place).

[7.4] Through a skeptical lens, however, it cannot go unnoticed that many of the film's clever visual and narratological decisions (introducing the characters of Superwoman, Batman, and Green Lantern as masterbuilders, for example, and mimicking the aesthetics of brickfilming) can just as well be read as appropriations of fan cultural practices. To repeat Henry Jenkins's warning in his essay "Afterword: The Future of Fandom" (2007): "We should certainly avoid celebrating a process that commodifies fan cultural production and sells it back to us with a considerable markup" (362). *The LEGO Movie* has shown how, when corporate interests become a little too obvious, just the right amount of satire and self-reflexivity will save the day and silence most of the critics who would usually be quick to point out that the brand still represents an internationally operating corporation selling an ever-expanding range of expensive products that are largely addressed not to people who make their own constructions but to consumers who stick to instructions and packaged sets. The satiric and postmodern narrative approach also allows knowledgeable, Lego-savvy fans to distinguish between themselves and other, more average Lego users who do not get the numerous cross-references in the film and who do not have insight into how and where to receive free bricks and special conditions.

[7.5] The Lego Group's brand community-building efforts are no different from other corporations' strategies like Apple's or Ikea's in that they provide incentives for acquiring a seemingly fan cultural knowledge about the brand and its products. A detailed knowledge of products and regulations is ultimately a knowledge of how to work best within the rules set by corporate culture. Fans criticize an

increasing commercialization: Daniel notes a tendency that nowadays Lego sets include fewer and bigger pieces (as if they had already been glued together). This reduces complexity but also leaves less room for straying from the original instructions and for building MOCs.

[7.6] Furthermore, we consider it likely that Lego will receive positive feedback on its endeavors to become an umbrella-fandom that incorporates—quite literally—all kinds of active media fandoms into one large brand community. With reference to the company's protection of its own corporate interests, which shows in the deliberate outsourcing of promotion activities to fans (in RLUGs) and mining of fan-generated creative content, we may ultimately have to read the liberal message of *The LEGO Movie* as a conscious strategy of appeasement, a clever piece of PR, rather than a cultural critique or an honest declaration of political or ethical intent.

8. Notes

1. Low expectations were mentioned by fans in forums but also in several early reviews, such as the ones by Hartlaub (2014) and Coyle (2014), the latter referring to a "dim reputation of toy movies."
2. The Lego Group reported a profit of DKK 7.0 billion in comparison to 2013 where the profit, deducting all charges, amounted to DKK 6.1 billion. According to the annual report, revenue numbers increased by 13.0% in 2014 to DKK 28.6 billion against DKK 25.3 billion the year before ("Annual Report" 2014, 5).
3. The main argument against Star Wars was Lego's promise that war should never feature as a part of their toy world. However, Star Wars already included war in the wording and was mainly based on action and fights. Though the film is neither a classical war film nor outrageously brutal, executives feared that a deal with Lucasfilm over Star Wars would undermine their reputation as a child-friendly toymaker (Robertson and Breen 2013, 51).
4. Consumption is seen as a core activity of fans. In his article "Hitching a Ride on a Star," Charles Soukup writes that "in a capitalist, media-dominated society, the fan is encouraged to collect, to produce, and to consume media and media-related products" (2006, 323). In 2005, Sandvoss published a whole book about this relationship.
5. For a more detailed overview of the different licensed product lines see Konzack 2014, 5.
6. A total revenue of 901,984,527 Euro (at that time) compared to expenses of 32,290,615 Euro equals 4 percent ("Annual Report" 2004). What this figure does not tell us is how much the license costs account for of the actual product revenue for licensed product lines (Lego does not disclose such figures).
7. Thus far, a video game based on the film (*The LEGO Movie* video game) was released for various platforms, and over 20 sets based on the film were sold in stores. Again, as had happened with Bionicle, a Web site was created allowing fans to interact (<http://www.thelegomovie.com>). The page was online between 2013 and 2016 and can be accessed via The Wayback Machine: (www.archive.org) (Purchase 2013).
8. While Fonnesbaek and Andersen (2005) look upon this approach from a positive, insider perspective, Robertson and Breen describe the strategy of the Bionicle line as damaging to the brand as a whole: "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" (2013, 94).

9. We did not speak with Andreas personally; he gave a number of interviews on regional television about his Lego collecting. We are paraphrasing an interview that was broadcast as part of the news format Landesschau Baden-Württemberg on September 3, 2015, on the regional TV channel SWR (Gotovac 2015).

10. Translated from German: LGP, Lego-geplagte_r Partner_in.

11. Christopher Noxon (2006) discusses the phenomenon of adults taking part in activities usually associated with children in *Rejuvenile: Kickball, Cartoons, Cupcakes, and the Reinvention of the American Grown-up*, using a number of examples from sports to collecting items.

12. The author also stresses that such readings, especially those of predigitality and realness, are too simple to fully account for the relationship between analog and digital aspects of media or technology. Still, they represent widely held notions on the subject.

13. In cooperation with a digital photographer, Lego artist Nathan Sawaya explicitly addressed this effect; here the bricks in Sawaya's "sculptures acted as pixels, which played with themes of pixels in the digital photography" (2014, 213).

14. Interestingly, most reviews of the film left out this aspect; however, a number of vlog and blog posts picked it up, such as Rob Dean's (2015) "Is The LEGO Movie Anti-Copyright?" (April 17) and Greg Epstein's (2014) "How The LEGO Movie is Really about Copyright" (August 15).

15. Lens flares for a long time were considered unwanted light effects in film because they drew attention to the presence of a camera—only in recent times and after a process of conventionalization are they consciously placed as they are considered beautiful and atmospheric (J. J. Abrams makes abundant use of them in his films and once even apologized for having fallen in love with this effect).

16. In finance, diversification is generally defined as "the reduction of risk achieved by replacing a single risk with a large number of smaller, unrelated risks" (Mankiw 2008, 850). One could also describe it with a more colloquial saying: "Don't put all your eggs in one basket."

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