Beyond the Brick: Narrativizing LEGO in the Digital Age
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Introduction

Fantasylands, supernatural environments, and galaxies far far away– LEGO looks a lot
different today than when it was patented as a red studded brick in 1958. The physical
toy remains an intricate part of the LEGO business, of course, but now so are video
games, amusement parks, movies, television shows, and online entertainment. The
growing reliance on media communication and media technologies, a process many
scholars have dubbed "mediatization," has powerful implications for LEGO's long-
established and valued "system of play."[1] One effect has been the increasingly important
role of narrative within this system—what Stig Hjarvard calls "narrativization."[2] Indeed,
LEGO box sets increasingly specify narrative roles, conflicts, mythologies, and character
bios as part of their intended play. Traditional LEGO building and designing continues to
flourish, but while the material toys used to compose the entirety of the LEGO system,
they now function as elements within a larger media "supersystem."[3] This paper focuses
on LEGO's strategies for adapting to the digital age by leveraging story worlds around
their products and encouraging physical, virtual, and social play within and around those
worlds.

In *The Place of Play: Toys and Digital Cultures*, Maaike Lauwaert conceptualizes
the sum of all play practices, design, and discourses in terms of a "geography of play."[4]
He introduces a spatial terminology, including "core" and "peripheral," to describe the
dynamic between intended (core) and unintended (peripheral) modes of play.[5] The core of
the geography of play represents all facilitated and scripted play practices, whereas the
peripheral comprises of fan practices that deviate from the intended use.[6] To further 'map
out' the geographies of play, I will be examining two other terms with spatial
connotations—spreadability and drillability—as I compare narrative strategies in LEGO's
licensed property *LEGO Star Wars* and LEGO's original property *BIONICLE*. I argue
that *LEGO Star Wars* excels at spreadability, motivating audiences to produce and share

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[1] Hjarvard, Stig. "From Bricks to Bytes: The Mediatization of a Global Toy Industry." In IB Bondebjerg,
Peter Golding (Eds.) *European Culture and the Media.* Bristol, UK: Intellect Books, 2004. 43-63

[2] Ibid, 57

[3] Marsha Kinder has a more involved discussion of commercial supersystems in *Playing with Power in
Movies, Television, and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles.* Berkeley and
Los Angeles, CA: University of California Press, 1991.

[4] Lauwaert, Maaike. *The Place of Play: Toys and Digital Cultures.* Amsterdam: Amsterdam University
Press, 2009.

[5] Ibid

[6] Lauwaert, *17*

divergent stories outside the official canon and circulate them to a wide audience. *LEGO BIONICLE,* on the other hand, promotes drillability by encouraging immersive exploration into the core mythology. To some extent, both *LEGO Star Wars* and *LEGO BIONICLE* support the broad circulation and deep mining of media content, yet as a whole, they tend to emphasize different dimensions of the experience.

Some scholars, such as Stephen Kline and Marsha Kinder, have noted that the narrativization of toys largely coincides with the heightened commercialization and commodification of children's play culture.[7] Yet instead of speculating about whether narrativized play is 'good' or 'bad' for creative development and cultural discourse, this paper attempts to better understand how the LEGO system itself works, first contextualizing its narrativization within a larger historical perspective and then dissecting its mechanics through an analysis of spreading and drilling practices. This type of discussion, I will argue, helps illuminate not how narrative has replaced or destroyed the LEGO system of play, but instead has grown to be a part of it.

The Evolution of LEGO

Before analyzing *LEGO Star Wars* and *LEGO BIONICLE* as case studies, it is important to contextualize LEGO's narrativization within the company's broader historical development. Throughout much of the 20th century, LEGO built its wholesome reputation by self-identifying as a manufacturer of construction toys – and nothing else.[8] So how did LEGO reach a point where *Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, and *Harry Potter* represent integral parts of the business model? This section explores the economic, cultural, and technological forces that have shaped LEGO over time, culminating with the transformation of toys into media and media into toys. Ultimately, I contend that narrativization should not be viewed in opposition to LEGO's traditional geographies of play, but as an additional layer within the modern day LEGO system, where 'construction play' can mean anything from building toys to worldbuilding.

The origin of LEGO begins in 1932, when the carpenter Ole Kirk Christiansen set up a wooden toy factory in Billund, Denmark.[9] He called his product LEGO, based on the Danish words "leg godt" or "play well."[10] Ole Kirk's shop sold individually constructed wooden pull-toys, such as miniature airplanes and waddling ducks, and later traditional wooden blocks that could be stacked on top of each other.[11]

After World War II, the advent of the plastic-molding machine enabled toys to be mass-produced.[12] Ole Kirk quickly adopted the plastic materials, in part because he wanted production to be more efficient and affordable in the long run, but also because he

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[7] Kline, Stephen. *Out of the garden: toys, TV, and children's culture in the age of marketing.* New York, New York: Verso, 1999; Kinder, Marsha. *Playing with Power in Movies, Television, and Video Games,* 1991.

[8] Hjarvard, Stig. "From Bricks to Bytes," 2004

[9] Wiencek, Henry. *The World of LEGO Toys.* New York, New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1987

[10] Christiansen didn't know it at the time, but 'LEGO' is also the Latin word for "I put together." In Wulffson, Don L. *Toys!: amazing stories behind some great inventions.* New York, New York: Henry Holt and Company, LLC, 2000.

[11] Wiencek, Henry. *The World of LEGO Toys, 1987*

[12] Ibid.

saw unique creative potential for toy design.[13] As Ole Kirk's son Godtfred Kristiansen recalled, "it occurred to us that the [plastic] bricks would become an even better toy, with an even wider range of possibilities if they could be 'locked' together."[14] Early plastic toys were essentially replicas of wooden toys—boats, trains, and tractors—but LEGO envisioned a building toy that took advantage of the new technology, expanding the LEGO play options to include more diverse and detailed constructions.[15]

The first model with locking functionality was called "Automatic Binding Bricks," a slightly modified version of the "self-locking" bricks from Kiddicraft.[16] These were hollow rectangular blocks with studs on the top and slots in the sides for inserting windows and doors. The sets focused on the construction of architectural structures, primarily houses, as indicated by the drawings on the box covers. Maaike Lauwaert points out that these plastic building blocks had particular advantages over their wooden predecessors, since plastic bricks could "fit onto and into one another to allow for more design and construction versatility." [17] The molding precision of the plastic building bricks, for example, allowed bricks to connect tightly together, making the overall construction more stable and unified than the clunky wooden blocks. [18]

When Godtfred Kirk Christiansen patented LEGO with the stud-and-tube coupling system we know today, he also envisioned a "system of play", in which all bricks across all sets were interchangeable. Bricks could be reused, remixed, and rebuilt according to any design impulse. This freedom to create would feed into LEGO's values: unlimited creativity, imagination, and play potential. As the first LEGO magazine introduced the concept:

> The big advantage of the LEGO System, is namely that all components fit together. They are very adaptable and can be built together, and have experienced a broad enhancement with the implementation of additive elements to angled blocks. The hobby-friendly person can precisely make the highest demands towards the most life-like design.[19]

Indeed, LEGO Systems expanded the Automatic Building Blocks' geography of play to include an even wider range of building possibilities. Bricks could be used to produce not just architectural buildings, but people, animals, shapes, cities, and so on. More complex structures could be realized by combining any number of the 28 sets that were initially released. This system of play, Lauwaert argues, opened up a larger area for peripheral play practices, encouraging the bricks to be used as a creative form of self-expression,

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[13] Ibid.

[14] Ibid., 46.

[15] Ibid.

[16] The Automatic Binding Bricks and the Kiddicraft Self-Locking Building Bricks by British psychologist Hilary Page (1904-1957) look exactly the same. Yet Ole Kirk claimed the modifications included "straightening round corners and converting inches to cm and mm, which altered the size by 0.1 mm in relation to the Kiddicraft brick. The studs on the bricks were also flattened on top." In Lauwaert. *The Place of Play,* 2009.

[17] Ibid., 53

[18] Ibid., 52

[19] *Lego Post Magazine, No. 1*. Lego Spielwaren GmbH, Germany. Sept 1959. Accessed April 24th, 2011. http://brickfetish.com/magazines/post_1959.html Translated by Emerson Tuttle.

and converting the player from an engineer or architect to any role of the player's choosing. [20] We might think of LEGO Systems, then, as promoting a higher level of spreadability, offering more options for the builder to produce meanings that were relevant to them and share their creative constructions with friends and family.

Beginning in the 1960s, the toy industry became increasingly dependent on cinema and television for selling their product lines.[21] Entertainment properties, perhaps most famously *Star Wars,* demonstrated that children would respond enthusiastically to an imaginary world inhabited by characters and a master universe that was sustained across media.[22] These franchises also demonstrated the immense profits associated with narrativizing toys. [23] However, it should be noted that narrativization is not a new phenomenon.[24] Dan Fleming has examined English toy theatre performances in relation to "narrative spectacle"[25], while Avi Santo and Garyn Roberts have studied the narrativized toy culture surrounding *The Lone Ranger* and *Dick Tracy*, respectively.[26] Nevertheless, with the rise of "total marketing,"[27] multiple media could more effectively be used as promotional tools to detail backstories and create emotional attachment to the product.

LEGO's financial success during the 1960s, 70s, and 80s, stemmed from their ability to position LEGO values in opposition to traditional toy manufacturers and their often violent narrative contexts. A LEGO advertisement in 1966 read "there is, in this nervous world, one toy that does not shoot or go bang or rat-tat-tat-tat. Its name is Lego. It makes things." [28] Indeed, many parents deemed "activity toys" superior to television watching, hoping such toys would improve their children's learning and drive to achieve.[29] But this was a time when LEGO targeted parents as part of their marketing strategy. That changed toward the end of the century, when LEGO wanted to be more than a construction brick and appeal to a broader range of youth.[30]

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[20] Lauwaert, 57

[21] Fleming, Dan. *Powerplay: Toys as Popular Culture.* Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 1996.

[22] Ibid., 124

[23] Fleming traces narrativized toys back to the age of Mesopotamia, where clay and wooden objects would represent myths and legends. Ibid.

[24] Ibid.

[25]Ibid., 83

[26] Santo, Avi. *Transmedia Brand Licensing Prior to Conglomeration: George Trendle and the Lone Ranger and Green Hornet Brands, 1933-1966.* Dissertation presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of the University of Texas at Austin. 2006; Roberts, Garyn G. "Premiums, Paraphernalia, and Material Culture: The Dick Tracy Toys." In *Dick Tracy and American Culture: Morality and Mythology, Text and Context.* Jefferson, North Carolina: McFarland & Company, Inc., 1993.

[27] Fleming, *Powerplay,* 1996. 102-122

[28] Carter, Matt. The Green Tangerine Blog. February 8th, 2011. Accessed April 21st, 2011. http://www.greentangerine.co.uk/search/lego

[29] Fleming. *Powerplay,* 1996. 118

[30] Lauwaert. *The Place of Play,* 2009

Beginning in the 1990s, the LEGO Group tried to loosen ties with the construction of bricks and focus more on the concept of "quality of play."[31] This identity crisis was due to a number of factors including: a declining interest in construction play, an increasing interest in action/role-playing toys, technological innovations that captured children's attention (computers, MP3 players, video games), changes in consumerism that made kids demand products at an earlier age, and the need to sell more products within a shorter timeframe.[32] LEGO worried that its traditional bricks were becoming too old fashioned and boring and felt they needed to diversify their product range.

As a result, the company launched an expansive global brand strategy. LEGO opened theme parks, licenced properties from Warner Brothers and Disney, and developed playsets that contained pre-formed pieces in order to decrease building time.[33] Straying too far from their core product line led to massive economic decline in the late 1990s and early 2000s.[34] In diversifying their product, LEGO was competing directly with traditional toy manufacturers like Hasbro and Fisher Price, and consequently their total marketing philosophy. LEGO thus shifted their focus towards the entertainment business, designing narrative and role-playing as part of the play experience. [35]

Early narrativized properties like LEGO Ninjas, Throwbots/Slizer, Time Cruisers, Aquazone, and Rock Raiders were major flops, in part because the toys were such a drastic alteration from traditional LEGO bricks, but also because they failed to incorporate an engaging narrative system as part of the creative design. One wiki-contributor wrote on the BIONICLE page: "Robo Riders were complete and utter failures...Barely improving on the Throwbots, they had no elemental powers...or even some kind of story." [36] LEGO's early properties fell short because they had a glazed-over thematic shell, but not a narrative system with highly spreadable and drillable elements.

Maaike Lauwaert, on the other hand, has point towards narrativization as a contributing factor to LEGO's temporary downfall. He cites the shift in discourse from "bricks to action, from construction to narrative, from process to product" as frustrating the "expansive, modular, and open-ended forms" of LEGO play, "leaving little room for designing personal constructions and realizing them."[37]

While I agree Robo Raiders and Slizer were not particularly compelling products, I do not view construction play and narrative play as diametrically opposed. Rather, narrativization affords new creative possibilities and forms of expression that can include both the construction of toys and the construction of stories. The same way plastic materials afforded more precise architectural building and the original LEGO Systems afforded more complex building, narrativization affords another advancement: worldbuilding. Media scholar Jonathan Gray, for instance, contends that toys contribute meaning to a story world and provide audiences the opportunity to actively participate with it:

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[31] Interview conducted with LEGO Brand Manager on May 6th , 2011.

[32] Ibid., Hjarvard. "From Bricks to Bytes," 2004.

[33] Ibid.

[34] Ibid.

[35] Lauwaert. *The Place of Play,* 2009*.,* Hjarvard. "From Bricks to Bytes," 2004.

[36] Accessed April 25th, 2011. http://uncyclopedia.wikia.com/wiki/BIONICLE

[37] Lauwaert, *The Place of Play,* 61

Characters with no lines in the movies can be re-enacted and given a greater role…These toys allow children to feed meaning back into the proscribed narratives. Toys intensify themes from films, but also allow individual children to personalize these themes, situating the child in the middle and as an active participant—not just a distanced spectator….Though Star Wars toys offered many implicit and explicit "proper uses", in the schoolyard, garden, or bedroom, children could do anything they wanted with these toys, from the "proper" to the "improper."[38]

The problem with Lauwaert's assumption that narrativization equates "play with a finished product" is that it fails to account for the on-going process of playing with toys to appropriate, repurpose, and personalize a story in order to make it one's own. I therefore disagree that narrativization and role-playing replace LEGO's notion of construction play; it simply provides another level of meaning. Narrativized toys can co-exist with the free-form traditional LEGO play sets, offering different modes of creative play and self-expression. The trick is to understand narrativization in terms of its unique creative potential and incorporate that into the toy design, much the same way LEGO has done with material objects. LEGO's intellectual properties at the turn of the century failed because they were ineffective narrative systems, not because they were narrative systems. After all, at the time of this writing, *LEGO Star Wars* and *LEGO BIONICLE* are two of the top selling and most successful LEGO products.[39] To see why, I will explore at least two design characteristics supporting their narrativized system of play: spreadability and drillability. [40]

Spreadability and Drillability

Spreading and drilling practices can occur in both the core and periphery of the geographies of play. Lauwaert defines the core as all "facilitated play practices that are the sum of both the design of a toy and the discourse that accompanies it."[41] In relationship to narrative, then, the core refers to the pre-conceived, designed story and the discourse that has been 'scripted' as part of the experience. Drillability, then, is the potential to descend into the core and parse through its nuances. Coined by television scholar Jason Mittell, drillable media refer to programs that "encourage viewers to dig deeper, probing beneath the surface to understand the complexity of a story and its telling." [42] These "forensic fandom"[43] practices run counter to "spreadable media", which Henry Jenkins argues motivate communities to circulate content according to their own

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[38] Gray, Jonathan. *Show sold separately: promos, spoilers, and other media paratexts*. New York: New York University Press, 2010. 187

[39] Interview with LEGO Brand Manager. Conducted May 6th, 2011

[40] Both both of these terms will be discussed in the forthcoming book, *Spreadable Media,* edited by Sam Ford, Joshua Green, and Henry Jenkins.

[41] Lauwaert, *17*

[42] Mittell, Jason. "To Spread or To Drill." Justtv.wordpress.com, February 25th, 2009. Accessed April 20th, 2011. http://justtv.wordpress.com/2009/02/25/to-spread-or-to-drill/

[43] Ibid.

interpretations, uses, and social relations.[44] Spreading practices can take place in the core if official content is meaningful enough to share, but it occurs more often in the periphery, in the unintended area of play. Lauwaert describes the peripheral as "divergent practices of play that deviate from the discourse on a toy or that use the design in unexpected ways."[45] A spreadable narrative is thus one that invites users to take paratexts and creative interpretations into their own hands and circulate them across their social networks. [46] This usually comes in the form of user generated content that can be both "wanted" or "unwanted," either enhancing engagement with the property or damaging the brand's image and reputation.[47]

        Spreading and drilling should not be seen as mutually exclusive impulses, but rather as two opposing forces within a play experience. Drillability is associated with the narrow depth of the core narrative; spreadability with broad reach in the periphery. Although both practices are not new to the toy industry, our highly networked, participatory, and ubiquitous media environment amplifies both our ability to broadly circulate user generated content and descend into a compelling universe.

        LEGO Star Wars and *LEGO BIONICLE* emphasize different dimensions of narrativization. *LEGO Stars* taps into the unique characteristics of Lucas' universe, remixing and parodying them to facilitate similar fan practices. BIONICLE, on the other hand, relies on an expansive mythology to foster a loyal and collectively intelligent fan base. In terms of geographies of play, then, I will argue that the LEGO Star Wars excels at facilitating spreadability – encouraging users to produce and circulate their own LEGO creations to a wide audience, while BIONICLE excels at promoting drillability – encouraging users to dig into and contribute to a complex story world, an impulse enhanced by the positioning of the action figures as narrative portals. When taken as a whole, spreading and drilling represent additional layers to the geographies of play and provide a deeper understanding of what narrativization means to the 21st century LEGO system.

LEGO Star Wars

LEGO Star Wars: The Franchise
When LEGO initially decided to license *Star Wars* and sell product lines based on the beloved movie themes, Peter Eio, president of LEGO Systems, recalled the shock from many employees: "The initial reaction was, 'You guys are crazy.' We had been such a purist company…but it was the biggest product launch in history…It led us to say, storytelling is important."[48] Indeed, LEGO's partnership with *Star Wars* has been wildly

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[44] Jenkins, Henry. "Revenge of the Origami Unicorn: Seven Principles of Transmedia Storytelling." Henryjenkins. December 12th, 2009.
http://www.henryjenkins.org/2009/12/the_revenge_of_the_origami_uni.html

[45] Ibid., 13

[46] Ibid.

[47] Ibid., 13

[48] Fishman, Charles. "Why Can't Lego Click?" Fast Company, August 31st, 2001. Accessed April 20th. 2011. http://www.fastcompany.com/magazine/50/lego.html?page=0%2C5

successful, selling over 106,107,779 products as of 2008.[49] The first two released *LEGO* video games sold a total of 14.9 million units worldwide from 2005 to 2006.[50] LEGO's licensed properties have now expanded across media platforms, including short films, online games, and motion comics, most of which are available at LEGO.com.

The physical *LEGO Star Wars* play sets offer audiences the opportunity to recreate and replay scenarios in the *Star Wars* universe. Interestingly, however, the media texts of the LEGO-ized *Star Wars* world provide an alternative context through which to engage with the toys. Whereas the box descriptions instruct the player to build the same vehicles from the movies and re-enact events with *Star Wars* "mini-figures" (LEGO mini-people), the *LEGO Star Wars* video games celebrate the remixing and re-contextualizing of the *Star Wars* universe, developing a framework for playing with the toys that goes against their intended use. Then, with the use of digital technologies, consumers can easily remix and repurpose the *LEGO Star Wars* universe for themselves, even creating stop motion animation videos called "Brickfilms." Brickfilm shorts are usually rooted in parody, nostalgia, remix, and humor, all of which represent key traits of highly spreadable media.[51] LEGO encourages people to share these videos through various contests and exhibitions. Many of the films have accumulated hundreds of thousands, if not millions, of hits on YouTube. Thus, while the LEGO *Star Wars* toys are designed for playing with the core narrative, the media elements surrounding the toys promote a world that encourages peripheral, divergent play practices and the use of toys in unexpected ways.

LEGO Star Wars: The Video Games

The LEGO video games don't drastically alter the *Star Wars* universe as much as they tweak and re-invent them in fun and playful ways. Players control LEGO versions of Luke Skywalker or Darth Vader and follow the major events from *Star Wars,* completing puzzle and racing vehicles, as well as building and recklessly destroying LEGO objects.

The games rely heavily on our knowledge of famous movie moments to make jokes about them. Most people know, for example, how Luke discovers his real father in *Star Wars* – but in the LEGO version, Darth Vader pulls out a Polaroid picture to prove it. LEGO-ized characters are more comedic and lighthearted in tone. There is no dialogue in the cut scenes; only the characters' trademark noises, like the battle droids' "Roger Roger" or Chewbacca's growl. This effect makes the scenes much funnier, as they appear to be pantomimed silent movies rather than dramatic epic tales. Meanwhile John Williams' *Star Wars* theme juxtaposes the silliness of LEGO with the epic feel of the *Star Wars* universe. The musical tone sets our expectations for grandiose, dramatic conflict, which of course adds to the humor when the game doesn't take itself seriously at all.

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[49] It is unclear exactly which products this statistic refers to, but I'm guessing LEGO play sets, video games, and other merchandise. More *LEGO: Star Wars* statistics can be found at: http://media.prnewswire.com/en/jsp/tradeshows/events.jsp;jsessionid=5A618AF6752B0354FC3C6097F20 1B868.tomcat1?option=tradeshow&beat=BEAT_ALL&eventid=1003544&view=LATEST&resourceid=39 20748

[50] Ibid.

[51] Jenkins, Henry. "If It Doesn't Spread It's Dead (Part Seven): Aesthetic and Structural Strategies." February 25th, 2009. Accessed April 20th, 2011. http://henryjenkins.org/2009/02/if_it_doesnt_spread_its_dead_p_6.html

In addition, much of the iconography and environment remains generally the same. We still recognize the Millennium Falcon, Death Star, and C-P30 as *Star Wars* characters based on their shape, color, and design. At the same time, most LEGO mini-figs have unique characteristics all their own: cylindrical heads, blocky legs, dotted eyes, and clamp-like hands. The LEGO mini-figs thus represent both the existing franchise characters and the LEGO-ized characters, who are more comedic in nature. This dual identity makes LEGO's toys attractive to a wide range of consumers, allowing any combination of nostalgic adults, play-hungry children, or LEGO-obsessive fans, to relate to and connect with the property on multiple levels.

To side-step any notion of combat, *LEGO Star Wars* removes all sense of danger and aggression. When 'killed,' LEGO characters simply dissolve into a pile of bricks. So while Chewbacca rips stormtroopers limbs out of their sockets, it's seen as deconstructing a toy rather than a brutal mauling. As LEGO spokeswoman Charlotte Simonsen explained, "We think kids really want to have this good-against-evil play; they want this fighting against each other. But we want to do it with a wink."[52]

Another way the LEGO video games play with existing themes is by shuffling and remixing characters. It is possible, for example, to unlock and play as Indiana Jones in the *Star Wars* game, using a whip as weapon rather than a light saber. The result is an entertaining and unlikely face-off between Indiana Jones and Darth Vader. Further, players can choose any number of combinations of *Star Wars* characters to complete a level on free play mode. In this LEGO world, the player doesn't have to adhere to the rules and logic of the existing franchise – any character combination is fair game. Often times, one character has abilities that allow the player to access secret levels previously unattainable in the regular story mode. Part of the pleasure here is in seeing how these characters are re-mixed and re-contextualized, placing characters from separate *Star Wars* eras side by side. This is, of course, a virtual practice based on what many kids already do with toys: mix and match parts and see what new combinations can be applied. In this way, *LEGO* creates what could be described as a parallel universe, one with a funnier, playful logic at work. This logic is then reinforced through numerous paratexts.

LEGO Star Wars: The Paratexts
The LEGO-ized *Star Wars* world is extended through a series of short parody videos, first airing on Cartoon Network and then circulating around the Internet. These texts essentially function as commercially produced fan fiction, rewriting and reimagining the established protagonists in new contexts. Rather than emphasizing narrative continuity, the videos and motion comics maintain the same comedic tone and remix logic of the LEGO-ized world.

The first mini-movie, *Revenge of the Brick,* aired on Cartoon Network in 2005. Spoofing *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith,* the film takes place during the battle between Droid forces and Jedi Knights on the Wookiee planet Kashyyyk. Yet characters and locations from the original *Star Wars* trilogy also make appearances. One of the last sequences features various pre-trilogy characters drinking in a bar reminiscent of the Mos

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[52] Schwartz, Nelson D. "Turning to Tie-Ins, Lego Thinks Beyond the Brick" *The New York Times,* September 5th 2009. Accessed April 21st, 2011.
http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/06/business/global/06lego.html?pagewanted=3&_r=1

Eisley cantina. There, Chewbacca takes a photo of young Anakin and Obi-Wan standing together happily. When he views the Polaroid picture, Chewbacca sees Darth Vader and Obi-Wan engaged in a lightsaber battle (another reference to *A New Hope).* As he collapses in shock, we laugh at the irony in Chewbacca knowing Anakin would turn to the dark side, but being unable to articulate it.

Inside jokes abound throughout the *LEGO: Star Wars* paratexts. The motion comic *LEGO Star Wars: Clone Wars* follows a group of clones looking for R2-D2. At one point, a clone proclaims, "Wow, we're terrible shots", as another responds, "it's not my fault—these helmets are hard to see out of!" The clones then try to come up with names for themselves. When one suggests "Luke, Leia, or Chewie," the other clones brush them off, saying "those are the stupidest names I've ever heard." Other references require more cultural knowledge on part of the player to understand. For example, in *LEGO Star Wars: The Quest for R2-D2* (2009), R2 enjoys a romantic boat ride with R2-KT, a nod to the droid named after Katie Johnson, a young *Star Wars* fan who suffered from brain cancer. For *Star Wars* fans, identifying and understanding these arcane allusions allows them to attach personal meaning and spread them to others who might appreciate their significance.

As with the video games, the short parody films also re-contextualize characters in humorous ways. *The Quest for R2D2* follows the fight between Republic and Separatist leaders as they seek out R2-D2 for a "very important secret" stored in the droid. The Jedi Knights battle armies of droids, star fighters, and various Separatist leaders to finally access R2's hologram – VIP all access tickets to an amusement park called Skywalker World, a highly commercialized theme park. We then see the Jedis eating cotton candy together, trying out the "Force-O-Meter," and playing a sideshow shooting game. The humor here is in seeing the usually unemotional, self-controlled Jedi let loose in a highly commercialized theme park.

For more slapstick humor, we might look towards *The Han Solo Affair (Episode V ½),* which portrays a madcap chase around Cloud City with Luke Skywalker, Darth Vader, and Boba Fett scrambling to secure Han Solo's frozen carbonite body. Boba Fett wins, of course, and all the other characters pass out, ostensibly from exhaustion. In another example from *Quest for R2D2,* two clones play ice hockey in order to knock down an entire droid army and their giant Walker vehicle. They then quickly build a starship out of the scattered LEGO pieces. However, playfully deconstructing and constructing LEGO models isn't just a comedic ploy; it is an intricate part of the world's logic. In *Revenge of the Brick,* Jedis dismantle LEGO spacecrafts using the Force, allowing them to dodge enemy fire, and then quickly reassemble the ship afterwards. Because characters can build whatever they need out of LEGO bricks at any time, the short animated shorts reinforce the message that any type of LEGO construction is possible with imagination and ingenuity.

All of these narrative design characteristics – the remixing, re-contextualizing, and parodying of the Hollywood universe – demonstrate new opportunities for creativity and play. They serve as model examples for what fans can do to express themselves using the toys. LEGO *shows us* how much fun it is to engage with the playsets in this manner, rather than explicitly *telling us* to do so. In terms of spreadability, then, LEGO succeeds by creating an appealing context for people to come together and share content. The video games and their ancillary media promote the idea that the toys can be used in

spontaneous, surprising ways. Indeed at the end of *Raiders of the Lost Brick,* we see LEGO versions of Steven Spielberg and George Lucas in the screening room, high fiving each other as their movie ends. The message is clear: even the official authors can poke fun at their franchises – and you can too.

Toys as Subjects for Spreadable Videos
As I mentioned previously, there is nothing inherently humorous about the licensed LEGO toys. The descriptions on the box describe the characters' roles in the movies, often with a call to action like "Help the rebels defend their base!" However, the video games and transmedia texts provide an alternative context with which to engage with the toys. This alone may have been enough to sell the product, except LEGO went a step further by providing the tools and resources for consumers to make their own fan videos and share them with an audience.

In 2000, LEGO released a playset called *LEGO: Studios*, which enabled fans to shoot and edit their own LEGO stop-motion films. It included licensed themes (i.e. *Jurassic Park),* a camera, and editing software. There was even a mini-fig of Steven Spielberg as "the Lego Director." In response, several websites dedicated to Brickfilmmaking emerged, such as Brickfilms.com and Bricksinmotion.com. Many of these videos wound up on YouTube and garnered over a million hits, such as "*LEGO Star Wars* vs. *LEGO Star Trek*."[53] Such a video illustrates the spreadable power of remixing stories and making crossovers unlikely to occur in commercial media. Although *LEGO: Studios* was discontinued in 2004, digital video tools are now more accessible and powerful than ever before. Brickfilms.com continues to thrive with an estimated 5,500 registered users as of July 2007.[54] Just as with the licensed video games, many Brickfilms remix and re-contextualize characters, whether its Indiana Jones and Han Solo trespassing in Darth Vader's underwear drawer or Batman and Indiana Jones fighting Boba Fett and the Penguin.[55]

The LEGO Group has embraced these filmmakers, featuring user generated content on LEGO.com and hosting a number of contests, such as the "*LEGO Star Wars* Movie Making Contest." The Movie Making Contest asked fans to submit *LEGO Star Wars* videos, with the winner receiving $500 and a free copy of the video game. In doing so, LEGO successfully showcased the *Star Wars* product line while rewarding fans for their creativity. Many of the submissions followed a similar logic as the official parodies – the winning video portrayed a goofy stormtrooper struggling to avoid Darth Vader because he forgot his Christmas present. The video has received over 4 million hits on YouTube and in terms of style and humor, it fits on an even plane with the LEGO produced parodies. That is, they incorporate similar moments of satiric, remix, and slapstick humor. There are other Brickfilms that don't align with the *LEGO* licensed franchises, of course, but by providing the tools to create content, LEGO ensured consumers could engage with the toys in their own meaningful way and connect with others who share that interest. As one Brickfilmmaker described the experience, "It's just

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[53]As of the time of this writing, "LEGO *Star Wars vs. Star Trek"* has over 2 million views on YouTube.
[54]Cox, Josh. "Brick Films: A New Online Stop Animation Film Style." *Associatedcontent.com*, July 27th 2007. Accessed April 20th, 2011.
http://www.associatedcontent.com/article/326544/brick_films_a_new_online_stop_animation.html?cat=5
[55]Both videos are by 'blobstudios', which is a fan site about Brickfilms.

cool to be able to bring [the Mini-Figs] to life like that, because that's how you always imagined them anyway when you were playing with them as a kid."[56]

My LEGO Network

LEGO hosts a social media platform called "My LEGO Network" (MLN) that is designed specifically for building and sharing content. The website is part social networking, part social gaming. A member creates a customizable profile page and collects, builds, and trades virtual items. The goal is to use Red LEGO Bricks, the currency of MLN, to build "masterpieces" that promote the member to higher ranks.[57] One gains Red LEGO Bricks by posting modules, or 'animated images,' on their page. These modules generate a certain amount of bricks each day in addition to bonuses based on how many visitors click on them. For example, the LEGO Tree Module, one of the most basic modules, produces 10 Red LEGO Bricks per day, plus one for every five clicks by visitors. More complex modules can be made by trading various items and "blueprints" with other members. As we will see with *BIONICLE*, members can even trade items with LEGO characters (aka "networkers") to develop narrative-driven modules.

The logic of My LEGO Network is designed to facilitate spreadability – the more people who visit your profile page, the more likely they will click on your modules, and the more red bricks you will acquire. Thus, there is an incentive to post interesting content on your page and connect with as many friends as possible. While members can't post videos, they can create animated images and use LEGO Digital Designer to build their own 3D LEGO models. Thus, MLN functions as the LEGO hub for creating and sharing content, providing virtual rewards (Red LEGO bricks, modules, masterpieces, ranks) to motivate community participation.

To sum, the *LEGO Star Wars* narrativized geography of play relies heavily on spreadable media. The video games provide a context that reinforces the remix and humorous logic of the LEGO-Hollywood world, which is then reinforced through ancillary paratexts. Then, by providing the tools, resources, and platforms for people to produce and spread their media content, LEGO encourages peripheral play practices, and demonstrates another exciting and entertaining way to engage with the toys in addition to re-enacting traditional movie scenes. As we will see in the next section, if *LEGO Star Wars* motivates a broader audience to re-imagine the story world and circulate their creative expressions far and wide, the *BIONICLE* franchise motivates a comparatively smaller audience to drill into and contribute to the official canon.

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[56]Dibbel, Julian. "Lego films: introducing the new Harrison Ford." Telegraph.co.uk, May 10th, 2008. Accessed April 20th, 2011.
http://www.telegraph.co.uk/culture/film/starsandstories/3673238/Lego-films-introducing-the-new-Harrison-Ford.html

[57]It takes an estimated one to two months to collect all the necessary items to create a masterpiece and advance to a higher rank.

LEGO BIONICLE

LEGO BIONICLE: The Franchise
In 1999 and 2000, the LEGO Company released two new product lines, *Slizer* and *RoboRiders*. The action figures were easy to build and came with distinct character personalities, but the sets had very little marketing muscle behind them. Rather than relying on the 'newness' of the product line, LEGO began to wonder what they could accomplish by building an intellectual property in ways that rival the film industry. Michael McNally, Senior Brand Relations Manager for LEGO, describes the company's thinking:

> We looked at what [*RoboRiders* and *Slizer*] were offering: shorter building time, true personality in the final product and a relatively low price point. We started to consider ways to move this formula into something bigger. What would happen if we developed a rich story line? What would we achieve if we actually did put a full marketing program behind this concept? Thus, the birth of *BIONICLE*.[58]

Indeed, in 2001, LEGO launched an epic adventure story for their *BIONICLE* product line, one that featured a fictional world so expansive it needed to be conveyed across multiple media platforms. *Slizer* and *RoboRiders* quickly faded away while *BIONICLE* soon became one of the most profitable franchises in the toy industry.[59]

In many ways, *BIONICLE's* marketing strategy represents *transmedia storytelling* at its purest. Each media text offers unique narrative contributions to the whole franchise while standing on its own as a satisfying experience. The fictional world simply cannot be exhausted within one medium. And when all the narrative pieces are placed together, the result is a fuller understanding of the story world at large.

Rather than each medium corresponding to a specific chapter, all *BIONICLE* media work together to tell the same chapter of the timeline in a coordinated fashion. There are four overarching multi-year sagas—*BIONICLE Chronicles* (2001-2003), *BIONICLE Adventures* (2004-2005), *BIONICLE L*egends (2006-2008)*,* and *The Bara Magna Trilogy* (2009-2010). Each year of a saga follows a story line conveyed through novels, comics, films, and online content, and focuses on the toy characters being released that year.

When this type of complex transmedia storytelling captures our imagination, it encourages us to dig deeper into the story and learn more, hunting down narrative information to fill in gaps, and make the world more complete. This drillability, then, has the powerful effect of sustaining a long term, loyal fan base, one that occupies a great deal of time and energy in parsing out the complexities of the text. The *BIONICLE* franchise promotes such commitment and dedication through a coordinated transmedia design, narrative-driven toys, and invitation for fans to participate in the world building process.

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[58]Kardon, Andrew. "BIONICLE, PART 1: Checking in with Lego's Michael McNally." Mania.com, July 29nd, 2002. http://www.mania.com/BIONICLE-part-1_article_35573.html

[59] Fonnesbaek, Jeppe; Andersen, Morton Melbye. "Story Selling: how LEGO told a story and sold a toy." *Young Consumers: Insight and Ideas for Responsible Marketers.* (6,3) 2005. 31-39

LEGO BIONICLE: The Universe
BIONICLE takes place in a world inhabited by biomechanical beings, some good, some evil, with both sides fighting for control over the universe.[60] The main story follows six robotic heroes on their journey to defeat the nefarious Makuta Teridax and save their Great Spirit Mata Nui, who's actually a giant robot himself. Known as Toa, these six heroes command elemental abilities (manipulating Air, Earth, Fire, Water etc.) represented by magical masks. On just the basis of content, *BIONICLE* is overflowing with characters, vehicles, strange creatures, mystical locations, and fantastical powers. Its detailed history spanning hundreds of thousands of years across multiple generations demands transmedia exploration and drillable engagement.

   Greg Farshtey is the primary author of the BIONICLE universe. He has written over 30 of the novels, almost the entire comic series, and much of the online content. An iconic figure for fans, Farshtey answers fan questions and hints at future story lines. He has also embraced his role as the definitive source for the story's canon: "Many years of reading comics has trained me to keep track of complex continuity," Farshtey says, "and we generally try as much as possible not to retcon old story, as it just makes things more confusing."[61] With Farshtey at the helm for the past ten years, fans could be assured they could go to the man behind the curtain if a narrative inconsistency popped up.

BIONICLE's Transmedia Design
   Before the *BIONICLE* product line even reached the market, the foundation for the story was already built. First, the *Mata Nui Online Adventure Game* launched on BIONICLE.com in January 2001. Set on Mata Nui, an island inhabited by a species called Matoran, the game introduces the Toa as well as Makuta's various cohorts. Players followed Takua, a Matoran who would later become a Toa himself, as he travels around the island learning about the Toa and rescuing Matoran.

   Rather than being a single experience, the game was released in installments every month. After a specific episode, players could look through a telescope and foreshadow new content, a kind of sneak preview device. This format kept users returning to the site, garnering more than a million unique page views each month, according to *The Guardian* in August of 2004. [62]

   Throughout BIONICLE's transmedia design, stories from media texts overlap on top of each other, providing varying levels of detail. Nevertheless, almost all texts contribute some new information that can be pieced together and provide additive comprehension. As a result, *BIONICLE* ensures that there is no 'right' way to drill into the transmedia text. Any number of combinations of primary media (novels, films, comics) could yield the same major storyline, while revealing new narrative developments. So if one person read only the novels, and another read only the comics, they might have the same idea of the characters, but they would have different experiences to share about them.

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[60] 'BIONICLE' comes from the words 'Biological' and 'Chronicle'

[61] Maskofdestiny.com. "Interview: Greg Farshtey." Post by 'Mark,' October 13th, 2005. Accessed April 20th, 2011. http://www.maskofdestiny.com/story/bricktalk/Interview_Greg_Farshtey_95252.asp

[62] Widdicombe, Rupert. "Building Blocks for the Future." Guardian.co.uk, April 29th, 2004. Accessed April 20th, 2011. http://www.guardian.co.uk/technology/2004/apr/29/shopping.toys

Fan Community as Universe Hub

        Within the *BIONICLE* universe exists a Matoran occupation known as a Chronicler. This esteemed position involves traveling across the land and recording the events of all BIONICLE creatures. Documenting history ensures all future BIONICLE generations will understand the importance of the three virtues: unity, destiny, and duty. In a lot of ways, the fan community has taken on this role of Chronicler, working together to form a comprehensive database of events spanning 150,000 years. Their collective drilling thus increases the level of immersion – participants can feel like they are traversing the *BIONICLE* universe and chronicling their experiences on the wiki. In contrast, the wikis surrounding *LEGO: Star Wars* are more about providing walkthroughs for the games and showcasing the playsets. They are very much removed from the story world. So whereas the wikis to LEGO's licensed properties are about aggregating product information, the *BIONICLE* wikis are more aligned with story immersion and comprehension.

        As there is no identifiable 'mothership' media form in the *BIONICLE* series, fans must rely on their collective intelligence to make sense out of long-term story arcs.[63] To truly understand how all the narrative strands tie together in terms of location, chronology, and character history, one must look towards various fan wikis, such as The BIONICLE Sector01, The BIONICLE Wiki, and BIONICLEpedia, as well as fan sites like BZ Power. [64] These fan sites capture the essence of the BIONICLE world by documenting in-depth maps, specific regions, character bios, and descriptions of all major landforms. Visitors can review the general articles or they can dig deeper and discover the world building details that make the *BIONICLE* story so compelling, such as the "Bio measurement system" or the slang language "Chutespeak." [65] I would argue that the real hub of the *BIONICLE* universe, then, is the collection of fan sites that document every detail and event, constructing a more intricate world than any official media text can possibly provide. Indeed, these fan practices provide greater depth to the core narrative, increasing the overall text's drillability.

Toys as Narrative Portals

Whereas the *LEGO Star Wars* toys were used as subjects for spreadable videos, the *BIONICLE* toys are used as narrative portals for further drilling. Early product lines featured CD-ROMs containing additional narrative content, including character backstories and descriptions of their unique powers. For instance, the *Toa Mata Mini Promo CD* was packaged with special releases of the six original Toa in summer 2001.The mini-movies and games on the CDs introduced fans to the characters and the plot of the 2001 storyline, which later overlapped with the story in other media. Similarly,

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[63] There are many ways to define the "mothership" of a transmedia franchise (scope of audience, narrative weight, level of commitment etc). Here, I'm referring to the fact that no single media form can provide all knowledge necessary to comprehending *BIONICLE*.

[64] According to LAMLradio: LEGO Talk Podcast, BZPower features 38,000 registered members, over 4.5 million posts, and around 3,000 active contributors. BIONICLE Sector01, the largest fan wiki, claims 6500 registered members and just under 1,000 articles. In Wadsworth, James. LAMLradio: LEGO Talk Podcast. Episode #10: "BZPower and Bionicle." Available on iTunes Podcasts.

[65] The Bio measurement system has three different units of length: the Bio, the Kio, and the Mio. In terms of languages, "Chutespeak" or "Treespeak" is a slang vocabulary with its own set of terms.

the 2004 Toa Metru canisters featured Promo CDs that documented the Toa's search for the Great Disks, which either foreshadowed or overlapped the 2004 storyline depending on when you bought the toy.

BIONICLE's toy packaging also featured special access codes, which allowed the purchaser to earn "Kanoka points" and later "BIO Codes." These points functioned as currency for collecting stickers, merchandise, and wall papers on the BIONICLE.com website. But more than that, they allowed purchasers to unlock items in online games, access old storylines, and learn more about character bios. Entering these codes on LEGO.com let fans 'friend' the toy character on My LEGO Network and learn more about their story through their profile page. Buying more toys thus grants you more BIO Codes, and more opportunities to friend characters and earn a higher ranking. So while the toys represent artifacts from the *BIONICLE* series, with the addition of the codes and CD-ROM content, they also represent portals to new narrative information. I should note that there are *BIONICLE* remixes and parody videos circulating around the Internet, but not nearly to the same extent as LEGO's licensed properties. For the most part, user generated content and fan fiction is meant for deepening the story, rather than sharing "video attractions" with a mass audience. In the *BIONICLE* universe, the goal is to become not just a toy collector, but a story collector as well.

Enter the BIONICLE Canon

 The LEGO Group celebrated and rewarded loyal fans who dove into the intricacies of the *BIONICLE* franchise by giving them the opportunity to actively contribute to it. That is, LEGO hosted a series of contests asking fans to design characters and write potential narratives, with the winning entries becoming part of the official *BIONICLE* canon.

The first contest, the Rahi Building Challenge in 2004, asked participants to create a creature living on Metru Nui. The winning species, Tahtorak, was then featured in comic 21 and made a large appearance in the novel *BIONICLE Adventures: Challenge of the Hordika*. Still other fan-made characters were included in the *Rahi Beasts Guide*. All character contests involve basic parameters – specific heights, colors, and structural pieces – but other than that, fans are free to create whatever design they want. From these contests, official minor characters like Certavus, Sorel, and Kyry have been introduced to the *BIONICLE* universe.

Farshtey also opened up the universe for fans to submit their own stories to the *BIONICLE* mythology. In the "A Thousand Years" contest, he prompted fans with the following mission: "A thousand years have gone untold between the Metru Nui Prequel Story and the time of the Toa Nuva. Three islands have been in the official story so far, and all three have countless possible stories that might have taken place during this Untold Era. Your job is to tell one of those stories."[66] Farshtey then outlined the main elements in the story—the characters fans could use, the location, the basic situation – and fans would tie it all together. As Farshtey put it, "I set up a basic sketchy scenario, and your job is to fill in the details and figure out how it ends."[67]

Inviting fans to participate in the canon, no matter how insignificant, allows them

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[66]BZPower.com. "S & T Contest #2: A Thousand Years Untold, Until Now! Three Islands--Three Short Stories--Three Winners." Post by 'bonesiii,' June 22nd, 2006. Accessed April 20th, 2011. http://www.bzpower.com/forum/index.php?showtopic=215387&st=0

[67] Ibid.

to feel a real sense of participation within the storyworld. It rewards fans for engaging in collective intelligence and mastering a narrative universe. Then, when the fan-created character appears in the official storyline, it represents an explicit acknowledgment of the fan community. By letting fans contribute to the storyworld in discreet ways, *BIONICLE* assured its fans that they matter beyond being consumers, transferring ownership from a single author to a collective group.

The Narrativized Geography of Play

As I have discussed, both spreading and drilling represent key fan practices in narrativization. To some extent, every franchise supports the broad circulation and deep mining of media content, but as we saw with LEGO, different franchises emphasize different dimensions of the experience. The holy grail, from a design standpoint, is to *amplify* both fan impulses, thereby enhancing engagement and furthering participation from a wide range of audiences. If LEGO teaches us anything about the future of their narrativized geographies of play, it's that people should have the opportunity to create their own meaningful content *and* the opportunity to drill down into an existing story world, incorporating both a world to be created and a story to be uncovered. There should be sufficient depth in the core of play as well as enough reach in the peripheral of play to motivate a wide range of play practices. Though it's impossible to boil this down to an exact science, LEGO's various properties offer important strategies in terms of providing the context, tools, and rewards for spreading and drilling.

Context

Building the context for spreadabaility and drillability begins with the content. The design characteristics of the LEGO-ized *Star Wars* world inspires fans to broadly circulate media to share with friends (humorous tone, remix logic, familiar story re-imagined), or they can demand active drilling (a complex story, vast world, multiple generations of characters). Similarly, the worlds of the licensed video games extended into short parody films and motion comics, which not only functioned as spreadable media in and of themselves, but also implicitly encouraged fans to produce their own interpretations in a similar style. At the other end of the spectrum, *BIONICLE* used a decentralized and serialized transmedia structure that provoked fans to pool their knowledge to make connections across media texts.

Tools

The introduction of *LEGO Studios* contributed to the beginning of a Brickfilms culture and the use of toys as subjects for remixing and parodying existing franchises. Then, through My LEGO Network, fans could spread LEGO related content to fellow LEGO enthusiasts or post their works to YouTube for an even larger audience. Through My LEGO Network, members could acquire red bricks and modules, but they could also connect with fellow LEGO-enthusiasts, discussing and exchanging construction ideas.

BIONICLE positioned its toy as tools for narrative drilling, casting each action figure as a portal to new story materials. However, as the technology advances, there is huge potential for drillable tools to develop further. I can imagine *LEGO Mindstorms*, LEGO's product line of programmable robots, becoming narrativized in the future, such that when one toy interacts with another, a new narrative scenario might play out. In this way,

LEGO bricks would not just be "virtualized" into digital media, as is the case with the LEGO video games, but the digital media would also be "materialized" as computer technology becomes integrated into the physical LEGO models. In this respect, there is huge potential for characters to crossover from the physical to the virtual space and vice versa in order to tell more immersive stories.

Rewards
LEGO developed several reward systems for the time and effort involved in spreading and drilling. My LEGO Network rewards the most active members with Red LEGO Bricks, and thus more opportunities to 'level up' and create more powerful modules. Many Brickfilms have also been featured in official LEGO magazines and websites, showcasing the best fan work. *BIONICLE* rewarded fans by allowing them to take part in the official canon and submit their suggestions to the primary author of the franchise. Even after BIONICLE was discontinued in 2010, Greg Farshtey continues to draw on the fan community for story ideas and releases new installations on BIONICLE.com.

In sum, LEGO invites drilling and spreading by creating a context that brings people together, embracing fan communities through various tools, and recognizing the best drillers and spreaders for their commitment. This is not so different from traditional children's play —imagining a fictional world (context), using the toys to engage with the imaginary world (tools), and seeking validation for their creative expressions – for example, the praise that comes along with building an entire LEGO set (reward).
  To play with the LEGO system in the digital age is to use media to produce fictional stories and share them with a community; to play with LEGO is to engage with narratives across a range of media platforms and collaboratively participate in them; and to play with LEGO is to crossover characters from one world to another and see what happens. This constitutes the narrativized geography of play, which is fuelled by spreading and drilling within the core and periphery. Yet more research needs to be done to explore the mechanics of such a system – the LEGO Group's franchises are just the building blocks.

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