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Transmediality and the Brick: Differences and Similarities between Analog and Digital Lego Play

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If the study of games is, today, a well-established academic field of inquiry, the heuristic efforts of game scholars rarely focus on freer playful activities, the so-called *paidia*.¹ Toys, in particular, are playful objects that are only occasionally taken into consideration, as they do not fit well into the models proposed for the study of video games, which often focus on games as rule-based systems or as activities with narrative aspirations. Toys are more often discussed by scholars who emphasize the idea of playfulness (notably Sutton-Smith), but who, in turn, tend to exclude games from their theories. Indeed, Gregory Bateson even suggests that games might not be playful at all.²

In this chapter, I will try to bridge the two spheres of games and play through the vehicle of the Lego franchise, which ranges from analog toys to digital games. The Lego franchise includes a particularly diverse and wide ensemble of cultural products that is crossed by two main axes. The first one is transmediality: the Lego franchise encompasses toys, games, videos, motion pictures, and much more. The second axis is the digital/analog divide—if Lego was born as analog toys, today many of its manifestations are digital. These two axes are not separate, of course, but they influence each other in complex ways. In this article, I discuss both, in an attempt at shedding some light on what remains constant despite all the intermedial translations and why.

The methodological “bridge” needed to begin our path is that between the tools used to analyze toys (which are static texts) and those used to approach games (which are dynamic practices). For this purpose, a sort of “lowest common denominator”—a common, meaningful element—must be defined. No formalist approach will be of help in this project. The *development* of playing activities would not take the indeterminacy of toy-play, which has fluctuating structures and broken rhythms resulting from the negotiations between the participants or from the wandering creativity of lone toy players, into account. On the other hand, the purely objectual characteristics of our objects of study would miss the dynamicity of games in which the same toy may change its meaning or role several times during the development of a game session. To overcome this impasse, I have decided to approach my case study from a semiotic perspective, which will allow me to focus on the interpretations guiding the playful practices of players engaged in toy play and in games. This approach will take the figurative features of toys into consideration, while, at the same time, help me analyze how the evolution of a game or of a play session re-negotiates the meaning and position held by these objects.

From the semiotician’s point of view, the most profound mechanism of play is *resemantization*, a shift of meaning that, although eventually guided by rules, is always performed by the players.³ When engaged in playful activities, subjects re-interpret the world according to specific semiotic domains: they select a series of objects (from a repertoire of available things) that will be included in the play activity and assign to them new meanings.⁴ These new meanings may be fairly complex, especially if they are prescribed by the rules of a game (or by a *matrix of semiotic constraints*). The king piece of a chess game, for example, has several layers of meaning attached to it, for example regarding its modalities (what it *has-to-do* and *is-able-to-do*) and its actantial role (an *object of value* that must be protected/conquered).

The same, however, holds true for toys, even when they are plastic representations of their referents. Philosopher Eugen Fink, for example, has claimed that toys are unique among human artefacts, as they convey completely different values depending on the perspective adopted. From a non-play point of view, toys are commodities, objects which serve to entertain children. However, *within* a playful context, toys acquire additional values that transform them into something *different*. In other words, for a father, the teddy bear he gives to his children is simply an object to keep them occupied and entertained, while for the playing children the toy will “come to life,” at least in the fictional worlds of play. Toys acquire new values and meanings that are true only as long as the toys are part of play. Fink defines this feature as “magic,” as it conveys the ontological and semiotic confusion

characteristic of ancient magic practices.⁵ In semiotic terms, the toy becomes a functive of a sign function inside the semiotic domain of play or, in other words, becomes the signifier of a new, playful, signified.⁶

This theoretical framework considers both digital and analog playthings as *texts* with two meanings, one referring to ordinary life and one that is “activated” only within the semiotic domain of play. These texts, however, are not simply meant to be interpreted; instead, they invite players to use them and to manipulate them within the context of a playful practice. Accordingly, part of the meaning of playthings resides in their possible uses, often inscribed in their own objectual features, their affordances. A semiotic take on playthings, then, explores them both in their static objectual states and in their virtual uses when inscribed in dynamic play practices.

The world of the brick

Lego is one of the most famous toy brands in the world. Founded in Denmark in 1934, the company introduced the first version of the world-famous plastic bricks in 1949. Sixty-six years later, in 2015, the Lego Group surpassed Mattel and became the world’s largest toy company by revenue. In the sixty-plus years in-between, the construction sets became the center of an empire which is no longer restricted to plastic toys, but rather practices an aggressive transmedia strategy that arguably culminated in the critically acclaimed *The Lego Movie* (2014).⁷ The motion pictures celebrates the “brick” from every angle—aesthetic, cultural, and ideological. While many of the massive transmedia phenomena typical of convergence culture are based on transmedia storytelling, it is *not* a narrative that sits at the heart of the Lego empire. Instead, it is structured around the formal characteristics of a toy line.

Primarily, Lego are toys and parts of toys. The bricks are sold as part of construction sets including instruction manuals detailing how to build a specific model. Nevertheless, the bricks have great creative potential, as they may be re-combined in ever-new ways, limited only by imagination—and by the pieces the player owns. Lego patented the first Lego blocks in 1958. Initially, the Lego toys were designed to create several generic shapes (mainly dealing with architecture); however, different lines of products—or “themes”—were created over the years, such as Lego City, Castle, Pirates, Belleville, Friends (the last two aimed at young girls), and Duplo (for younger children). On the occasion of the release of *Star Wars Episode I: A Phantom Menace* in 1999, the Lego Group produced construction sets based on licensed themes for the first time. The enormous success of this line led to the rapid increase

of licensed themes (in combination with the need of brand innovation after the patent had expired). Two years later, the first *Harry Potter* construction sets appeared. Since then, the number of franchises exploited by Lego have skyrocketed, including *Indiana Jones*, *Pirates of the Caribbean*, *The Lord of the Rings*, *Spiderman*, *Batman*, *The Avengers*, and *The Simpsons*. These sets feature characters, vehicles, and places inspired by the franchises, gradually shifting Lego's focus from recombination to transmedia expansion.

The success and diffusion of Lego toys had an important consequence: the peculiar aesthetics of the toys—their appearance and, especially, their way of portraying real-life objects and people—became part of the collective imagination. In semiotic terms, Lego's aesthetics has reached the center of the semiosphere, which implies that most people immediately recognize Lego toys as well as their (digital) reproductions.⁸

The Lego plastic bricks are also used for the less famous Lego Games. The Lego Games line, born in 2009, features twenty-four board games (both well-known ones such as chess and original designs) which exploit the Lego aesthetics, but are regulated by rules or, in semiotic terms, by a pre-made matrix of constraints. Lego blocks, in this case, are not used to build toys, but to create playthings, such as boards, dices, and pieces. The recombinatory nature of Lego, however, allows the players to reshape these playthings: the boards are customizable, the Lego-built dices have interchangeable faces, and all pieces are compatible with all the Lego toys, which, in turn, players may integrate into the games. The Lego Games thus function as an extension of the traditional Lego toys, but also open up new play experiences, all the while increasing replayability.

Additionally, some games such as *Ninjago Spinners* and *The Legend of Chima: Speedorz* add new gadgets—spinning tops and small vehicles based on flywheels, respectively—that may be used in any playing activity involving Lego. These gadgets are meant to represent “objective” duels between ninjas or pilots: the outcome of the confrontation is decided by chance, and not by a decision of the players, to allow competitions and tournaments. Even though these games are often based on specific themes (both original, such as the prize-winning *Ramses* series, or the *Ninjago* games, and licensed ones, such as *Harry Potter*), they do not tell stories.

There is also a third way of using Lego blocks in a rather playful way: to use them as puppets for staged spectacles. The word “brickfilm” designates fan-made stop-motion videos realized using Lego toys. If, early on, these films merely circulated on private tapes, the internet has made them more widely available. In fact, Lego players started to make brickfilms in the 1970s, but, due to their homemade nature, the phenomenon became famous only in the following decade. Today, the Lego Group openly encourages this practice, as

the company probably understands it as free promotion. The first known brickfilm is *Journey to the Moon* (1973), produced by the then-twelve-year-old Lars Hassing and his brother Henrik. Inspired by the Apollo program, *Journey to the Moon* depicts a moon landing. Curiously enough, another early brickfilm to gain public attention was Fernando Escovar's *Lego Wars* (1980). As the title suggests, *Lego Wars* draws on *Star Wars*—the same franchise that would become the first licensed Lego set more than twenty years later. Apart from indicating a contiguity (at least demographical) between Lego players and *Star Wars* fans, this video exemplifies the playful *resemantization* of Lego. Despite the apparent intention of representing *Star Wars*, most of the Lego figures featured in the video are equipped with medieval weapons, while a Red Cross helicopter is used as a stand-in for a spaceship (see Figure 11.1).

This way of using toys is not surprising for a play activity, thereby suggesting that some brickfilms are much closer to the recording of a play session than to a proper film. When watching *Lego Wars*, the audience needs to perform the same kind of resemantizations a play session would require: the Red Cross Lego helicopter is, in fact, a spaceship—otherwise the video would not make sense. Accordingly, the audience of brickfilms consists of co-players

FIGURE 11.1 *Lego Wars* was one of the first brick films. Screenshot from *Lego Wars* (Fernando Escovar, 1978).

who follow the instructions of the brickfilm's producers by activating the re-interpretative patterns the filmmakers propose.⁹

Similar to Lego bricks as such, their digital representations have also been used as a means for play. In fact, digital games dedicated to the "brick" predate Lego board games. Since 1997, the Lego Group, in collaboration with several developers, has published more than fifty video games, half of which are based on licensed themes. With the possible exception of *Lego Creator* (Superscape, 1998), all these games are strictly regulated and do not explicitly leave space for creative play. On the contrary, generally, players cannot use the digital simulations of Lego blocks for building models at all. Granted, the games sometimes imitate the building possibilities of Lego (usually via a video sequence in which digital Lego pieces gathered by the players are automatically re-arranged in order to build the shape required by the game). However, Lego's *aesthetics* have been applied to very different kinds of digital games, from racing games such as *Lego Racers* (High Voltage, 1999) and simulations such as *Legoland* (Krisalis, 1999) to real time strategy games such as *Lego Battles* (Hellbend, 2009) and even an MMORPG, *Lego Universe* (NetDevil, 2010). Most of Lego's digital games and, in particular, almost all the themed ones (*Ninjago*, *Bionicle*, *Legends of Chima*, etc.) are story-driven action-adventure games, which leave little room for creativity.

However, Lego's recombinatory nature may allow for a certain degree of customization or may be exploited as a game mechanic. For example, in *Lego Indiana Jones: The Original Adventure* (Traveller's Tales, 2008), players have to collect Lego pieces to activate the automatic creation of an item they need, such as the engine of a plane. Similarly, in *The Lego Movie Videogame* (TT Fusion, 2014), "free builder" characters can dismantle designated Lego buildings to retrieve the pieces to build other, pre-determined objects (notably vehicles). Obviously, the digital nature of these games does not allow for any kind of compatibility with their analog counterparts—except through the use of augmented reality, which Lego has been increasingly employing within the framework of the Fusion project.

Since players can only interact with the digital toys and playthings through a digital prosthesis, this generally reduces the recombinatory nature of Lego bricks to mere imitation. Games emulate this key feature of Lego through an effect of meaning without allowing players to build personalized models. In other words, players generally cannot decide what to build, as the outcome of the building process is scripted, and they do not even virtually build it, but merely activate an animation. To compensate for the limited agency of the players, Lego digital games feature full-fledged narratives. This story-based character is not limited to action-adventure games, but also defines racing and

strategy games, which often feature very well-constructed backgrounds, interesting plots, and enjoyable campaigns.

To be sure, digital representations of Lego are not only used for play. With the advancement of CGI, the Lego Group started to produce its own films, mostly geared toward children and directly released to home video markets. Indeed, between 2003 and 2017, nineteen Lego films were released. Most of these films are relatively simple and are more akin to a sophisticated marketing campaign than an actual attempt toward cinematographic achievement. *Lego: The Adventures of Clutch Powers* (2010) is worth mentioning, as it not only functioned as a low-quality prototype of *The Lego Movie*, but also introduces the idea of a universe—or, rather, multiverse—in which the different Lego themes coexist.

The idea of a “Lego World” is very important for the development of the transmedia net that surrounds play, as it implies that toys cease to be representations of W_0 (the real world). Instead, they become part of their own W_N (a diegetic, fictional world), which is a parallel, Lego-version of the former.¹⁰ This idea is perfected in *The Lego Movie*. In the film, many features of Lego’s aesthetics are present and are fundamental elements of the plot. In the narrative, the villain threatens the recombinatory nature of Lego by trying to glue the entire Lego galaxy into a fixed form. Such an outcome, in the axiology of the narrative, is certainly dysphoric, as the “Legoness” of the Lego World must be preserved. The toys’ features thus become inherently positive characteristics. Similarly, the motion picture represents the growing use of licensed themes in the creation of Lego sets in an extremely positive manner, as several characters are “borrowed” from other narratives (e.g. Batman, one of the main characters), thereby establishing intertextual relations that mix parody and what Gérard Genette has referred to as “transposition,” all the while aware of the Lego nature of the setting.¹¹ In addition, the film sets up a sort of Lego mythology. Notably, it introduces so-called relics: non-Lego objects, such as coins, rubber bands, and used band aids—things that typically end up in children’s Lego boxes—which appear in the Lego World. Finally, *The Lego Movie* has also been conceived as the centerpiece of a new transmedia ecosystem, which includes both narrative and playful texts. Indeed, the Lego Group released several construction sets and a digital game based on the motion picture simultaneous to the movie.

The Lego language

Analog and digital Lego feature a common aesthetics, which is today part of the collective imagination. The most important characteristic of Lego is their

recombinatory nature or, more precisely, their modularity. Lego's modularity is extremely detailed (it comprehends very small parts), durable (the pieces resist the attempt to separate them), and endemic (human figures and animals can also be dismantled and are compatible with other pieces). Indeed, every Lego piece is meant to be connected to others in order to build *something*. All kinds of Lego products share this fundamental characteristic, as complex objects may be reduced to smaller pieces and used to build new objects.

Everything in the Lego universe is fully recyclable, everything can serve many purposes; even characters can be disassembled and combined with others, sometimes with surreal effects. Modularity is connected with another important feature of all Lego products: their complete compatibility. Not only can the pieces of all construction sets be mixed, but this compatibility has been stable since the beginning. An old Lego block representing a shingle can easily be combined with the latest *Star Wars* spaceship, even though years have passed and the production process has changed (new plastics, new colors, etc.). This is not only a way of making Lego pieces almost everlasting, but it can also be considered as part of the morphology of a sort of Lego "language." According to Roger Said, Johan Roos, and Matt Statler, for example, Lego should be considered a proper, new, and specific language constituted by peculiar signs, the blocks themselves, and characterized by four main features: "connectivity, low barriers [to participation], repeatability and reversibility."¹²

The linguistic approach to Lego is particularly relevant because it helps clarify some peculiarities of these toys. First, it explains how Lego *translates entire* worlds, from the real world to the increasingly intricate narrative worlds the toys represent. Additionally, it makes clear that the transmedia phenomenon that is Lego is not organized around a narrative world, but rather around the ability of Lego to translate *any* world into its language. This dimension contributes to creating the effect of a stable Lego world parallel to ours that Douglas Coupland has described as a "seamless world of . . . modularity, indestructibility, sound bites, acrylonitrile butadiene styrene."¹³

In semiotic terms, Lego represents reality in a very particular way: It is a construction set conceived to represent domestic and every-day-life situations. Its way of representing reality has not changed—not even when new representational frameworks (science fiction, fantasy, etc.) were added. This ability to depict different kinds of realities, paired with the very typical style of these stylizations, is one of the features that determines Lego's success. The differences between the objects and people populating Lego World and their real-world counterparts are organized in a coherent system. Lego figures have their own characteristics: yellow skin, big cylindrical heads, few facial traits, widespread baldness, polygonal bodies, painted clothes, standardized

accessories, claw hands, and limited possibilities of movement. Likewise, the objects come in standardized sizes and a reduced range of colors, and they are designed to be connected with one another and the Lego people.

Despite the differences, all objects and persons of the real world may be re-created by using Lego blocks. The infinite amount of possible combinations of Lego parts can give birth to the reproduction of in-scale buildings or full-sized vehicles. Their versatility allows builders to reproduce any kind of object, with the only limit of the number of pieces owned. As for the "Lego race," its peculiarity can be formalized as a system of differences from the human race, a stylization: applying this system to an existing or fictional human being allows moving and translating him or her into Lego World.

The sheer limitless possibilities of translation allowed Lego to build the dense net of intertextual relations that have particularly defined the past fifteen years of its products. Every possible world is susceptible to Lego translation, and the characteristics of the Lego aesthetics make this translation not only possible but also pleasurable. If the audience of, for example, *The Lord of the Rings* (2001–3) is an adult audience—an audience which is quiet and receives a message, as Yuri Lotman has it—when confronted with the Lego version of the film, the audience becomes a folkloric audience, allowed—even invited—to play, question, and re-imagine the narrative.¹⁴ Lego thus becomes a means to exploring a transmedia world and enjoying the freedom offered by creative play or by the interactivity of a game.

The evolution of the game from generic construction sets to original themes and subsequently to licensed themes maps well onto the different kinds of toys based on their meaning: actant toys, thematic toys, and actor toys.¹⁵ The first Lego sets mostly portrayed generic houses, vehicles, and people. These toys, which represented what players desired, were actant toys, susceptible to play whatever role the players chose. These sets have been discontinued, but many Lego parts of modern sets can still be used in the same way. Thematic toys, which represent a precise thematic role or a figure, on the other hand, are produced in great numbers. These Lego sets reduce human(-like) pieces to specific roles: medieval warriors, football players, clowns, policemen, firemen, and so on. Generally, these stand-ins for humans are not sufficiently developed to identify them as single characters; however, they serve to define a particular space/time frame and a set of possible skills. In the domain of nonhuman representation, thematic toys also include more specific types of buildings (such as police stations and hairdresser salons). The Lego original themes often feature these kinds of toys, mainly because they create a possible world (provided with all the necessary themes and thematic roles), but they do not feature a narrative (and therefore neither the actantial roles necessary to create actors).

Lego representing specific characters or objects of Lego and non-Lego fictional worlds (e.g., Gandalf and the Batmobile) are generally more detailed, as they need to clearly identify a unique object among many others. These actor toys are particularly present in the licensed Lego sets, whose reason for existence is, after all, the representation of well-known characters and props, such as Darth Vader, Jack Sparrow, the *Millennium Falcon*, and the *Black Pearl*. Actor toys are thus charged with meaning, as they embody all of the isotopies of the character they represent, such as relationships (e.g. friends, foes, lovers, and family) and scripts (e.g. Robin Hood steals from the rich, while Batman fights criminals). Crucially, however, these toys allow players to recreate and variate these beloved narratives—to *play with* them.

The Lego Movie portrays these three different types of toys. Emmet, the main character of the film, is a thematic toy, a construction builder similar to all others with little to no personality. He is part of a community of thematic and actant toys—toys with only a handful of details which always follow the instructions—until he comes in contact with the “master builders” (who can build something without the need of instructions). These are actor toys representing both licensed characters such as Batman and Dumbledore as well as newly-introduced and easily recognizable ones such as Vitruvius and Wyldstyle. Among them, however, is Benny, a 1980s vintage Lego figure with very few details apart from an almost erased symbol on his chest and a broken helmet. He is a “blue astronaut,” one of the first thematic toys Lego produced. His presence among the “master builders” indicates the bond of affection players develop with their oldest toys, which thus become exceptional and acquire an identity of their own. In other words, the film suggests that a toy can become an actor toy not only because of the meaning that it carries, but also because of the relationship players establish with the object over years. The toy’s value is thus based on its “backstory” and the player’s emotional attachment.¹⁶ Accordingly, the additional meaning necessary to transform these toys in actor toys is not present in the text, but in practice; it is the specific value a specific player attributes to it that makes it more meaningful.

Lego’s modular nature complicates the situation, as not only buildings and vehicles may be disassembled, but so may figures, whose parts and accessories may be combined with other figures mixed. This practice creates new, customized toys which can be either useful to represent new themes or actors or end up constituting “schizophrenic” toys with no isotopies that allow the players to make sense of them. In that case, the only way of playing with them is through additional resemantization.

Lego’s success in creating a toy-based transmedia universe is not only a symptom of the ludification our culture has been undergoing, but also provides

testament to Lego's efficacy as a language through which entire worlds may be "Legoized." Throughout its long history, the variety of Lego products has allowed players to engage in different kinds of play—digital vs. analog; creative play vs. games. Lego's peculiar form of expression, which unites a specific aesthetics and pervasive modularity, makes possible the incredible success of these toys, as it allows players to become creative, while the toys are always sufficiently recognizable to be commodified—and thus commercially exploitable. Recombining Lego pieces is always an act of creativity, but limited by their fixed form, which constrains players' possibilities. Lego's modularity, in other words, creates a space of playfulness within the playing activity itself—and playing with the boundaries of play is among the most rewarding playing activities.

Lego's substance and form of expression

The transmedia potential of Lego causes the "brick" to be the object of several intersemiotic translations, notably between different practices (active play and passive entertainment) and between different play activities (toy play and gaming). This transmedia dimension entails an opposition between the analog and digital versions of Lego—the second axis I will explore. This opposition is particularly meaningful, as it challenges several of the fundamental traits of the Lego "language" just outlined: How can a digital object still be considered a Lego object if its materiality, and therefore its possible uses, is radically different? The second half of this chapter, then, will explore the differences and similarities between analog and digital Lego.

On the most fundamental level, there is an evident difference in the materiality of analog and digital Lego. Yet when considering both kinds of playthings as texts which are part of a sign function, Louis Hjelmslev's conceptualization of "expression" and "content" sheds some light on their differences. In brief, Hjelmslev understands the signifier (i.e., the expression) and the signified (i.e., the content) in relation to their substance (i.e., their material manifestation) and their form (which is abstract). In natural languages, the substance of the expression is articulated voice; the expression is formed by phonemes (units of sound considered as different in a specific language); the content's form is the lexical articulation of the objects of the world; and the content's substance is the world itself, which can be perceived and organized by humans only according to the form that they give to it.¹⁷

Despite the different substances that make up Lego sets (industrially shaped ABS) and games (light emitted from a screen according to the game's code), they both share the same *form* of expression—in other words, they

look (almost) the same to the player. This illusion of similarity is the cardinal point upon which the continuity between the toys and the digital games is built. While the content is not necessarily similar, and the substance of expression is by definition very different, the form of the expression is what makes a digitally constructed virtual image perceived and treated as a Lego object or not.¹⁸ The purpose of Lego's form of expression is different for its analog and digital variants. The shape of Lego toys is directly related to their modularity; it is a *competence* that allows the different pieces to connect, the mini-figures to hold objects, and so on. Maintaining the same form of expression through time and across products allows compatibility between different Lego sets. On the other hand, the form of expression of digital Lego is an exclusively *aesthetic* matter: the virtual objects do not require specific forms for them to interlock. The form of expression of virtual Lego, then, aims at an identificatory effect of meaning, as it mimics the form and substance of the expression of their analog counterparts in a virtual environment.

The relationship between the material aspect of Lego and what it represents involves a degree of iconicity, as the two forms are connected by a toposensitive similarity. According to Umberto Eco's modes of sign production, Lego are a *stylization* born from a radical *invention*.¹⁹ The first term indicates that, today, Lego can represent every object of the world (and of imaginary worlds), since Lego is based on a stable, culturalized system of similarities with and differences from reality. This basic system of similarities and differences also provides the point of origin for the Lego "language." Of course, Lego has a very specific way of representing reality, which is often very far from physical reality, but based on a balance between the fundamental characteristics of being a construction set (hence the claw hands) and the necessity of being able to represent, in some measure, anthropic reality, not without adding some specific and purely aesthetic elements (as yellow skins). The creation of Lego has brought forth a whole new set of signs which may, today more than ever, be employed for various types of representations.

Interacting with the brick: manipulation and prosthesis

Different substances of expression require different forms of interaction and, therefore, determine different play practices. The fact that digital playthings only exist in a virtual world has several consequences for the way players can interact with them. The most important one is the fact that the players need an interface that mediates between their bodies and the digital world. The first level of this instance is the interface of the platform (i.e., the device which

allows the play activity). These interfaces transform the movement of the players' bodies into data which affects the virtual world and its objects. The nature of the movement and the ways of tracking it can change greatly, as becomes evident from the difference between clicking with a mouse and using a Wiimote.²⁰

The player's movements are projected onto a digital *prosthesis*.²¹ This virtual stand-in allows the players to act in a world that is materially inaccessible to them and creates a meaning effect of direct agency. In fact, games use different kinds of prostheses. Building on Eco's typology, Agata Meneghelli has distinguished between *extensive prosthesis* (which extend the natural actions of the players' bodies) and *magnifying prosthesis* (which perform actions that would be impossible for the players' bodies), both of which may be *intrusive* (if they allow the players to access spaces normally inaccessible).²² In addition, digital prostheses are either *unactorialized* and therefore "transparent" (e.g. in god games) or *actorialized* through the use of an avatar.

According to Bruno Fraschini, actorialized prostheses may be articulated in three ways: vehicles (when the players drive a car, a spaceship or similar), characters (when the players control an avatar representing an actor—e.g. Super Mario), and mask (when the players "see" through the avatar's eyes). The different kinds of prostheses entail distinct relationships between the player and the character and, accordingly, different compositions of the subject. While the "vehicle" does not directly alter the player's identity, the "character" involves the deepest characterization of the prosthesis, while the "mask" involves the highest degree of identification with it.²³

In analog play, "character" and "vehicle" may be understood as the use of toys as puppets and toy cars, while "mask" is akin to live-action play and "god" to playing with an entire set of toys. Digital prostheses, therefore, are virtual equivalents to analog play, allowing the players to interact with virtual playthings as they normally do with real ones. From this perspective, the "avatar" is simply a puppet invested with the role of *actant observer*. Lotman, speaking about puppets in theatre, writes that: "[I]f the actor plays the part of a person, the doll/puppet plays the part of the actor, and becomes the image of another image."²⁴ The same holds true for the avatar. Like a puppet, the avatar can be used for the creation of narrative texts that become part of the game's repertoire. In this context, in contrast to live performances and analog play, the mediated nature of digital games allows game designers to adapt strategies known from cinema and television (e.g. the choice of cameras, lightning, and the use of music). Accordingly, game designers can use cinematic tools to foster identification with and (con)fusion between the player and the avatar—that is, between the different instances that make up the subject.

Creative play vs. games: ludic differences and similarities

The need of a prosthesis, and therefore of surrendering agency to the code, also influences the types of practices that can be performed. From a semiotic standpoint, “games” are all those playful activities in which a large part of the system of constraints has been invented prior of the process of playing, while the other forms of play can be designated with the expression “creative play,” as they involve a higher degree of creativity and authorship on the players’ end. Of course, this simple definition does not account for the amount or complexity of the rules involved in a particular game/play and is parallel to Roger Caillois’s distinction between *ludus* and *paidia*—where *paidia* means that the players create their own rules while they are playing, and *ludus* means that they accept the rules of a specific game and play it. However, whereas Caillois focuses on the “rules,” I differentiate between resemantizations and the matrix of constraints. The difference may seem subtle, but it means that I would consider playing “Cowboys and Indians” as being, at least in part, a game (as the resemantization of the two players has become culturalized), while Caillois probably would not.

For a long time, analog Lego emphasized creative play, while its digital counterpart was exploited for the creation of games. As early as the 1990s, however, the line began to become blurry. Digital sandbox games such as *Legoland* and *Lego Creator* feature digital playgrounds that leave room for the players’ creativity, while, ten years later, the Lego Games introduced matrices of constraints into analog play.

This development reflects broader technological trends. Since Lego was born as a construction set, any attempt to transpose it into digital form was bound to face technical restrictions. Creating digital games is much easier than crafting a virtual space with its own physics to host creative play. Coding is based on the creation of constraints that are used to shape players’ potential courses of action. Free play, on the other hand, requires much more possibilities than most games allow for. In this respect, digital and analog play are opposites. The tendency toward “gaminess” in digital play, then, is an intrinsic characteristic of the medium (at least, it has been so far).

Despite these differences, Lego has persisted in its recognizable shape in a wide range of cultural products. The transmedia translations which Lego has gone through have only highlighted that there is something that makes both analog and digital Lego easily recognizable. “Legoness” is not tied to a specific materiality or in the medium Lego was designed for, but in a combination of two semiotic characteristics. The first is related to their

appearance, which makes them a “representation set” which allows for a systematic representation of reality. The second is their syntax, which pertains to the way the different signs (i.e., the Lego pieces)—can be combined, assembled, disassembled—the way they interact with each other. These two features, then, are at the same time Lego’s essence and the key to the Brick’s transmedia success.

Notes

- 1 Roger Caillois, *Les Jeux et les hommes* (Paris: Gallimard, 1967).
- 2 Gregory Bateson, “The Message ‘This is Play,’” in *Group Processes: Transactions of the Second Conference*, ed. Bertram Schaffner (New York: Macy Foundation, 1956).
- 3 Yuri M. Lotman, “The Place of Art among Other Modelling Systems,” *Sign Systems Studies* 39, no. 2–4 (2011).
- 4 Mattia Thibault, “Realities of Play: A Semiotic Analysis of the Province of Meaning of Play,” in *Is It Real? Structuring Reality by Means of Signs*, ed. Zeynep Onur, Eero Tarasti, İlhami Sığircı, and Papatya Nur Dökmeci Yörükoğlu (Newcastle: Cambridge Scholars, 2016).
- 5 Eugen Fink, “Oasis of Happiness: Thoughts toward an Ontology of Play,” *Purlieu* 1, no. 4 (2012). The same intuition probably led Johan Huizinga to the idea of the “magic circle.”
- 6 In semiotics and glossematics, “functive” indicates the two terms of a function. On sign functions, see Umberto Eco, *Trattato di semiotica generale* (Milano: Bompiani, 1975).
- 7 According to the review aggregator *Rotten Tomatoes*, the film received 95 percent positive reviews (https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_lego_movie/, accessed February 9, 2017).
- 8 See Yuri M. Lotman, *Universe of the Mind: A Semiotic Theory of Culture* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1990).
- 9 Of course, a brickfilm that proposes a perfect representation of narrative wouldn’t share this playful dimension, being instead a full-fledged film, even if of a particular kind.
- 10 The notation follows Eco, *Trattato*.
- 11 Gérard Genette, *Palimpsestes: La Littérature au second degré* (Paris: Seuil, 1982).
- 12 Roger Said, Johan Roos, and Matt Statler, “Lego Speaks (Working Paper 20),” *Imagination Lab*, November 2011, <http://www.imagilab.org/pdf/wp02/WP20.pdf>.
- 13 Douglas Coupland, “Toys that Bind,” *New Republic* (June 6, 1994): 10.
- 14 Yuri M. Lotman, *Testo e contesto: Semiotica dell’arte e della cultura*, ed. Simonetta Salvestroni (Rome: Laterza, 1980), 145–50.

- 15 Mattia Thibault, "Towards a Semiotic Analysis of Toys," in *New Semiotics: Between Tradition and Innovation*, ed. Kristian Bankov (Sofia: NBU/IASS, 2016).
- 16 Katriina Heljakka, *Principle of Adult Play(fulness) in Contemporary Toy Cultures: From Wow, to Flow, to Glow* (PhD diss., Aalto University, 2013).
- 17 Louis Hjelmslev, *Prolegomena to a Theory of Language* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969).
- 18 Lego's content is common when the same "themes" are used (e.g., a *Ninjabo* construction set and digital game share the same form and substance of content), but this is not necessary to create the effect of continuity.
- 19 Eco, *Trattato*.
- 20 For an in-depth semiotic analysis of this aspect of the interface, see Agata Meneghelli, *Il risveglio dei sensi: Verso un'esperienza di gioco corporeo* (Milano: Unicopli, 2011) and Enzo D'Armenio, *Mondi paralleli: Ripensare l'interattività nei videogiochi* (Milano: Unicopli, 2014).
- 21 Bruno Franchini, *Metal Gear Solid: L'evoluzione del serpente* (Milano: Unicopli, 2003); Martti Lahti, "As We Become Machines: Corporealized Pleasures in Video Games," in *The Video Game Theory Reader*, ed. Mark J.P. Wolf and Bernard Perron (New York: Routledge, 2003).
- 22 Meneghelli, *Risveglio*, 54; Umberto Eco, *Kant e l'Ornitorinco* (Milano: Bompiani, 1997).
- 23 Franchini, *Metal Gear Solid*.
- 24 Lotman, *Testo e contesto*, 149; my translation.

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