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Lego: when video games bridge between play and cinema.

Introduction

Playful phenomena are often exploited as source of inspiration by film-makers. Toys, after videogames, are the most fruitfully exploited playful phenomenon featuring films about toys (as Pixar's Toy Story) and inspired by real products, as Barbie G.I. Joe and Transformers. However the only toy-inspired film that had a genuine success both by audience and critics is the Lego movie.
The path of Lego from toy to cinema features many steps, among which the creation of many videogames. This article aims at investigating the role and position that Lego videogames hold in the definition of a Lego aesthetics and in its application to different media.

1.0 Lego: language and aesthetics.

The transmedia phenomenon that we refer to with the world "Lego", is complex indeed. It has been analyzed both as a language[1] and as a parallel, alternative world[2]. Undoubtedly Lego aesthetics are very well defined in the collective imagination. We will try, here, to describe it focusing on four main characteristics.

1.1 Modular nature

First of all Lego are bricks, construction sets: Lego are meant for building things. This fundamental characteristic goes through all kind of Lego products: objects (and also people) can be reduced to unbreakable pieces ans used to build other things.

1.2 Full translatability

Objects and people from the Lego world, are alternative to their real-world counterparts Lego minifigures have their own characteristics: yellow skin, cylindrical heads, few facial traits, polygonous bodies, painted clothes, and limited possibilities of movements. This features can be summarized as a system of differences from human race: applying this system to an existing or fictional human being allows to move and translate him or her into the Lego world. The same happens with objects that can be adapted to a set of standardized characteristics (connectivity, standard sizes, reduced range of colors) and become Lego. Lego aesthetics, therefore, are fully applicable to any existing creature or object, making our world fully translatable in the Lego world.

1.3 Characters, roles and actors

In his article "*Dolls in the system of culture*" Jurij Lotman explain the difference between statues as

1 Roos, J., Said, R. and Statler, M. (2001) *Lego speaks*, Working Paper 20, Imagination Lab.
2 Couplan, D., (1994) "Toys that bind", in *New Republic/June issue.*

toys as a matter of details: a statue as many details in order to convey the artist's message, toys, instead, have less details and let the player's imagination free to complete them.

Lego minifigures can be divided in three groups according to their details:

- Actors: minifigures (often the older ones) with almost no detail: they represent simply a human being and they can play every role;
- Role-based minifigures, which display a certain amount of details to indicate their *thematic roles*[3] (medieval warriors, football players, policemen and so on).
- Characters, both from Lego and licensed fictional worlds, the detail and characteristics of these minifigures portray, without any doubt, the identity of one single person, with all his isotopies, background narrations and abilities.

The Lego modular nature, of course, further complicates the situation: body parts and accessories can be mixed creating endless new minifigures.

1.4 Intertexuality

In 1999, in occasion of the release of *Star Wars Episode I: A phantom menace*, The Lego Company, for the first time, produced licensed theme based construction sets; since then Lego exploited many other licensed franchises: Indiana Jones, Pirate of the Caribbeans, Lord of The Rings, Minecraft, Batman, The Simpsons... just to mention few of them. Every narration is susceptible to be translated into Lego, and the characteristics of the Lego aesthetics make this translation, not only possible, but suitable, allowing the audience to become players and re-enact, question, parody the original narration, enjoying the freedom given by a toy-based playfulness.

2.0 The Lego Transmedia World

The corpus of Lego products is huge, comprehending also works of art and fan-made products that exploit Lego's aesthetics without being official Lego products. Omitting the more extravagant[4], we can draw a range of different products from the most to the less playful

2.1 Toys

The construction sets are the first and most important of all Lego products. The first Lego bricks have been patented in 1958 and their popularity grew worldwide: today Lego is the most popular construction set in the world. Caillois[5] would classify them as *paidia*, being a free form of play, with very few and relatives rules.

The difference between the three types of minifigures (characters, roles and actors), linked with the evolution of Lego sets troughs time, is present to its full extent only in toys, and gives rise to

3 Greimas, A., (1988) *Maupassant: the Semiotics of Text: Practical Exercises*, Amsterdam, John Benjamins.

4 As Brikfilms, Marti Huewold's Lego Bridge and the Lego Fantasia Symphony, composed in 1995 by Frederik Magl and many other.

5 Caillois, R., (1967), *Les Jeux et les hommes*, Paris: Gallimard.

different degrees of freedom in play. The increased amount of details, in fact, appeals to the player's desire of mimicry[6], but at the same time becomes a constriction, directing the course of the play. Therefore, the less detailed are the toys, the more freedom has the player; the more detailed are the toys, the more mimicry is involved. Moving in the range between toys and statues means moving between creation and representation, authorship and readership.

2.2 Lego Games

The Lego Group produces a wide range of games that exploit the Lego aesthetic in a more regulated form of play – which Caillois calls *ludus*. The *Lego Games* line produced 24 boardgames, both from Lego themes (e.g. *Ramses* and *Ninjago* series) and from licensed themes (*Harry Potter*). The modular nature of Lego aesthetics featured in Lego Games is very productive: boards and dices can be redesigned and their compatibility with Lego toys make them susceptible to be adapted and modified in order to evolve the game play.

Lego Games feature, like most boardgames, a regulated form of play, in which the narration is extremely simple and mostly out of the player's control. The latter, however, thanks to the customization possibilities granted by Lego aesthetics, has an unusual control on the game's rules.

2.3 Videogames

Since 1997 The Lego Company, in collaboration with many different developers, has published more than 50 videogames, half of which featuring licensed themes. With the possible exception of *Lego Creator*, all the Lego videogames are forms of *ludus:* strictly regulated games. The Lego aesthetics has been applied to very different kind of videogames, as racing games (*Lego Racers*), simulation strategy games (*Legoland*), real time strategy games (*Lego Battle*) and even a MMORPG (*Lego Universe*). Most of Lego games and, in particular, almost all the theme based games (*Ninjago*, *Bionicle*, *Legends of Chima,* etc.) are action-adventure games.

As for the Lego Games, the modular nature of Lego hold a central position in the working of these videogames, both for customization and as primary feature of the games. However, differently from toys and games, Lego videogames are almost always characterized by complex narrations. This is not surprising for action-adventure games, but even the racing or strategic games have well constructed backgrounds, interesting plots and enjoyable campaigns.

2.4 Lego movie

The Lego Movie is a very smart display of *meta-Lego*. On one side it explicitly put the Lego aesthetics in the foreground of the plot: the modular nature of Lego is both opposed by the villain, and praised by the good; intertextuality is stronger than ever, many characters of the film coming from licensed themes; and different kinds of minifigures (roles-based and characters) represents different ways to approach Lego building (following the instructions vs free construction). On the

6 According to Caillois one of the four forms of play, based on imitation.

other side the film give prominence also to the Lego *mythology*: Benny, a broken *blue astronaut* from the 80s, represents the bond of affection that players develop with their oldest toys; "relics" non-Lego objects (as coins, rubber bands and similar) parody the disorder usually found in any kid "Lego boxes"; and the ending, with the threat of the *little sister* capable of destroying the world, reflects a real-life problem of many young Lego players.

Finally it is important to mention that the *Lego Movie* has been conceived as part of a *transmedia playful narration*: both construction sets and a videogame have been launched simultaneously with the film. The latter, therefore, is not considered as the end of a process of evolution, but as a new center of innovation in a knotty intertextual and transmedia net.

3.0 Bridging between toys and movies.

The different Lego products listed above define a range between playership and readership according to the amount of details present in characters and to the presence of predetermined narrations. Starting from the most free form of play, *paidia*, we saw that toys with increasing details created more and more a sense of mimicry, but at the same time restricted the freedom of the players. Games, thanks to their rules, trace a feeble line of narration that players must follow. The story-telling, in videogames, become more important and complex, and a real plot finally appears. In the end, with films, the audience no longer participate at the narration, but reaches a degree of total readership.

Videogames for the first time apply Lego aesthetics to a fully constructed narration, although interactive and thus are of central importance in the definition and translation of Lego aesthetics from toy to film. In addition Lego videogames are the first Lego product made without... Lego. In all the previous Lego products, fan-made tributes(as stop motion brickfilms) and work of arts Lego brick were their *raison d'être.* Videogames substitute Lego bricks with their digital version, similar, but different. It is on this digital version, however, that the Lego Movie is based upon.

It is not possible – even if it would be interesting – investigate here more deeply the role that videogames play in this transmedia translation. Nevertheless, this few pages are meant as a reflection on the importance of considering the relationship between cinema and videogames as a part of a wider chain of transmedia translations that pervades all forms of play and of storytelling. Lego, thank to their wide range of products, are a particularly good case study, but they are no exception. Many transmedia narration involve toys, boardgames and action figures and they should probably be taken more seriously into consideration, if we wish shed some light on the complex relationships between playfulness and communication.

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