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The Contribution of Branded Games for the LEGO Ninjago Brand Narrative

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La Contribución de los Juegos de Marca a la Narrativa de Marca de LEGO Ninjago

ABSTRACT

This study will examine how branded games in the LEGO Ninjago franchise communicate the brand narrative through their mechanical, semiotic and referential design. Digital games as communicative tools facilitate a new paradigm of marketing

focusing on experience creation through integrated marketing communication plans. The LEGO brand creates highly successful games that communicate the brand effectively. To explore the possibilities and counteract the simplistic use of branded games, this study introduces an innovative framework to formally analyze branded games and their communication of a brand narrative through mechanical, semiotic and referential layers. This framework introduces formal game design to advertising studies, while dragging game studies into branded ecosystems. Using the framework, we analyze *LEGO Ninjago the Movie – The Videogame*, to identify how this paid digital game expands the Ninjago universe and fulfills specific marketing purposes oriented to LEGO toy sets. Our analysis shows that on a mechanical and semiotic layer, the game presents a standalone experience catering to the universe of the Ninjago movie and the values of the Ninjago brand narrative. However, by framing the whole game as LEGO – in its materiality and interactable objects – the LEGO brand narrative of creative construction informs the act of play. The referential design in these games makes use of playful disruption of rules to instill additive comprehension in the player related to purchasable sets and content.

Keywords

LEGO, branded game, game analysis, brand narrative, referential design

Introduction

Building blocks seem to be a surefire way to make a time-resistant brand. The LEGO brand has seen a revenue increase of 23% in 2021, compared with an increase of 13% in 2020 (The LEGO Group 2021; Ibbetson 2021). The annual report highlights “a digital shift” as a main contributor, among other factors (Milne

2021). As website accessibility spurred sales, another line of profit is LEGO's reliance on digital games, which have been profitable for decades (Wienberg 2016). The licensing cost of these digital games is, however, the third largest expense category of the brand (The LEGO Group 2021, 23). Despite being a constraint, both financially and playfully – digital games are less open to free play than LEGO bricks – the games published by LEGO are a boon for the brand. In this article, we will explain this success by introducing an innovative framework of mechanical, semiotic, and referential design of digital games.

With marketing shifting towards branded content – or the creation of standalone consumable content to spread brand values implicitly as users simply consume a media product (IAB Spain 2022) – games, as an interactive medium, have taken up a bigger role in marketing campaigns. Regrettably, branded games are often reduced to brand placement only, disregarding the boarder persuasive potential that these media can offer to the brand (de la Hera 2019). Advertising studies then ignore the potential of games, and therefore fall short of explaining the success of LEGO games. In this article we will combine advertising studies insights with game studies. As humanities game studies have a stronger tradition in close readings and understanding how games generate meaning (Caroline 2020), it offers the means to ground advertising research in the game itself, while forcing game studies into a marketing ecosystem. Through the analysis of one of the branded games of the LEGO Ninjago franchise as a case study, this paper illustrates how an innovative framework on mechanical, semiotic, and referential design can be used to formally analyze how games can be used to communicate the brand narrative as part of an integrated marketing strategy.

First, through a review of advertising and game studies literature, we outline the framework of mechanical, semiotic, and referential design used to analyse the communication of a brand narrative in branded games. After operationalizing the framework, a case study of *LEGO Ninjago the Movie – The Videogame* (TT Fusion 2017)

will illustrate how the brand narratives of LEGO and the Ninjago franchise are designed effectively into the game. The focus on this original intellectual property by LEGO allows us to study the manifestation of the LEGO brand narrative in a canalized product completely of LEGO's design. The case study first requires a review of corporate documents to inventory what the brand narrative of LEGO and the Ninjago franchise is. Secondly, a formal game analysis following the mechanical-semiotic-referential design framework shows which formal elements communicate the brand narrative, and how the game can stand on its own. On a mechanical and semiotic layer, the game presents a standalone experience catering to the universe of the Ninjago movie, but the referential design frames the whole game as LEGO play by disrupting rules and fostering creative construction of experiences.

ANALYZING BRANDED GAMES

Unpacking the LEGO use of the digital games requires the marriage of advertising studies and game studies. The former has a strong disposition to seeing the manifestation of a brand spread over different products, but lacks the understanding of how a game can thrive on player interaction. The latter, instead, has profound insights into games themselves and their diegetic links, but the corporate context misses in close readings of games. By combining the two into an analytical framework that charts the inclusion of a brand strategy in formal design we propose an innovative approach to the study of how brand narratives are communicated in branded games through mechanical, semiotic, and referential design. In the following three sections we explain the reasons why this new framework is necessary and how it contributes to a more comprehensive understanding of branded games.

Games and Marketing

With the development of digital means, ludic actions have become more prominent in marketing and its studies. Kotler, Kartajaya and Setiawan (2010) highlight that with the digital changes came a shift from a product-centric perspective (marketing 1.0), based on sales and persuasion, to a human-centric vision (marketing 3.0), where marketing deals with aspirations, emotions and consumer interest, with the purpose of contributing to the world with their brand values (idem, 4), and letting consumers participate, express their ideas, and interact with the brands and other consumers (Cañete Sanz and Martens 2020). Games, with their interactive capabilities and digital world building possibilities, are a prime channel for this consumer-centric marketing approach (de la Hera 2019).

This new marketing direction resulted in a categorization of games in advertising along two lines: in-game advertising and advergaming (Marolf 2007; Nelson and Waiguny 2012; Youn 2019). In-game advertising focuses on the actions around brand placement in larger entertainment games (Terlutter and Capella 2013; Vashisht 2021). Advergaming, instead, are the games specifically designed for promoting a brand, product or service (Terlutter and Capella 2013; Gurney and Payne 2016; Castelló-Martínez and del Pino-Romero 2018). Regardless of which direction was followed, academic research in advertising approached these games as an effective way to increase brand awareness (Nelson 2002), and focused on the analysis of brand effectiveness in games, persuasive knowledge in consumers, and concerns about persuasive actions on children (e.g., Peters and Leshner 2013; Vashisht, Royne, and Sreejesh 2019; Wang and Mizerski 2019; Sreejesh, Dwivedi, and Ghosh 2021). The study of games in advertising is more focused on their efficacy than on an understanding of the games themselves.

Games are mostly seen from a marketing 1.0 perspective, and Noorbehbahani et al. argue that “to maximize the effectiveness of a gamified marketing app, researchers need to consider which elements of the game are suitable for which marketing activity” (2019, 409). Although some researchers have shed light on the complexity of embedding advertising messages into games (e.g., De la Hera, 2019), there is still a need to better understand the role of games as part of a broader marketing campaign.

An alternative to this trend is the study of branded content. The goal of branded content is to get the audience interested in the products of a brand, and implicitly – through their content – communicate brand values and narratives (IAB Spain 2022) through standalone mediatized products. Here, the objective is on customer engagement through consumable content instead of ads (Aguilera and Baños 2016, 39). This shift allows us to study games in a broader marketing ecosystem, instead of in isolation. Connecting the branded content are brand narratives. It is the understanding of these narratives that will allow us to study branded games on their merit as games, and study games as positioned in a broader strategy.

Brand Narratives in Branded Games

A brand narrative is defined by marketer, Laurence Vincent, as a means “to convey a worldview, a set of sacred beliefs that transcend functional and epistemic product attributes” (2002, 16). The brand narrative is then a common and coherent communicative direction, seeping through all branded content, including branded games, thriving on synergy and consistency of the chosen forms and formats (Ozuem, Howell, and Lancaster 2022; Costa Sola-Segalés 2003). This narrative is based on the brand values, which dictate what the brand is and how the audience can experience it (Ganassali and Matysiewicz 2021). By searching for the brand narrative elements in a branded game, a formal game analysis is afforded, as the focus is on identifying designed

elements that represent the key values, effectively bridging advertising and game studies.

In game studies however, the link to integrated marketing campaigns has often been missing. Instead, transmedial connections, where each media (or communicative form) does what it does best (Jenkins 2008; Scolari 2016), have received more attention than marketing relations as the connecting factor, either focused on the content and narrative (Planells de la Maza 2017; Tosca and Klastrup 2019) or through fundamental discussions (Kennedy 2019). The spreading of a story over multiple media and channels, with several degrees of consumer interaction, approaches the contextualization of a game more from a content-level, as the focus is on how these texts are related or contribute in their medium specific instance to a larger universe or narrative (Martens 2016). This focus on medium specificity keeps game studies from looking at the connection to the brand narrative within a game, as the focus is on the game itself. To fully bridge the game-focused game analyses and the brand-focused advertising approaches, we introduce a framework for game analysis that pinpoints brand value and narrative elements within game design.

Mechanic-Semiotic-Referential Framework

The framework that combines game and advertising studies is an expansion of game scholar Espen Aarseth's mechanic-semiotic understanding of videogames. Aarseth understands games as a "unique dual materiality" in which the "coded level can only be fully experienced by way of the external, expressive level" (1997, 40). He later labeled the levels mechanical and semiotic, respectively (2016). The mechanical layer "is the engine that drives the game action, allows the players to make their moves, and changes the game state" (idem, 488) – both the programmed possibilities for, and limits to, player actions. Located in the nuclear part of this framework, the mechanical elements can be

the interactive focus of a game, but can also communicate key *actions* from a brand. The expressive, or semiotic, layer “informs the player about the game world and the game state through visual, auditory, textual, and sometimes haptic feedback” (Aarseth 2016, 448). This layer can expand the brand narrative, either as a storyline addition, or story ramification (Costa Sánchez and Piñeiro Otero 2015). This creates an approach that strongly grounds the design and the analysis of a game in the product itself. However, it remains focused upon a singular product, as the semiotic layer is the expression of the mechanical possibilities and limitations. For this model to also account for an integrated brand narrative based on brand values, another layer should be added on top, as shown in Figure 1: a referential layer.

The referential layer interprets the semiotic expression of the mechanical layer and explicitly assesses what broader narrative, product, or value a designed element refers to. Objects of interest are references to other products, marketing actions, campaign or extrinsic values that are represented in the game. This way, Aarseth’s model becomes enhanced with a sensitivity to a broader marketing ecosystem, while still grounded in the design of the game.

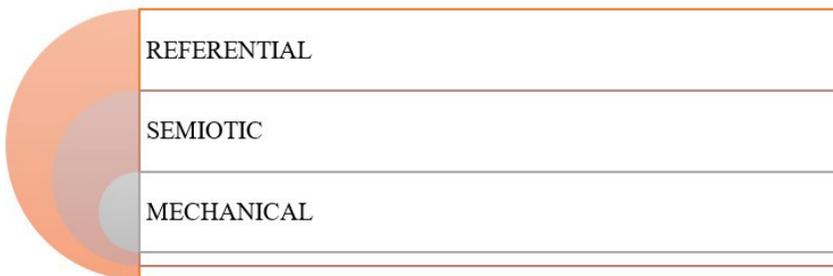


Figure 1: Representation of the three-level framework for analyzing branded games. Source: Own elaboration.

The referential layer is based on insights from transmedial worlds and additive comprehension. Lisbet Klastrup and Susana Tosca introduce *mythos*, *topos*, and *ethos* to talk about the stories, spaces, and rules or values, respectively, of a transmedial universe (2004;

2019). While yielding a way to link larger narrative elements to an individual instalment, this framework remains focused on the diegetic level and thus does not touch upon a brand, as it exists in the physical surroundings of the player. The referential layer serves a similar function as their trinity, in that it highlights “the central knowledge one needs to have in order to interact with or interpret events in the world successfully” (2004, 412). In the case of the referential layer, formal game design elements are sought that allow players to interpret events or actions happening in the game within the brand narrative.

The second element of the referential layer is “additive comprehension,” a term used by game designer Neil Young to describe the effect of having a piece of information that allows a reconsideration of the current narrative into a larger context through fragmented references (Young in Jenkins 2008, 127). The referential layer identifies designed elements that cause additive comprehension, instilling a reconsideration of the game elements into the brand narrative. The formal elements of the referential layer then are ambiguous design elements that serve a function in the game, but are also strongly informed by brand values, or have a place in the brand narrative.

This expanded model highlights how brand narratives are communicated in branded games through mechanical, semiotic, and referential design. It provides a design approach to formal elements that communicate brand narratives. However, as an analytical framework it only presents a perspective on games. To operationalize it for analyses, a method must be outlined.

Method of analysis

The method of using the framework effectively consists of two steps: a literature review and a formal game analysis according to the tripartite framework. This method can give us insight into how

LEGO games successfully engage with a brand, its narrative, and its values, while also functioning as fully fledged branded games.

The first step of this method is a review of corporate communications. In order to determine the brand narrative, the official channels of communication of a brand have to be scrutinized. This can mean looking at press briefs, corporate websites, and product presentations. The goal is to look for values that are recurrent through all branded content; “properties of things and states of affairs that we care about and strive to attain” (Flanagan and Nissenbaum 2014, 5). This could be done through a close reading of branded content, yet the brand narrative consists of the (often positive) values that the brand wants to communicate about their product. Therefore, the values are often found in official documentation. In the case of LEGO Ninjago, this means looking at the official LEGO website of the Ninjago theme, an interview with the creator, and the values communicated in diegetic narratives (such as character descriptions). With the brand narrative known, the design of the game can subsequently be studied to see how this narrative is translated or represented.

To ground the analysis of a branded game within the capacities of the game, the analysis of The Ninjago Game will take the form of a formal analysis. Following game scholar Miguel Sicart, this should be “understood as descriptions of game components that can be discerned from others by means of their unique characteristics and properties” (2008). For the framework, the unique characteristics and properties are determined in compliance with how formal game elements communicate brand values and the brand narrative. This requires identifying game components on a mechanical, semiotic, and referential level, and interpreting these based on how they engage with the brand narrative. The formal analysis, according to the mechanical-semiotic-referential framework, allows for an analysis of a game with an extra layer of brand interpretation.

This analysis will then examine formal elements on three different levels and in three different steps. In accordance with the framework, the nucleus of the analysis is the mechanical layer – or the actions made possible and limited by the program code. For this step we will analyze the mechanics of the game, its rules, and the level design as building blocks. Mechanics are “methods invoked by agents, designed for interaction with the game state,” distinguishable in core and secondary types (Sicart 2008). The former relates to the “mechanics (repeatedly) used by agents to achieve a systemically rewarded end-game state,” whereas the latter are “mechanics that ease the player’s interaction with the game towards reaching the end state” (idem). The relative importance of the mechanics, the level design and rules all determine which actions are central to the game, and which are secondary. Understanding this hierarchy can help explain which mechanics are conducive to the game experience only and which serve an additional function as a brand narrative element.

The second step is the analysis of the semiotic layer. Starting with the inventoried mechanic layer, this analysis will examine the diegetic and extradiegetic differences. The diegetic relations identify which “elements belong to the fictional world that can be experienced by the characters” and which are solely directed at the player (Fernández-Vara 2015, 125). Recognizing which mechanics in the game are of special importance to the in-game characters, and which are directed to the players can foreground which brand values are central to the game and to the players. Furthermore, determining the meaning of some of these actions within the game can give an extra meaning to what the player is doing or is interacting with. The semiotic layer then filters through game-focused mechanics and story-focused mechanics, illustrating what the game offers besides a branded experience.

Finally, the referential layer is addressed. This final level dives into the representation of the game elements, extradiegetic elements (such as other products), and elements that result in additive comprehension. The final layer of the analysis is all about re-

interpreting the expressed mechanics, and determining if there is a secondary reference behind it with a bigger context – the brand narrative. This re-interpretation can look at tangible dimensions, like the materiality of the semiotic layer (for instance, does it explicitly relate to LEGO or a product?) or intangible, relating to more brand values or storylines from different products. Anything that has not been interpretable in the previous steps can now be assessed again. At the end of this third step the balance between ludic experience of the game, and indebtedness to the brand narrative is clear.

Corpus: LEGO Ninjago

LEGO Ninjago is the transmedia universe created by LEGO in 2011, spread over different media, amongst which is a game. It is a concrete manifestation of the LEGO brand narrative through predetermined stories. As an original intellectual property, the brand narrative of this franchise is more controlled through LEGO products – in comparison to other licensed games that also have brand narrative influences from other directions. Focusing on this specific franchise will show how the larger LEGO brand narrative translates to concrete products communicating the Ninjago brand narrative.

Ninjago deals with the exploits of five ninjas, representing different natural elements, who, with their martial art style called ‘Spinjitzu’ must confront a variety of evil forces. Taking inspiration from Asian cultures, the sets deal with ninja, samurai, and mythology, but also feature robotic mechs and modern vehicles. This hodgepodge of elements specifies storylines, but leaves space for creativity by combining ninja stories with fast cars, for instance.

Ninjago is characterized by its co-dependency on the TV series *LEGO Ninjago: Masters of Spinjitzu* (Hegner and Andreasen 2011). The series and the sets appeared in tandem for several years,

introducing new stories behind new sets, and developing recurring characters. With its success, more products appeared, expanding on the story exploits (and possible sets), such as comics, online games, and theme park sections.

In 2017, LEGO strayed from the series focus and published *The Lego Ninjago Movie* (Bean, Fisher, and Logan 2017). In addition to the initial lines of toys related to the TV series, there now was another parallel line of toys relating to the film. This also spawned *The LEGO Ninjago Movie – The Videogame* (LNMV), a purchasable game retelling the events of the film.

LNMV is an open-world game with fixed levels. The player plays characters from the Ninjago universe and can switch between different characters. While exploring the open world, players can go to specific locations to start a linear level. In levels, players must perform a variety of platforming actions and attack enemies to reach the end of the level, often finished with a boss battle. In the open-world setting, players can explore Ninjago city and the surrounding area, all the while collecting ‘studs’ (money) by breaking the environment. In our analysis we shall examine the possible player actions in the open-world segment once the level “Ninjago City Downtown” is accessible, halfway through the game. This selection ensures that all skills have been unlocked, meaning that the player can exploit all the possibilities of the game and is unconstrained by obstacles that require a specific skill. This way all three layers of the framework can be explored without being cut off.

Analysis: Brand Narrative of LEGO and LEGO Ninjago

Knowing the narrative is essential to illustrate how the mechanical, semiotic, and referential design of LNMV communicates the brand narrative. In this section a review of various corporate documents

of LEGO and their official websites will show what the brand narrative of LEGO and of the Ninjago franchise is.

LEGO Brand Narrative

The LEGO Group is a company whose main business focus is on the toy market where they have been orienting their brand towards children's education since the 50s. In 1963, the brand published the 10 LEGO Characteristics, which were the basis for setting values related to the lack of limits and rules when playing:

“Unlimited play possibilities; for girls and boys; Enthusiasm at all ages; Play all year round; Stimulating and harmonious play; Endless hours of play; Imagination, creativity, development; More LEGO, greater play value; Easy to supplement; Sustained quality” (The LEGO Group n.d.)

Arguing from a clear marketing 3.0 human focus, the brand narrative of LEGO is focused on giving consumers the means to equally and creatively construct whatever they want, whenever they want, through construction bricks, optionally according to instructions.

Games, licensed sets, and audiovisual products seem to limit possible creativity by subjecting the whole to a predetermined story. Narratives in LEGO, however, enable structure interpretation by the consumer, while simultaneously keeping creativity at its core. As Neal Baker shows, even licensed sets thrive on creative interpretation by the customer, exemplified by a rocket launching platform hidden in the Attack on Weathertop Lord of the Rings set (2014).

With the introduction of *The LEGO Movie* (Lord and Miller 2014) and the game *LEGO Dimensions* (Traveller's Tales 2015) LEGO introduced open worlds in films and games where other franchises appear. This allows players to experience prefabricated stories, but also play with boundaries in such a way that every story built with

LEGO is valid. Matt Hills argues that the matter of authenticity in these cases is irrelevant, as it redefines the meaning of the represented brand when it is processed into the LEGO world, and transforms the characters and stories into the LEGO brick form (Hills, 2016). In a way, LEGO then functions akin to what theatre scholar Chiel Kattenbelt calls a “hypermedium” or “a medium that can contain all media” without discrediting the contained medium, while presenting it as the hypermedium (2008, 23). In the case of LEGO, it functions as a hyperbrand, able to incorporate different brands within itself while subduing everything to its own internal logic of building bricks.

Briefly put, the brand narrative of LEGO in all their channels – toys, games, movies, etc. – comes down to creating personal stories through building bricks. These stories can be predetermined – following instructions – or they can be open to user creativity – building up and breaking down franchise boundaries however they see fit.

LEGO Ninjago Brand Narrative

With a great variety of products, Ninjago offers a diverse manifestation of the LEGO brand narrative, with toy sets at its core. The storylines in this particular manifestation yield an alteration of the brand narrative through more specific, universe-informed, values.

In the Ninjago universe, the LEGO brand narrative is expanded with an educating or scholastic tone. The idea is to instill positive values and to learn how to differentiate them from the negative ones. This in-universe narrative is presented to both the consumer – usually children – and the client – their parents. The corporate website created for the Ninjago universe has a statement of intentions of the values:

“...we challenge [children] to master each of these virtues in their everyday lives. To have the courage to believe in themselves like Kai, to be curious enough to always learn new things like Nya, to stay as well balanced and controlled as Cole, always look to share like Zane, lead from the front like Lloyd and always tell the truth like Jay” (The LEGO Group n.d.)

This description highlights a narrative that appeals to the parents as clients, by presenting a good influence in their children’s development; on the other hand, to children it provides an ideal to strive towards and an interpretation of their playing. The brand narrative of LEGO Ninjago is then an expansion of the creativity-focus of the general brand narratives by adding developmental virtues, through values like courage and balance.

FORMAL ANALYSIS

With the analytical framework and the brand narratives clear – (un)structured creative building according to social and educational ideals – we can analyze the open world and a linear level of the game. This will show that LNMV functions as a standalone game thriving on the Ninjago brand narrative while subsuming every aspect of the game to the LEGO brand narrative through material references and additive comprehension.

Mechanical Elements

Analyzing the mechanical layer means looking at the mechanics, the level design, and the rules of the game. The core mechanics relate to the repeated actions of players and other agents that are required to progress through gameworld. In LNMV these core mechanics are: fighting, jumping, running, building, and solving puzzles. To traverse the open world, players can make their athletic ninja characters jump or run around the city using a variety of platformer moves. Progressing through a level also means jumping

or running from one location to the next. Obstacles, both on the level and in the world, are present in the shape of physical obstacles such as rocks, trees and enemies. These obstacles can be overcome by fighting using aggressive actions that are different per chosen character (using different weapons for instance). Another way to progress past these obstacles is by building. The physical environment can be destroyed and its pieces – literal LEGO bricks – can then be automatically used to build a solution to a puzzle, like destroying trees to get wood for a bridge.

The previously mentioned core mechanics are available almost constantly. Some mechanics are more context or puzzle specific, such as pushing boxes. Often these puzzles require character-specific skills, which build on brand values. A character with a spear can, for instance, lodge this spear in the wall to use it as a jump assist, while characters with a sword can get past vines. While these specific skills are purely mechanical – matching the right character and skill to the right puzzle – this is a formal element that repeatedly engages the player with the brand values. The ‘Spinjitzu’ action is a mechanical element that has to be unlocked, and is used to solve many puzzles, as the player character uses their elemental powers to overcome an obstacle, like freezing a waterfall. The specific skills of each character make them a unique addition to the ninja team, mirroring the development virtues, such as balance (Nya can balance over ropes) and strength (Cole’s hammer hits harder than other weapons). This way the mechanical actions actively convey the brand values, by making them repeated actions (Chen & Ringel, 2001; Martí Parreño, 2010). Although collectible skills are also needed to progress, playing as the characters and performing their actions gives the mechanics an extra layer: players can play as the characters as they can with the toys.

As the core mechanics provide the player with maneuvering and environment-breaking capabilities that both progress the game and convey the brand values, the secondary mechanics instead enhance the act of playing the game on its own merits, through exploration

and collection. Exploratory actions present extra activities, such as experiencing the map by driving a car, destroying parts of the scene, or climbing to find hidden places. The main purpose of these actions is to engage with the game itself by destroying and rebuilding the world, or driving around on a bike. This enhances the game itself by giving the player the freedom to play around. It is this freedom that precisely echoes the brand narrative of LEGO itself; creative expression using provided building blocks.

From a purely mechanical point of view, this exploration also builds upon collection. Exploring the map allows players to encounter secondary quests, collectibles, and new characters (with specific character skills). As a form of playing the game, exploring the world also yields more tools for the player to progress. Exploration and collection can then serve a wholly mechanical function; progress and improvement. Collection, however, also has a referential layer, as we shall see later.

The mechanical layer of LNMV shows a duality. On the one hand, the game offers playable instances to enjoy on their own merit. On the other hand, some of the repeated actions are embedded in character-specific values. This way, the mechanics themselves embrace both the LEGO brand narratives of creatively playing with bricks, as well as the Ninjago brand narrative by giving mechanical actions an extra meaning that does not hinder, but rather facilitates playing.

Semiotic Elements

The second layer looks at the expression of the mechanical layer in diegetic or extradiegetic domains. The semiotic elements in *Ninjago the Movie – The Videogame* strongly mirror the expressions of the film.

Regarding diegetic information, the game presents a world fully based around the visuals and the story elements of the *LEGO*

Ninjago Movie, at times even directly shown through cutscenes. The mechanical options the player has are thus squarely positioned in the Ninjago universe, albeit explicitly referring to the setting of the film instead of the wider universe. The character-specific mechanics are also specifically related to the events of the film – in which the Ninjas develop their powers. By keeping the player actions confined to the universe of the film, the game acts as a standalone product contained in the film universe. Character interactions heard while playing, or smaller cutscenes expand this universe, but do not go beyond the diegetic contained in the Ninjago story. While the mechanical interactions are kept free, the setting and interpretation frame of actions are securely anchored in the Ninjago movie universe.

The extradiegetic elements come in the form of set pieces. While the vehicles, mechs, and animals are all elements that have a function in the diegetic world, they are ultimately representations of actual LEGO sets. By achieving objectives and exploring the map, the player can interact with specific toys that are explicitly linked to the movie, but that can be purchased in real life. As they are made of LEGO, destroying them results in falling bricks. Building with these elements follows a similar logic that does not fit the Ninjago actions of Spinjitzu, but instead follow the logic of LEGO. In doing so, the game provides the player with a delimited playful experience expanding on the engagement with the Ninjago movie brand, yet also firmly keeps the rules of the world linked to LEGO and its creation narrative. As Hills stressed, these games incorporate a franchise into the rules of LEGO, even if the franchise is a LEGO franchise in the first place (2016).

Referential Elements

Looking deeper into some of the (extra) diegetic representations incurs additive comprehension in that they refer to broader brand narrative elements, even specifically to further branded content. The referential layer adds this extra reflection to sweep up

remaining game elements that need positioning, or scrutinizes representations from a broader perspective.

The collection mechanic has a mechanical function facilitating play, but the collected items, like characters and vehicles (unlocked after finding 10 ‘minikits’ in each level) explicitly refer to the wider Ninjago universe. The game contains 101 unlockable characters. While some movie characters wear different costumes, like dark overlord Garmadon in pajamas, half of the characters are from the TV series (see Figure 2).

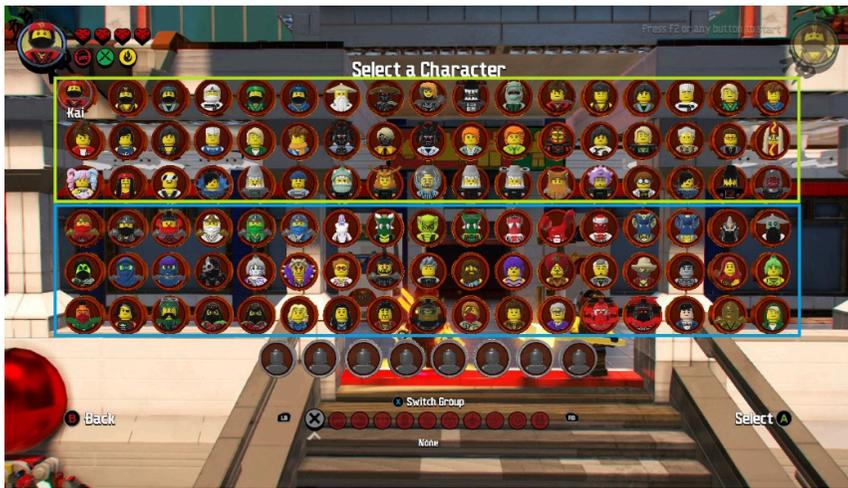


Figure 2: All unlockable characters in LNMV, with movie characters in the green area, and series or comic characters in the blue area. Source: Own elaboration

Both in their representation, their voice lines, and their associated side quests, events from the series are called upon. The same goes for explorable map areas, such as the Unclimbable Mountain, which has many more salient locations than those featured in the movie. While providing gameplay elements, the player needs familiarity with different products to understand why playable characters behave the way they do. The character, Griffin Turner, a normal LEGO figure with sunglasses and a karate suit, can run extremely fast in the game. This is only explained in Tournament of Tournaments Arc from the series, where he is revealed to be an

Elemental Master of Speed. Although these characters are purely mechanical elements, their extradiegetic positioning makes them a source of additive comprehension, opening up different products of the brand. In this sense, LNMV concretely communicates the LEGO brand narrative in which playful creation, even within their own semiotic universe, is only limited by the player's imagination, and in this case, the inclusive, but limited programming.

Another referential dimension explicitly links to corporate products. The collectible, representing new characters, is expressed semiotically as a green detailed rectangle. These rectangles are extradiegetic, in that at the moment of pick-up, they overlay the play screen as if presented to the player. The rectangles are polybags that are torn open, shaken upside down, and drop pieces of a LEGO figure, which are subsequently assembled into a collectible character. This is an explicit reference to the physical product of a polybag available in shops (see Figure 3). An investigative player will be confronted with these more material references to the LEGO brand. Again, the referential layer illustrates how the game subsumes the Ninjago brand narrative within the larger LEGO brand narrative, which is linked to the player's reality. This breaking of the fourth wall turns the player's actions in the game into actions from a LEGO player outside of the game. It is as if the player is just playing with LEGO, despite the linear structure of the storyline.



Figure 3: On the left, a polybag as represented in the game. On the right, a polybag for real LEGO figures. Source: Author screenshot and photo.

By integrating mechanical elements within a semiotic universe, the LNMV creates a playful experience that explores the Ninjabo brand narrative through actions, dialogues, cutscenes, and linear level design. As such, the game offers an experience in itself that can be played through. It is in the referential elements that explicitly refer to the materiality of the LEGO content or different products, both physical toys and TV series, that the LEGO game shows its true colors. Ultimately, in order to play the game, players will come into contact with LEGO and its brand narrative of creative toy construction. Through references to polybags or different characters, the boundaries of the semiotic layer are disrupted, opening up a larger universe in which to play. Players can build and explore, and toys and their materiality are made experiential, simulating a possible purchase need. Ultimately, playing the game is made parallel to playing with LEGO bricks, although this is done through a strong foundation in a standalone game design. The setting up of rules and actions forms a basis to subsequently disrupt in order to foster player creativity.

As argued by Hills, this unlocked creativity and switching product focus allows for affective play and the option to “experience, feel and live playfully within the texts that are the subjects of their fandom” – in this case the whole Ninjago universe (2002, 90). By incorporating the product values with a larger brand strategy, the authenticity or creative freedom when designing a branded game is however limited, instead submitting to “transbranding” values – in this case of the whole LEGO brand (Hills 2016, 26). Instead of having to only compete with the historical storylines and elements of a product narrative – such as Ninjago, as is often the case in transmedial products (Williams 2009), the LEGO strategy also limits design to one that follows the larger brand value. As such, the similarity of many LEGO games can be explained, and simultaneously commended for its shrewdness and lamented for its uniformity.

CONCLUSIONS

This article explored how a framework on mechanical, semiotic, and referential design can be used to formally analyze how branded games are used to communicate the brand narrative as part of an integrated marketing strategy. By blending advertising studies and game studies, we created a framework used for a formal analysis of the *LEGO Ninjago the Movie – The Videogame*. Our analysis showed that on a mechanical and semiotic layer, the game presents a standalone experience catering to the universe of the Ninjago movie and the values of the Ninjago brand narrative. However, by framing the whole game as LEGO – in its materiality and interactable objects – the LEGO brand narrative of creative construction informs the act of play. Especially by referring to alternative products or specific LEGO sets, the game manages to partly simulate the act of playing with physical LEGO in which set instructions only form some of the possibilities. A LEGO game, in that sense, is nothing more than another experience of playing with

LEGO, with the possibility of following the instructions, i.e., the franchise narrative.

By marrying advertising studies and game studies we introduced an innovative framework that can analyze branded content from a game perspective. This provides both an interdisciplinary pilot for future academic attention, as well as some measure of evaluation by which to design branded games. However, in doing so, we shied away from full interdisciplinary collaboration. The formal methodology provided remained focused on the game content but ultimately says little about the efficacy of this integrated marketing communication. Through player interviews or customer surveys, the purchase need can be quantified in future research. Furthermore, different entry points into the brand could be compared to judge the coherence of the narrative and assess medium differences. By including a referential layer in the analysis of branded content, it is possible to see how the communication of a brand narrative in different products can (ninja)go.

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