Platform Rhetoric and Fan Labour as the Building Blocks of LEGO Ideas

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Introduction
The LEGO Group is a multinational toy manufacturer headquartered in Billund, Denmark, with interests in videogames, television, and film, in addition to toys. Their primary product consists of plastic building blocks with thousands of variations in dozens of colours, purchasable either in sets with instructions to create particular designs, or as assorted boxes for more creative freeform building; sets have a multitude of "themes", including in-house labels such as ‘Bionicles’ and ‘Ninjago’, ‘city’ sets, and products based on popular intellectual property from film, television, videogames, and even organisations such as NASA. Different sets and themes are targeted at different audience segments, including adults and children by age group. The company announced in 2021 that it would aim to ensure its “products and marketing are accessible to all and free of gender bias” (LEGO Group, “Girls”).

The LEGO Group and its various products attract active and engaged fans. LEGO bricks allow users to create designs limited only by their imagination and their ability to acquire sufficient parts. Though initially and perhaps primarily a children’s toy, LEGO has over the past few decades attracted a substantial adult audience, often referred to as Adult Fans of LEGO (AFOLs) who function as brand ambassadors, consumers, and co-creators (Jennings 222). The toy’s creative affordances have allowed AFOLs to establish numerous fan conventions and events at which they display their designs. In addition to unofficial fan activity such as conventions, LEGO has shown an interest in direct economic engagement with fans of their products. This is evidenced by their 2021 purchase of a large after-market LEGO reselling marketplace, Bricklink (LEGO Group, “LEGO Group Acquires”), and the establishment of the LEGO Ideas platform, which is the subject of this article. Such efforts might be viewed in light of Busse’s warning that there is “danger to fan culture [from] the co-optation and colonization of fan creations, interactions, and space” (Busse 112).

This article investigates the LEGO Group’s relationship to adult fan labour through the notion of ‘platform rhetoric’, by which we mean the way in which the LEGO Ideas platform, and specifically the LEGO Ideas Guidelines (LEGO Group, “Product Idea”), hereafter “Guidelines”, create an infrastructure for structuring the relationship between fan designers and the company. The platform harnesses the labour of both adult fan designers and other site users to generate new and successful products for the LEGO Group. In doing so, it offers a tantalising case study of how this toy is positioned at the intersection of creativity, transnational data flows, and global economic activity. While the LEGO Ideas platform and Guidelines are not the only space in which LEGO and their fans negotiate such matters, as shown by other examples already mentioned, the platform’s public nature and its intersection with other aspects of participatory online media offer a valuable case study for understanding platform rhetorics and the way they can structure interactions between fans and brands.

About LEGO Ideas

LEGO Ideas was established in 2008 as a collaboration between the LEGO Group and a Japanese company as a crowdsourcing platform called LEGO CUUSOO. It was relaunched as LEGO Ideas in 2014 (LEGO Group, “LEGO History”). Crowdsourcing is an “online, distributed problem-solving and production model” (Brabham 75) that became popular from about 2006 as a new approach to generating product ideas. It is a process in which “the crowd was co-opted” (Ghezzi et al. 344) and where “products designed by the crowd become the property of companies, who turn large profits off from this crowd labor” (Brabham 76). Ideas appears part of a broader reset for LEGO that occurred as the Internet came to occupy increasing prominence in social and commercial life. Hatch and Shultz (596) observe that in contrast to previous strategies for the
company, by the early 2000s “consumer and company alike were now using the Internet as both the platform and a channel for brand engagement”.

In line with this trend, the Ideas platform invites fan designers to submit ideas for new LEGO products which then pass through a series of filters before reaching a stage at which the company considers them for production, including multiple stages of public voting. After reaching the final stage of fan voting, potential products are assessed by the LEGO Group on a range of factors. Each of these stages is laid out in the Guidelines, along with authorship arrangements: successful designers receive “1% of the total net sales of the product ... 10 complimentary copies of your LEGO Ideas set [and] Credit and bio in set materials as the LEGO Ideas set creator”. Ideas capitalises on the cultures of creation and co-creation that Nancy Jennings has identified as central to AFOL communities, although her work focusses on the Lego Ambassador Program and LEGO Group AFOL Engagement Department (238).

The LEGO Ideas Website can be described as a platform, a “digital, socio-technical system that create[s] relationships between different entities” (Lee). When self-applied by the entity, the term platform has a political purpose to simplify or obfuscate “tensions ... between user-generated and commercially-produced content, between cultivating community and serving up advertising, between intervening in the delivery of content and remaining neutral” (Gillespie 348). In applying the term ‘platform’ to LEGO Ideas, we are making similar political claims that it occupies a tension-filled role between users (including those who submit designs) and the commercial interests of the LEGO Group. Plantin et al. suggest something of a convergence between platform and infrastructure studies, especially when addressing “new digital objects” (293). The platform also serves a role in collecting large amounts of data for LEGO, which can be understood as equivalent to the advertising initiatives of other platforms. It is certainly not a neutral carrier of content, as our analysis of the Guidelines will show.

The affordances of the LEGO Ideas platform engage both fans who actively produce fan products in the form of designs and photographs submitted to the site, but also “nonproductive fans [who] can participate in fandom’s gift economy through their engagement with the fruits of fannish labor” (Turk). Such engagement takes the form of participating in the voting systems, commenting upon the designs, and generating engagement through social media. This is a capturing of consumer labour in much the same way envisioned by Toffler (cited in Bruns) in the notion of a ‘prosumer’: “Producer and consumer, divorced by the industrial revolution, are reunited in the cycle of wealth creation, with the customer contributing not just the money but market and design information vital for the production process”. The ecosystem of participation also extends beyond the platform itself as the Guidelines explicitly specify that a user may “promote as you wish online”. Fan designer Brent Waller, creator of two successful LEGO Ideas sets, commented in an interview that

| you need to actively promote it via outside avenues – forums, websites, Facebook, Twitter etc. This is particularly important if your project is based on existing [sic] license or intellectual property. If that is the case then you need to reach out to those external fan bases who may not be huge LEGO fans but may be a fan of the project you’ve submitted and would love to see it come to life in LEGO form. (Ong, “Interview with Brent Waller”) |

As such, submitters tend to use social media and other Internet platforms to generate votes, further extending the complexity of interactions between user creativity, the toy company and their economic interests, and the flow of user-generated information across Internet platforms.
**LEGO Ideas Guidelines as Rhetorical Infrastructure**

While we have characterised *LEGO Ideas* as a platform, it is not an open social media platform but instead has tightly controlled submission procedures. Each submission to *LEGO Ideas* must incorporate several required elements outlined in the Guidelines and be approved by platform staff prior to publication. This is the first in a series of processes by which *LEGO Ideas* operates to shape the products which are published through it. These are rhetorical infrastructures, “not just containers for composition but systems of support that structure the compositions they generate in an active way” (Pilsch 8). Accepting the distinction between platforms and infrastructure in terms of digital objects discussed by Plantin et al., we are distinguishing between *LEGO Ideas* as a platform and the *LEGO Ideas* guidelines as an infrastructural element which shapes how the platform operates. Whereas infrastructure studies has “focused on analyzing essential, widely shared sociotechnical systems” (Plantin et al., 294), the Guidelines serve that purpose only within the *Ideas* platform for the purposes of this case study.

There are similarities in this conception of rhetorical infrastructure and terms such as ‘affordance’, which similarly seek to describe the way in which artifacts embed “mechanisms and conditions [which] create a scaffold through which artifacts request, demand, allow, encourage, discourage, and refuse” (Davis and Chouinard 246, original emphasis). The notion of “rhetorical infrastructure” is distinctive in capturing the functional and relational work done by networks of documents, artifacts, activities, and procedures that underpin action within a given environment (Read 12); within technical communication, there is a particular emphasis on the rhetorical infrastructure of “invisible documents” such as documentation and standards – forms of writing that serve a vital regulatory function but which are often invisible until they fail (Frith 406). Understanding the *LEGO Ideas* Guidelines as rhetorical infrastructure allows us to excavate how this document works behind the scenes to shape user action and standardise outputs within a platform that ostensibly privileges free play and creativity, but actually transforms these into valuable intellectual property for the LEGO Group. The Guidelines function as a translational infrastructure to incorporate fan labour directly into the LEGO ecosystem.

The Guidelines serve their regulatory function in part by outlining in plain terms, both textually and visually, what content will and will not be accepted as a submission to the site. The Guidelines specify that Ideas must be:

- “single, stand-alone LEGO products”;
- “a maximum of 3000 pieces”;
- “must focus on a single concept”; and
- not based “on a licensed property we currently sell”.

Platform users must be older than 13 years of age, and any submitter younger than 18 must have written approval from their caregiver. In this way, LEGO further orients the *Ideas* platform toward the putative AFOL, and submitted Ideas, in our review, likewise tend to be targeted toward older builders. Additionally, the Guidelines prohibit any commercial activity related to submitted Ideas, although they do permit sharing of “photos and building instructions free of charge”. These are the basic substantive rules by which staff approve submissions to be posted to (or remain on) the platform, though further aesthetic and legal conditions are outlined elsewhere in the Guidelines.
Following initial approval, concepts published on LEGO Ideas must achieve a series of voting milestones in which other users of the platform show their ‘support’ – 100 supporters in the first 60 days, 1,000 supporters in the next year, and so on – a process which generates substantial amounts of user data for LEGO. Ultimately, projects have just over two years to attain the figure of 10,000 supporters that triggers the “expert review” phase of the Ideas selection process. Such voting is a form of collective knowledge generation; within the context of a workplace, Majchrzak et al. describe this practice as “metavoicing … adding metaknowledge to the content that is already online” (41). It is also a substantial source of market data. Assuming at least some supporters of each successful project have selected their time zone and filled in other details, the submission of these votes under the LEGO Ideas guidelines demonstrates potential market interest for the projects and other data points of economic interest to the toymaker. Additionally, LEGO Ideas places at least eight ‘cookies’ on Web browsers used to access the site. This process also generates a substantial potential data pool (Bennett; Englehardt et al.).

In addition to generating data for LEGO, achieving milestones motivates submitters to continue promoting their idea and thus drives traffic to the platform. Blog posts published on the LEGO Ideas site demonstrate that the 10,000 vote milestone in particular generates substantial excitement for the fan designers. For example, in one such post Peter (user SoGenius106), who submitted an Idea based on television program The Office, notes that

this project hit 10k about 8 days before it was set to expire, this is what really made me nervous, knowing that this project was so close to 10K but had little time to get there. (Kamila9)

Similarly, Sam (user KaijuBuildz) expressed excitement at reaching the 10,000-supporter milestone:

it took a while, around 16 months to be precise. But the feeling when it finally DID hit that magic 5-digit number felt incredible, though it did take some time to truly sink in. (fergushart)

Like Waller, quoted earlier, both fan designers noted that using social media platforms outside of Ideas was important to their success. But Sam / KajuiBuildz also credited the platform’s affordances and userbase, suggesting: “word of mouth through the supporters of the project itself was a big help for sure” (fergushart). Such extension across platforms demonstrates “the logic of self-branding – of carefully curated self-promotion – [which] is a fact of social media life, for everyday users and cultural workers alike” (Duffy and Pooley 8).

While the LEGO Ideas platform shapes production of submitted projects, the Guidelines also structure the relationship between fan designers and the LEGO Group after any successful voting period. Any Idea that reaches the 10,000-supporter milestone is reviewed by a ‘review board’ of “designers, product managers, and other key team members”; if an Idea is selected for production, “professional LEGO designers take over” (LEGO Group, “Product”). In practice, a number of fan designers document collaborating with professional designers in some capacity. For example, Motorised Lighthouse designer Sandro Quattrini said he was able to express ideas “in our very first meeting” (Ong, “Interview with the LEGO Ideas Design Team”), while the designer of the Typewriter set stated: “I was really made to feel a part of the team” (Huw). In this case, the published document sets a term of engagement that may or may not be reflected
in the actual practice of creating a LEGO set following a successful Ideas submission. It therefore establishes the framework through which the decision to interact or not with the designer is left in the hands of LEGO staff assigned to the project.

**Guidelines for Social Action**

This points to the dual role of the Guidelines: the document is at once procedural, laying out the steps required of platform users, and social, shaping the ways that users of the platform engage with the Ideas published there and with the LEGO Group. It’s common for technical documents such as guidelines and instructions to be characterised as formulaic, mechanical tools for dictating practice, what Walwema and Butts refer to as "grey genres" (Butts and Walwema 15); in practice, however, such genres both shape users’ actions and position them as members of a community with shared interests and values. This positioning happens in both informal and formal guidelines – for example, Ledbetter’s study of user-generated instructional content in YouTube beauty communities has demonstrated how video tutorials begin from users’ shared interests (here, in makeup techniques) and then build fan-user communities that share specialist vocabularies, social interactions, and value-led behaviours (Ledbetter). Within institutions, codes of conduct are a well-defined and stable genre, yet operate in a complex, unstable nexus of procedural, ethical, and legal contexts; they are simultaneously internal policy documents (setting out standards of behaviour for organisation members), public ethical statements (published as part of an organisation’s commitment to ethical frameworks, emphasising principles and values over actions), and deployed or deployable in legal contexts to shield corporations. As Sam Dragga notes, codes of conduct typically adopt a legislative approach and are composed as “guidelines and regulations”, even where they use language and syntax – like “we” statements – designed to look more like commitments than regulations. These documents position users as subject to the institution’s values, “implying that the individual is without power because all power comes from the regulating corporation” (Dragga 7), rather than as collaborators in them.

The LEGO Ideas Guidelines likewise operate to require alignment of user actions with brand values to ensure that fan labour can be successfully monetised at all stages of the Ideas process, from initial visits to the platform right through to commercial production of fan designs. This expectation is codified in the Guidelines' “Acceptable Content” section: “in order for us to be able to consider your product idea, it must fit with our brand values and guidelines … following these guidelines is the surest recipe to see that your work is approved for LEGO Ideas”. Those values, however, are only implicit in the list of concrete themes and attributes that “do not fit”, including nudity, modern warfare, human-scale weapons, and racism. The Guidelines are explicitly directive, with a hard demarcation between LEGO and its fans: the document refers to “we” the LEGO Group and “you” the user, and bans fan designers from using any version of the brand logo, even an approximation so abstract as “a red square”, lest their submission be misconstrued as LEGO-endorsed. This exclusion occurs even as in-house terminology like “LEGO Fan designer” and “professional LEGO designer” or “LEGO Set designer” establishes an overlap between the labour of fans and employees – one reinforced by the showcasing of those fan designers who do participate in some co-design with LEGO’s professional team when their Idea goes into production.

**Conclusion**
The **LEGO Ideas** platform is presented as a channel for fans and designers to use their existing passion and creativity productively, for their own financial benefit and for the (considerably larger) economic benefit of the company. Adult designers using the platform do so only in alignment within the operation of a set of Guidelines that constrain and guide their decisions in a way perceived to be an appropriate reflection of the LEGO brand. Like other online platforms with social features, the **Ideas** platform is a commercial infrastructure in which community is shaped, rather than a community infrastructure. The success of the platform has also impacted on the wider toy industry, with other toy companies introducing Ideas-like platforms, such as Mattel’s ‘Creations’. In turn, the platform and its users intersect with other participatory Internet platforms such as social network sites where they promote their Ideas to garner the magical 10,000 supporters needed to progress to the next step. Further engagement with broader notions of digital infrastructure and platforms, especially on the terms described by Plantin et al., would offer fruitful insights into both the wider LEGO operation and **LEGO Ideas** specifically. Throughout the process, LEGO collects massive amounts of user data from both participating fan designers and other users of the site through both technical means and social signals. Such data is of additional value when combined with other LEGO user accounts such as purchase history, and potentially also with information about users (buyers and sellers) on the **Bricklink** site. This offers a potentially vast amount of signals about purchase, browsing, and interest among both existing and prospective LEGO customers, and could again be part of a larger study of the company’s corporate strategies.

The Guidelines shape the entirety of this interactive space, creating the infrastructure in which different forms of knowledge and cultural capital operate, and rhetorical action occurs. Successful Ideas have captured a social Zeitgeist to gather the required number of supporters, while also ensuring they closely align with the LEGO brand guidelines. LEGO staff participating in the process bring their own institutional perspective to the designs, taking over where required but also consulting the submitting fan designers in a number of cases. On this point, the Guidelines offer ambiguity, allowing the LEGO Group discretion over the final shape of interaction between designers of different status.

All of these examples demonstrate the rhetorical infrastructure of the **LEGO Ideas** platform and its Guidelines. As a key interactive space between the LEGO Group and its adult fan community, the underpinning expertise, documentation, networks of information and individuals, and complex data flows clearly demonstrate the ways that toys can intersect with other social and economic structures.

**References**


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