



NEW IDEA

## Lego Stays on Script

How the toymaker leapt to the silver screen—without forgetting its roots

IT SOUNDED LIKE A CYNICAL MONEY GRAB, A 90-minute commercial that no adult would willingly watch. But *The LEGO Movie*, released in 2014, surprised audiences worldwide with its clever, subversive story line, winning over children and adults for a global box office of \$469 million that had everyone involved humming along to the movie's hit song, "Everything Is Awesome." Following on that success, February saw the release of *The LEGO Batman Movie*, with *The LEGO Ninjago Movie* due in September and *The LEGO Movie Sequel* slated for 2019. So what is the secret sauce behind this new franchise? Two alumni on different sides of the process sum it up the same way: be true to the brand's core value of creative, open-ended play.

Movie producer **Dan Lin (MBA 1999)** got the idea for making a Lego movie by watching how his son played with the interlocking bricks and figures: "He

was talking to himself and telling stories. He had a much bigger adventure in his head than what was physically in front of him. I realized it would touch people universally if we could make a movie that captured the imagination and creativity of that experience."

Play is at the center of the Danish company's ethos (the name Lego itself is a rough transliteration of *leg godt*, play well). Lego's VP of marketing, **Michael Moynihan (MBA 1993)**, has been with the company since 1996, long enough to remember its missteps in attempting to broaden Lego's customer base by expanding into product categories such as action figures, arts and crafts, and music toys. "Consumers saw absolutely no connection to the Lego brand," Moynihan recalls. "Ultimately, that led to an extremely difficult period around 2003 and 2004, when we almost lost our financial independence as a private entity." After that, the company refocused its attention on customers who

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Dan Lin on what it takes to be a Hollywood producer on our new *Skydeck* podcast  
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loved Lego for its original emphasis on open-ended play. It wasn't clear if, or how, a movie would ever fit into this point of view.

When Lin first approached Lego, the company hedged, asking him to consider working on a specific play theme like Lego's robot line Bionicle—making *the Lego movie* felt like too big of a risk. "It's a tough conversation when you ask to use a company's main brand, because that affects all of its employees and business," he says. "But the way we play with Lego is a mash-up. My son's Batman minifigure interacts with a *Star Wars* minifigure, and we wanted that style of play to be reflected in the movie itself." Lin's approach, in essence, was true to the spirit of Lego's brand.

According to Moynihan, there's a reason for all of those figures that Lin asked (and was granted permission) to play with in his movie, from Wonder Woman to C-3PO: "Given the way the media and entertainment landscape is evolving, kids are exposed to many different properties and have a strong affinity for characters," he says. Characters like Superman, Scooby-Doo, and Shaquille O'Neal can be a great way to engage new Lego users on or off the big screen, Moynihan adds, with one caveat: "We cannot just

become a role-play toy because many of those already exist. They need to have a building component and exist as a starting point for kids to create their own stories, not just play out what they see on television or in a movie." In every case—including movies—"we have to make sure we have a marriage of the property and Lego play that makes magic for both sides," he says, adding that the process of making the movie reflected the collaboration and team effort that Lego play encourages.

For Lin, making that magic required a deep dive, from visiting the LEGO Idea House in Denmark to attending BrickCon gatherings of adult Lego fanatics. "Getting under the skin of the brand made it much easier to understand the right stories to tell and the right people to bring on to our team," he says. The movie's success was "gratifying on both a personal and a brand level," Lin adds, because it encouraged people to go home, play together, and explore each other's imagination and creativity.

"Making an original, bold movie really boosted Lego sales," says Lin. "By not being an overt commercial, it ended up being the best branded content possible."

—JH

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