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“I Thought Shell Was the Bad Guy”: Narrative and Fictionality in Greenpeace's Campaign against the LEGO-Shell Partnership

Per Krogh Hansen and Marianne Wolff Lundholt

Abstract

In 2014, LEGO decided not to prolong its co-promotion with Shell due to an extensive global campaign initiated by Greenpeace. The campaign was a reaction to Shell's plans to drill in the Alaskan Arctic. Rather than initiating a factual campaign targeting Shell's activities in the Arctic, Greenpeace attacked LEGO on account of the policies of Shell by impugning LEGO's reputation as a socially and environmentally responsible enterprise. What is noteworthy in this case is that Greenpeace used narrative and fictionality as strategic communicative tools to achieve its goal.

Narrative and storytelling have received increasing attention in studies of organisational communication. In recent years, special interest has been shown toward organisational master narratives and counter-narratives. But hitherto only very little has been said on the role of fiction and fictionality as a rhetorical resource in the context of business and organisational communication. By means of a case study, this article examines how fictionality within a counter-narrative realm can merge the real and the fictive and thereby produce an effective campaign that highlights the possible and imagined rather than truth or untruth, avoiding discourses of proof or falsification.

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Keywords: Greenpeace, LEGO, Shell, fictionality, counter-narrative, strategic communication, narrative in business

Introduction

“Shell: Lets drill the arctic

Lego: lets make shell lego sets

People: stop Lego

Me: i thought shell was the bad guy [sic]”

Lego4bird’s response on YouTube
to Greenpeace’s campaign against
LEGO (Greenpeace, *Not Awesome*)

The observation quoted above was posted by a viewer of the YouTube video *LEGO: Everything is NOT Awesome*, created by Greenpeace as part of its 2014 global campaign calling on the Danish toy company LEGO to end its collaboration with Shell (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qhbliUq0_r4). The campaign was a reaction to Shell’s plans to drill in the Alaskan Arctic. Greenpeace opted for a different strategy than those traditionally used by the NGO. Where one would have expected Greenpeace to initiate a campaign in its own visual style relaying information about the Shell-LEGO partnership and Shell’s activities in the Arctic, Greenpeace imitated visual and rhetorical effects from LEGO’s marketing material and product series. And Greenpeace succeeded: later in 2014, LEGO decided not to prolong its co-promotion with Shell due to the pressure.

Greenpeace's strategy was controversial because it more or less held LEGO hostage in the conflict between Greenpeace and Shell. As pointed out in the post by Lego4bird, LEGO was not involved in Shell's drilling plans; it merely had a promotional cooperation with Shell very similar to those of other well-known brands such as Star Wars, Disney, Harry Potter, and NASA. Surprisingly, Greenpeace's campaign took the form of an attack on LEGO as an organisation rather than on the actions of Shell, the real target of Greenpeace. Taking into consideration LEGO's strong brand as a manufacturer of popular quality toys and the company's developed and well-known efforts regarding corporate social responsibility, Greenpeace's strategy most certainly had the potential to backfire. But it didn't, and, as will be shown in this article, Greenpeace's campaign was articulated through the formation of counter-narratives against LEGO, based on LEGO's own responsibility report and master narrative.

When analysing the materialisation of these counter-narratives, it becomes apparent that one of their key features is fictionality. Thus, fictionality becomes an essential strategic communication tool for telling a story different from the one most customers associate with LEGO. Furthermore, the use of fictionality in this specific campaign is especially effective insofar as both fiction and fictionality are part of the product LEGO sells: toys for children's creative and imaginative games.

We will use the Greenpeace-LEGO-Shell case as an example of the strategic use of fictionality and storytelling in a factual, organisational context. More specifically, we will demonstrate how counter-narrative and fictionality played a decisive role in Greenpeace's success in forcing LEGO to terminate its collaboration with Shell. Our approach will be guided by two theoretical strands: on the one hand, the conception of master and counter-narratives as analytical tools to explore the

dynamics between dominant, strategic narratives and narratives of resistance against these master narratives; and, on the other hand, the growing interest in fictionality as a rhetorical resource.¹

Greenpeace vs. Shell and LEGO: Case Information

In August 2014, the oil company Shell submitted a new offshore drilling plan to US authorities to explore for oil in the Alaskan Arctic. The non-governmental environmental organisation Greenpeace responded by declaring a global sanctuary in the Arctic, attempting to have offshore drilling banned in the area. To draw attention to the initiative, Greenpeace launched a three-month-long campaign. But instead of aiming it explicitly at Shell, Greenpeace directed the campaign against the toy manufacturer LEGO, accusing the latter of “keeping bad company” by collaborating with Shell. Printed material was distributed, simulating the layout of the LEGO Group Responsibility Report, and a one-minute-and-forty-five-second-long YouTube video titled *LEGO: Everything is NOT Awesome* was produced. The video’s scenario was built in LEGO bricks, showing Shell drilling in an Arctic environment and eventually being flooded by oil.

LEGO had collaborated with Shell since the 1960s on co-promotion of its products. All over the world, LEGO toy cars were sold together with fuel at Shell gas stations. The contract had been renewed in 2011, and the deal has been estimated to be worth £68 million, or \$116 million (Vaughan). According to the then-CEO Jørgen Vig Knudstorp, LEGO collaborated with Shell because this was one of “many

ways we are able to bring LEGO bricks into the hands of more children and deliver on our promise of creative play” (Knudstorp).

Known as a company with a strong brand and a highly developed Corporate Social Responsibility strategy, LEGO was caught by surprise by the Greenpeace campaign. In a press release during the campaign, Knudstorp stated that LEGO was of the opinion that the conflict between Greenpeace and Shell should be handled by these two parties. Furthermore, he said that LEGO was “saddened when the LEGO brand is used as a tool in any dispute between organisations.” Nonetheless, Greenpeace succeeded: LEGO decided not to renew its contract with Shell after the expiration of the current arrangement.

Critical public voices, e.g. in the comments on YouTube, argued that Greenpeace was trying to “gain cheap publicity” by attacking a “children’s toy company,” and that asking LEGO not to collaborate with the oil industry was tantamount to asking it to stop its business, given that LEGO bricks are an oil-based product (Greenpeace, *Not Awesome*). Other voices, in favour of Greenpeace’s campaign, argued that the campaign targeted Shell specifically, “which has a history of shitting on everything”—not the oil industry as such. The campaign received intense media coverage. Since its release in 2014, the YouTube video has been watched over 8,800,000 times and by April 2020 had received more than 75,000 likes. Moreover, in response to the video, fifty children led a protest outside Shell’s office in London, and more than one million people sent e-mails to the CEO of LEGO via Greenpeace’s website urging him to terminate the collaboration.

Organisation, Narrative, and Fictionality: Theoretical Background

In organisational communication theory, narrative theory and concepts have played an important role since the 1990s (Norlyk, Hansen, and Lundholt). Narrative, often conceptualised as “storytelling,” has been used both in marketing and PR as a way of promoting products and services by telling stories about product quality and customer satisfaction, and thus promoting a corporate identity or establishing the brand of the organisation as a whole. This is where the understanding of a “corporate narrative” (a story and/or a plotline) emerges, and in recent years, the dominant narratives of organisations have been approached as “master narratives,” while special attention has been paid to secondary narratives, or “counter-narratives,” that reject or dissociate from master narratives.

The concept of master and counter-narrative originates in sociology and identity research. Andrews defined counter-narratives as “the stories which people tell and live which offer resistance, either implicitly or explicitly, to dominant cultural narratives” (1). As such, the term *counter-narrative* displays a positional nature in tension with another relational category (Bamberg and Andrews x). Correspondingly, master narratives imply a reciprocal relation between counter- and master narratives (Jensen, Maagaard, and Rasmussen 87), and a dynamic interchangeability can be observed (Hansen and Lundholt 103). According to Stanley, a master narrative is “a script that specifies and controls how some social processes are carried out” (14). This script is what Bamberg refers to as a storyline, which in his understanding serves as a blueprint for all stories and thereby becomes a master narrative. As Andrews states: “The power of master narratives derives from their internalisation [. . .] we become the stories we know, and the master narrative is reproduced” (1). In an organisational context, the internalisation has to be constructed through the overall narrative of the organisation, that is, through its strategic vision.

However, the internalisation of such a master narrative may only come into effect when accepted and endorsed by relevant stakeholders. If this is not the case, stakeholders may marginalise, silence, invert, or counter the master narrative.

With reference to Andrews's definition, Frandsen, Lundholt, and Kuhn state that in business communication, the "most common distinction pointed to by those who use the notion of counter-narratives is between a preferred organizational story and an alternative vision, one that seeks to contradict or defy the authoritative version" (2). Here, counter-narratives offer different interpretations of organisational realities from those constituted by "dominant" (Boje) or "authoritative" (Kuhn) narratives. This dynamic may play out *within* the organisation, where employees apply a counter-strategy resisting the formal identity communicated by management by drawing attention to gaps between experienced reality and representations of reality (Lundholt). As pointed out by Nymark, divergences between what management says and what it does may lead to "counter-stories" among employees (51). Counter-narratives constituted by gaps may also emerge in the *external* sphere of an organisation, where different narrators "speak through each other's stories," as formulated by Jensen, Maagaard, and Rasmussen (88). As we will see in the case analysis, Greenpeace speaks through LEGO's stories by running a campaign against Shell based on LEGO's own stories published in the LEGO Group Responsibility Report of 2013.

Whereas "narrative" is solidly and extensively incorporated in the study of organisation and business communication theory, the role of fiction and fictionality has only received limited attention. "Fiction" has been used to describe exaggerations of organisational performances (Christensen, Morsing, and Thyssen), and as a rhetorical means within marketing in relation to communication of

commercials and campaigns through feigned characters and scenarios. But the recent interest in fictionality as a rhetorical mode of communication (Walsh; Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh; Zetterberg Gjerlevsen) has not yet reached the strands of business communication.

In the rhetorical approach, fictionality “is understood as a means to communicate what is invented” and is defined as an “intentionally signaled invention in communication” (Zetterberg Gjerlevsen 1). In this sense, fictionality is therefore not bound up with any genre or limited to narrative representation. It is rather an invitation to the audience “to imagine and interpret” (Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh 64), with the intention of shaping the audience’s beliefs, interpretations, evaluations, or other responses to the actual world. It is a specific communicative strategy that “invents or imagines states of affairs in order to accomplish some purpose(s) within its particular context” (63). Thus, the use of fictionality shifts the focus away from direct truth claims and toward the possible and the imagined (64); one can't effectively counter an argument that relies on fictionality by saying that its utterances are not true. With this understanding of fictionality, we have a tool to consider the role of imagination and invention in business communication.

Countering LEGO’s Master Narrative

LEGO’s master narrative of being a successful manufacturer of quality toys and thereby “having a positive impact on the world [children] live in today and will inherit in the future” (LEGO, *About Us*) is constituted by various communications, collaborative associations, and other activities that serve as a blueprint for the communicative activities around the organisation. In particular, LEGO’s annual Responsibility Report is a script or storyline functioning as an important part of its

master narrative, since it accommodates the organisation's legal as well as voluntary obligations and serves as its annual Communication On Progress (COP) report. This report includes stances on issues such as product quality, community engagement, business ethics, and environmental sustainability. The report also draws attention to LEGO's collaborations with organisations such as UNICEF, Save the Children, Children's Rights, and UN Global Compact. Furthermore, the responsibility report contains company guidelines for responsible marketing communication with children in line with the Children's Advertising Review Unit (CARU) guidelines. For instance, this involves the following marketing efforts:

[. . .] our communication must:

- not take advantage of children's inexperience by creating materials that would potentially mislead their understanding of the product in any way.
- not portray unsafe or harmful situations or actions. (LEGO, *Responsibility Report* 51)

In combination with its values (Imagination, Creativity, Fun, Learning, Caring, and Quality), LEGO's mission is to inspire and develop what it refers to as "the builders of tomorrow" (*About Us*). According to the Responsibility Report, LEGO is guided by the following four brand promises:

- Play Promise: Joy of building. Pride of creation.
- Partner Promise: Mutual value creation
- Planet Promise: Positive impact
- People Promise: Succeed together (136)

Because LEGO has chosen an explicit CSR (Corporate Social Responsibility) approach by publishing an annual Responsibility Report on the various ways in which it lives up to its own promises, the organisation has become exposed to the emergence of counter-narratives (Lundholt). As pointed out by Morsing, Schultz, and Nielsen, research indicates that the companies most active within CSR are also the most criticised, whereas companies doing the least are correspondingly the least criticised (Vallentin). Thus, a gap between an organisation's actions and statements represents an open flank for unwelcome hyper-exposure, particularly when organisations with an explicit CSR approach are involved. This could challenge the assumed value of an explicit CSR approach. However, as described by Morsing, Schultz, and Nielsen, organisations operating in Denmark encounter contradictory demands regarding CSR communication which they label as a "Catch 22": on the one hand, the public expects companies to engage in CSR activities, but on the other hand, organisations should not communicate too loudly to the public about their engagement. So, given the vulnerability arising from an explicit CSR approach, organisations need to adapt their communication accordingly.

As mentioned, counter-narratives in business communication evolve as a reaction to a gap between statements articulating a preferred organisational story (the master narrative) and actions that contradict it. With LEGO's publication of its annual Responsibility Report, the master narrative is publicly outlined and thereby vulnerable to counter-narratives focusing on conflicts between promises and actions. Lundholt pointed out that Greenpeace took advantage of this vulnerability by recontextualising the LEGO Group Responsibility Report (by quoting the report in its own document, entitled *LEGO Is Keeping Bad Company*) and using the report to

support its quest to cancel the partnership between Shell and LEGO and thereby put pressure on Shell to drop the plan for drilling in the Arctic. In that sense, LEGO's original intention with the LEGO Group Responsibility Report (i.e., to provide a positive image of the organisation) was undermined by Greenpeace.

In LEGO's master narrative of being a manufacturer of quality toys which enrich children's lives and prepare them for adulthood, the protagonist is the child who is sent on a quest for "creative play" with the pursuit of a better future. However, in the immediate background of this narrative are the parents: they make choices for the children, and LEGO takes on the role of the "helper," providing quality toys in keeping with its strong CSR policy and in cooperation with different organisations that support children and nature. One danger (among others, but we will mention just one here) affecting this mission relates to the company's marketing efforts: if they are not fulfilled, LEGO will be considered to have damaged the children by misleading the parents and exposing the children to unsafe and harmful situations and actions.

In Greenpeace's campaign against Shell, several narratives are intermingled. The main story is of course that of Greenpeace (the protagonist) trying to save the planet in general and the Arctic in particular for the sake of future generations. As formulated by the organisation, its strategic goal is "to ensure the ability of the earth to nurture life in all its diversity" (Greenpeace, *Core Values*). Oil-producing companies like Shell are major opponents in Greenpeace's attempt to realize this project, while Greenpeace is helped by the support of consumers who are critical of Shell. These voices are then intended to have an impact on governmental authorities with the aim of promoting legislation against the extraction of fossil fuels.

Greenpeace's (counter-)narrative in the campaign against Shell's plan to drill in the Arctic goes like this.² According to Greenpeace, Shell (the protagonist) wants

to “protect its investments” and maintain “the company’s value” by exploiting the oil resources in the Arctic (*Bad Company 3*). LEGO is helping Shell by co-branding products with Shell and thereby “lending” its brand value to Shell. Greenpeace’s story about Shell and LEGO is a story of villainy, and Greenpeace itself plays the role of being the hero-antagonist battling against these misdeeds and the greed they express.

The surprising aspect of Greenpeace’s storytelling is that it chooses to spotlight the role of one of Shell’s “helpers,” namely LEGO. Greenpeace warns LEGO that it should be aware it has engaged with a company that is basically an opponent with regard to LEGO’s own master narrative, given that Shell’s actions (in the past, the present, and the future) are destructive of the environment and the future of the planet. Through its engagement with Shell, LEGO has become its own enemy/opponent since it is not following its own marketing policies. Greenpeace thus establishes a counter-narrative about LEGO, in which it recasts the company from the preferred image of a helper (LEGO profiles itself as a responsible organisation) into the contradictory position of an opponent (an irresponsible organisation).

Although one can contend that there is logical consistency in Greenpeace’s campaign against LEGO, the line of argument is rather complex and easy to ridicule, as can be seen in YouTube commenter Lego4birds’s post quoted at the beginning of this article. Certainly, LEGO’s explicit CSR approach exposes the company to criticism regarding its failure to abide by its official policy. But this alone is not a sufficient reason to direct the campaign against LEGO rather than Shell. The question therefore is: What does Greenpeace gain from attacking LEGO rather than Shell? In order to understand the potential of such a campaign, we need to recall that counter-narratives are typically attempts by (or on behalf of) the powerless,

marginalised, or disempowered to challenge a master narrative emerging from those in power. By bringing LEGO, and thereby children, into the equation, Greenpeace creates sympathy among the public: “For over 50 years, LEGO has inspired children’s play and creativity. The company which was founded in 1932 is loved and admired not only for producing quality toys, but also for its efforts around safety, climate and the environment. It is ranked as one of the top ten most reputable companies in the world. For all these reasons, LEGO is a wonderful playmate for children around the world. (Greenpeace, *Bad Company* 3).

Greenpeace manufactures a narrative about the vulnerability of children, who need protection. As Shell does not apply such a pathos-oriented rhetorical strategy in its own Responsibility Report (it refrains from using children to invoke an emotional appeal), Shell has not exposed itself to criticism to the same degree as LEGO. Furthermore, Shell ranks very low on the reputation score compared to LEGO, which in 2013 was ranked number 10 on the list of the 100 Most Reputable Organisations in the World (Shell was not ranked among the top 100) (Reputation Institute 7–8). This means that the public has less sympathy for, and fewer expectations of, Shell than it has of LEGO. Thus, the public’s emotional reactions and contempt can be more easily accessed through LEGO than through Shell.

The vulnerability of children is stressed in *LEGO Is Keeping Bad Company*: “We need to protect children’s imaginative play from branding for many reasons, including the important need for them to explore their own ideas and develop their own world view. Children have a right to experience a full, playful and joyful childhood without cynical advertising from companies whose only interest in kids is as a consumer group” (6). However, protecting children from branding is not part of Greenpeace’s general strategic goal of protecting the environment. Greenpeace’s inclusion of the

child protection consideration can therefore be better explained as an attempt to underpin their counter-narrative. It thus serves as a conscious attempt to produce, promote, or change the story.

We can now explain LEGO's role in the campaign as follows. Greenpeace positions LEGO as an antagonist to the Greenpeace *goal* (to ensure the ability of the earth to nurture life in all its diversity) due to LEGO's collaboration with Shell. However, in relation to the Greenpeace *mission* (to "expose global environmental problems, and to force the solutions which are essential to a green and peaceful future" (*Core Values*)), Greenpeace turns LEGO into an ally or a helper, since it uses LEGO to expose the problems caused by Shell and thereby hopes to force it to deliver on its mission. By appealing implicitly to the contradiction between LEGO's stated master narrative and its alliance with Shell, and thereby casting LEGO as an opponent to its goal and a helper in relation to its mission, Greenpeace establishes a constellation where LEGO is criticized for a strategic decision made by Shell. As will be illustrated in the following section, this strategy materializes in the use of fictionality.

Fictionality Used Strategically

The rhetorical use of fictionality is implemented in different ways in Greenpeace's campaign against LEGO. We will focus on the two main texts of the campaign—the booklet *LEGO Is Keeping Bad Company* and the short YouTube video *LEGO: Everything is NOT Awesome*. If we turn to the role of fictionality in these two texts, it is obvious that they they rely on the distinction between fictionality and nonfictionality. The booklet contains factual information told mainly by Greenpeace but with quotes and facts from both Shell, LEGO, and others. Fictionality is here primarily used to

frame the message Greenpeace wants to communicate. By contrast, the video is a fully-fledged fiction. The scenario is built in LEGO bricks and depicts a non-existing (or “not-yet-existing”) situation in an Arctic environment. But as we shall see, “reality” invades this scenario in different ways, which we consider to be the main reason for the video’s success.

Nielsen, Phelan, and Walsh state that “the ascription of fictionality to acts of communication designed to be nonfictional can impede effective communication” (66). This is exactly what happens with Greenpeace in its campaign booklet. *LEGO Is Keeping Bad Company* was produced with visual allusions to LEGO’s Responsibility Report. Colours, layout, and headline wording “mimed” LEGO’s report, despite the fact that Greenpeace was the sender of the message. On the one hand, this merger of form and content can be seen as an example of “spoofing” (Berthon and Pitt): making a parody of a text by creating a similar or modified work. Spoofing is an act of fictionalisation insofar as its parodic status is explicitly signaled. Greenpeace does this metatextually by placing its logo on a LEGO brick on the front page of the booklet (see Figure 2), thus implying a (fictive) collaboration with LEGO, not unlike the one seen over decades between LEGO and Shell (Figure 1).



Figure 1. An example of LEGO's Shell-branded bricks (photo by Flemming Bech Thøisen).

By means of this fictive establishment of a co-brand, irony is signaled, especially when the brick is seen in relation to the other visual elements on the front page of the booklet: an unhappy LEGO figure with oil under his feet and an anti-Shell flag in his hand, combined with the critical title of the booklet: *LEGO is Keeping Bad Company* (Figure 2).



Figure 2. Front page of Greenpeace's booklet.

But on the other hand, there seems to be more to Greenpeace's feigned co-branding and use of LEGO's visual style than just parody. As described above, the story Greenpeace tells is built on an argument where LEGO is claimed to be "too good" to collaborate with a company like Shell. Shell is defined as the "villain," and LEGO is blamed for taking on the role of the villain's "helper" by carrying out a collaborative co-branding campaign with Shell. Throughout the booklet, however, LEGO is generally praised for its company values and products. In that sense, Greenpeace takes sides with LEGO, but blames it for the "bad company" it has found in Shell. Placing "Greenpeace" on a LEGO brick is therefore more than a parodic statement on the LEGO-Shell collaboration. It is also a way of signaling that Greenpeace is actually on LEGO's side and that it is a better company than Shell. Rhetorical fictionality is employed here to convey a two-sided message showing that Greenpeace both is and is not on LEGO's side.

Another use of fictionality is found in the covert and feigned inclusion of "voices" in the booklet. The running text is characterised by information on Shell's activities and its collaboration with LEGO. The rhetorical appeal is a constant shifting

between *logos* (logical appeal) as dominant (e.g., “Shell needs certainty that social or political changes will not undermine the company’s value” (4)) and *pathos* as dominant (e.g., “LEGO is a wonderful playmate for children around the world” (3)). Often the two forms of appeal are combined within single sentences: “By placing its logo in the hands of millions of children, Shell is building brand loyalty with the next generation of consumers, voters, business leaders.” Greenpeace is the main narrator, and if other narrators are cited, this is clearly marked as quotation or by references. However, the headings of the chapters, though clearly coming from Greenpeace, are in a different voice from Greenpeace's other narration: “No more playdates with Shell” and “Shell needs nice playmates”; and later on, “LEGO is too good for Shell” and “Shell is bad company.” There are at least two important effects of these headlines. Firstly, Greenpeace borrows the language in these headlines from a parental/childhood discourse, and “positions itself in a parental role forbidding LEGO to play with Shell” (Lundholt 49) out of concern about the child’s new acquaintances. Secondly, the parental tone in (at least) the first two headlines fictively invokes the voices of LEGO’s primary customers: the parents. By alluding to these voices and expressing concern about LEGO and its activities, Greenpeace anticipates possible reactions from LEGO’s customers whose scepticism constitutes a potential threat to LEGO’s business. Here, fictionality is used to perform an indirect threat to LEGO. And because this is done indirectly through heteroglossia, by evoking voices other than those explicit in the booklet, Greenpeace can always deny that it has made a threat.

Toward the end of the booklet, there is a picture of what looks like a LEGO product (see Figure 3). The picture shows two boxes of LEGO toys from what seems to be an Arctic oil driller series of toys, but depicting a situation where something has

gone wrong with the drilling. Oil is flooding out over the ice and into the sea, and two of the LEGO figures are carrying brushes to clean up the mess. The drilling rig, the helicopter and other machinery carry Shell's name and logo. The picture obviously refers to the video Greenpeace made with the oil-flooded, LEGO-built Arctic environment.



Figure 3. A fictive LEGO product in Greenpeace's booklet.

In connection with this scenario there is a statement in the booklet by psychologist Dr. Susan Linn from Harvard Medical School, who is quoted extensively on children and advertisements. Linn states that “research shows that if you secure brand loyalty when children are young, that positive glow lasts into adulthood. Brand loyal customers are less likely to notice changes in a product or think critically and independently about a company’s ethics” (6). Greenpeace uses Linn’s statement to back up remarks it makes regarding the possible elimination of critical consumer awareness which can be the result of the early relationship with large brands through playing: “The beauty of Lego lies in a child’s ability to create their own versions of the real world in their play room and with the Shell LEGO cars, children will start to see

Shell as an inevitable part of the fabric of life – like a hospital, school or farmyard” (5). This aligns with Linn’s remarks later in the booklet. She also states that “toys profoundly influence children’s desires, values and aspirations. Adverts aimed at children are bad enough, but branding their favourite playthings gain [sic] companies like Shell many hours and even days of their dedicated time, energy and love” (6). Linn’s quote ends like this: “We need to protect children’s imaginative play from branding for many reasons, including the important need for them to explore their own ideas and develop their own world view. Children have a right to experience a full, playful and joyful childhood without cynical advertising from companies whose only interest in kids is as a consumer group” (6).

Even though it may seem paradoxical, Greenpeace draws its rationale from Linn for its fictionalised toy scenarios in the booklet and in the film. One could argue that Greenpeace should follow Linn’s warning and stay out of the LEGO universe and leave it to the children. But instead, Greenpeace indirectly redeploys the battlefield: if Shell thinks it can win future customers’ loyalty and lack of critical reflection by being part of the children’s fictional world of playing and make-believe, Greenpeace can use the same strategy to awaken critical awareness and damage Shell’s brand. And if LEGO wants to “play” in a world where it lets real-life brands into its fictional universes, it should also accept that other parties and organisations enter these realms.

For the same reasons, Greenpeace’s LEGO video *LEGO: Everything is NOT Awesome* had such a powerful effect. The video not only borrows LEGO’s visual identity (as was the case in the booklet) and the song “Everything is Awesome” from *The LEGO Movie* (2014). It also breaks into LEGO’s core product (the toys and the games the toys provides) and the core target groups (the children and their parents)

by miming the genres most often used by LEGO to reach these groups (the commercial and the video).

The video opens by showing an Arctic LEGO landscape with Arctic animals, an indigenous fisherman, and children playing in the snow. All the animal and human figures are depicted in action, but without movement. The camera moves through the landscape and shifts between close-ups and panoramic shots of a photographically frozen moment in the daily life of its inhabitants. Beginning at 0:17, the camera observes large construction machinery and drilling activities. A Shell truck and a (very) happy worker in a coverall with an oil-badge function as a visual bridge to a pedestal down shot starting with a Shell flag and ending with a zoom on a villain-like manager standing on the rig, smoking a cigar with a rather greedy look on his (LEGO-)face (0:33). In the following moments, movement is introduced into the scenario—not between the LEGO-figures, but rather because the rig starts leaking oil, and before long the whole scene is covered in oil, showing drowning animals, adults, and children. The figures are still frozen in their doings, but some of their faces are expressing fear, horror, and pain. In the final shots, a close-up of the top of some white bricks with the imprinted characteristic LEGO logo are filmed as they disappear under black oil. All that is left is a Shell flag in LEGO waving over the oil pool. Then follow two text images: one saying “Shell is polluting our kids’ imaginations,” followed by the aforementioned “Tell LEGO to end its partnership with Shell.”

It is fair to assume that the video played a major role in Greenpeace’s success with the campaign. The number of views was (and still is) immense, and the compositional efforts and qualities put into the video are hard not to be impressed by,

not only because of the scene's construction out of thousands of LEGO bricks, but also due to the way the narrative unfolds.

The initial state of affairs in the frozen daily-life moment is characterized by harmony (between animals and nature, nature and humans, as well as in-between the humans), and the soundtrack accompanying the depiction is the Tegan and Sara song "Everything is Awesome" from the soundtrack to *The Lego Movie*, celebrating team spirit and the fulfillment of hopes and dreams. The soft pop song matches the scenario's initial harmony, but when the oil starts flooding the landscape, a strong ironic tension is created. The song's statement that "everything is awesome / everything is cool when you're part of a team" is undermined by the implied message of the video: LEGO's teaming up with Shell is not awesome, but is instead dangerous and damaging both to the Arctic and to LEGO itself, as illustrated by the shot of LEGO's logo being covered in oil and disappearing into the black. Furthermore, by letting the oil be the only element in motion in the scenario, the fragility of nature, children, and daily living is emphasized. The oil-catastrophe is at the same time presented to us as a calm, steady, and progressive movement. But insofar as it is taking place in a frozen moment, it becomes both surprising and aggressive, both to the viewer and to the LEGO figures, whose facial expressions have changed from joy to horror.

But the power of the flooding oil also has another important aspect. Beside the backdrop (with clouds), the oil is the only thing in the scenario that is not built in LEGO. The oil is, so to say, the only "real thing" in the video. By fictionalising an already fictive play environment and letting "the real" (the oil) break into the fictive world and take it over, Greenpeace shows what it predicts will be the consequences

of letting the real (Shell) enter the fictive world of LEGO and children's play: they will disappear.



Figure 4. Stills from Greenpeace's LEGO video.

But, as Greenpeace also shows, this doesn't have to be the end of the story. In the wake of this video, Greenpeace went on to create further fictive LEGO scenes showing public protests against Shell—and, paradoxically, against LEGO itself (see Figure 5). Here, Greenpeace hijacked the mission of LEGO by positioning itself in the role as LEGO's primary stakeholder, the child, and thereby becoming a stand-in for the "builders of tomorrow." This is not just done as a parody, nor just to illustrate alliance with LEGO. Greenpeace has occupied the LEGO universe and built—through creative play—its own narrative.



Figure 5. Greenpeace campaign picture.

Conclusion

In their “Ten Theses About Fictionality”, Nielsen, Walsh, and Phelan pose the following question: “How can information that we understand to be untrue contribute to our engagement with truth and reality?” (64). This question resembles the question this article is concerned with, namely why and how something blatantly untrue influences our beliefs about the real world. As the present essay reveals, the answer can be traced both to the formulation of a strong counter-narrative established through a transition of narrative roles (from helper in LEGO’s own quest, to opponent in the fulfilment of Greenpeace’s goal, to helper of the Greenpeace mission), and to the use of fictionality in the communication. We hope to have shown how fictionality within a counter-narrative realm can merge the real and the fictive and thereby construct a convincing story which eventually leads to the fulfilment of Greenpeace’s mission, namely to cancel the collaboration between LEGO and Shell.

Despite the fact that Greenpeace deliberately chose to “bark up the wrong tree” when it directed its campaign against LEGO instead of Shell, the public in

general did not dispute the goal of Greenpeace's campaign: that the collaboration between LEGO and Shell had to end. This, we claim, is due to the ability of fictionality to shift the focus away from the true/false value of an argument and toward the realm of the possible and the imagined. As such, what we are dealing with is a merger between the fictive (the LEGO universe), the real (the collaboration between Shell and LEGO), and the possible (an environmental disaster in the Arctic). It is in the merger between the real and the fictive that fictionality triggers the "People: stop Lego" reaction.

In the printed campaign material (*LEGO Is Keeping Bad Company*) we saw how Greenpeace established a paradoxical fictive co-branding between itself and LEGO by fabricating counter-narratives in line with Greenpeace's goal and mission. Here, fictionality was implemented in the Greenpeace-LEGO brick, in the visual similarity between the Greenpeace booklet and LEGO's Social Responsibility Report, in the evocation of parental voices, and in the depiction of the fictive oil spill disaster toy sets. Through these mechanisms, fictionality enabled Greenpeace not only to criticise Shell and LEGO, but also to make an alliance with LEGO and thereby to break the alliance between LEGO and Shell.

Whereas the most dominant form of appeal in the booklet is that of *logos*, the video was dominated by *pathos*. Unlike the booklet, the video did not primarily provide selected facts regarding Shell, LEGO, children's development, or the Alaskan Arctic. Instead it was composed as a fiction built in LEGO bricks depicting (fictive) daily life in the Arctic and a sudden environmental disaster caused by Shell. Greenpeace's use of this pathos-promoting fictionality as a strategic tool left no opportunity for the audience to question whether Greenpeace was right in its claim that LEGO's collaboration with Shell was below LEGO's high standards. Instead, the

audience was invited into an imaginative world encompassing alternative evaluations established through counter-narratives materialised both visually and rhetorically.

Moreover, constructing a counter-narrative around LEGO (and the LEGO Group Responsibility Report) gave Greenpeace access to a pathos-oriented rhetoric associated with positioning children as figures in need of protection. Furthermore, by attacking LEGO rather than Shell, Greenpeace benefited from the higher brand-ranking of LEGO in comparison to Shell. Finally, positioning LEGO as an opponent to the Greenpeace goal but as a helper in the Greenpeace mission supported Greenpeace's strategic aims. Gaining a more pathos-oriented approach and getting access to a high-ranking brand could also have been the motivation behind Shell's decision to collaborate with LEGO in the first place. It may therefore seem hypocritical that Greenpeace uses the vulnerability of children to ensure the success of its campaign, thus deploying the same strategy as Shell. This is even more apparent when we turn to Greenpeace's argument that children's imaginative play should be protected from branding campaigns.

So why did Greenpeace get away with it? As we argued at the beginning of the article, there is a close relation between organisations and narratives. As a consequence, organisations are open to counter-narratives. When Greenpeace manufactured a counter-narrative campaign against LEGO's master narrative, it was not only trying to damage LEGO's reputation but was also threatening internal organisational parameters such as employee commitment, engagement, and loyalty, which had the potential to cause immense damage to the company.

Greenpeace managed to create a counter-narrative which to some extent had an unusual focus and took an unexpected form. The "People: stop Lego" reaction was achieved through the use of storytelling, fiction, and fictionality—perhaps

because the value of storytelling is that it reveals meaning without defining it. Without definitions, meaning is a matter of interpretation and negotiation, not to mention emotions and sympathies. Here, Greenpeace undoubtedly had the advantage over Shell.

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² This is how it is expressed in the booklet *LEGO is Keeping Bad Company*: "Shell is responsible for a significant amount of global carbon emissions. And Shell is now hunting for more oil in one of the world's last remaining pristine regions: the Arctic. Sea ice in the far north is melting, but rather than see this as a warning sign, Shell sees it as an opportunity to drill for more of the oil that caused the melt in the first place. In the Arctic it would be next to impossible to clean up after the inevitable oil spill and the consequences of an accident would be devastating for the unique wildlife and fragile environments of the polar north. Nevertheless, despite the all too obvious risks, Shell refuses to give up its ambition of taking first place in the race for Arctic oil" (3).