

Afterword: “You’ll Find I’m Full of Surprises”

The Future of Star Wars

Will Brooker and Dan Hassler-Forest

Dan Hassler-Forest: Will, you’ve been a lifelong Star Wars fan and you’ve published numerous books and articles on the franchise and its fan culture. Having invested so many years in Star Wars, where do you stand right now regarding the films in the Disney era? Have the new movies made you more or less of a fan?

Will Brooker: The meanings of “being a fan” and of “Star Wars” (and therefore, of “being a Star Wars fan”) have changed so much during my lifetime that it’s hard to answer in terms of more or less. Between 1977 and 1983, to be a Star Wars fan at my age meant that you loved the world depicted in and suggested by three feature films: you saw them as often as you could in the cinema, bought all the toys that you could afford, played games based around the stories and characters of that world, maybe read the comic books and spin-off paperbacks, and pursued other assorted activities like taping the soundtrack from TV broadcast onto cassette.

Being a Star Wars fan now could involve a much broader and more diverse range of activities, around a much broader and more diverse range of texts: within the new Disney-authorized canon alone, there are eight official movies, various TV series; console, PC, and phone-based games; new comic books and novelizations; and, of course, new toys, costumes, and other merchandise. And this is just within the post-2014 canon. A Star Wars fan might have to specify that they also like the EU that was relegated to Legends status after the Disney takeover; that they pretend the prequel movies didn’t happen, and don’t include those in their own head-canon; that they prefer the retro texts like trading cards, comics, the *Holiday Special*, and the Ewok movies from the era of the original trilogy. And, of course, there are many more ways of engaging in fandom now: phone apps and online discussion boards weren’t available to me when I first encountered Star Wars, but neither were conventions, because of my age, and cosplay, although I did of course dress up in my own modest way at home.

So I don't think it's possible to measure a person's commitment across different periods of "Star Wars fandom," given the way all the words in that phrase have so radically changed; but I could give a rough sense of my relationship to the franchise.

As I've discussed in my own academic work, my first burst of Star Wars fandom was around the original trilogy, starting when I was seven years old; it faded when new films stopped being made, inevitably, but I would say I was still a fan at heart throughout the 1980s. I experienced a special rush when I played the arcade games or even the basic, bleepy home computer games based on Star Wars movies. So the Timothy Zahn books of the 1990s revived something that was only dormant in me, rather than dead. I really enjoyed that return to the world and the familiar characters, and bought a few games for the more sophisticated PCs I owned during that decade.

I started writing academically about Star Wars around 1995 (an early chapter in *Postmodern After-Images*, reprinted later with some framing remarks in *Liquid Metal*) and I was ready to be an enthusiastic fan of the prequels, but, while I tried—a review I wrote for *Scope* journal at the time is testament to that—I was, like many people, disappointed. My book *Using the Force* makes an effort to celebrate *Attack of the Clones* and I remember being relatively satisfied with *Revenge of the Sith*. But, in hindsight, I think they're simply not great films. I find it hard to even enjoy short clips of them now, although the online fan groups that have recently arisen around 'prequel memes' convincingly encourage an affectionate, ironic look back at those flawed movies.

So, that's where I was in the lead-up to *The Force Awakens*: wary, disillusioned, distanced. I deliberately avoided all trailers and production information, wanting to see the film unspoiled. I was pleasantly surprised by it, though, looking back, I do think it ticks easy boxes and treads a safe path. I was more impressed by *Rogue One* the following year, which I think did something more interesting and exciting with the dynamic between old and new. I saw that movie three times in a week, which is not something I usually do.

So I am not more of a fan of Star Wars now than I was between 1977 and 1983, or even in the remainder of the 1980s and 1990s. I am more of a fan of Star Wars than I was between 2005 and 2016, but I also recognize that it isn't being made entirely for me, and people like me, anymore. On the one hand, I feel I have a kind of authority as a long-term curator of Star Wars—someone who lived through it and cherished it for decades, as well as writing about it professionally—and on the other, I don't really know a lot about the details of the new Star Wars universe as it now stands, in

terms of the expanded worlds and history sketched out by all the spin-offs I now ignore. So I respect that there are other people, perhaps from younger generations, much more expert and also more enthusiastic than I am.

The neat thing, of course, is that Star Wars is all about legacy, and generations, and passing the torch, so it's quite easy to comfortably identify with the older characters of the saga, giving the kids their blessing. You can feel a connection with those fundamental themes even if you don't really feel you're deeply invested in the franchise any more: so Star Wars has an inherent, built-in role for the older people who lived through the old battles and now recognize that it's time to let others have a turn.

DHF: One of the things that's changed recently is that George Lucas is no longer involved creatively. Instead, the new movies are the product of a collaboration between self-declared Star Wars fans like J.J. Abrams, Gareth Edwards, Rian Johnson, and the new cast members, together with veterans like Kathleen Kennedy, Lawrence Kasdan, and the surviving cast members. What do you think this will mean for the future of the franchise, and for its fan culture?

WB: Given what Lucas did with the prequels, when he had a great deal of control, it would be a struggle for anyone to make worse movies. So I can't regret that the franchise is now, apparently, out of his hands. I've read speculation recently that his role may be still more significant than was imagined—that *The Force Awakens*, *The Last Jedi*, and plans for the anthology films actually follow Lucas's notes to a surprising extent—but I feel he's lost much of the creative talent he had. Perhaps he was always strongest at sketching out grand, mythical ideas, rather than writing dialogue and directing actors. So, if there is now genuinely a situation where other people are implementing the detail and doing the hands-on work, based on his broad strokes—as was the case with *The Empire Strikes Back*—that seems promising.

If the original creator has always shown a strong, steady hand on the helm throughout a franchise, then I can see there could be hesitancy about passing it on to anyone else. But that isn't the case here. I doubt the newer, younger generation of Star Wars fans cares whether Lucas is directly involved, and I expect many of the older generation feel like I do—though I did hear that there was an online current of resistance to Abrams, a strand of fandom which took a revisionist approach to the prequels and tried to argue that Lucas was the one with the true authorial integrity.

DHF: Star Wars has always been a transmedia phenomenon, with peaks of activity surrounding the occasional film release. Now that Disney plans to

release a Star Wars film once a year, alongside a variety of TV shows and comic books, how do you think that will impact fan production? Is this a way for the franchise's owners to gain more control over the Star Wars storyworld?

WB: I don't think more official texts limits fan production. Batman appears in multiple comic books every month and, of course, a variety of TV shows, movies, and games, and I don't think that incredible amount of official material has ever limited or controlled what fans do. If anything, I think the dynamic might be opposite and that fan activity tends to tail off when faced with a lack of canonical primary texts—compare Star Wars fandom now to 30 years ago, in the late 1980s. Equally, I don't think producers can control fan engagement by flooding the market. I would suggest that official texts actually help to prompt and encourage fan creation and, on one level, they provide the materials for bricolage, mash-ups, and other forms of pastiche.

A better example of producer control over fan activity was the official website's attempt to rein in and fence off unauthorized creativity, in the early 2000s; I believe there was a wave of cease and desist orders from Lucasfilm, coupled with an invitation to produce work within the boundaries of the official site, where, of course, that work would be restricted and controlled.

DHF: The decision to update the films' representation of women and ethnic minorities in the recent films has created very different responses: on the one hand, what seems like a majority of fans who have strongly embraced the featured presence of female protagonists and more diverse cast members, while there have also been boycott campaigns accusing the films of "political correctness" and "white genocide." Does this point to a separation within Star Wars fandom—or perhaps even two separate kinds of Star Wars fandom—and if so, how would you relate it to the current political climate?

WB: I would hope that we don't need to recognize racist Star Wars fans as a significant group. I wouldn't be surprised if the people who claim *The Force Awakens* and *Rogue One* embody "white genocide" are affiliated more with other, political groups, and have latched onto Star Wars as a particularly topical, high-profile platform. I also suspect that a proportion of those may be young, immature people who don't actually hold right-wing ideas, misguidedly trolling and trying to provoke a reaction, using these hashtags just to get attention and to feel part of a group: they are also "rebels," I suppose, but in a very stupid way.

I'm not trying to claim that Star Wars fans cannot be racist, of course, but I do feel these boycott campaigns are more about a general bigotry than

they are about feeling this specific franchise has betrayed them politically. Star Wars, to them, would (I think) be just one more example of a downward cultural slide.

Star Wars has always lent itself to diverse political readings. In the 1980s, it was associated with Reagan's Strategic Defense Initiative, of course, and with his views on the "Evil Empire" of Russia. The Original Trilogy and *Rogue One* are inherently about colonialism and terrorism, and can be read in a variety of ways in parallel to a range of real-world occupations and revolutions. So I think, in themselves, they are essentially about the same thing now as they always were in a political sense, which is not "everything and nothing" exactly, but a lot of things and thus nothing specific. The battle fought by Jyn and her comrades in 2017 is the same one that Luke, Han, and Leia pursued in 1977: Rebels against an Empire, an opposition that involves many cultural signifiers pointing in different directions. And of course, that is a sensible decision—the only commercial decision—when you're trying to market a blockbuster franchise to audiences around the world.

What changes, in a more fascinating and significant way, are the readings of that fictional political dynamic. The term "Resistance" began to circulate online in the early days of the Trump administration, linked to the currently vast and deep cultural affection for Carrie Fisher, who, of course, had recently died and, in turn, her role as leader of the Rebellion across five films of the Star Wars saga. The idea of a female-led resistance against America's current leadership and its policies clearly drew inspiration and iconography, at least superficially (in terms of placards and tweeted images) from Leia and Jyn. I don't think that is a meaning inherently in the primary texts, but it's a very interesting use of the films.

DHF: The Marvel Cinematic Universe (now also owned by Disney) has become a media-industrial model for robust, commercially successful transmedia storyworlds. Its complex multi-platform, multi-phase organization was clearly inspired by Star Wars, but has now also provided a model for further commercial development of transmedia properties. Is this a model that you see Star Wars mimicking over the coming years? Or, if not, how do you think Star Wars will be different?

WB: I don't see a great difference between the Marvel Cinematic Universe and the way the Star Wars Universe is now operating. I think Harry Potter is also going the same way and Universal is attempting something similar with the revival of its classic monsters. There may be less use of, and intersection

with, television than we're currently seeing with Marvel, but I can imagine the films cross-referencing each other and overlapping in similar ways.

One key difference is that the Star Wars universe was firmly established in cinema in 1977, whereas Marvel was able to create the terms of its cinematic world and characters far more recently; so Star Wars producers now are working in the gaps, within existing structures, and in that respect the task is more tricky—though with more of a nostalgic pay-off when it works.

DHF: Nostalgia has always been central to the Star Wars experience, but, in the original films, this was a diffuse and somewhat undefined nostalgia for an older form of storytelling. Now, in the Disney-era Star Wars films, a lot of this nostalgic sensibility has been about recreating the experience of the earlier films (and their transmedia extensions). Is this a self-consuming nostalgia? To what extent is Star Wars a forward-looking franchise?

WB: I think there's a complex dynamic here. Star Wars is inherently about the past, about legacy, inheritance, and the relationship—symbolic and literal—between fathers and sons (and now, belatedly, also about daughters). The original trilogy essentially explores Luke's relationship with Vader; whether he will follow his father's path or resist it, whether he will destroy Vader or save him. The prequel trilogy now functions as a long flashback—the fan-recommended Machete Order of viewing the films positions it this way—it's explicitly all about the past, and how things reached the point where we came in at the start of *A New Hope*.

As such, the end of *Revenge of the Sith* is the most rewarding part of the prequels for old-school fans like me because we finally see some meshing of the two in terms of character, plot, and design aesthetic: it satisfies because of our nostalgia for the originals. *Rogue One* is able to play up those pleasures to a much greater extent and, in a way, has a far easier task than *The Force Awakens* because of all the nods, cameos, and overlaps with the original that its place in the sequence enables it to introduce. That said, *The Force Awakens* also hooks deeply into original trilogy nostalgia wherever it can, sometimes subtly through visual and narrative echoes and sometimes directly, as with the reintroduction of Han Solo. The exchanges between Leia and Han incorporate a wistful, affectionate melancholy into the storyworld, echoing what fans are feeling.

As such, the films were always about looking back, and *The Force Awakens* ramps that up even more. But at the same time, I think there is a sense of forward dynamic. There is a new generation of young heroes, more culturally diverse than we saw in the older movies, in both the recent Star Wars

films. In *Rogue One*, of course, they all have to die, for the sake of continuity, but I think we can see it as a progressive step—literally progressive, as in “moving forward.” (There’s a complication here in that *Rogue One* is progressive about the past, rewriting history and suggesting that the Star Wars cast was always more diverse than we saw at the time.) I expect to see a shift away from the older characters in *The Last Jedi*, with Leia probably passing on somehow in *The Last Jedi* and a focus primarily on Rey and her companions by the (as-yet-untitled) Episode IX.

However, for that to happen, I think we will either have to retain Luke as fairly central in the story, and/or have Rey revealed as a member of one of the saga’s central families—because Star Wars has become essentially a family saga, a story about the Skywalkers, and I think the challenge is to move it along while retaining that focus. So, to answer the question, it functions like a family: it does progress and hand its inheritance down to a new generation, but it remains steeped in history, and I think it has always been about looking back, learning lessons from the past while adapting to a new period and its new challenges.

DHF: So if Star Wars has developed primarily into a semi-mythical family saga, do you think Star Wars will remain in some way bound to the story of the Skywalker clan across the generations? Or do you think it will start branching out further within the central “authorized” storyworld?

WB: Obviously, Star Wars will complete the nine-episode saga, as planned, which revolves firmly around the Skywalkers. The next anthology film, about Han Solo and Lando Calrissian, will not be about that family and has no obvious reason to include members of that family. If it excludes the Skywalkers entirely, it will immediately set a new precedent for the feature films, as both Leia and Vader had iconic cameos in *Rogue One*.

On the other hand, we could argue that Han is part of the extended Star Wars “family,” so his solo movie is an easy sell, even if it branches off from the Skywalker saga. Equally, a movie about Vader (between *Revenge of the Sith* and *Rogue One*) would essentially be about Anakin Skywalker, a Boba Fett movie would inevitably feature Vader, and a movie about Obi-Wan Kenobi’s exile on Tatooine would doubtless include the young Luke. So, in a way, you would have to take a huge step away from the familiar ground of the central saga to avoid all references to the Skywalkers. Han Solo movie aside, that would be a riskier prospect.

Games and novels have explored the distant past and the far future of the original trilogy’s world and the movie series could also, in theory, go that

route in future. I would suggest that a movie about previous Dark Lords of the Sith, or Luke's grandchildren, will be more difficult to pitch to a broad audience than it was to sell to the more niche fan-base of games and novels, so I'm not sure if I do anticipate such huge leaps forward and backwards in time, in the anthology movies.

I would expect to see side-narratives about what Han, Fett, Kenobi, and Vader were doing in the gaps of the original movies first and then perhaps the same types of solo movie about Poe Dameron, Finn, and other key members of the sequel cast, depending on how well the next episodes are received, and the extent to which those new characters continue to be embraced by fans. I could possibly envisage spin-offs from the prequels, about Darth Maul and Mace Windu, for instance, but I think those are more likely to be kept to television series rather than standalone feature films. I don't imagine we are going to get an anthology movie about Walrus Man (Ponda Baba) or the legendary Darth Plagueis the Wise, but I guess if they've exhausted all other options, the producers might have to explore those avenues to keep the franchise going in cinemas.

Star Wars has survived for 40 years, at the time of writing, including a sixteen-year gap—easily enough time for it to lose its fan base—between *Return of the Jedi* and *The Phantom Menace*. It has survived a prequel trilogy that was derided both by mainstream critics and by hardcore, long-term followers of the saga. It survived the loss of the entire EU, built up over decades and now relegated to “Legends limbo” and thereby officially outside canon. It now has fans who are too young to read and write, as well as middle-aged professors adding to the academic library of Star Wars scholarship. In the absence of official texts, Star Wars fandom—if my experience is anything to go by—lies dormant, rather than dying: like Han Solo in carbonite, it remains alive, and in perfect hibernation. But we now know that Star Wars is bigger than Abrams, bigger than Lucas, bigger even than Disney. It is a popular myth, passed on from one generation to another. It will do more than just survive: it will outlive us all.