

Foreword: “I Have a Bad Feeling About This”

A Conversation about Star Wars and the History of
Transmedia

Henry Jenkins and Dan Hassler-Forest

Dan Hassler-Forest: You're probably one of the world's best-known Star Trek fans—certainly within academia. Since you have always reflected on popular franchises from the dual perspective of the “aca-fan,” it seems most appropriate to start with a question about your own relationship with Star Wars. What's your own history with this franchise?

Henry Jenkins: I grew up on *Star Trek*, the original series. It was a formative influence on my identity and my understanding of the world. On the other hand, I was an undergraduate when *A New Hope* first appeared, so I necessarily have a different relationship to it. It took a while for Star Wars to win me over. When I saw the first preview in the movie theaters, I laughed it off the screen. From the highly generic and on-the-nose title to the dorky robots, it seemed to embody everything that I thought was wrong about Hollywood's relationship to science fiction as a genre. It just looked laughably bad. Keep in mind though that that first trailer didn't have John Williams's musical score, so the tone would have felt very different for those of us seeing it for the first time. And keep in mind that it followed trailers for *Logan's Run* and *Damnation Alley*, which were both releasing at the same time. What I really wanted was a new Planet of the Apes movie!

So it took me a while to even go see the movie. By that point, it had started to build up some buzz. And when I saw the film, I fell hard. It totally excited my imagination. It had such a strong sense of fun and adventure; its reliance on the Hero's Journey would have been particularly resonant with me at the time since I was undergoing a period of undergraduate infatuation with the writings of Joseph Campbell.

I've gone out and seen every subsequent film on opening day with my wife. She loves to tell the story of how we first met: she arrived for her first undergraduate film class and saw this undergraduate standing around talking to anyone who would listen about the social significance of Star Wars. She rolled her eyes, and later in that afternoon wrote a letter to her

best friend talking about this “pretentious ass” she’d seen in the class who had embodied everything that she was afraid a film class would be like. Two years later, by the time *The Empire Strikes Back* came out, this “pretentious ass” was hers, and she never ceases to remind me of her first impression.

But the story from my point of view suggests just how deeply I was, at that point, engaging with the mythology around Star Wars. Subsequently, my fandom of Star Wars would wax and wane. I’ll talk about some of the twists and turns along the way, but I think that I, like many fans of my generation, was cranky when Star Wars became too much of a children’s franchise, and engaged when there was material there that works at a more mature level.

DHF: So as a highly engaged witness to the Star Wars phenomenon as it took shape, how would you place it within the larger framework of science-fiction fandom?

HJ: In some ways, I see it as a crucial turning point for the kind of media-centered fans, the mostly female fans that I wrote about in *Textual Poachers*. Up until that point, most of fandom had been organized around Star Trek, which had been a defining text for a generation of fans. Suddenly, you were seeing forms of fan expression that were taking shape around Star Trek expanded to incorporate new texts, including Star Wars. We can see this as a move from a fandom centered around individual stories to a multi-media fandom, which would continue to expand across genres, across franchises, to the present day.

So if we think about the texts that defined fandom over time, Star Trek is certainly one of those, Star Wars is another, Harry Potter is another, Buffy the Vampire Slayer is another, maybe Xena—these are the fandoms that represent a profound shift in the way fandom operates. It’s easy to understand, then, why some Star Trek fans saw Star Wars as a threat or competition. Star Trek was seen as true science fiction—science fiction about ideas, about the future, about utopian and dystopian alternatives. Star Wars was seen as space opera, fantasy, bound up with spectacular special effects. But I never understood why you had to pick one over the other. Different tastes, different moments in our lives, but both representing exciting contributions to the larger development of science fiction.

DHF: Unlike most previous fantastic storyworlds, Star Wars was, in many ways, a transmedia experience from the very start: the comic books, the novelizations, the arcade games, the action figures, the soundtrack albums,

and so on. While all the merchandising and transmedia spin-offs clearly contributed to the franchise's phenomenal financial success and its cultural impact, they also made the storyworld appear more childish, more frivolous, and more obviously commercial than other science fiction. But at the same time, its ubiquity helped make it a gateway drug for millions of young fans who felt inspired to look beyond Lucas's space opera and discover a whole universe of fantastic fiction. What is your take on the way Star Wars's commercial success has colored its perception among fans of the genre? Is it less of a "cult text" because of its sheer scale?

HJ: There's no question that George Lucas was a founding figure in the evolution of modern transmedia storytelling. A lot of this has to do with the deal he cut with Twentieth Century Fox around the production of the film, waiving his normal fees as director in favor of a percentage of the gross from ancillary products. Because the ancillary products became so central to his revenues, they also became central to his interest in the stories. This arrangement created a strong incentive for those pieces—the comics, the toys, the novelizations, and so forth—to be more fully incorporated into the story system of Star Wars.

Such experiences became central to Star Wars's commercial success, and meant the experience of Star Wars extended off the screen and throughout the intervals between the releases of individual films. No other science-fiction property had so totally saturated a generation's media experiences. No previous science-fiction film had gained this kind of blockbuster status. The summer blockbuster had only really been established as a category in Hollywood through the success of *Jaws* (1975) just a couple of years earlier. *Star Trek: The Original Series* barely survived on television, limping along through its three seasons, and only really regained the impact it had on the culture through reruns in syndication. As Star Wars achieves this kind of instant mass success, you could make the argument that science fiction was no longer a marker of subcultural identity, but something that could be a mass phenomenon.

It's hard therefore to talk about anyone who came of age in the 1970s and 1980s for whom Star Wars and subsequent science-fiction franchises weren't a central influence on their lives. We could look toward Harry Potter as a similar mainstream niche success, a seemingly contradictory category, but one that seems earned in both cases. It's a mass success because almost everyone in the culture would have gone to see these films, or read the books in the case of Harry Potter, as they were released; but at the same time, it's also a niche success because there were so many subcultural practices that

grew up around them. So each person's experience of these mass hits would have had slightly different inflections and would have brought them into contact with like-minded communities. Liking Star Wars was no longer enough to gain fan street cred, and various forms of fan involvement could still be seen as being too geeky. There's not just one Star Wars but many "Star Warses," which is why I think the ancillary properties or transmedia extensions become so interesting to study.

DHF: While the narratively self-contained original trilogy clearly wasn't organized as a form of transmedia storytelling, the popularity of the early toys and video games gave audiences at the time unprecedented ways of engaging with the storyworld outside the actual films. How did this affect the development of fan culture in the early years of the franchise, and how would you describe this constant interaction between immersion (in the films' spectacularly visualized and richly detailed storyworld) and extraction (of toys, games, and other items into audience members' lived experience)?

HJ: There's a tendency to underestimate how central the toys were to the Star Wars transmedia system. Academics are primed to dismiss toys as simple commodities that are ways of exploiting the markets opened up by individual franchises. In the case of Star Wars, as with many other contemporary media franchises, they play a much larger role. They are evocative objects that shape the imagination in particular ways. They are authoring tools that grant to the purchaser the right to retell and extend the story that they saw on the screen. The action figures suggest that there is more going on than can be captured in an individual movie, and that the background details of a fictional world can be as important as the saga of the central protagonist. Indeed, it hints at a place where any given character's story could be of central interest to us, and so, in that sense, we can see the action figures as paving the way for the kind of stand-alone films that are part of the new Star Wars transmedia plan.

In many cases, the action figures that mattered were not those of the big protagonists but those of secondary characters, background figures. In some cases, characters that barely count as extras are given new emphasis and new life as they become part of the personal mythology of the fan. We often tell the story through the example of Boba Fett, who developed a fascination off-screen that far exceeded the amount of screen time granted in the films, and paved the way for him to become a much more central character in the prequels. But I think you could tell the same kinds of stories around characters like Admiral Ackbar, Mon Mothma, or Hammerhead, all

of whom gained greater resonance through their extension in playrooms and playgrounds across the country.

I think this results in several different ways that one might read Star Wars. One is to see Star Wars as the Skywalker saga, which is grounded in the Hero's Journey and which has a singular focus even as it expands outward over time and space. But the second would be to read Star Wars as a world, in which many different parts can be explored, and in which background details can be as rich and meaningful as anything that goes on in the lives of the protagonists. This logic of world-building, of extension, expansion, extraction, shapes all the other elements that would emerge around the Star Wars constellation. Each new extension of the Star Wars text adds potentially more depth or appreciation of the world depicted on screen.

I don't know that there's necessarily a friction between immersion and extraction. I know I originally described this as a kind of paradoxical relationship, one drawing us into the film, one drawing us out of the film. But, in the case of Star Wars, the mastery built up through the extracted elements can result in greater attention or a greater sense of immersion into the world when we return to the film. Immersion involves kinds of recognition, mastery, built-up investments in certain series' elements that pop off the screen, the more we know about them and the more we appreciate them from the world off-screen. This is a sense of making Tatooine and other fictional spaces our own by making them the sites of our collective fantasies.

DHF: In the many years between the original trilogy and the release of the prequel films, Star Wars moved away somewhat from the cultural mainstream and became something that was more of a "cult text," maintaining its core audience of fans through the production of novels, video games, tabletop RPGs, comics, and collectables. At the same time, the growing popularity of fantastic franchises and the arrival of the internet contributed to fan culture's dramatic growth in that period. How do you look back at this era from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s, and how would you describe Star Wars's position within science-fiction fandom at that time?

HJ: Around the time that *The Empire Strikes Back* was released, Lucas did what is now a notorious interview with *Time* where he described his vision for the possible future of the Star Wars franchise. He spoke about three trilogies as adding up to the full Star Wars saga. The first was the one initiated by *A New Hope*. Once that was completed, he had announced that he was going to go back and do a series of prequels that told the events surrounding the collapse of the Jedi knights, the Clone Wars, the corruption of Anakin

Skywalker, and the breakdown of his relationship with Obi-Wan Kenobi. After those were completed, and after the actors had a chance to naturally age a bit over time, he planned to go back for a third trilogy, which suggests what happened to these ruling families as they were forced to hold the galaxy together.

As fans, we knew then what to expect from the prequels. They would be Arthurian, operatic, mythic—pick the word of your choice—but shaped by Lucas's particular reading of Joseph Campbell's monomyth theory. All of this pointed towards a more mature, darker conception of the series that would require strong performances to achieve the emotional intensity we wanted to see on the screen. Part of what cemented that sense of a shared conception of the prequels was the beginnings of the internet fandom, certainly by the 1990s. Early internet fandom was marked by sharp divides, flame wars between different factions who had very different sets of expectations about what Star Wars, or any other media property, was supposed to do. But over time, online fan communities tended to develop very strong senses of consensus about a particular media franchise, and that consensus becomes more entitled and empowered over time, so that, by the time the prequels came out, Lucas was facing a very intense and embedded sense of fan expectations, expectations that had been building over almost 20 years during the gap between the films.

You mention here that this fan interest is kept alive by the secondary production by the corporation, but it has also been kept alive by fan-cultural production. Over the 1980s and 1990s, you see the extension of the timeline of Star Wars as fan writers flesh out incidents earlier and earlier and later and later in the life of the characters, and then move beyond them to tell the back story of the Sith or the Jedi, often in ways that extend across centuries. Fans sort through these, debate them, some become semi-canonical in the fans' imagination, and these become central forces shaping what fans want Star Wars to become. During the same time period, we see both the increased visibility of fan-cultural production, and the first rounds of skirmishes with Lucas and the other producers over what the rules of our participation are going to be. And so Star Wars became one of the central battlegrounds by which fan relations to intellectual property would take place.

DHF: The prequel films were ambitious attempts to flesh out an existing storyworld, but they also seemed to place a very strong emphasis on aspects of the franchise that strengthened two common negative conceptions of Star Wars: first, that it was primarily about visual spectacle and groundbreaking technological effects, and second, that it was targeted at children and therefore

fundamentally childish. The CG-character Jar Jar Binks became the focus of fans' criticism in relation to both these points. How did you respond to the reception of the prequel films, and how do you look back on them today?

HJ: With the release of *The Phantom Menace*, Lucas seemed to seek to further expand Star Wars fandom to a new generation by doubling down on the child-friendly elements that had been prefigured by the Ewoks. It's not simply Jar Jar Binks who generated such intense controversy, but focusing the film around young Anakin Skywalker, who becomes a kind of male equivalent of a Mary Sue, not only someone who can do anything and everything well beyond their age, but also someone on whom the entire future of their universe seems to come to rest. I think from the first, Lucas saw Star Wars as a children's franchise, and in particular as a series of boys' adventure stories aimed at young men as they came of age.

This focus on the child consumer ran smack in the face of the consensus view of what those prequels were supposed to be. These were not the droids we were looking for and, as a result, it would be difficult to describe the resounding cries of disappointment many of us felt when we saw *The Phantom Menace* for the first time; such a sense of letdown, after the high hopes many fans had going into that film. It's not simply the shift of focus from adult storylines to a children's narrative, but it's also the lack of emotional depth in performances. It was very clear from the beginning that these actors with this director were never going to achieve the mythic resonance many of us had expected from the fall of Anakin Skywalker.

The second issue was a tendency to overexplain, which is sort of the core contradiction in transmedia storytelling. Fans often love and desire backstory, and yet a transmedia franchise, as Geoffrey Long has pointed out, requires negative capability. There must be gaps and holes that fans can fill with their own imagination. So, one of those gaps had been how the Force works: many read the Force as an extension of various kinds of Eastern spiritualism, but, with *The Phantom Menace*, we were suddenly given a biological explanation—the notorious midi-chlorians—that becomes so elaborate it shuts down so many of the possibilities that fans had been developing through their own speculation across the decades. This is simply one example of a number of ways in which Lucas's imaginings—which were clearly also retrospective imaginings—are supposed to override fan investment, and often result in fans having to let go of ideas that were much richer and more fully developed in their own grassroots extensions.

We also have to factor in the re-release of the enhanced and expanded versions of the original Star Wars trilogy. By this point, I had royally screwed

up my own son's chance to be of a generation that grew up with Star Wars. My wife and I had set very few rules as parents with regards to media. One was that we said he shouldn't see *The Rocky Horror Picture Show* (1978) for the first time with his parents in the room, and the second was that he should see Star Wars on the big screen. We couldn't have predicted that more than a decade would pass before Lucas would show the films on the big screen again, and that his generation would have the experience of growing up watching them on VHS. So it was only with the release of the special editions that my son became a Star Wars fan.

What frustrated fans about the release of the digitally enhanced versions was precisely this notion of the author's privilege to rewrite his own work, and Lucas's refusal to continue to provide access to the originals. It's a tension between author's rights and the public's rights: the public's right to access culturally resonant work, to see stories that had been a central part of their cultural identity since childhood. Many of us felt that this was a kind of vandalism, something in the order of colorization, which had been a central controversy during that period of time, and we would have drawn comparisons with other director's cuts, which were always released alongside the original. So, there's an increased sense in first-generation Star Wars fans that something was taken away from them, that the new films were a threat to their fannish investment.

My personal disappointment was so strong that I saw the prequel films only once. My memories of them grow fuzzier with each passing year, and I lost interest in most subsequent Star Wars extensions. So, for me, it's a period in which Star Wars simply faded from being a central text in my canon as a fan to something I used to be interested in. I could still be outraged by some of the further treatment of Lucas by his fans. I ended up being one of the major talking heads, a voice for the prosecution, in the documentary *The People vs. George Lucas* (2010), which is a long indictment of Lucas for the kinds of offenses against fandom that I've just summed up. But Star Wars itself held little appeal to me leading up to the release of *The Force Awakens*.

DHF: The prequels arrived just as media corporations' once-popular term "synergy" was beginning to go out of fashion, soon to be replaced by other concepts, including "media convergence" and "transmedia storytelling." So, in ways that were different from the earlier trilogy, Lucasfilm, LucasArts, and many of their licensees developed elaborate transmedia extensions that filled in some of the gaps between the films. How important do you think this phase of the Star Wars franchise was for the development of transmedia storytelling

forms in the early 21st century? And what do you think were some of the most interesting shapes it took?

HJ: The animated series *The Clone Wars* and games such as *Knights of the Old Republic* and *Galaxies* were very important for shaping the next phase of Star Wars transmedia extension. These narratives would have been especially important for a generation of fans who had come of age with the prequels, who were looking for more sophisticated versions of the Star Wars stories, a more elaborate mythology, a more fully built-up world, and more interesting plays with the timeline of the story. All of these are classic functions of transmedia extensions.

I think there's a missing chapter in the story that begins slightly earlier with the strategies that George Lucas and Steven Spielberg developed around the Indiana Jones franchise. It's largely forgotten today, but the television series *The Young Indiana Jones Chronicles* (1992-1993) was a serious transmedia extension of that franchise, and one that carefully negotiated between the interests of children, young adults, and adults. Beginning with *Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade* (1989), we got a glimpse of young Indiana Jones that was built into the film itself. The TV show then went back and told stories of the character at various ages. Each story introduced a different chapter in world history, each included cameos by historical figures but also recurring characters that helped us to build up a sense of a larger mythology around the Indiana Jones storyworld. The focus on different ages of the character meant that different segments of the audience could find themselves and their interests within this larger transmedia extension. This is so different from the kind of early experiments in transmedia extension surrounding Star Wars, which were almost always targeted at children, whether we're talking about the *Holiday Special* or the *Ewoks* Saturday morning cartoon series, which suggests perhaps the difference in the ways in which Lucas thought about the fan bases for the two franchises.

DHF: *You have written extensively about fans' complex negotiation (and contestation) of Lucasfilm's claims to intellectual ownership of the storyworld. One well-known chapter in your book Convergence Culture memorably describes the production company's various responses to fans' own creative storyworld extensions and transformations, shifting from a generally "prohibitionist" position to one that has been at times more "collaborationist." How do you think these developments in the industry's responses to fandom have affected a more general change in the way fans are perceived and treated by powerful corporate IP owners?*

HJ: By the time *The Phantom Menace* was released, a strong tradition of amateur Star Wars fan filmmakers had taken root. Around that time, you could find hundreds of amateur Star Wars films, often assembled on web pages celebrating fan contributions to the saga. Some of those films were attempts to replicate Star Wars's digital effects, using the resources of home computers; others parodied Star Wars and expressed, in various ways, fan dissatisfactions or simply playful irreverence towards beloved characters. Some of this might be understood as the working-through of the transition from childhood to adulthood, as might be expressed by the large number of fan films that bashed, abused, slaughtered, or kicked Jar Jar Binks in the groin, who came to stand for the childish elements in the new Star Wars franchise.

One set of those films celebrates fan mastery, the sense that, with the growth of home computing, fans now had access to the tools by which they could create works that would stand alongside more professional Hollywood productions. Others made a virtue of limited resources, a kind of grassroots equivalent of what was dubbed "imperfect cinema" when we're talking about Third World film. Star Wars and Lucas got a lot of credit during this period of time for their celebration of these fan filmmakers, running competitions online and, in some cases, recruiting the best of the fan filmmakers to work on one or another of the transmedia extensions of the Star Wars franchise. Looked at more closely, though, they were carefully policing the activities of the fan community, embracing those forms of fan creativity, such as parody, which enjoyed the greatest protection under US copyright law, and trying to shut down those forms that would have involved a much deeper degree of fan creativity.

Parody certainly has always been popular with male fans, and male fans produced the bulk of these amateur Star Wars films, at least the ones visible through the official competitions. Some have argued that male fan preference for parody suggests an attempt to downplay their emotional investment in the media properties, to hold it at arm's length, to demonstrate their emotional superiority over the media that fuels their creative response. But these fan parodies also took shape precisely because it was a legally permitted space in which fan filmmakers could work. If we look carefully, though, the rules of the Star Wars fan competition rejected other emerging forms of fan media production, which might make their own claims on the character or narrative development, something like the 'shipping that emerges from female-centered fandom, and in particular the kinds of re-use of found footage and the exploration of the emotional lives of characters that characterizes vidding as a particularly female response to Star Wars.

Here's Jim Ward, a vice-president of marketing for Lucasfilm, talking to the *New York Times* in 2002: "We've been very clear all along on where we draw the line. We love our fans, we want them to have fun, but if in fact someone is using our characters to create a story unto itself, that's not in the spirit of what we think fandom is about. Fandom is about celebrating the story the way it is." So there's a sense that Lucas's own creativity was to be celebrated and that fan creativity had to be shut down when it seemed to offer an alternative path forward for the franchise.

Star Wars seems particularly precarious to a new round of policing of intellectual property, because Disney as a studio has historically been highly hostile to any vision of a more open or transformative use of their materials, to the point that they have notoriously sued daycare centers that put pictures of Mickey Mouse on the wall. I know from my own dealings with Disney that the company is in transition, that there are many within the company, especially tied to Marvel and Star Wars, who want to see a more generous and open policy towards transformative production, but the fan policies have not been fully resolved. This is troubling when we consider the sheer range of cult media franchises that Disney now controls, between Pixar films, Disney originals, the Star Wars films, the Marvel films, and the Muppet movies, Disney now owns and controls an incredible chunk of the fantasy life of people all over the planet. And so, if they develop more prohibitionist policies, it's likely to have a chilling effect on fan creativity across the board.

DHF: Speaking of Disney's acquisition of Lucasfilm, we've seen two remarkable changes since the Star Wars franchise has entered a new phase in its history: firstly, George Lucas is no longer attached to the franchise as its sole "author-god" figure, and second, we are seeing a lot more diversity in terms of the films' representation of gender, sexuality, and ethnicity. Do you think the changes in the makeup of the new films' cast reflect a changing perspective on fandom, or on science-fiction audiences more widely? Why do you think Star Wars was associated for so long with fandom that was strictly white and strictly male? Is it mostly a question of the films' own representation of gender and ethnicity?

HJ: Frankly, Disney's acquisition of the Star Wars franchise and the news that George Lucas was giving up control over the saga was the best set of developments one could possibly have imagined. Suddenly, Star Wars seemed full of possibility again, in part because it was freeing itself from the increasingly embattled relationship between George Lucas—a cranky old white guy—and his more diverse fan base. As became clear with the

prequels, Lucas had a particularly narrow conception of Star Wars's audience that reflected his own white, male worldview, and he drew on a set of genre conventions, largely without reflection, that dated back to the late-nineteenth/early-twentieth century, and which smacked of the cultural logic of colonialism. Lucas had been clear all along that his desire to make Star Wars was a desire to keep alive the traditions of the movie serials from the 1930s and 1940s, but it seems that he was unable to separate the larger-than-life adventure elements from the exoticization of various races around the world and the kinds of racist depictions of non-white populations that had fueled film series like *Fu Manchu* and *Tarzan*.

The new Star Wars films reflect a fundamental shift in that conception of the audience. For once, Star Wars is ahead of, rather than behind, the curve, in terms of the developments demographically in who is going to the movies in the 21st century. Both of the Star Wars films released so far have strong female protagonists cut from the models developed by YA fiction, especially *The Hunger Games*. Katniss Everdeen could easily have been a prototype for Rey or Jyn Erso. These characters represent a reimagining of the Hero's Journey, no longer about a young man's move into adulthood but now, increasingly, about a young woman empowered and forcing her way into acceptance by a world that still remains somewhat skeptical of female accomplishments. This seems to value the contributions that female fans have made to Star Wars from the very beginning.

Secondly, the new Star Wars shows a recognition of the growing demographic diversity in the United States. Over the last couple of decades, we've seen a shift away from a white majority toward a minority-majority population, and therefore an increased pressure at the box office for representations that speak to Latino and African-American viewers, as well as Arab-American and Asian-American viewers. Hollywood is increasingly encountering this diversity, when it takes its stars and directors on the road to San Diego for Comic-Con. Comic-Con is noteworthy for the high number of female attendees and the visibility of people of color, and there has been a growing number of panels at Comic-Con that become spaces where fans articulate the value they place on diversity and inclusion in genre entertainment. So, in some ways, Comic-Con puts pressure on the entertainment system to provide a different kind of story, a different set of characters that we might not otherwise have seen.

Finally, the third pressure here is the recognition that Star Wars has a global market. We see it in the kind of transnational casting of *Rogue One* in particular, but a simple flip on the internet shows the ways that countries around the world are not only embracing Star Wars but pulling

it towards their own cultural practices. So, in Malaysia and Indonesia, you'll find shadow puppet performances of the Star Wars films; in Russia, it's nesting dolls; in Mexico and much of Latin America, it's piñatas; in Brazil, it's sand sculpture; and, in the Arab world, it's forms of cosplay that incorporate the hijab into the performance of Princess Leia and the other characters. All of this suggests the world wants to participate in Star Wars, and wants to remake it in its own image, and I think we're seeing Hollywood, which increasingly relies on global revenue, becoming more open to the inclusion of characters that represent key markets in the contemporary entertainment system.

All of this creates multiple points of identification within the Star Wars text. Both of the recent films are, in many ways, ensemble stories, no longer simply bound up with the Luke and Anakin Skywalker saga but expanding outward and building on the rich world-building that has shaped Star Wars from the very beginning. The portrayal of these characters of color and these female characters are full of contradictions, not the least of which has been the failure of the Disney marketing wing to fully incorporate them in its strategies.

DHF: Exactly! This reminds me of how other key industries, like toy companies and fashion designers, have been slow on the uptake, still producing Star Wars figures as a "boys only" genre. When The Force Awakens was released, many fans were disappointed about the extent to which toys and other merchandising were focused on the male characters, while the movie itself had a female hero!

HJ: I think Disney's failure to produce the Rey toys may reflect something of their own limited understanding of what Star Wars brought to the company. I know when Disney first started acquiring Star Wars and Marvel Studios, many people said that Disney had cornered the market for "princesses," and that it was looking towards these other franchises to provide them with "princes." That's a very gendered understanding of the market, and one that doesn't necessarily reflect where the current generation of consumers are, where we've seen more women and girls embrace superheroes and space opera, and it doesn't reflect the direction taken by more recent Disney films in which women are being given incrementally more active and heroic roles.

During this period of transition, the news media has been preoccupied with the narrative of white male backlash, especially the complaints about having a black stormtrooper in *The Force Awakens*. The news coverage of white male backlash serves the interests of producers, because it allows

them to go slow for fear of alienating the core market segment. But if you look beyond the backlash, we see many signs that fans are actually impatient with the slow process that is being made, in ways that media accounts simply don't document. We can look at the phenomenon of race bending in fan art and fan fiction; we can look at race casting, where fans try to identify what actors of color might play the leads in various popular genre franchises; we might see it in terms of competitions run by fan fiction and fan art sites, which encourage people to develop the secondary characters, particularly characters of color, in new ways.

Certainly, the fan conversations about these diverse characters are sometimes problematic. Many fans of color complain that white fan fiction writers map essentialist narratives onto the bodies of characters of color. More troubling still is that, even with the presence of resources to support a more diverse storytelling, fans, in some cases, are backing away from writing the characters of color. The fan podcast *Fansplaining* recently ran an episode flagging that the Kylo Ren/General Hux pairing had become the dominant one for many fan fiction writers, displacing the more racially diverse pairing of Finn and Poe. Here, we heard fans of color and white fans debate what this displacement might have to tell us about the persistence of various forms of racism within fandom. This is an important conversation about race in contemporary society, one that has far more at stake than white boys pissing and moaning about black stormtroopers. But so far, these debates have gained little attention from mass media and do not seem to be part of the dominant conversation about Star Wars's turn toward a more diverse casting.

DHF: Star Wars was huge from the moment it opened in 1977. But until recently, it was also—paradoxically—one of the only entertainment franchises that was owned and operated more or less independently from the major Hollywood studios. Now that it's the property of the Disney conglomerate, it has become another pillar within an increasingly monopolistic corporate entertainment industry that now seems focused on fan-pleasing transmedia storyworlds that operate as serialized narratives, as stand-alone blockbusters, and as the “mothership” for endless transmedia extensions and offshoots. Now that producers and marketers seem to have become so good at making fans feel involved and included, where do you see fan culture moving from here? Now that Star Wars movies are being made by self-described Star Wars fans, does fan culture still embody an alternative to corporate-produced mainstream entertainment? As much as I enjoy the stuff that's being made, there's also something depressing and even a little frightening about how well these

corporations know what we want and, of course, they're glad to keep giving it to us as long as we're paying for it.

HJL: George Lucas may have been technically independent from the Hollywood establishment as he took control of the Star Wars franchise, but the irony was that he was running the franchise in a more autocratic and reactionary way than the media conglomerates ever would. His independence meant that he was cut off, in some cases, from trends within Hollywood that increasingly valued fan engagement, which were pushing studio properties to be more responsive to the tastes and interests of their consumers. And he was cut off from critical voices that might have questioned some of his creative choices around the prequels and might have challenged the residual racism they masked. Disney has adopted a more enlightened, more progressive, more responsive version of the franchise in its relationship to media audiences.

So this suggests to us that the models of resistance that come out of Cultural Studies in the 1980s may not really be the best way to account for why fandom matters today. For one thing, what fans historically advocated for has increasingly been incorporated into the core text. In the 1980s and 1990s, we celebrated slash's same-sex romances as a resistance to patriarchal constructions of gender and sexuality. We're now getting hints of same-sex couples within the series proper, with many people reading Chirrut and Baze in *Rogue One* as an old gay couple. Slash fandom, though, was a way of working through how to tell stories of same-sex relationships within the inherited vocabulary of genre fiction, and what needs to happen right now is a working through of the nineteenth-century legacy of these genres to embrace greater racial and ethnic diversity and new configurations of gender and sexuality.

In that sense, fan fiction writers may be doing the work of the studios, but they're also doing work that matters politically, that will have a progressive outcome. Fan fiction writers are going to create many more narratives than will be generated by the studios themselves, all representing a range of different approaches that could be taken in telling the stories of the characters of color. Fans are going to explore the tropes and conventions that are the residue of those earlier historical moments in the evolution of the genre. They're going to rethink and reimagine what constitutes the alien in the space opera tradition, for example.

We're also seeing fans tap in to Star Wars as part of a larger trend of young activists using popular culture as a shared vocabulary for social and political change. In my own research, I'm increasingly talking about

the functions of the civic imagination and the sense that we need shared stories in order for us to imagine what a better world looks like and to work towards its achievement. What we see when we look at Star Wars as a resource for the civic imagination is that the series has been ideologically up for grabs for a long time. We could go back to Ronald Reagan's use of Star Wars to describe his defense system, down to Ted Cruz's embrace of the Jedi Knights to describe his own struggles against the concentrated power of the federal government. For every fan who is outraged by the colonialist fantasies driving Jar Jar Binks, there may be other fans for whom this is a perfect realization of their own reactionary conception of contemporary society.

These two forces came to a head during the last presidential campaign, when fan activist Andrew Slack went to a Cruz rally and gave him a lightsaber, which the candidate took great pleasure in waving about and acknowledging his enthusiasm for the franchise. Then the fan activist asked him, "What kind of Senator are you? Are you Senator Palpatine or are you Senator Organa?" asking questions about ethics, particularly ethics tied to the corrupt campaign finance system. This became the perfect photo op, the perfect clip to circulate on YouTube, to dramatize the ways in which fans were using Star Wars to critique current conditions in their society. The same group of Star Wars activists also have turned May the Fourth, Star Wars day, into a celebration of teachers and public education, a message not out of line with the emphasis on mentorship in the original series, but definitely with a progressive edge at a time when the right is advocating for school vouchers rather than supporting public education.

So we can definitely see the new Star Wars films as demonstrating a shift in the industry's understanding of its fans, a strategy of incorporation and collaboration rather than of prohibition. We're seeing an increased number of research firms working around the entertainment industry who are trying to understand, in more and more complexity, the dynamics of fan investment in media properties and how to maximize the value of fan appreciation. We're seeing mass media accommodate fan culture more and more, and we're seeing more signs of fan service, for better or worse, within the texts themselves. This focus on the diverse audience also reflects a recognition that transmedia allows media producers to serve multiple fan audiences through different kinds of extensions. All of this provides reasons for folks focused on the structure of media industries, the monopoly power of mass media and transnational conglomerates, to provide very cogent critiques about what's happening to Star Wars and other media franchises at the current moment.

But in so far as the Star Wars producers seem determined to serve fans, there is an opportunity for fans to push Hollywood toward more inclusive and diverse forms of representation and to critique and challenge the persistence of colonialist narratives and white supremacist narratives in the ways their genres operate. I've argued for some time now that fandom is born of a mixture of fascination and frustration. If fans did not see potential in the original material, they wouldn't be fans to begin with. But, if the text fully satisfied their demands, there would be no reason to rework it and rewrite it continually in the generative ways that we now associate with media fandom. We do not need to see what fans produce as radically resistant to media narratives; we can see it as in fact actively expanding those media narratives. We can see it as innovative on a grassroots level, testing the waters for future versions of media franchises.