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STAR WARS AND FRANCHISING:
EMOTIONAL OWNERSHIP AND TENSIONS IN THE DIGITAL AGE

by

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Introduction

I have always been attracted to the idea of the franchise¹ because it represents far more than just the individual film. It represents an amorphous cultural economy filled with meaningful interaction and exchange. Some say that creativity in Hollywood is dead and, in some senses, I wouldn't argue with them. This is a business and it is financially easier to justify expanding on something that has already worked. The franchise has long been satirized as a space that represents a loss of meaning and creativity. Just the Hollywood machine spitting out regurgitated ideas for the sake of money. "Even the most rigorous media scholars cannot help but confront franchising as a cultural blight 'such is the nature of the successful media franchise... doomed to plow forward under the even increasing inertia of its own fecund replication'" (Johnson, 2). But undoubtedly, their emergence as an economic system has shaped the media landscape and generations of consumers. There is a thriving ecosystem around pieces that have touched people and their identities on the most personal level, beyond their own lives and into their children's. In this paper, I aim to analyze the historic underpinnings of the relationship between fans² and creators in terms of ownership of ideas and relationships to canon³. From its roots to the digital age, I will break down the idea of franchises as cultural monoliths; they are sites of change and activity in an increasingly connected world.

¹ Franchise – A concept or Intellectual property (IP) around which an interconnected media market is created. This can include films, tv shows, digital media, video games, and more.

² "Fandom is a common feature of popular culture in industrial societies. It selects from the repertoire of mass-produced and mass-distributed entertainment certain performers, narratives or genres and takes them into the culture of a self-selected fraction of the people. They are then reworked into an intensely pleasurable, intensely signifying popular culture that is both similar to, yet significantly different from, the culture of more 'normal' popular audiences" (Fiske, 30). Fans are those operating within this system.

³ Canon - is the material officially accepted as part of the story in the fictional universe of the franchise. It is often contrasted with, or used as the basis for, works of fan fiction.

While franchises are sites of incredible social interaction, it's important to recognize that they are also corporate machines and "the contours of its skeleton...are beginning to stand out. Those in charge no longer take much trouble to conceal the structure" (Horkheimer and Adorno, 53). In order to feed the machine, franchises repeatedly expand back catalogue content, creating sequels and prequels galore. Providing new content is desirable for corporate monoliths and fans; it creates revenue and allows for fans to reinvest in the properties they love. However, new content can also create tension when the capitalist interests of the official, licensed Producers and the Consumers/Fans⁴ that they serve collide. As the intended audience, consumers see themselves as the owners and creators of franchises; top down dictations from Producers can cause frustration, disillusion, and disassociation from the franchise. I will be using the *Star Wars* franchise, and case studies within it, to conceptualize a cycle of reactions. I also aim to understand how the franchising machine may be dangerously deteriorating due to increasingly diversified media options and social media produced consumer apathy.

"A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away" is starting to regress further and further into a storied yet increasingly complicated past. *Star Wars: A New Hope* was released in 1977 from then little-known director George Lucas. The film exploded into one of the most storied franchises of all time. It has become a cultural signifier, touch stone, and legend for multiple generations. The films have chronicled generations of the Skywalker family in trilogy cycles. The first three, named Episodes 4-6⁵, were released from 1977 to 1983 and then a Prequel Trilogy, named Episodes 1-3, followed from 1999 to 2005. In the mean time between the official blockbuster films, countless books, TV shows, and comic books were released. Also,

⁴ It is important to note that the level and intensity of fan interaction exists on a broad spectrum of engagement, from casual to intense consumers.

⁵ The numbering of the original and prequel *Star Wars* films are based on the storyline chronology within the franchise and not the order in which they were released.

between trilogies, emerged digital platforms of interaction where fans created community by discussing the franchise and sharing their amateur content.

The Walt Disney Company purchased Lucasfilm, and the rights to the future of the franchise, for four billion in 2012. This began a new age for *Star Wars*. Disney has delivered one film a year since 2015. Every other year sees the release of a new trilogy instalment, building on the legacy of the Skywalker family. On trilogy off years, Anthology Films are released that expand on events from the classic series or create character backstories. These films have come in addition to a plethora of ancillary content released to support them and expand the universe. To understand the relationship between fans, producers, and the nebulous definition of cannon, I will be specifically focusing on *Episode 1: The Phantom Menace* (1999) and *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (2018). As the franchise delves further and further into archival content to find material and keep the machine fed, it returns to popular characters for inspiration. Anakin Skywalker, later Darth Vader, was the central focus of *The Phantom Menace*. It sought to reshape audience's view of this character from the most fearsome villain in the galaxy to a well-meaning but misguided kid. Han Solo, the dashing, scruffy rogue with an underworld empire from the original trilogy, was reintroduced as a hopeful, teen living on the streets in *Solo*. However, these evolutions happened in reverse chronological order, as fans were first introduced to Darth Vader and Han Solo as adults. Fans have had to reevaluate and realign perceptions of these characters because of added information. What happens when the machine with ownership steps in and reestablishes control over the topics and the direction of characters to which the fans already had identifications? Emotions of disappointment and disillusionment as well as confusion and disassociation develop. And the reactions in 1999 and 2018 share remarkable similarities; Fans took to the internet to discuss, create, and share in platforms of respective

times. These films forced audiences to realign their views of the films respective characters and further exposed the capitalistic drive of the franchise, ever regurgitating films for profit, regardless of anything.

In many senses, *Star Wars* was slotted perfectly into a company that is known for their interdisciplinary approach to franchising. Disney is famed for not only building on their franchises cross platform but also keeping old content fresh and exciting. As Lucasfilm President Kathleen Kennedy stated, “we have an unprecedented slate of new *Star Wars* entertainment on the horizon. We’re set to bring *Star Wars* back to the big screen, and continue the adventure through games, books, comics, and new formats that are just emerging. This future of interconnected storytelling will allow fans to explore this galaxy in deeper ways than ever before” (StarWars.com). *Star Wars* is once more at the forefront of the modern psyche, pulling the text into our time and place. However, this is also a new world with new norms that the franchise has been reborn into. To reiterate the main conflict of the paper in terms of *Star Wars*, the conventions of consumer/producer interactions have shifted with the continuing advent of the digital age. Building on a foundation of ever increasing user interactivity, Disney is finding itself needing to negotiate a shared place within an ever-expanding universe of content, coming from places outside of its control. Fans are rapidly embracing technology to play out their interpretations of the franchise. The emergence of Rotten Tomatoes, Netflix, Nerdist, and more in 2018 is remediating the franchise’s relationship with consumers. With constantly fluctuating tension on both sides, the future of this dynamic holds many possibilities. The *Star Wars* franchise is evolving the management of its brand along with the increasingly technological media landscape. But even as technology and methods of interaction evolves, their interactions

follow in terms of interactions between fans and creators on the technological landscape falls into somewhat predictable patterns of reaction and emotional cycles.

Franchising as an Evolution of Post Fordist Capitalism

To understand where the franchise exists in now, we must understand the development of the concept. Production monoliths, like: MGM, Warner Brothers, and Paramount, from the golden age of film morphed into larger conglomerates by the 1980's. These companies, such as Disney, with multiple mediums under their jurisdiction, "sought to develop brands that could be deployed across media channels" (Johnson, 4). But unlike the single leadership companies of the past, these new "conglomerates frequently joined with independent partners to develop and extend intellectual properties across those multiple delivery channels" (Johnson, 4-5). In favoring a more flexible workforce model, it created the ideal conditions for franchises to thrive under. Instead of having to employ a massive specialized workforce yourself, you could contract out to other companies to work on an aspect of the property. This contracting would save you the overhead and associated risk of having video game, merchandising, and film workers on your payroll directly. Or even if these smaller subsidiaries are not independent but truly owned by the larger conglomerate, each can still thrive, operate, and specialize within a new kind of ecosystem. An ecosystem that while, decentralized, has the flexibility to create and adapt for the global market. "Franchising enables corporate interests to exploit those properties in service of increasing consolidation and conglomeration...[creating] the industrial promise of 'synergy', where the same content can dominate multiple markets and generate more value than the sum of its iterative parts" (Johnson, 67). Before film companies were solely focused on their films and

the employees they had on retainer to create them. Now the flexibility of Post Fordist⁶ production model has situated media companies to take advantage of the potential of new technologies through a decentralized workforce.

Perhaps it was this Post Fordist model that so easily lent the franchise to be open to fan production since there is not just one entity creating content. Disney is a proprietor of the property contracting out to others, internal subsidiaries and external entities, to build a collective workforce around their intellectual property. This system is symbolic of modernity, mirroring the conglomeration and globalization of workforces within and outside of the media industries. In modern times, it is no longer unique to have developed media franchises across multiple platforms. We have seen the rise of these cultural monoliths alongside media monoliths like Disney. The struggle for these franchises is sustaining, adapting, and reimagining these cultural icons now that they have been produced. While the content and power may originate with the company as the producer, its replication is where it holds true power. “The replication of franchising extends not from the agency of corporate monoliths but from producers working for and within the cultural power structures. Without attention to the experiences of those cultural producers the replication implied by franchising remains mythologized rather than theorized” (Johnson, 4). Understanding franchises as being made of the producers who create within it, rather than as an intimidatingly large and distant machine, is useful to break down the franchises as ecosystems and sites of change and evolution.

This decentralized yet corporate model within the media industry, where control is in the hands of the many and at the at the same time the few, grew out of new available technologies.

⁶ Post-Fordist- The idea that modern industrial production has moved away from mass production in huge factories, as pioneered by Henry Ford, towards specialized markets based on small flexible manufacturing units.

Corporate communication technologies allow internal divisions communicate with one another easier; inventions like personal computers and email changed the way conglomerates operated. Externally, technology changed the ways that the producers reached their consumers. Alongside old media forms like film and TV, new media began to dominate spaces. New media's incorporation into films caused productions like *Star Wars* to become more than single films and to truly embody the term franchise. They are, at their core, defined as media objects that work across multiple channels of interaction. The film franchise is a key site of innovation for new technologies, working at the conjunction of new and old media to bring content to consumers.

The Rise of Digital Technology and Fan Interactivity

Legally, Lucasfilm aka Disney, owns the intellectual property rights and can do whatever it wants with the franchise. However, in practice, *Star Wars* is a cultural commodity. "All popular audiences engage in varying degrees of semiotic productivity, producing meanings and pleasures that pertain to their social situation out of the products of the culture industries. But fans often turn this semiotic productivity into some form of textual production that can circulate among - and thus help to define - the fan community" (Fiske, 30). Fans develop attachments not only because of Producer's content but because of the communities they form through discussions and grassroots content. Producers must also learn to cope with ideas of what is outside of its control in terms of new media. On the one hand, producers desire and need the work of fans; they are the primary consumer base and will perform the labor of replication without pay. On the other hand, anything created and thought outside the carefully regulated franchise system can complicate the relationship between fans and creators. Fans aren't under formal contract and when fans take the text in unexpected directions, tension also builds as franchisers attempt to reclaim the narrative. The impassioned audience is fickle and when

franchises don't fulfill the role that fans personally want and expect, there is tension. Alienating the core audience is not in the best financial interest of the producers.

At the same time as this diversifying of the media industry from within, there was a diversifying of technology from outside. *Star Wars* is a capitalistic consumer product. At first, media producers embraced new technologies such as “the computer [which] offered expanded opportunities for interacting with media content and, as long as it operated on that level, it was relatively easy for media companies to commodify and control what took place” (Jenkins, 133). Luckily for Disney, Lucas laid the foundation for authorized fan interaction early on. First, Lucasfilms saw the lucrative opportunities available in merchandising. The best example is the *Star Wars* action figures which were so popular during “that first Christmas, [when] demand for *Star Wars* action figures so far outstripped supply that Kerner, who had the toy license for *Star Wars*, was forced to ship empty boxes to retail with IOU certificates in them so that people would at least have something to put under their tree.” (Lukk, 254). Over time, with the advent of the digital age, this interdisciplinary marketing became even more essential to their models and *Star Wars* is infamous for the quantity of physical materials and tie in digital promotions they create for their films. In the physical and digital realms, you can't seem to escape it. On the other front of fan interactivity this has been something that has not always been in Lucasfilm's control.

The rise of the *Star Wars* fandom also coincided with the rise of fandom studies as a domain in media studies. Often using *Star Wars* fans as a case study, this early discussion largely centered around the physical creations that the fans made. Fandom scholars saw *Star Wars* fans as embracers of new technology. In addition to this series being a pioneer of the franchise model, the *Star Wars* fandom has historically pushed new frontiers in their creations based off

the text. And why shouldn't they; the widespread availability of home editing and production materials made it possible for fans to translate their love for *Star Wars* into the physical world. They innovated as amateur filmmakers, recreating shot-for-shot replicas of *A New Hope* using action figures, “breadboxes, a ventilation tube from a dryer, cardboard boxes, a discarded piece from a vending machine, and milk crates... [discovering that] large Styrofoam pieces from stereo component boxes work very well to create spaceship-like environments” (Jenkins, 147).

With the personal computer and production tools such as cameras, editing equipment, and website creators, Lucasfilm quickly lost control in the wild west of the web. The internet “made visible the hidden compromises that enabled participatory culture and commercial culture to coexist throughout the twentieth century... [as the circulation of fan content] came out from behind closed doors, they represented a visible, public threat to the absolute control the culture industries asserted over their intellectual property” (Jenkins, 137). The computer became a tool for personal use and individual exploration through user designed systems, allowing fan creation to move beyond creator's immediate personal friends. It allowed fans to find community with passionate individuals that didn't exist in their immediate interpersonal circles. The computer was a response to the desire for “interactivity [which refers] to the ways that new technologies have been designed to be more responsive to consumer feedback... Participation is more open-ended, less under the control of media producers and more under the control of media consumers” (Jenkins 133). 21st century American arts are defined by “a public reemergence of grassroots creativity” where mass culture is appropriated into popular culture (Jenkins, 136). Fans inject their own experiences and identities into the original item, using increased technology to birth new pieces of media. They even combine media in new and interesting ways, like in the case of *Troops* (1998) directed by Kevin Rubio. His “ten-minute, \$1,200

film...offering a Cops-like profile of the stormtroopers who do the day-in, day-out work ... had attracted the interests of Hollywood insiders ... interesting in financing his next project” (Jenkins, 132).

On the one hand, producers need the consumers to interact with the text. But these new creations from unlicensed sources may support or contradict the intended messages of the creators. And in the *Star Wars* fandom specifically, altered narratives have been met with mixed reactions by creators. Lucasfilm offered official fan portals and video contests as a way of cultivating content on the web about *Star Wars* but it was a losing battle. Then it became a constant struggle of how much control to exert over the IP. At what point do you tell fans to stop being passionate? But the one domain that producers do have control over is the films and the content that they release, a powerful mandate that fans must take into account given the film’s gravitas.

Darth Vader and New Content Woes

With the conclusion of the original trilogy in 1983, fan interactivity and content dominated the landscape. But this reclamation narrative came in full force with the release of *Episode 1: The Phantom Menace* (1999). In *Using the Force: Creativity, Community, and Star Wars Fans*, Will Brooker argues that:

After 16 years with no new *Star Wars* films, the release of *Episode 1: The Phantom Menace* was a major event for fans. After such intense anticipation, after such a long wait, it was perhaps inevitable that at least some of them would come away from the cinema with everything from a vague sense of disappointment to a feeling of betrayal. Of this group, some would try to rehabilitate the saga ... to celebrate the positive elements

and forgive the ones that jarred. Some would physically reedit the film or make their own *Star Wars* digital cinema according to their own conception of the saga; others, on a lower budget, would turn to fan fiction and explore aspects of *The Phantom Menace*'s characters that the film glossed over. Some would take out their fury on discussion boards, debating with other fans who labeled them 'bashers' and accused them of ingratitude to Lucas (Brooker, 79).

The idea of betrayal is fascinating. *Star Wars* is unique because of its age. It is an old enough franchise that the full impact of events like a franchise reboot can be studied in hindsight. The takeaway is that without the rise of new media technologies and the emergence of grassroots creativity, this boiling pot of emotions wouldn't have been as strong. Fans now had a space to express their confused and conflicting emotions about the controversial film and to realize how widespread these feelings were. Feelings of disillusionment when, in the fans' view, *The Phantom Menace* catered to special effects and gags rather than deep, emotional storytelling. One aspect of this disillusionment, I believe, was the older fans being awakened to *Star Wars* as a commercial entity. The machine has arrived to capitalize again on its investment, something not as clear to audiences before. It's one thing to experience *Star Wars* for the first time as a child, when it was initially colored with nostalgia and cemented into popular legacy. It is another to experience its incarnation as an obviously commercialized product later in life, a fact that fans are forced to grapple with to this day. The series means so much to fans, especially the kids who were in their prime youth when it came out and then were adults when *The Phantom Menace* was released. To their credit, fans are conscious that their gripes may be taken as the grumbles of complaining adults who don't want to grow up. But these insecurities "stem from a deep rooted personal involvement and investment in the *Star Wars* saga" (Brooker, 82). They

feel the need to preempt “the argument that fans were only disappointed by *The Phantom Menace* because they had grown older and expected the impossible – a film that thrilled them in the same way *A New Hope* (1977) did when they were seven years old” (Brooker, 83). The fandom fights vehemently against this “eye of the child argument” saying that even if you were to view *A New Hope* and *the Phantom Menace* objectively without that emotional attachment, *A New Hope* would be a better film for specific, logical reasons. “The fan betrayed” is an accurate way to put it (Brooker, 79). No matter what side you took at the time, for or against *The Phantom Menace*, there was a sense of being conflicted. You would either be conflicted that it didn’t meet expectations or angry over other’s critical reactions.

The reactions to *The Phantom Menace* revealed generational differences. *The Phantom Menace* introduced a new generation of children who were experiencing a new *Star Wars* film for the first time. One element within the text that was hard for original fans to grapple with was the recharacterization of Darth Vader. The whole prequel trilogy was focused on the history of Anakin Skywalker and his transition from innocent youngster blessed with the Force and technological skills to one of the fiercest villains in the galaxy. This was a drastic and traumatic shift from perception of the character that original fans had. How could this new character audiences were being presented with be the same one they loved to fear and hate? This conundrum then did not exist for younger generations of fans who were only beginning to be exposed to new *Star Wars* content through the Prequel films. Younger fans then made little distinction between the prequels and the original trilogy because, in their eyes, it exists as one continuum. They also lack the older generation’s instinctive realization: that they only reason fans were receiving new *Star Wars* content is because producers stood to make money.

And both new and old fans took to the web and created media in 1999. They competed in fan film competitions, popular TV shows now staffed with lifelong *Star Wars* fans created spoofs within Hollywood, and fans reedited the original film to include only what they desired. Brooker and McDermott have completed extensive field work investigating specific instances of fan creation that reacted to *The Phantom Menace*. They detail fan creations that gained notoriety like *The Phantom Edits*, a production in which a mystery fan re-edited *Episode One*. Jar Jar Binks was removed almost entirely and Anakin's dialogue was trimmed; the Phantom editor, via email correspondence, cites specific plot based and thematic reasons for his edits. "Ultimately, the Phantom reveals himself as not merely a fan, but as someone who was inspired by Lucas's filmmaking vision ... [made] possible because of the confluence of trends in computer technology" (McDermott, 256). In some ways disappointment in *The Phantom Menace* was inevitable yet the best thing that could have happened. "Nearly all of the current generation of Hollywood creators...can trace their desire to work in their fields to the influence of the original *Star Wars* trilogy" (McDermott, 224). But "for all the clever parodies and critical subtext of the fan films, they still cannot engage their source texts on an equal footing" (McDermott, 260). Though some have risen past fan creation, "fandom and fan writing were essentially the rookie leagues from which ... [one] might one day graduate to the big show" (McDermott, 252). The fact that fan creation will still always be categorized as amateur is what lead to the scholarship celebrating fan creation and elevating it, legitimizing the disillusioned reaction of fans into something worthy of being studied. The importance of fans and scholars work in defining the legacy of *Star Wars* cannot be understated.

Flying Solo in the Age of Digital Technology

I. Introduction

It's been long enough fans have forgotten about what it was like to experience the emotions of *The Phantom Menace* and Prequels. It was destabilizing and unleashed a flurry of interactivity. Fans struggled to accept that the text of their childhood was evolving. Many of the same insecurities about the state of the cannon are coming full circle again as new content is introduced, even if the circumstances of the society to which the piece is born have changed. The legacy of the Prequel films is the tumultuous footing that Disney began to build their new empire on. And in the time between the Prequel Trilogy and their new films, even more fan content was created. Now that Disney is in control, franchisers are creating even more content that doesn't always mesh with previous themes and iterations. New auteurs are taking up the mantle which is deeply unsettling for people with deep emotional connections to the older films. The new order of the franchise threatens the stability of deeply held personal attachments to the themes and content of a shared cultural commodity.

While the first few *Star Wars* films under Disney's helm have enjoyed critical and box office success, it remains to be seen if the new Disney films will continue a positive trajectory or if the same tumultuous emotions that emerged from the Prequels will occur again. I believe that this same emotional reaction is coming full circle and happening again, this time being played out on the stage of the anthology films. The anthology films present a unique thread to the prequels in that both are filling in character and plot that the audience has "never seen before" at least in a hegemonic, commercialized sense. They are going back and fundamentally changing and uprooting the popular conception of previously characterized characters. Han Solo in *Solo: A Star Wars Story* is a case study, just like with Darth Vader in *The Phantom Menace*, of what happens with the franchise becomes revisionist in original texts for the sake of the continuation of the series.

Solo: A Star Wars Story (2018) is the backstory of Star Wars's famous rogue, Han Solo. A founding character of the franchise, the enigmatic and charming smuggler roamed the galaxy with his alien sidekick Chewbacca. Despite the film making \$392.9 million at the box office, it was considered a flop for a *Star Wars* film, mainly in comparison to *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*'s 1.056 billion box office performance.

A lot has changed between now and the Prequels and a lot of it has to do with technology. Fans have forgotten a past where they couldn't create or interact with media objects through the internet. And fan's interactions between each other and with the producers are no longer contained to guerilla fan websites. They occur through the portals of social media sites which further complicates these interactions. Social media sites act as hubs where anyone can easily insert themselves into the conversations. The removal of the niche aspects of fandom makes social media sites breeding grounds for the casual fan. As there are more consumers, there is a smaller portion of the fan base that create and engage to a fanatic level. People undoubtedly still do the work of before in creating fan fiction and fan videos. But now people can also stand back and enjoy with as easy access to the fan content. This fan communication is becoming increasingly commercialized too because of the rise of third party news sites like Nerdist that while, are outside of the official *Star Wars* machine, are very much business, profiting off the desire for engagement and doing a large part of the engagement for the fans.

II. *The Phantom Menace* and *Solo*: Differences in Emotional Reactions and Fan Creation

What I think is dangerous about the *Solo* movie is the apathy from fans towards this film. Growing disinterest and has been seen in other franchises but so far it seems to not have affected the *Star Wars* franchise. The other new *Star Wars* films have set box office records. But not *Solo*. Numerous online articles debate where *Solo* fell off the tracks. But what remains is

general discontent and indifference. Franchises should never reach an equilibrium. It is this very tension that makes fandom exciting. Tensions and negotiated spaces for personal narratives are what drives creators, both licensed and unlicensed. But without that tension, the spark of what makes a franchise ceases to exist. Without revenue it also ceases to exist, at least in terms of official production. And the fan sites can continue to tear the film apart and analyze in excruciating detail what went wrong in terms of the film's content. But for whatever reason *Solo* didn't inspire audiences. Not that *Solo*'s poor performance will spell doom for the *Star Wars* machine. It is certainly concerning and is a good reminder that all films no matter how storied, are subjected to the whims of the market. Fan creation is happening around *Solo* in the same way as the Phantom Edits where fans attempt to rehabilitate the franchise. A YouTube channel called "derpfakes" has been posting videos that demonstrate the impressive, and at times frightening, capabilities of image processing using artificial intelligence. Using a process called deep learning, an AI ... intelligently performs an automatic face replacement on a source clip, in this case replacing actor Alden Ehrenreich's face with Harrison Ford's." (Liszewski).

But for large swaths of *Star Wars*'s audience, their fan interactivity is mediated by Social Media sites. And "not all platforms enable community formation" (Bury, 627). With the digital age, consumers migrated from personal blogs/websites/message boards to platforms like Facebook, Tumblr, and Twitter. These sites are beneficial to creators in that they can market and promote canon content. Fans too can measure success of their reach through social media platforms. Social capital is turned into a commodity of likes and shares on these platforms. While allowing a mediated level of personalization, the rigid structures of these sites limit fan interaction. Facebook, for example, "is not considered a fannish space precisely because it is not perceived as a safe space"; it requires real names and connections to others in the real world to

friend them thereby ‘policing identity and authenticity’” (Bury, 635-636). Unlike on other fan sites, on Facebook, fans cannot strike up a conversation with each other simply from stumbling across the same message board. Facebook’s platform mechanics discourage the development of online communities, potentially connecting from different parts of the world. Instead of building friendships through digital means, social media sites in recent years largely serve to underscore real life social interactions. This structure detracts from the potential of these sites as community building spaces. Without community, fans may leave a comment on a *Star Wars* trailer and then cease to interact further.

III. Relationship to Canon

Part of this dissociation from *Solo* I believed stemmed from its nature in editing the canon. Much like with the prequel trilogy and Darth Vader, it asks to call into question what we know about a beloved character for the sake of the machine putting forth more content and material. In the way that films were released it’s hard to reconcile the difference between Harrison Ford’s powerful performance as Han Solo in *Episode 7: The Force Awakens* (2016) to Alden Ehrenreich young and naive take on the character in *Solo*. In the film’s setup, producers were asking us to not only reach back in time to before the films from 1970’s where Han Solo was a young man, they are also asking us to reconcile our view of him as a much older, harder man from only a few chronological years before. While this is the same issue that fans had to grapple with regarding Darth Vader in 1999, that emotional struggle produced a different effect in this case.

In terms of the canon, the vast universe of information from official and unofficial sources has become too overwhelming for Disney to handle. An interesting case study is Legends vs Canon. As *Star Wars* was acquired by Disney, they have officially reorganized to

firmly distinguish sections of the vast universe. Never before has Disney tackled a problem like this. In terms of everything else needed for a franchise, they've got that down to a science. They have the merchandising, the big budget film releases, and cultural capital. But the cannon is confusing, and Disney has their work cut out for them. They have divided existing material into two categories, Cannon and Legends. Cannon is anything from the original films or the Clone Wars film/TV show, officially created and distributed by Lucasfilm. Cannon also includes a few texts but is broadly contained to the films. Legends content is expanded material approved and distributed by Lucasfilms before the Disney Merger. This encompasses old expanded movies, books, comics, and video games. Lucas's original six films are not Legends as these have been absorbed into Disney Cannon. This material does not include fan fiction. Legends material had to be officially approved and published by Lucasfilms. Legends is a term created by Disney to distinguish yet honor past creative content. "Anything that happens in the Canon universe, the films and so on, is in no way influenced by Legends material" (ComicVine). And while Cannon never acknowledges material dubbed Legends, "Legends acknowledges Canon" (ComicVine). But in some cases, especially within novels and video games, the distinctions seem arbitrary. It's clearly all associated with the same universe and under the same umbrella. And nor are Legends antiquated. Some are still ongoing like in the case of the *Old Republic* video game franchise. And really what do these labels matter in the grand scheme of things when it is all still content relating to the same franchise. The Legends versus Cannon distinction applies largely to semiofficial novelizations and video games that have existed within the *Star Wars* universe. This is more an attempt by Disney to organize. With these categories, they can keep Legends content in circulation but distinct from the new creative direction of the franchise. But it also serves to delegitimize fan production.

All the media forms discussed in the differentiation between Legends versus Canon are Paratexts or media objects that:

“surround texts, audiences, and industry, as organic and naturally occurring a part of our mediated environment as are movies and television themselves. If we imagine the triumvirate of Text, Audience, and Industry as the Big Three of media practice, then Paratexts fill the space between them, conditioning passages and trajectories that criss-cross the mediascape, and variously negotiating or determining interactions among the three. Industry and audiences create vast amounts of Paratexts. Audiences also consume vast amounts of Paratexts.” (Gray, 23)

Paratexts have the power to “amplify, reduce, erase, or add meaning” to original texts, serving in varying capacities as “control[ing] the viewer’s entrance to the text ...[or] flowing between the gaps of textual exhibition” (Gray, 23). As the digital age allows audience to flow between Paratexts without differentiation and younger audiences are consuming in less moderated ways. This official reorganization also doesn’t change the fact that many fans and consumers have been exposed to the ancillary content of non-canon producers through digital spheres of influence. When compared to the generational differences between adults and children viewers during *The Phantom Menace*, today’s younger audiences, that are being introduced to the series through the Disney series, are lightyears ahead in terms of potential for interactivity with the franchise. Fans now have the incredible power to access databases and content at their fingertips, filled with information and material about the official licensed producers and others. YouTube, blogs, and fan sites have been devoted to theorizing and creating from *Star Wars* for decades, fulfilling the needs and desires of fans. This inherently changes the way that fans interpret content given that they are consuming it out of chronological order and in many forms. Technology introduces ideas of generational differences in consuming

cannon because of chronology and digital spaces. Why does one even need to go to the theater anymore? Much less create fan texts when that previous work is so readily available.

IV. Critical Reviews and the Commercialized Information Tunnel

A number of reasons have been cited for why *Solo* performed poorly. One reason I believe is the information channels and the way that information about a series is conveyed to fans. One thing that is different about *Star Wars* during *The Phantom Menace* and *Star Wars* now is the sheer quantity of information and analysis available for the films. Information news sites on Hollywood, focusing on both the business side of the films as well as the fandom, have become more prevalent since the Prequels. Websites like Variety, The Hollywood Reporter, and Deadline are industry “trade” sites that analyze the business side of Hollywood. Fans were able to closely follow along as news titles were played out on international computer screens. Fans saw as original directors “Phil Lord & Christopher Miller Drop Off⁷ Han Solo Film Due To ‘Creative Differences’” (Busch and Hipes) and “Ron Howard [was] Confirmed As New ‘*Star Wars*’ Han Solo Director” (Fleming). This brand of Hollywood drama is one that creators would have had an easier time suppressing before. But third-party sites now meticulously track information about the series. And the information machine about Hollywood goes beyond reporting. The increasing presence of film/media critics, from traditional and online publications, make dissenting opinions of films known long before they hit theaters. Reviews titled everything from “How can *Star Wars* get back on track after *Solo*'s disappointing debut?” (Child) to “‘*Solo: A Star Wars Story*’ Answers Questions You May Not Have Asked” (Scott) and “The Force Is Half-Awake” (Morgenstern). A particularly scathing quote from the New York

⁷ *read fired from

Times describes *Solo* as “a curiously low-stakes blockbuster, in effect a filmed Wikipedia page” (Scott). This editorial coverage was combined with less than stellar audience feedback. The power of the site Rotten Tomatoes, a film rating and movie ticket site, has changed the way that users interact with films. As opposed to the assurance that official publications provided to older generations “the younger generations ‘don’t read newspapers and never will.’ ... they ‘check out film rankings at Rotten Tomatoes or Metacritic and dip into some reviews, but they haven’t found a particular film critic they trust to steer them straight’” (Frey and Sayad, 46). For newspapers, this is crisis in which “the traditional authority of criticism has been called into serious question” (Frey and Sayad, 47). Working from the popular sentiment is that the Internet has the potential “to enhance ‘communal spirit and values,’ provid[ing] avenues for participation in virtual communities, and build[s] connections between people who share similar values, interests, or concerns” (Frey and Sayad, 47). Rotten Tomatoes and similar sites “make some claims to a more democratic spirit and function of criticism”; whether they are truly more democratic not, consumers have grown to trust sites like Rotten Tomatoes more (Frey and Sayad, 47). Reviews and industry news are another element for Disney to contend with.

Nerdist is a fan news website that has built its whole business from providing videos, articles, and information for fans to dissect upcoming releases and analyze current franchises. It is a subsidiary of Legendary, a massive media conglomerate. Started by Chris Hardwick⁸ in 2012, the site is loosely based from the tenants of his book in which he defines “Nerdist” as “artful nerds. He or She doesn’t just consume, he or she creates and innovates... It’s the Golden Age for Nerds” (Hardwick). He discusses how self-proclaimed nerds can now profit and use their knowledge to further themselves from what they love. News sites and fan boards are no

⁸ “AMC suspends Chris Hardwick talk show after ex-girlfriend makes allegations of abuse” (Almasy)

longer just on the fringes, they are big business now. Nerdist represents the fan culture, communication, and community being absorbed into the capitalistic, hegemonic/dominant position. Franchises have struggled with the ownership and autonomy of fans dealing with the content in their own ways. The dissemination of information is something that they absolutely had control over and it is a space where the fans rely on information from the franchise. Now they have less control because of the increasing capitalization of fan culture and third-party sites. Fans have more autonomy on deciding whether or not to attend films which hits the franchise where it hurts: the bottom line.

V. An Increasingly Diversified Media Landscape

Also, people have many more options rather than just the *Star Wars* franchise. In the 20th century when *Star Wars* was initially released, there were fewer blockbuster films overall. *Star Wars* films are still big events today, but they historically didn't have to compete with the hoard of media content available to consumers in 2018. The movie theater is no longer a viewer's only option for entertainment on a Saturday night. There are numerous sources outside of it. Television and Digital Content are substantial adversaries to franchises like *Star Wars*. Television is experiencing a new golden age and is being filled with film level quality content. Digital Content through sites, like YouTube, are a new frontier with their own developing norms. And although *Star Wars* deploys across those platforms, it is no longer the only competitor. Newer franchises like *Transformers*, *Harry Potter*, and more all compete for the valuable commodity of fan's time. It is telling that even *Star Wars*, one of the most solidified franchises to ever exist, is having trouble drawing crowds to theaters. And its inability to do so stems not only from the amount of content available to consumers but the immediacy of that material.

“In 2013, according to research by Pricewaterhouse Coopers, 63% of households in the United States used a video streaming and delivery service such as Hulu, Netflix, or Amazon Prime, and, as the Leichtman Research Group found, 22% of those households are streaming Netflix every single week of the year... As a result, viewers not surprisingly are watching more, ... in larger doses at a time.” (Matrix, 120). These changes in consumer habits are also forcing media companies to rethink their strategies. People don’t feel particularly motivated to go to the theaters if they see that they will be able to watch the film at home. What’s the rush? Consumers did not feel a pressing need to see *Solo* immediately. The information in the film wasn’t significant enough to necessitate immediate viewing in order to have cultural capital to interact with other fans. Of course, the hard-core fans will go but what happens when you alienate them with the actual content of the piece. I think that the disillusionment and the conflicting emotions from before and with *The Phantom Menace* apply to the reaction around *Solo*. But there are also disturbing new trends come from fans and casual viewers alike.

Conclusion

“If we try to understand the media franchise as a list of markets, products, and corporate owners, we miss the processes and moments of instability as that multiplication has crossed boundaries of institution, territory, and culture” (Jameson, 68). *Star Wars* represents far more than just a corporate product. There is a thriving ecosystem around pieces that have touched fans lives personally. In this paper, I have unpacked the often-tumultuous relationship that has existed between Producers and Consumers, especially around the release of new films by the Producers. The reaction of fans to new media texts in existing franchises is in constant flux. Tumultuous emotions of betrayal come in waves following the release of new content for the sake of profiting from franchise. After the inception of a beloved franchise fans will never

experience it in the ways that they did before. Maybe fans have valid concerns about the intellectual merit of the new content that has been produced but it is always through the lens of the childhood they cherished. Fans attempt to remediate the differences in canon and their own interpretations of the franchise through fan creation.

I specifically have investigated the role that the digital realm has played in this interaction through history. An increasingly digital world has created ever evolving platforms of interactivity in which Producers/Consumers can touch one another. These untamed planes of interaction are the sites where tension between the capitalistic interests of the franchise and the individual investments of the fan (who perhaps desires a subversive or alternative interpretation of the text) are played out. The evolving economy of the web is changing the dynamic between producers and consumers. On the one hand the internet allows for producer's message to reach consumers more directly. On the other, it is distancing fans from the franchise and each other. The internet is also affecting the accessibility of information about these films which has changed the way that the industry operates. Consumers have a trove of information at their fingertips to make decisions about films. Consumers can access the reviews right at their fingertips from third party sources outside the franchises marketing machine. Fan culture is also big business and sites like Nerdist stand to profit. The content boom across platforms is competing for consumer's time, unsettling even the most secure franchises. It is not such a bad thing that *Star Wars* is forced to fight for audience's attention. It may allow them to get back to the roots of what made the franchise great. But social media sites and recent developments in methods of fan interaction are disturbing. People are creating, but not with the fervor and necessity that they once did. The franchise should never reach equilibrium, it is this tension that

drives it forward. Fan interactivity is key, and the evolving digital landscape continues to change this relationship.

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