

Star Wars and the History of Transmedia Storytelling

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Introduction: “What Is This Strange World We’ve Come to?”

“Excuse me, master Luke, but what is this strange world we’ve come to?” “Beats me, 3PO. Seems like we’ve landed on some sort of ... comedy-variety show planet.” Having just burst through a dressing room wall during the cold open of the February 29, 1980 episode of *The Muppet Show*, the “stars from Star Wars” maintained their in-character performances throughout this unusual episode, performing a comedic narrative that could—in theory, at least—be considered a legitimate part of the Star Wars canon.¹ Watching this episode almost 40 years later, one is struck, first of all, by the fact that both the Muppets and the Star Wars franchise are now owned by The Disney Company—a realization made all the more uncanny when all the characters join in a climactic rendition of “When You Wish Upon a Star” to close down the show. But the episode also illustrates that the means by which Star Wars reached across media to draw upon audiences’ familiarity with the franchise mostly happened in ways that were provisional, self-reflexive, and firmly located within familiar media-industrial practices.

Starting as a film that almost single-handedly transformed the American film industry, expanding into a merchandising and branding juggernaut, and resulting in one of the world’s most profitable entertainment franchises, Star Wars has, over the past 40 years, redefined the popular media landscape. Its multiple transformations make it not only a vivid case study of media-industrial history, but also constitute a unique, widely shared, and constantly evolving storyworld that has developed across every available media platform. Without exaggerating the novelty or uniqueness of a franchise and storyworld that has been so consistently disparaged for its magpie sensibility, the sheer scale and cultural impact of Star Wars clearly sets it apart from its many precursors as well as from its multiple successors. In part, this is again a question of scale: the first film’s blockbuster success in 1977 instantly launched an uncontrolled wave of merchandising and cross-media spin-offs that were incrementally developed into an elaborate storyworld with its own mythology, its own aesthetic, and its own fan culture.

The result of this decades-long negotiation between storytelling, participatory fan culture, and shifting media-industrial practices has been

1 “Shooting Gonzo into the Canon,” *Star Wars Insider* 55, August 7, 2001.

four decades of transmedia storytelling. From disavowed experiments like 1978's infamous *Holiday Special* to the lasting impact of the EU across novels, games, comics, and TV series, the franchise has pioneered ways of expanding storytelling that reach across media boundaries. Therefore, as the current age of media conglomeration and consolidation continues to intensify, Star Wars's transmedia history can help us understand both the opportunities and the tensions that arise when commercial entertainment properties expand across multiple media platforms while engaging with different audiences.

This book approaches the transmedia history of Star Wars as an opportunity to gain new insight from these complex interactions across media. Understanding the franchise not as a unified and cohesive storyworld, but as the product of constantly shifting creative, industrial, and reception practices, the authors in this volume dissect individual moments of crisis, of discovery, and of inspiration that collectively inform the development of transmedia storytelling as a media-industrial practice. In other words, these essays illustrate that “Star Wars” and “transmedia storytelling” must be understood as complex and contradictory terms that are undergoing constant redefinition.

In order to impose some order upon the almost overwhelmingly complicated history of the Star Wars franchise, we have identified four key phases in its history as a transmedia phenomenon. While the chapters in the book are not strictly chronological, as many essays discuss transmedia phenomena that reach beyond the period in which they were first explored, we have organized the volume into three larger sections—a trilogy, if you will—that foreground specific transmedia expansions that typify the media-industrial practices of particular eras. The book's first section brings together essays that are firmly grounded in the period in which the now-classic original trilogy was produced, from 1977 to 1983. In this initial phase, the Star Wars mythology was laboriously created—not just through the films developed in those years, but especially in the many expansions that experimented ambitiously with transmedia storytelling, such as tie-in comics, film novelizations and franchise novels, television films and animated cartoons, a radio adaptation, and developing video game platforms.

The second key phase occurs in the period between the first three films and the prequel trilogy—roughly from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s—as both fans and media industries converge in the development of the EU, incorporating every medium *but* film. The third phase follows from the prequel trilogy (1999-2005) and continues until Disney's purchase of the

Star Wars franchise in 2012. In this period, at the same time that Star Wars faced new branding challenges as a result of the negative reception by older fans of the prequel films and also of George Lucas's edits and re-edits of the original trilogy in the late 1990s and early 2000s, the franchise expanded incrementally across media, intensifying its transmedia world-building strategy through hundreds of novels, comics, games (board, card, computer, video), action figures, animated television series, and licensed adaptive and paratextual materials, such as storybooks, LEGO sets, and museum exhibitions. The second section tackles the second and third phases in Star Wars's history simultaneously, since many of the world-building and franchising strategies that have come to define Star Wars as we know it evolved together across these periods. As the chapters in this section illustrate, the periods between the mid-1980s and 2012 not only solidified the fan culture surrounding the franchise, but also resulted in structured collaborative practices between media licensors, developers, and creative personnel that rendered a complicated landscape of Star Wars media.

The fourth phase and current era begins with the franchise's return to mainstream cultural presence in the Disney era. Chapters in the third section address franchise, fan, licensee, and broader cultural responses to the new strategies and intensified industrial production proffered by Star Wars in the post-2012 age. The three main sections are bookended by interviews with two renowned "aca-fans" who are known for their previous work on world-building and transmedia storytelling: Henry Jenkins provides an introductory reflection on the franchise's past and Will Brooker speculates provocatively about its transmedia future.

As tempting as it has been to dismiss Star Wars as the top-down expression of cultural and economic power, the many chapters in this book illustrate above all that its rich history results neither from some capitalist master plan nor from the creative genius of any one creative figure. While it may seem as though transmedia franchises such as Star Wars have become all-powerful entertainment empires, these analyses of key moments show how precarious, unpredictable, and strangely unstable the Star Wars storyworld has truly been.