

School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry

**Transmedia Storytelling and the Evolution of Popular Narrative in the Age
of Social Media**

Luke Webster

0000-0003-0572-7578

**This thesis is presented for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy
of
Curtin University**

November 2024

Declaration

To the best of my knowledge and belief this thesis contains no material previously published by any other person except where due acknowledgement has been made.

This thesis contains no material which has been accepted for the award of any other degree or diploma in any university.

The research presented and reported in this thesis was conducted in accordance with the National Health and Medical Research Council National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research (2007)—updated March 2014. The proposed research study received human research ethics approval from the Curtin University Human Research Ethics Committee (EC00262), Approval Number #HRE2018-0645.

Signature:

A handwritten signature in black ink, consisting of a stylized 'A' followed by a horizontal line.

Date: 11 November 2024

Abstract

Drawing on case studies from the Marvel, DC and *Star Wars* franchises and my interviews with leading entertainment industry practitioners, this research interrogates the various approaches to commercial transmedia storytelling from 2008 to 2021. It situates present-day, technologically driven transmedia storytelling in the context of recurring patterns of human communication. I argue that transmedia storytellers must design clear navigational structures and engage in direct dialogue with their fans to be effective and conclude that storytellers who recognise that commercial transmedia storytelling is a flow of cultural energy rather than simply a commercial practice can achieve better commercial outcomes. As technology continues to evolve, commercial storytellers and producers who prioritise cultural storytelling processes will incorporate technology in ways that will maximise audience engagement and immersion.

Acknowledgement of Country

I wish to acknowledge and pay my respects to the traditional custodians of the lands on which the Curtin University Boorloo (Perth) campus stands—the Whadjuk people of the Noongar nation. These are the lands on which I have worked, studied and lived throughout this project. I acknowledge the rich history of education and storytelling in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and express my deep gratitude to the Elders, both present and emerging, and their peers who have open-heartedly shared their culture and knowledge with me. I acknowledge the enduring influence that First Nations cultures have on our storytelling traditions and am grateful for the opportunity to reflect on this throughout this project.

Acknowledgements

First, I extend my sincere gratitude to Professor Tama Leaver and Dr Eleanor Sandry for being not only the most insightful, passionate and accommodating supervisors a student could ask for but also wonderful human beings. Thank you for your wise counsel and knack for helping me see the forest from the trees. Your care, guidance and advocacy throughout this long and tumultuous project have shown me the teacher and academic I strive to be.

To my interviewees, who openly collaborated with me in the true spirit of transmedia storytelling, thank you for so generously sharing your time and knowledge and introducing me to a wider network of transmedia practitioners. A special thanks goes to Jeff Gomez for hosting me in New York and continuing to support my research.

To my Curtin University family—my mentors, teammates and fellow research students—you inspire and encourage me daily, and I am fortunate to count you as friends. A special thanks goes to Charles, Rachel, Kirsten, Tara, Nicc, Cam, Arun and Adam for helping me understand the direct applications of my research. To Tom, Jon and the irrepressible Team Extreme community, thank you for seeing every movie with me, keeping the transmedia discussion going and being part of my PhD journey.

To my extended family and parents-in-law, thank you for your support and encouragement as I juggled full-time work and part-time study. Dad, you inspired my love of storytelling and modelled community engagement as a way of life. Mum, I submit this thesis with deep love and gratitude for your commitment to making the world a better place and in memory of your enduring legacy of social advocacy. Josh (and you too, Pete), thank you for being there from the start—you are my most trusted accomplices in pop culture.

Finally, to my loving and patient family—Kate, Ollie and Charlee—you are my world. Thank you for cheering me on and becoming experts in the Marvel Cinematic Universe along with me. I hope I have made you as proud as you all make me.

My thesis was edited by Elite Editing, and editorial intervention was restricted to Standards D and E of the *Australian Standards for Editing Practice*.

Table of Contents

| | |
|---|-------------|
| Declaration | i |
| Abstract | ii |
| Acknowledgement of Country | iii |
| Acknowledgements | iv |
| Table of Contents | vi |
| List of Figures | ix |
| List of Tables | xii |
| List of Abbreviations | xiii |
| Chapter 1: Introduction | 1 |
| 1.1 Thesis Structure | 3 |
| Chapter 2: Literature Review | 6 |
| 2.1 Key Examples of Early Large-Scale Commercial Transmedia Projects | 9 |
| 2.2 The Growth of Story Across Platforms: A Tool to Maintain Audience Attention | 14 |
| 2.3 Transmedia as an Industry Term | 16 |
| 2.4 Scholarly Discourse on Transmedia Storytelling | 20 |
| 2.5 The Role of Fans | 23 |
| 2.6 The Historical Context of Transmedia Storytelling | 27 |
| 2.7 Transmedia and Technology | 31 |
| 2.8 Stories of Collective Groups Appearing in Present-Day Commercial Transmedia | 34 |
| 2.9 Best-Practice Methodologies for Transmedia Storytelling | 38 |
| 2.9.1 Building a Storyworld | 38 |
| 2.9.2 Consistency | 40 |
| 2.9.3 Aspirational Narratives | 41 |
| 2.9.4 Fan Satisfaction | 41 |
| 2.9.5 Super-producers | 42 |
| 2.10 Recognising Transmedia Storytelling as a Cultural Process | 43 |
| Chapter 3: Methodology | 45 |
| 3.1 Semi-structured Interviews | 47 |
| 3.1.1 About My Elite Interviewees | 49 |
| 3.2 Case Study Analysis | 53 |
| 3.3 Critical Textual Analysis | 54 |
| Chapter 4: Present-Day Commercial Transmedia Storytelling | 55 |
| 4.1 Marvel Cinematic Universe: Anticipation, Intersemiotic Translation and New Media Literacies | 57 |
| 4.1.1 Anticipation and Navigation | 61 |
| 4.1.2 Adaptation and Intersemiotic Translation | 64 |
| 4.1.3 New Media Literacies and Entertainment Thrills | 70 |
| 4.2 <i>Star Wars</i> and the Primal Message | 73 |
| 4.2.1 The Primal Message | 76 |
| 4.2.2 The Disney Era | 77 |
| 4.2.3 A New Hope | 84 |
| 4.3 DC Extended Universe: Character, Experimentation and Multiversal Architecture | 88 |

| | |
|--|------------|
| 4.3.1 Experimentation and Zeitgeist | 92 |
| 4.3.2 Inconsistent Navigational Incentive | 97 |
| 4.3.3 Teamwork in Typical Industrial Structures | 103 |
| 4.4 Summary | 106 |
| Chapter 5: Transmedia, Shifting Narratives and Cultural Impact..... | 109 |
| 5.1 The Hero's Journey in Commercial Storytelling | 110 |
| 5.1.1 Reciprocity and Collective Action in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Culture | 116 |
| 5.1.2 The Collective Journey..... | 119 |
| 5.1.3 The Collective Journey and Our Present-Day Networked Existence | 126 |
| 5.1.4 The Collective Journey and Commercial Transmedia | 129 |
| 5.2 Aspiration, Inspiration and Activation: Storytelling and Active Citizenship | 135 |
| 5.2.1 Active Citizenship, Fan Practices and Social Media..... | 136 |
| 5.2.2 Categorising Degrees of Affective Transmedia Practice | 140 |
| 5.2.3 Aspiration: Connecting with the Individual | 143 |
| 5.2.4 Inspiration: Situating the Individual Within the Collective | 147 |
| 5.2.5 Activation: Participating in Active Citizenship for the Collective Good..... | 156 |
| 5.2.6 Responsibilities and Opportunities for Commercial Storytellers..... | 164 |
| 5.3 Modelling Diversity and Reconciliation for a Global Audience..... | 167 |
| 5.3.1 The Difficulty of Making a Storyworld for a Global Audience..... | 176 |
| 5.3.2 Modelling Reconciliation and Divergent Perspectives | 185 |
| 5.4 Summary | 189 |
| Chapter 6: Transmedia Storytelling, Participation, Social Media and Authorial Control..... | 191 |
| 6.1 The Merry Marvel Marching Society: Celebration, Validation and the Impression of Fan Agency in the Marvel Cinematic Universe | 195 |
| 6.1.1 Consolidation of Marvel's Authorial Control Under Marvel Studios..... | 195 |
| 6.1.2 Validating and Celebrating..... | 203 |
| 6.1.3 Speaking to (Not With) the Fans = Impression of Fan Agency | 210 |
| 6.2 Finding Balance in Fandom: <i>The Last Jedi</i> and Lucasfilm's Fear Of The Dark Side . | 215 |
| 6.2.1 'The Fear of Loss is a Path to the Dark Side'—Yoda..... | 220 |
| 6.2.2 An Overwhelming Silence | 227 |
| 6.2.3 Social Media Jujitsu | 231 |
| 6.2.4 The (Attempted) Rise of Skywalker..... | 234 |
| 6.3 Super-divided: #ReleaseTheSnyderCut and the Runaway Fandom of the DC Extended Universe..... | 238 |
| 6.3.1 DC's Foray into a Shared Cinematic Universe | 239 |
| 6.3.2 #ReleaseTheSnyderCut and Divisive Energy | 243 |
| 6.3.3 Porous Storyworlds | 247 |
| 6.4 Summary | 249 |
| Chapter 7: Transmedia, Technology and Future Trends | 251 |
| 7.1 Physical Immersion: Personalisation, Exclusivity and Immediacy | 253 |
| 7.1.1 Personalisation and Agency | 255 |
| 7.1.2 Exclusivity and Socialisation | 259 |
| 7.1.3 COVID-19 Disruption and Digital (Dis)Connection | 262 |
| 7.1.4 Immediacy and Intimacy | 265 |
| 7.2 Platformed Immersion: Streaming, Rhythm, Repetition and Overflow..... | 268 |
| 7.2.1 Streaming | 269 |
| 7.2.2 Rhythm..... | 271 |

| | |
|--------------------------------------|------------|
| 7.2.3 Repetition | 277 |
| 7.2.4 Overflow..... | 279 |
| 7.3 Summary | 282 |
| Chapter 8: Conclusion | 284 |
| 8.1 Main Findings | 285 |
| 8.2 Future Research Directions | 289 |
| 8.3 Final Thoughts..... | 290 |
| Afterword | 291 |
| References | 296 |

List of Figures

| | |
|--|-----|
| Figure 4.1 Increasing Pace of the Marvel Cinematic Universe..... | 58 |
| Figure 4.2 Marvel Cinematic Universe Films: Critic and Audience Ratings from Rotten Tomatoes and Metacritic (2008–2024) | 59 |
| Figure 4.3 Highest-Grossing Movie Franchises Worldwide as of June 2022..... | 59 |
| Figure 4.4 Worldwide Box Office Revenue for All Marvel Cinematic Films (2008–2021) .. | 60 |
| Figure 4.5 Death of Tony Stark in Avengers: Endgame (2019) | 69 |
| Figure 4.6 Fan’s Use of Images from The Rise of Skywalker to Mock the Return of Emperor Palpatine | 81 |
| Figure 4.7 Worldwide Box Office revenue for Star Wars Films | 82 |
| Figure 4.8 Fan-Produced Meme Mocking the Return of Emperor Palpatine | 82 |
| Figure 4.9 Luke Skywalker at the Height of his Jedi Powers in The Mandalorian..... | 86 |
| Figure 4.10 George Lucas Meets Grogu on the Set of The Mandalorian | 87 |
| Figure 4.11 DCEU Flash Meets Arrowverse Flash in Crisis on Infinite Earths. | 91 |
| Figure 4.12 Harley Quinn Portrayed by Margot Robbie in Suicide Squad..... | 96 |
| Figure 4.13 DCEU Version of Superman Portrayed by Henry Cavill in Man of Steel | 98 |
| Figure 4.14 Global Box Office Revenue for DC Extended Universe Films | 99 |
| Figure 4.15 DC’s Most Profitable Films | 100 |
| Figure 5.1 The Hero’s Journey | 112 |
| Figure 5.2 Yunkaporta’s Model of Indigenous Systems Thinking | 117 |
| Figure 5.3 Closing Shot of The Last Jedi: A Stablehand on Canto Bight Wields a Broom Like a Lightsabre in a Galaxy no Longer Occupied by Luke Skywalker | 125 |
| Figure 5.4 The Avengers Cast with Director Joss Whedon Posing for a Photo at San Diego Comic-Con | 130 |
| Figure 5.5 Cast and Key Directors and Producers of the Marvel Cinematic Universe Showcasing Greater Diversity | 131 |
| Figure 5.6 Marvel Cinematic Universe’s Phase 4 Line-Up of Films and Shows Includes a Diverse Range of Characters..... | 133 |
| Figure 5.7 The Fan Engagement Pyramid..... | 141 |
| Figure 5.8 Model of Affective Storytelling..... | 142 |
| Figure 5.9 Early Marketing for Star Wars: The Force Awakens, Showing Finn Brandishing Luke Skywalker’s Lightsabre | 150 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Figure 5.10 Black Panther, Portrayed by Chadwick Boseman, is a Powerful Marvel Superhero and King and Leader of a Secret Technocratic African Community .. | 151 |
| Figure 5.11 Fans Gathering Outside a Screening of Black Panther in Japan..... | 153 |
| Figure 5.12 Marvel Cinematic Universe Actor Mark Ruffalo Posts Photographs of Children Recognising the Importance of Boseman’s Passing | 153 |
| Figure 5.13 Actor Halle Berry Posts an Image of a Child Mourning the Loss of Boseman, Highlighting the Importance of Racial Representation..... | 154 |
| Figure 5.14 John Boyega Speaking at a Black Lives Matter Rally in London | 155 |
| Figure 5.15 Mark Hamill Tweets About a Fan who Drew on the Jedi Ethos to Act Peacefully in the Face of Conflict | 158 |
| Figure 5.16 Placard Images of Star-Lord and Rocket Raccoon with Modified Dialogue at a Climate Change Rally in Los Angeles | 160 |
| Figure 5.17 Example of Fan Activism in the #wheresgamora Movement..... | 162 |
| Figure 5.18 Example of Fan Activism in the #WheresNatasha Movement..... | 162 |
| Figure 5.19 Example of Fan Activism in the #WheresRey Movement | 163 |
| Figure 5.20 Kathleen Kennedy Attending the Archer Film Festival as Keynote Speaker.... | 168 |
| Figure 5.21 Marvel Cinematic Universe Phase 4 Films and Television Shows Announced at the 2022 San Diego Comic-Con..... | 170 |
| Figure 5.22 Main Cast of the DC Extended Universe..... | 172 |
| Figure 5.23 Spouses Larma D’Acy and Wrobie Tyce Kiss in The Rise of Skywalker | 184 |
| Figure 5.24 Captain America and Iron Man Fighting in Captain America: Civil War..... | 188 |
| Figure 5.25 Iron Man and Captain America Reconcile With Each Other in Avengers: Endgame..... | 188 |
| Figure 6.1 Marvel Cinematic Universe Version of Spider-Man Introduced in Captain America: Civil War | 200 |
| Figure 6.2 Spider-Man: No Way Home (2021) Features Three Versions of Spider-Man.... | 201 |
| Figure 6.3 Kevin Feige Introducing Fans to Marvel Cinematic Universe’s Phase 3 Films.. | 204 |
| Figure 6.4 The Avengers Cast Posing for a Photograph | 209 |
| Figure 6.5 Chris Evans Posts a Message of Optimism During an Era of Political Upheaval in the United States | 210 |
| Figure 6.6 Official Membership Badge of the Merry Marvel Marching Society | 212 |
| Figure 6.7 Actor Tom Hiddleston Silences Fans While Appearing as Loki at the 2013 San Diego Comic-Con International | 215 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| Figure 6.8 Mark Hamill Apologising for his Public Comments and Stating That Johnson’s Vision of Luke Skywalker was Better than His Own | 220 |
| Figure 6.9 Hateful Edits Made to Rose Tico’s Wookieepedia Page | 221 |
| Figure 6.10 Body Shaming Commentary Directed at Rose Tico by a Social Media Influencer | 222 |
| Figure 6.11 Pizzagate Conspirator Jack Posobiec Posted a Fictional Star Wars Conspiracy Designed to Motivate Trump Supporters to Boycott the Franchise... .. | 226 |
| Figure 6.12 Mark Hamill Defends Kelly Marie Tran, Posting ‘What’s Not To Love? #GetALifeNerds’ | 228 |
| Figure 6.13 Rian Johnson Posts an Image of a Resplendent Tran with a Crown Emoji Following the Release of The Rise of Skywalker | 236 |
| Figure 6.14 Zack Snyder Posts Cryptic Messages in Niche Social Media Site Vero | 244 |
| Figure 6.15 #ReleaseTheSnyderCut Trends Across America..... | 245 |
| Figure 7.1 DC FanDome 2021 Offered Users Access to the Different Worlds of DC | 264 |
| Figure 7.2 Marvel Phase 4 Timeline Revealed at the 2019 San Diego Comic-Con, Including Five Films, Four Live-Action Streaming Shows and One Animated Show..... | 272 |
| Figure 7.3 Lucasfilm’s 2020 Announcement of New Projects, Including One Film, Seven Streaming Shows and Three Animated Shows | 272 |
| Figure 7.4 Star Wars Legacy Character Boba Fett Appearing in Season 2 of The Mandalorian Prior to Headlining His Own Spin-Off Show | 273 |
| Figure 7.5 The Memification of Grogu | 276 |
| Figure 7.6 Disney+ Offers Users Multiple Viewing Orders for the Marvel Cinematic Universe | 278 |
| Figure 7.7 At the Conclusion of WandaVision, Viewers are Recommended to Watch Avengers: Age of Ultron | 279 |

List of Tables

| | |
|---|-----|
| Table 5.1 Collective Journey Storytelling Structure | 121 |
| Table 5.2 Marvel Cinematic Universe and the Trend from the Hero's Journey to the Collective Journey | 132 |

List of Abbreviations

| | |
|------|----------------------------|
| AR | augmented reality |
| DCEU | DC Extended Universe |
| DCU | DC Universe |
| FOMO | fear of missing out |
| IP | intellectual property |
| MCU | Marvel Cinematic Universe |
| PGA | Producers Guild of America |
| SDCC | San Diego Comic-Con |
| US | United States |
| VR | virtual reality |

Chapter 1: Introduction

Scholarly inquiry into transmedia storytelling reached a zenith in the 2010's before interest in the concept began to wane, however as global communication practices continue to transform at an unprecedented rate understanding effective interconnected storytelling practices has only continued to become more relevant for present-day communications practitioners and scholars.

Over the past decade, excitement has surrounded the analysis of major commercial entertainment franchises and the industrial and cultural convergences that have allowed interconnected storytelling to be implemented at a larger scale than previously possible. Research has reflected upon the possibilities of highly coordinated commercial entertainment and focused upon identifying innovations in this field.

This thesis advances considerations of transmedia storytelling through a holistic analysis of commercial transmedia entertainment projects that have unfurled over the past fifteen years. With the benefit of time and distance, this research is focused upon analysing what occurred and how the realities of commercial entertainment differ from idealised conceptual models. From this perspective, this research locates present-day transmedia practice within recurring cultural patterns and in the context of shifts occurring within other fields of communication. While notions of storytelling are generally affiliated with the realm of entertainment especially within transmedia studies, here storytelling is shown to be essential components of cultural change and action, and transmedia storytelling is therefore situated within a broader discourse of systemic cultural change.

Transmedia storytelling is a concept that has been forged through ongoing scholarly and industry collaboration and has become a rich field of inquiry by scholars seeking to better understand the rapidly evolving media landscape. The concept rose to prominence following the publication of Henry Jenkins's (2006a) *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media*

Collide, which describes transmedia storytelling as a collaborative, interconnected, immersive form of entertainment against a backdrop of converging industrial and technological innovations. Transmedia storytelling can provide audiences with thoughtful, well-planned, artistically rewarding and participatory entertainment experiences. However, it has not been employed in the entertainment industry to the extent that advocates had hoped. While transmedia storytelling is often used as an industry buzzword for interconnected distributed content and elements of it are appearing more frequently, this typically occurs without best-practice planning or coordination, and it rarely moves beyond the author–audience dynamics of traditional broadcast media.

This thesis seeks to highlight the gap between the vibrant early discussions about transmedia storytelling and the realities of large-scale commercial entertainment. Central to this discussion is the increasing conglomeration of large-scale entertainment companies, the undeniable influence of social media and ongoing advances in technology. This thesis focuses on the period 2008 to 2021, a relative boom time in the evolution of commercial transmedia storytelling, with a specific focus on the years 2016 to 2021. During this period, the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), under the stewardship of Disney, became a dominant force in global entertainment; Disney acquired and rebooted *Star Wars* for a new generation of fans; and Warner Bros. experimented with its intellectual property (IP) from DC Comics across a range of major media platforms. While other media companies have attempted to launch commercial transmedia franchises, they have not flourished to the same degree.

The period of this research was also marked by a proliferation of new content. Following the international success of Netflix, every major media company launched its own streaming platform, resulting in a battle for audience attention dubbed ‘the streaming wars’ (Lobato, 2018; Lobato & Lotz, 2021). The industry-wide rush to find new ways to connect with audiences has resulted in more commercial entertainment than ever, transformed popular

viewing habits and fuelled new modes of commercial transmedia practice. In the era of information abundance, effectively navigating content has become increasingly important to the design of transmedia storyworlds.

This research was also shaped by a range of substantial and unforeseen global events. First and foremost, the COVID-19 pandemic had a significant impact on the entertainment industry that is still being felt today. The pandemic reshaped commercial production practices, enabling the analysis of a different iteration of commercial entertainment during the second half of this research project. Second, the role of social media as a tool for spontaneous and self-organised social movements has become increasingly prevalent (M. M. Brough & Shresthova, 2012; Jenkins et al., 2016). Global political movements such as #MeToo, Black Lives Matter and Stop Asian Hate have amplified the public discourse on inclusion and diversity during a time of cultural introspection and reckoning. Simultaneously, Donald Trump's presidency of 2017–2021 ushered in an era of heightened binary political discourse in Western culture and on social media (Lockhart, 2019; Ross & Caldwell, 2020). Along with the pandemic, this has brought an increased focus to the role of social media in the spread of misinformation, deception and social division.

Despite this, as I argue in this thesis, entertainment plays a significant role in informing and facilitating the cultural conversation, which is often overlooked in the commercial and industrial discourse. This thesis analyses various aspects of convergence culture, exploring transmedia storytelling as both an idealised form of entertainment and a modern commercial practice.

1.1 Thesis Structure

The remaining chapters of this thesis are structured as follows.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature on the topic, highlighting the historical, cultural, commercial, artistic, technological and authorial aspects of the current media landscape. It

discusses the optimism that permeated the early discourse on transmedia storytelling and its importance for modelling possibility and change.

Chapter 3 outlines the mixed methodology used for this research, which included semi-structured interviews with ‘elites’ (Brunn, 2016; W. S. Harvey, 2011; Moyser & Wagstaffe, 1987), the analysis of three major case studies and a critical textual analysis. Insights from the interviewees have been incorporated across the entire project.

Chapter 4 presents an analysis of three case studies on modern commercial transmedia—the MCU, the DC Extended Universe (DCEU) and *Star Wars*. This enabled me to consider the variety and complexity of commercial transmedia structures alongside the common commercial interest in adaptation and remixing.

Chapter 5 investigates the cultural forces that inform and are informed by large-scale commercial storytelling. It considers modern transmedia within the cyclical nature of cultural education and argues that the transmedia phenomenon is both new and ancient. I explore what I call *affective storytelling practice* and argue that conscientious storytelling can and must be used to advance social cohesion.

Chapter 6 considers the evolving relationships between commercial authors and audiences in the age of social media. Using case studies from the MCU, DCEU and *Star Wars*, I investigate the importance of fan engagement strategies to maintain the health and vitality of large-scale entertainment franchises. I explore the power of directly conversing with fans, despite this strategy being typically avoided by major media companies. I also reflect on the shifting expectations of modern franchise authors and the complex power dynamics that are becoming increasingly public through our collective use of social media.

Finally, in Chapter 7, I explore the correlation between transmedia and technology. While recognising that technology plays an undeniable role in the evolution of commercial entertainment, this chapter reinforces that the creation of transmedia storyworlds long

precedes the advent of modern technologies. I show that storytellers must prioritise the fundamental principles of human communication when using emerging technologies to create sustained immersive entertainment experiences.

Throughout the duration of my research project, I have been driven by a desire to better understand the cultural and commercial forces shaping our modern systems of entertainment. As I conclude the writing of this thesis, I realise this desire stems from a fundamental urge to better understand how information can effectively travel and be received in the age of information abundance. My hope is that this research advances the discourse on the meaningful creation of, and engagement with, commercial entertainment and the roles that both producers and consumers can play to foster greater inclusivity and social responsibility in this space. By understanding how entertainment can influence systemic cultural change, storytellers and audiences gain greater insight into their capacity to imagine, plan and drive meaningful change.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

The concept of transmedia storytelling has flourished since the early 2000s, both as a mode of production in the commercial entertainment industry and as a field of academic study. Traditional approaches to commercial entertainment have been disrupted by technological advances, structural shifts in the entertainment industry and social media. Storytellers now have the ability to tell ambitious and complex stories across multiple platforms, while audiences have more avenues through which to consume and participate in the experience. While many have tried to define transmedia storytelling, the lack of a universally accepted definition demonstrates the fluid nature of this cultural phenomenon.

Marsha Kinder (1993) coined the term ‘transmedia’ in her book *Playing with Power in Movies, Television and Video Games: From Muppet Babies to Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles*. Kinder (1993) uses the term ‘transmedia intertextuality’ (p. 120) to describe the postmodern children’s entertainment experiences that were emerging in the early 1990s, when entertainment companies were beginning to offer these experiences across multiple platforms to boost their commercial success. A prime example of this phenomenon is the *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* franchise, where the characters appear in cartoons, video games and toys. Kinder (1993) refers to this as a ‘supersystem’, described as ‘a network of intertextuality constructed around a figure or group of figures from pop culture who are either fictional . . . or “real”’ (p. 122). These supersystems have the capacity to not only cut across different media platforms but also appeal to diverse generations, classes and subcultures for increased commercial success (Kinder, 1993). In her small quantitative study, Kinder demonstrated that children prefer this new and more interactive mode of entertainment over the traditional cinema experience, which they find boring in comparison. Framed by concepts of marketing, commercialisation and consumption behaviours, the term ‘transmedia’ was born from Kinder’s research.

Jenkins (2003) repurposed the term ‘transmedia’ in his article ‘Transmedia storytelling: Moving characters from books to films to video games can make them stronger and more compelling’. In this article, Jenkins argues that younger generations, who grew up on franchises such as *Pokémon*, will increasingly expect to see these interconnected stories across a range of platforms, and that this type of entertainment will become normalised in the popular culture. He further notes that despite the technological conditions being right, the seamless production of such stories will require media companies to engage in collaboration and develop their infrastructure, which would bring them substantial rewards. According to Jenkins, transmedia storytelling is a method of expanding the artistic vision and may be achieved by single authors or small creative units overseeing its rollout across connected platforms.

In his seminal work, *Convergence Culture: Where Old and New Media Collide*, Jenkins (2006a) popularised the term ‘transmedia storytelling’, shaping academic and commercial discussions of the concept in the years since. In the book, Jenkins analyses Western (primarily American) commercial entertainment, using the term ‘transmedia storytelling’ to describe the heavily integrated popular narratives that were emerging such as *The Matrix* franchise. Jenkins (2006a) describes the transmedia storytelling model as follows:

A transmedia story unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole. In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best—so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through television, novels, and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction.

(pp. 95–96)

Jenkins (2006a) argues that transmedia storytelling differs from multimedia, cross-media or adaptation—rather, it is a new form of entertainment that transcends previous models. It

enables storytellers to strategically place content in different types of media with the purpose of creating vast, immersive storyworlds and achieving levels of narrative complexity and audience investment far beyond what Hollywood has traditionally been able to. In a 2007 blog post, Jenkins (2007) explained that ‘transmedia storytelling represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience’ (para. 2).

In his book, Jenkins (2006a) argues that this practice has only become possible because we have reached a point of cultural convergence, which he defines as ‘the flow of content across multiple media platforms, the cooperation between multiple media industries, and the migratory behavior of media audiences who will go almost anywhere in search of the kinds of entertainment experiences they want’ (p. 2). In essence, Jenkins (2006a) believes we have reached a point where collaborative industrial relations and advanced technologies enable storytellers to tell immense stories across multiple platforms, and audiences have the cultural and technological literacy to track down and become immersed in this content (p. 282).

Jenkins (2006a) argues that audiences are active participants in transmedia storytelling. Drawing on his earlier research into fan culture, he observes that social media has enabled fan communities to work collectively to navigate and understand complex storyworlds. Unlike the traditional ‘lean-back’, single-platform styles of entertainment, transmedia storytelling requires audiences to move across media platforms to follow a narrative. Through this process of searching for information, individuals become hunters and gatherers (Jenkins, 2006b), piecing together information in the order they wish and becoming increasingly immersed in the transmedia storyworld.

Jenkins’s research leans more towards exploring the artistic potential of transmedia storytelling. In his personal blog *Pop Junctions*, Jenkins (2023) refers to himself an ‘aca/fan’

(a hybrid of ‘academic’ and ‘fan’) (para. 11). It is from this perspective that he conducts his research, with the optimistic discourse of a fan of popular media who can see a way for storytellers, audiences and technology to combine in a manner that will elevate the art of storytelling and entertainment.

Since the publication of *Convergence Culture*, much discussion and debate on transmedia storytelling has ensued as both academics and practitioners, some of whom wear both hats, have sought to make sense of this cultural phenomena. Jenkins’s transmedia storytelling framework, while clear and constructive, has been the topic of much debate as relevant stakeholders have sought to better understand transmedia practices. The ever-present tension between art and commerce has provided fertile ground for much of the discussion and attempts made to define the practice.

2.1 Key Examples of Early Large-Scale Commercial Transmedia Projects

In the early 2000s, practitioners and academics engaged in a hard-fought turf war over the most appropriate terminology for this emerging media practice. These exchanges often took place ‘on the margins, through informal channels—face-to-face exchanges at conferences and local meet-ups, podcast interviews, blog posts, even exchanges on social media’ (Jenkins, 2019a, p. xxviii). While Jenkins had put a name to an emerging cultural and industrial practice, there was no collective and precise definition of transmedia storytelling. Transmedia practitioner Andrea Phillips (2016) likens this to an art movement excitedly attempting to establish the boundaries and possibilities of a new style.

Brian Clark (2021b), a leading practitioner and prominent figure in the transmedia debate, distinguished between ‘East Coast’ and ‘West Coast’ transmedia. East Coast transmedia refers to New York-based indie productions, which have smaller budgets, are more web-centric, interactive and interwoven, are likely to last for shorter periods and are designed mostly for small audiences. In contrast, West Coast transmedia, otherwise known as

Hollywood or franchise transmedia, describes big media productions such as films and video games that typically take place on a larger scale and over longer periods (Clark, 2021b; Phillips, 2012).

While many professional storytellers and media creatives saw the potential in creating transmedia stories from ‘whole cloth’, as suggested by Jenkins (2007), the reality for those in the commercial entertainment industry was that they were bound within the confines of rigid production and financial structures. Prior to the publication of *Convergence Culture*, a number of practitioners had already worked on or experimented with transmedia storytelling, including Jeff Gomez (*Magic: The Gathering*, 1994; *Turok: Dinosaur Hunter*, 1996), Mike Monello (*The Blair Witch Project*, 1999), Jordan Weisman and Sean Stewart (*The Beast*, 2001) and Jay Bushman (who would go on to write *The Lizzie Bennet Diaries* in 2012). In their own way, these projects were pushing established commercial media boundaries and creating more immersive entertainment experiences.

Jeff Gomez, a pioneer of modern transmedia storytelling, founded Starlight Runner Entertainment and spearheaded some of the earliest large-scale commercial transmedia experiments. Already using the hyphenated term ‘trans-media’ to describe his work, Gomez (personal communication, 4 October 2024) began corresponding with Jenkins in 2005 after reading the latter’s online essays, subsequently transitioning to using the non-hyphenated term ‘transmedia’.

Gomez and his team at Starlight Runner have worked with a range of prominent Hollywood film studios to inject transmedia structures into their existing IP, including Disney on *Pirates of the Caribbean* and *Tron: Legacy*, 20th Century Fox and James Cameron on *Avatar*, Sony Pictures on *Men in Black* and *The Amazing Spider-Man*, Microsoft on *Halo* and Nickelodeon on *Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles* (Starlight Runner Entertainment, n.d.-a). The Starlight Runner team offers rich insights into the narrative potential of existing IP and

advises how best to create or extend a franchise for maximum transmedia effect. This is often achieved through the creation of a ‘story bible’, which summarises an existing storyworld in intricate and lavish detail to elucidate its core themes and narrative elements for the purpose of propagating further stories. Along with advice from Starlight Runner, producers can use this ‘bible’ to ensure that future projects are consistent with the original, comply with audience expectations and remain true to the narrative essence (Phillips, 2012; Rose, 2011, p. 245).

Jeff Gomez (personal communication, 24 November 2018) is one of the most prominent, consistent and optimistic figures in the advancement of transmedia theory. An unabashed geek of pop culture, Gomez was heavily influenced by the interconnected storytelling traditions found in Japanese entertainment such as *Godzilla* and *Ultraman*. He has used his deep love and knowledge of these storytelling techniques to influence commercial Western entertainment. Gomez (as cited in Bernstein, 2013) suggests three flexible ‘rules’ for effective commercial transmedia production: first, transmedia narratives should ideally contain some kind of aspirational quality; second, transmedia storytellers should have an intimate understanding of the media platforms used; and third, transmedia storytelling should contain an ‘architecture for dialogue’ with fans (paras. 5–7).

As transmedia strategies became increasingly visible in commercial entertainment, many in the industry interpreted it as an advanced form of social marketing (Phillips, 2012). While artists were experimenting with grassroots transmedia projects, the general public was being exposed to large-scale commercial transmedia projects backed by significant marketing power and money (Phillips, 2012) and often green-lit for their potential to attract a broader audience to a film or television show. A key example of this was the ambitious and expensive ‘Why so serious?’ transmedia marketing campaign to build hype for the 2008 film *The Dark Knight*. Designed by 42 Entertainment, the campaign invited fans to become one of the

Joker's henchmen by following clues and solving puzzles. Fans had to work collectively to complete online and real-world challenges in locations around the United States (US), such as piecing together the story of a school bus theft (which would later feature in the film). For their efforts, fans were rewarded with preview photographs of Heath Ledger's the Joker and an invitation to an IMAX screening of the first 8 minutes of the film with director Christopher Nolan (Rose, 2011). While the campaign was a costly and experimental gambit on the part of Warner Bros., it succeeded in engaging the Batman fan base prior to the film's release.

Perhaps the best example of the use of transmedia to generate interest in a product was the phenomenal success of the 1999 indie film *The Blair Witch Project* co-produced by Mike Monello. Prior to the film's release, Monello published a multiplatform narrative about people who were missing and presumed to be victims of a local legend, the Blair Witch. The story caught the imagination of global audiences, with many believing it to be real and becoming deeply invested in the story. This created an unprecedented demand for the film's release, spawning a successful franchise (Rose, 2011).

Monello went on to found Campfire (which Steve Coulson would join as creative director), an agency specialising in commercial transmedia campaigns for Hollywood. Much of Campfire's work has focused on increasing the scope of entertainment experiences and creating more points of immersion for fans (Campfire, n.d.; S. Coulson, personal communication, 15 November 2018). In a highly successful campaign to promote *Game of Thrones*, the team created sensory kits that gave fans an impression of what different areas in the seven kingdoms would smell like. At the 2017 San Diego and New York comic book conventions, Campfire designed live theatrical experiences to simulate the experience of entering *Westworld*'s Mariposa Saloon. At the 2017 New York Comic Con, the team installed interactive signs and graffiti in the women's toilets to promote *The Handmaid's Tale*. Initially, Campfire's clients were mainly the marketing departments of TV shows, which did

not have access to or the budget for including cast members or other core elements, meaning that the story elements created by the Campfire team often acted as an extension of a show (S. Coulson, personal communication, 15 November 2018).

Another prominent example of transmedia storytelling is the elevated game approach. Working with Sean Stewart, Jordan Weisman convinced Steven Spielberg and Kathleen Kennedy to allow him to create *The Beast*, an augmented reality game (ARG) and the first of its kind designed to expand the audience's experience of Spielberg's upcoming film *A.I. Artificial Intelligence*. *The Beast* was a series of intricate puzzles subtly targeted at audiences (beginning with a credit for a 'sentient machine analyst' on the film's poster) that led participants on a wild chase for information, drawing them deeper into the world of artificial intelligence and offering them insights into some of the narrative elements and characters featured in the film. Participants had to work collectively to solve the clues, which would appear randomly and in various media, including the film's trailer, fake newspaper ads and emails and faxes sent to individuals. By the time the film was released, over 3 million people had already become immersed in its storyworld (Rose, 2011, p. 22).

Corporations began taking note of the success of these Hollywood transmedia strategies, including their ability to draw in larger audiences and sustain their interest (Jenkins et al., 2013; Phillips, 2012). They became aware that transmedia storytelling could provide multiple points of sale and encourage audiences to actively seek information in a quest to become more deeply immersed in an experience (Phillips, 2012). Subsequently, the line between storytelling and marketing became less clear.

Campfire, for example, worked with Audi to create an award-winning transmedia story to promote the new A3 model sedan. In an advertising campaign known as 'The art of the heist', the team staged a fake robbery of an Audi A3 and encouraged people to become involved in an elaborate alternate reality game experience, tracking the stolen car and

following clues as to where the ‘thieves’ had taken it. The campaign resulted in a significant boost in Audi car sales (S. Coulson, personal communication, 15 November 2018). Similarly Starlight Runner produced an award-winning storytelling experience for Coca-Cola entitled the ‘Happiness Factory’, which introduced global audiences to a world of loveable creatures who lived inside Coca-Cola vending machines and worked together to produce the soft drink. This storyworld also led to the production of animated shorts, comics, websites and songs. This project created an appealing way for Coca-Cola to increase its audience touchpoints and, ultimately, sell more soft drink (J. Gomez, personal communication, 24 November 2018).

Jenkins (2006a) uses the term ‘storytelling’ to distinguish his application of transmedia as more artistic than other types of applications, including transmedia marketing and transmedia branding. However, transmedia storytelling and transmedia marketing have become deeply intertwined, making them difficult to distinguish. As promotional campaigns for media experiences increase their focus on audience engagement and play, they become more fused with storytelling. Therefore, commercial entertainment is increasingly becoming a fusion of marketing and storytelling practices (Rose, 2011).

2.2 The Growth of Story Across Platforms: A Tool to Maintain Audience Attention

Transmedia storytelling often exudes both entertainment and marketing qualities because it is frequently driven by a commercial desire to maintain audience attention. In her analysis of the evolution of transmedia storytelling in the British television industry, E. Evans (2011, 2015) reveals that the growth of narratives across platforms is driven by commercial interests. According to Evans, the multiplatform expansion of TV shows such as *Spooks*, *Doctor Who* and *The X Factor* is a way for these shows to remain engaging and commercially viable in the age of social media. E. Evans (2015) identifies three ways in which these TV narratives are extended across platforms: (i) through the use of media such as webisodes to

fill narrative gaps and keep viewers engaged between episodes; (ii) by shifting content onto mobile devices to increase its accessibility; and (iii) by producing ‘layered transmediality’ (p. 123), where audiences are encouraged to access device-based content as a means of participating during live TV shows and between episodes. For example, *The X Factor* app allows audiences to predict winners and vote for contestants in the lead-up to a show, engage in real-time activities during the TV broadcast and engage with commercial sponsors of the show. These narrative extensions reflect commercial efforts to create a ‘digital enclosure’ (Tussey, 2014, p. 204), and to control the ‘second screen’ (Hassoun, 2014, p. 279) habits of the audience by providing correlated interactivity. E. Evans (2015) argues that this provides fans with a deeper, more engaging experience, noting that TV producers must now rely on transmedia strategies as they battle a decline in TV viewership.

As media companies distribute their content across multiple platforms, the boundaries between these platforms begin to blur. In her study of transmedia television, E. Evans (2011) concluded that TV viewing has shifted away from the domestic hub, with TV content often being accessed on mobile devices. She suggests that this expansion has blurred the boundaries of television. However, the elements that thrive and are embraced by audiences depend on the type of content (e.g. drama, news, sports) (E. Evans, 2011, p. 174). Evans argues that the increased desire and ability to create content that moves between platforms also redefines the boundaries and audience expectations of different platforms.

Similarly, Brooker (2001) uses the example of *Dawson’s Creek* to argue that ‘contemporary television increasingly “overflows” from the primary text across multiple platforms—particularly onto dedicated internet sites—and that certain programmes invite a participatory, interactive engagement which constructs the show as an extended, immersive experience’ (p. 456). Brooker’s description of television overflow suggests the difficulty in

establishing the boundaries of a TV narrative. As popular culture becomes increasingly networked, it also becomes more difficult to determine the boundaries between platforms.

Gray (2010) advances this argument with his concept of 'paratexts' (p. 6), peripheral elements such as posters, reviews, online videos and fan-produced content that have become an essential part of the core text. To engage with these elements, audiences must traverse platforms, meaning that they remain actively engaged with the storyworld for longer periods. According to Gray (2010), paratexts can operate both as 'entryway' and 'in medias res' (p. 18), thus can serve as an initial entry point for new audiences or provide ongoing insights into an evolving text. In the modern networked culture, these additional textual elements have become compelling and necessary sites of engagement through which fans can experience a story more deeply. Fans who choose to circulate the content stand to gain social capital linked to the storyworld.

Mittell (2014) distinguishes between paratexts that hype, promote or introduce a story and those that function as 'ongoing sites of narrative expansion' (p. 202). Scolari et al. (2014) agree that paratextual elements are necessary components of the transmedia environment (p. 4). In many instances of large-scale commercial storytelling, the story begins with paratexts such as trailers, which appear as a mix of promotional material and story content, with these sites of engagement and play becoming an essential part of the storyworld experience (Gray, 2010). Though not all paratexts are created to expand the narrative of a storyworld, the infusion of story into these media elements has become increasingly popular in certain segments of the commercial entertainment industry.

2.3 Transmedia as an Industry Term

Convergence Culture was released during the 2007-2008 Hollywood writers' strike, with writers demanding proper compensation for the work expected of them, particularly in the ever-expanding digital space. Those on the picket line gratefully embraced Jenkins's

(2006a) work, which offered a new set of tools for articulating the changing media landscape. While the term ‘transmedia’ became a buzzword in the entertainment industry, it was promptly applied to practices that differed in scope and intention from those that Jenkins had described (Dena, 2009; Long, 2007).

A key milestone in settling on an official industry definition of ‘transmedia’ occurred in 2010, when the Producers Guild of America (PGA) approved a credit for the role of transmedia producer (Dena, 2010). While this decision helped to solidify the term, the initial definition published by the PGA (as cited in Dena, 2010) offered a new perspective on the concept:

A Transmedia Narrative project or franchise must consist of three (or more) narrative storylines existing within the same fictional universe on any of the following platforms: Film, Television, Short Film, Broadband, Publishing, Comics, Animation, Mobile, Special Venues, DVD/Blu-ray/CD-ROM, Narrative Commercial and Marketing rollouts, and other technologies that may or may not currently exist. These narrative extensions are NOT the same as repurposing material from one platform to be cut or repurposed to different platforms. (para. 4)

Jeff Gomez is widely credited as being the driving force behind this credit (Dena, 2010; Finke, 2010). He notes that the PGA intentionally kept the definition broad to allow for flexibility in the types of projects that might fall under the transmedia umbrella.

Nevertheless, there were some who were not satisfied with the definition. For example, Australian academic and practitioner Christy Dena and American practitioner Brooke Thompson both used social media to express their concern that the definition was too narrow to accommodate experimental projects (Dena, 2010). Dena (2010) also notes that video games were excluded from the definition, despite their increasing influence in

entertainment and narrative experimentation¹. Similarly, Clark (2021a, 2021b) used social media to question the labels being placed on the creative process and artistic intentions of transmedia storytelling before decrying it as a futile cultural experiment that failed to offer any creative advancements. These individuals were all expressing their collective frustration that a model that offered artistic and financial freedom had not been found.

The PGA's creation of an official transmedia producer credit put both money and credibility at stake. For example, producers seeking funds could be subject to the terms of the PGA when ensuring their projects were eligible (Phillips, 2012). The industry had essentially decided on what and what did not constitute transmedia in a way that was likely to stifle future experimentation and creativity.

Nevertheless, Hollywood had seen the commercial potential of transmedia, and work in the field continued. According to former Starlight Runner associate Caitlin Burns (2016), following the success of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise, Disney has developed in-house transmedia teams and methodologies. Disney continues to employ a range of transmedia strategies, most prominently in its MCU and *Star Wars* franchises.

Beyond the scope of the PGA's definition of transmedia, practitioners continued to find ways to leverage the artistic opportunities offered by transmedia production. Compared with academic texts, industry handbooks are often better at capturing the tension between artistic ideals and commercial realities and highlighting commercial considerations for producers. These handbooks also contribute to a shared understanding of transmedia storytelling via not only what is written but also what is not. For example, *A Creator's Guide to Transmedia Storytelling* by American game designer and transmedia practitioner Andrea Phillips (2012) offers deep insights into transmedia storytelling in a commercial context. According to Phillips (2012), the three key criteria for transmedia storytelling are 'multiple

¹ The PGA have since updated the definition to include video games: <https://producersguild.org/code-of-credits-transmedia/>

media, a single unified story or experience, and avoidance of redundancy between media' (p. 15). A single story may either be splintered across multiple media or have new parts continually added to it, as long as the overall experience is greater than the sum of its parts (Phillips, 2012, p. 15). This form of transmedia extension can be used to fill in narrative gaps or expand on a character. Each element must have a narrative purpose to avoid being redundant or alienating the audience (Jenkins, 2006a; Phillips, 2012).

Robert Pratten (2011), a prominent transmedia consultant based in the United Kingdom, also offers practical insights in *Getting Started in Transmedia Storytelling: A Practical Guide for Beginners*. He warns that transmedia projects may not succeed and that it is acceptable to begin with a single story and subsequently expand the narrative world (p. 11). Similar to Phillips, Pratten suggests that the retrospective application of transmedia principles to a central text is not only acceptable but also common practice, challenging Jenkins's notion that transmedia projects should be fully planned in advance. Pratten (2011) categorises transmedia projects into three types: (i) franchise transmedia, which is the use of various platforms to expand a narrative; (ii) portmanteau transmedia, which is relaying a single story across multiple platforms; and (iii) complex transmedia, which is a combination of franchise and portmanteau transmedia, with multiple stories across multiple platforms that audiences can combine to create a cohesive overarching story (p. 14).

Gary Hayes (2011) takes a perspective more in line with Jenkins's notion of proactive planning in *How to Write a Transmedia Production Bible*, a handbook that Screen Australia encourages film producers to use when seeking funding for transmedia stories. Hayes encourages producers to plan their transmedia narrative in advance and recruit a central director and experts who can develop content on specific platforms. His template suggests the creation of sequential plot points under the assumption that a story will unravel in a traditional sequential manner. It also suggests launching different elements in different phases or

chapters under the assumption of seriality. Producers are encouraged to include calls to action to encourage audience participation. Most interestingly, the template calls for producers to outline the narrative journey from platform to platform to ensure that the user is aware of the entry and exit points. The template also includes business modelling, marketing, branding and funding, which are key to project success.

2.4 Scholarly Discourse on Transmedia Storytelling

Geoffrey Long, a research student of Jenkins, was one of the first to conduct research on transmedia. In his doctoral dissertation, Long (2007) argued that the transmedia storytelling construct required a more concrete definition and must be understood as a process of world-making because multiplatform distribution does not always guarantee narrative expansion. In doing so, he helped establish a more detailed perspective of the transmedia story design process. In contrast to Jenkins's emphasis on storytellers creating and delivering a complete storyworld, Long (2007) suggested that transmedia stories could be developed retrospectively or in a piecemeal manner, which is the prevailing view among practitioners. He uses the terms 'a priori', 'chewy' and 'a posteriori' (p. 20), respectively, to describe the creation of a transmedia text before, during and after the delivery of the initial story. He also suggests that different texts within a transmedia storyworld can hold different levels of value for the narrative, using the terms 'hypotexts' (p. 29) and 'hypertexts' (p. 34) for primary and secondary texts, respectively. Long considers canon (and adherence to it) a key factor in establishing the strength of a storyworld and a means by which audiences can judge the essentiality of each text. In exploring this space, Long offers a more detailed view on how audiences may achieve different levels of narrative enjoyment based on the ranking of text according to its adherence to canon.

Dena (2009) was also one of the first to offer a scholarly counterpoint to Jenkins's concepts, arguing that transmedia storytelling should take commercial realities into account

and that the expansion of narrative is more important than how it is achieved. Dena (2009) argues that transmedia stories can be ‘intercompositional’, where a number of stories from a storyworld can play out across various media, or ‘intracompositional’, where one story is told across multiple media (p. 98). She also argues that adaptation is not redundant, as Jenkins suggests, but a form of transmedia because of the way in which it can deepen insights into a story (p. 98).

Dena (2011) outlines four models of transmedia storytelling for writers. The first is a ‘collection of mono-medium stories’ (p. 2), most often seen in franchises where a number of stories contributing to a storyworld are told and often adapted across a range of media. The second is ‘a collection of media that tells one story’ (p. 3), which requires a strong understanding of interactivity because it often involves using additional media to expand on the core of a text. The third style involves ‘expansion analysis’ (p. 3), where a core text is produced, then writers are recruited to help expand it into a transmedia property. The fourth style is ‘proactive transmedia’ (p. 4), which is designed as transmedia from the start. Both Long and Dena highlight the various creative processes that may be considered transmedia storytelling.

Since the publication of *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins (2013) has continued to adapt his definition of transmedia storytelling, acknowledging that Hollywood tends to use the ‘mothership’ (p. 244) model in which a central text is produced, then subsequently expanded across platforms once it has proven to be financially successful. Jenkins borrowed the term ‘mothership’ from showrunners Damon Lindeloff and Carlton Cuse, who used it to describe the evolution of their TV series *Lost* (Mittell, 2014, p. 203). Jenkins (2013) attributes this to the industry being slow to overcome traditional licensing and franchising structures, which often interfere with content flowing freely across platforms. Mittell (2014) argues that mothership texts are a financial imperative in commercial entertainment enterprises because

producers must demonstrate ratings for a product before they can justify foraying into other platforms. More broadly, Scolari et al. (2014) observe that the production of transmedia stories is subject to the nature of commercial business (p. 5).

In the entertainment industry, it is common for the cost of transmedia extensions to be covered by the marketing budget rather than the production budget (S. Coulson, personal communication, 15 November 2018; Phillips, 2012). Both *The Beast* and the ‘Why so serious?’ campaigns were created in the service of promoting a core text. While Jenkins outlines the possibility for designing and implementing entire transmedia strategies, the reality is that this rarely occurs on a large commercial scale.

In an attempt to convey a more flexible concept, Scolari et al. (2014) argue that transmedia storytelling can be understood in a number of ways depending on the disciplinary perspective of the research. From a semiotic point of view, transmedia storytelling can be understood as ‘a network of texts in different media that expand a fictional universe’ (Scolari et al., 2014, p. 3), where official and fan-generated content are considered equal. This focus on narrative intertextuality is the majority view. Researchers from an ethnographic or cultural studies background may ‘privilege the activity of the users, the generation of new peripheral contents and the fan (sub)cultures’ (Scolari et al., 2014, p. 3), noting the essentiality of fans to the operation of a transmedia system. Scolari et al. (2014) suggest that at its most basic, transmedia storytelling is ‘the expansion of the narrative through different media and, in many cases, by the participation of the users in that expansion’ (p. 6).

Much of the discourse on the definition of transmedia prioritises the storyteller. However, this understates the importance of the audience and its contributions to the transmedia experience and system. Therefore, the following section discusses the role of fans in transmedia, highlighting that commercial entertainment has inevitably become a communal activity in modern networked life.

2.5 The Role of Fans

Fans are an essential component of the operations and success of transmedia storyworlds and are the ideal audience for transmedia producers (Jenkins, 2006b, 2013). In the age of social media, fan participation has become increasingly visible and influential. However, the participation of fans poses a range of complexities for the storyteller.

To better understand the role of fans in the transmedia system, it is important to distinguish between fan interaction and true fan participation. In some circumstances, storytellers can limit the audience's level of involvement, favouring interaction over participation. Jenkins (2013) differentiates between the two terms as follows:

For me, interactivity is a property often designed and programmed into the technology and thus is more likely to be under the control of media producers. Participation, on the other hand, is a property of the surrounding culture and is often something communities assert through their shared engagement with technologies, content and producers. (p. 283)

As Jenkins (2013) suggests, enabling interactivity rather than participation may be a means of exerting control over audiences or offering fans the illusion of participation under controlled circumstances. E. Evans (2011) suggests that audiences navigate transmedia texts through immersion, agency and immediacy, thus must have the opportunity to experience all three, regardless of whether a transmedia system is only interactive or truly participatory.

Gomez (as cited in Bernstein, 2013) argues that transmedia storytelling should always include opportunities for audiences to actively participate and that an 'architecture for dialogue' (para. 7) enables audiences to be heard and acknowledged. From Gomez's perspective, active and full participation should be the default setting in a transmedia experience, and it is the responsibility of the storyteller to create and nurture opportunities for this to happen in a collaborative spirit. Gomez (2017c) advocates for storytellers to utilise

‘regenerative listening’ (para. 13), which requires them to listen to the desires of fans, find ways to make fans feel heard, be willing to adjust a narrative if appropriate and to honestly and openly engage in dialogue with fan. Thus, Gomez refers to participation as a communal and ideally equitable process that forges stronger social connections.

Aside from notions of interaction and participation, there are multiple views on the extent to which audiences can truly contribute to a transmedia storyworld. Booth (2010) refers to fan-produced content as ‘narractivity’ (p. 105), where fans actively contribute to a story. In complex transmedia storyworlds, fans can act as gatekeepers for the community, offering points of entry into a franchise for newcomers and connecting fellow fans with the tools and knowledge to decode the text.

In his exploration of paratexts, Gray (2010) suggests that fan-produced paratexts can reshape an auteur’s text in new, unexpected or unwanted ways. Similarly, Sandvoss (2005a) positions the fan as resisting the dominance and power of producers through fan fiction. Mittell (2014) highlights that the *Star Trek* novels, which are typically released in the gaps between films, were often inconsequential to the canon. However, these novels became important to fans who wished to play and engage with the *Star Trek* storyworld in the periods between officially sanctioned core texts.

In their book *Spreadable Media*, Jenkins et al. (2013) refine this argument, arguing that audience participation should be understood as more than just production and that mundane modes of audience engagement such as the grassroots circulation of texts are vitally important to the health of a franchise. In Western culture, there is a strong history of fan activity being moderated or shut down altogether, as exemplified by the *Star Wars* and *Harry Potter* fandoms. However, the liberties given to fans of the Japanese *otaku* culture (Ito et al., 2012) enable storyworlds to grow organically, offering a valuable lesson for Western corporations.

Drawing from his earlier research into fandom, Jenkins (2006a, 2006b) uses the concept of participatory culture to describe the role played by fans in the transmedia ecosystem. For Jenkins, in a participatory culture, fans can publicly interact with writers and texts through digital platforms. He argues that this process is essential to the functioning of texts in the modern environment. First, social networking allows fans to form communities and pool their intelligence to track and deconstruct texts. This collective intelligence allows a range of voices to be heard, empowering fans. Second, technology facilitates the rapid formation and interaction of communities, creating deep connections and the means to produce fan texts. While not all participants will be heard equally by peers and storytellers, the consumption of texts becomes a collective process (Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b).

Nick Couldry (2011) is critical of Jenkins's lack of specificity in terms of the level of fan participation, arguing that Jenkins's sweeping statements on the democratisation of communication imply that all citizens have equal access to and an equal voice in online conversations. From Couldry's perspective, Jenkins generalises the behaviour of active fans to all fans and assumes that online collaboration can result in real-world change but fails to adequately demonstrate how talk can be converted into action. Finally, Couldry accuses Jenkins of assuming that fans will only use online communities for progressive causes but not regressive causes, an issue that has become recently prevalent in the *Star Wars* fandom.

In response to Couldry's criticisms, Jenkins (2014) acknowledges that his theories are rooted in fan studies and the fact that well-established groups can use digital media to further their interests. He concedes that he did not elaborate on the more complex formations of online communities, stressing that it has become 'more and more urgent to develop a more refined vocabulary that allows us to better distinguish between different models of participation and to evaluate where and how power shifts may be taking place' (Jenkins, 2014, p. 271).

Cornel Sandvoss (2005a) challenges fan stereotypes, demonstrating that fans come from a diverse range of economic and social backgrounds. He draws on sports-related fandoms to demonstrate how fans analyse and interpret objects in line with their own world views. Many fandoms allow members to sift through various opinions and choose those that match their own as opposed to having them challenged via collective negotiation (Sandvoss, 2005a, p. 99).

Hills (2015b) explores the stratification of fans in the *Doctor Who* fandom, noting a hierarchy in terms of fan engagement. Phillips (2012) outlines the different levels of engagement that transmedia producers can expect from fans, suggesting that 80% will be passive, 15% will be engaged, and 5% will be ‘superfans’. Scolari et al. (2014) propose a pyramid of user participation and engagement comprising four tiers: (i) consumers of a single media product; (ii) consumers of multiple media products; (iii) fans who share content online and participate in conversations related to the storyworld; and (iv) fans who produce new content that expands the storyworld (pp. 2–3). This fourth level is the highest level of transmedia engagement and is critical to producers. Scolari et al. (2014) created the following formula to define transmedia storytelling: ‘*Media Industry (canon) + Collaborative Culture (fandom) = Transmedia Storytelling*’ (p. 3).

New complexities in storyteller–fan relations are emerging with the promotion of prominent fans to the role of storyteller in large franchises, such as J. J. Abrams and Rian Johnson in *Star Wars* and Stephen Moffat overseeing *Doctor Who*. The concept of the ‘fanboy auteur’ highlights this growing tier of storytellers, whose commercial success depends on their ability to leverage their fan credentials (Salter & Stanfill, 2020; Stanfill, 2019). Hills (2015b) explores the increasingly complex relationship between the more recent showrunners of *Doctor Who* and the fan base. While leveraging their status as fans, these

showrunners also steer the narrative, meaning that franchise management and online fan interaction can involve contested power dynamics.

Ultimately, fans play a critical role in the transmedia ecosystem, which has been made more visible than ever by social media. The ability for people to use social media as a tool for organised movements has become apparent in global campaigns such as #MeToo and #BlackLivesMatter. Likewise, fans have the capacity to self-organise and use social media to amplify their joy or dissatisfaction for a franchise. Therefore, transmedia producers must pay attention to social media. Additionally, social media is a relatively new phenomena and its role in transmedia storytelling is best understood by considering transmedia a historical means of communication.

2.6 The Historical Context of Transmedia Storytelling

Scholars are reaching back into history as a way to better understand the modern transmedia storytelling environment. In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins's (2006a) description of transmedia storytelling as a unique mix of cultural confluences made it easy for many to interpret his research as heralding the arrival of something new. Since the publication of Jenkins's seminal work, there has been a wealth of exploration into the history of transmedia storytelling. Jenkins (2011) has since clarified that he never intended to claim that transmedia storytelling was an entirely new phenomenon and has been as vocal as other scholars to locate it in its broader historical context. Much of the research has focused on grounding Jenkins's theories in the industrial structures and commercial objectives of the modern entertainment industry.

Derek Johnson is critical of Jenkins's apparent dismissal of franchising, which came to prominence in Hollywood in the 1980s as a precursor to transmedia storytelling. In his book *Media Franchising*, D. Johnson (2013) explores how IP owners can expand their stories either through a single medium or across multiple media platforms through the licensing of IP

and the production of adaptations, spin-offs and sequels. He argues that franchising has enabled IP owners to expand their storyworlds while maintaining tight control over how licensees expanded their IP. He also argues that many of these industrial barriers are still present.

While D. Johnson (2013) asserts that the commercial motivation for transmedia storytelling is to retain audiences in an increasingly segmented market environment, he defends franchising as more than just a crass commercial exercise (p. 73). He argues that franchising should be seen as not only a financial process but also a creative endeavour, where storytellers work to expand storyworlds, despite industry structures, and create an environment of improved cross-departmental collaboration. He points out that franchising did industrialise the adaptation of works because it restricted the spread of content through licensing and reconceived culture and myth as proprietary elements (D. Johnson, n.d., 2013), a phenomenon that persists today. For these reasons, D. Johnson (2013) believes that Jenkins fails to consider the practicalities of the entertainment industry (p. 30).

In an effort to obtain a more global perspective, Steinberg (2012) explores the ‘media mix’ in Japan and how commercial Japanese storytelling practices have influenced commercial Western transmedia practices. The Japanese ‘media mix’ concept bears several resemblances to transmedia storytelling, describing a fusion between advertising and storytelling practices. A story is created, often via anime, and images of fictional characters from the story are placed on commercial items, turning them into media commodities and creating further opportunities for fans to engage with the storyworld. Steinberg attributes the development of the media mix to manga artist Tezuka Osamu, who was inspired by the early merchandising tactics of Walt Disney. Osamu saw potential in using merchandise as a medium to expand and continue the story as well as to raise capital for the production of more entertainment.

Mizuko Ito (2007) considers media mixes by analysing the popular franchises of *Pokémon* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* She notes that purchasing and collecting characters (in this case mythical monsters) is key to the story of each franchise and a central fan activity. By purchasing trading cards, fans become part of the storyworld, tracking down and collecting rare and powerful monsters like the characters in each show. Play is built into the franchise and is a communal experience, where fans trade and compete with one another to build their collection. Through this form of sanctioned play and lived experience, fans become more deeply immersed in the storyworld. According to Ito, the virtual story experience seeps into the everyday lives of fans as they encounter characters through virtual games, websites and offline experiences, making the experience flexible and wholly immersive.

The Japanese word *otaku* (Ito, 2007; Ito et al., 2012) is similar to the American term *geek*, describing the driven and sometimes obsessive fan practice of collecting items and information to become as deeply invested in a fantasy world as possible. Ito et al. (2012) explore the thriving cosplay culture in Japan, where fans are actively engaged in fan fiction, creating new adventures for the characters they love and admire. Ito et al. emphasise that in contrast to the American culture of copyright and restricting fan behaviour, Japanese storytellers openly welcome their fans playing with the characters of their stories because they understand that this leads to them investing more deeply in franchises and storyworlds, generating more income for storytellers. In *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins (2006a) acknowledges the influence of the media mix on transmedia storytelling, particularly the interconnected and anime-inspired storytelling tropes of *The Matrix* in the film industry and *Pokémon* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* in children's entertainment. Beyond these recent examples, other scholars point to historical precedents.

Matthew Freeman's voice has been one of the loudest in the debate over the newness of transmedia. In his examination of the historical precedents of transmedia storytelling,

Freeman (2014, 2016) traces the development of Superman across media platforms from 1938 to 1942 to highlight how media industries worked together to create a transmedia entertainment experience, despite their technological limitations. Freeman describes how Harry Donenfeld, one of the founders of DC Comics, saw the potential for comic book characters to sell children's entertainment and began the process of spreading characters across multiple media platforms, including radio, cinema and television, using strict licensing, cross-promotional agreements and a consistent creative team. Through this process, Superman's storyworld was organically expanded in controlled ways across different platforms, allowing for new narrative elements to be created and folded back into the core character mythology.

In their book *Transmedia Archaeology*, Scolari et al. (2014) support the case for transmedia appearing even earlier. Using three case studies—*Conan the Barbarian*, *Superman* and the Argentinian science fiction comic *El Eternauta*—the authors demonstrate that transmedia storytelling has occurred throughout the twentieth century and across the globe. Scolari et al. (2014) note that pulp magazines and comic books contain many of the elements that comprise modern transmedia storytelling. These types of media commonly built storyworlds retroactively by connecting the worlds of different characters. These commercial tactics were used to incentivise readers to follow the exploits of different characters and purchase more books (Scolari et al., 2014, p. 11).

Long (2007) and Dena (2009) use *Star Wars* as an example of a franchise that grew into a transmedia property prior to the technological conditions described by Jenkins. However, Long (2007) concedes that modern technologies have allowed the more rapid creation and consumption of the intertextuality essential for transmedia stories. Likewise, E. Evans (2011) and Hills (2015b) explore the predigital transmedia stories told through the *Doctor Who* franchise. R. E. Pearson (2009) points to even older narratives, such as stories of

Christ and ancient Greek mythologies, as early versions of transmedia storytelling. Similarly, Wolf (2014) argues that stories such as Homer's *Odyssey* bear the hallmarks of transmedia world-building because the story elements could be shared and expanded in a range of ways, including through performance, writing and oral storytelling.

Collectively, this research demonstrates that transmedia storytelling is not a new cultural phenomenon nor a result of modern technology but is often influenced by the structures of commercial entertainment. While Jenkins (2006a) did acknowledge that transmedia storytelling has historical precedents, he has been compelled to re-emphasise this point in light of more recent scholarly works. Jenkins has since clarified that although he did suspect he was observing something new, he was not suggesting that transmedia storytelling represented a complete break from historical practices. Although he focused on modern Hollywood-based storytelling experiments, he acknowledges that this style of storytelling has occurred throughout the ages (Jenkins, 2017b). Further, Jenkins (2019a) argues that the more recent academic work undertaken to define modern transmedia practices provides scholars with a toolkit when exploring 'earlier media ecologies' (p. xxix) such as *The Wizard of Oz*, Walt Disney, *Superman* and the *Lone Ranger*, enabling them to better understand modern practices in relation to historical precedents.

Transmedia storytelling that precedes the era of networked culture and social media shows us that digital technologies are not essential for stories to expand across platforms and cultures. Transmedia storytelling is not only the result of our access to digital devices or the internet. Nevertheless, technology plays a significant role in modern-day transmedia storytelling and is a tool that practitioners should approach in a considered fashion.

2.7 Transmedia and Technology

Our modern-day networked culture enables large-scale immersive stories to be told more easily and rapidly than was historically possible (Jenkins, 2006a; Long, 2007). Modern

technology not only offers storytellers the tools to create nonlinear, hyperlinked stories but also teaches individuals literacy in nonlinear text and enables them to construct or reconstruct texts however they wish. In essence, we have entered a cultural age where stories have greater prevalence and can be integrated more into everyday life.

As Rose (2011) points out, each new era of communications technology enables the creation of novel and increasingly immersive entertainment. From the printing press through to film, television and the internet, each media platform has allowed the creation of content that offers more complex and alluring narrative experiences. The internet age has facilitated storytelling that is hyperlinked, nonlinear, multilayered and participatory, leading to the creation of a 'deep media' (Rose, 2011, p. 3) that is far more immersive than what has been historically possible. Rose suggests that we have reached a nexus in entertainment, where previously binary notions of fact and fiction, author and audience, entertainment and advertising and stories and games are all beginning to blur.

Nevertheless, successful transmedia storytelling can and should include offline or place-based components. In the same way that Japanese media mix franchises factor in the everyday lives of *Pokémon* and *Yu-Gi-Oh!* fans, effective transmedia storytelling can seep into the everyday lives of fans through a combination of digital and non-digital experiences. Despite the proliferation of online content and access to social media, transmedia storytelling is not a purely digital pursuit. Storytellers continue to succeed in offering audiences the immediacy, intimacy and uniqueness of real-world events. As Freeman and Gambarato (2019) explain,

beyond the digital domain, transmediality can and should involve a variety of alternative combinations between both online and offline platforms. The Internet and all digital technologies unequivocally play a crucial role in (1) disseminating transmedia content, (2) making content easily available worldwide, (3) reaching a

diversified range of audiences, (4) enabling audience engagement, and (5) contributing to a participatory culture, for instance. But the possibilities to enrich the audience experience via offline activities, live events, and analogue initiatives, are immense because they can dramatically contribute to (1) the feeling of immersion, (2) the sense of belonging, and (3) the emotional response of audiences. (p. 4)

Place-based events pose obvious restrictions and may not necessarily be available to an entire audience or fan base. For example, not all players could participate in the Joker's real-world tasks in the 'Why so serious?' campaign, and not all fans can attend the San Diego or New York comic book conventions each year. The COVID-19 global pandemic also created a raft of issues, restricting offline events throughout half the period of my research.

However, for those who can access them, place-based events offer fan sites of deep engagement. Campfire specialises in place-based activations, producing the previously discussed exclusive interactions at New York Comic Con for shows such as *Westworld* and *The Handmaid's Tale*. Those who attend can also convey a sense of the experience to other members of the community, in some cases sharing photos, footage or a livestream of an event. This content creates paratextual hype for franchises and can serve to excite the wider fan base. For those who do attend, the experience is highly individualised and unique and comes with the prestige of exclusivity.

Going beyond one-off or annual events, some of the more recent blockbuster franchises have made significant financial investments into massive interactive theme parks, including The Wizarding World of *Harry Potter*, Pandora—The World of *Avatar*, *Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge* and *Star Wars: Galactic Cruiser*. These theme parks enable fans to further immerse themselves in the established storyworld of a franchise, interacting physically with fictional elements brought to life at theme park sites.

In some instances, the mothership narrative of a transmedia story is an offline event. Since its opening in 2011, the interactive Shakespearean theatre production *Sleep No More* has continued to be a popular event in New York (with small transmedia elements produced in print and online). Similarly, Meow Wolf (2019) offers immersive participatory experiences in sites across America, which continue to increase in popularity. Moment Factory (n.d.) creates place-based shows and destinations that incorporate virtual reality (VR), AR and digital transmedia elements. These examples demonstrate that despite its affordances, technology is still unable to provide the ‘realness’ of real-world experiences and interactions. Academic Sam Ford (personal communication, 24 January 2019) argues that this rediscovery of offline transmedia experiences may also indicate a desire to reconnect with our more immediate environment and rediscover a stronger sense of self, which can be lost in our increasingly globalised network culture—an idea that warrants further research. Beyond a focus on the self, present-day transmedia arguably allows a deeper reflection on our networked culture.

2.8 Stories of Collective Groups Appearing in Present-Day Commercial Transmedia

To understand transmedia storytelling as a broader and more fluid cultural phenomenon than originally conceived, we need to inquire into the nature of our present-day media experiences. Freeman and Gambarato (2019) suggest that scholars should consider ‘the increasing mediatization of life itself, and to better understand what it means to think of our digital lives as complex, intertwining, transmedial experiences’ (p. 9). In other words, we should seek to find deeper meaning in our transmedial experiences and entertainment consumption habits. While the debate has largely focused on defining transmedia in a technical sense and much attention has been directed towards designing new commercial storytelling structures, there is an opportunity to investigate the kinds of narratives that

successfully function in the present-day transmedia ecosystem and what that suggests about our modern culture.

Therefore, it is worth revisiting the purpose and cultural function of storytelling, which is how we make sense of our lives, find meaning in the everyday and connect with each other. Storytelling enables us to educate and entertain others, preserve our cultures, offer instructions for survival and guidance for how to live and instil values and expected behaviours in our communities (Campbell, 1949; Lévi-Strauss, 1978). While stories change over time to suit the environment, the underlying function of storytelling remains the same.

Rose (2011) argues that while stories are universal, the way we tell them changes with available technologies, with each new medium giving rise to a new kind of narrative. Scolari et al. (2014) use historical case studies to argue that ‘the expansion of a narrative is thus at the same time a social, commercial and semiotic necessity’ (p. 2). In other words, successful transmedia stories have performed well in the past because they resonated with the culture of the time. For example, during World War II, the success of Superman may have been the result of notions of resistance and the need for escapism at the time (Scolari et al., 2014). Similar arguments can be made for the success of *Star Wars* during the Reagan era. Scolari et al. (2014) note that while such examples of cultural resonance tend to be from the science fiction and fantasy genres, which offer rich storyworlds, it is a story’s cultural necessity that allows it to succeed and expand. Gomez’s (as cited in Bernstein, 2013) belief that transmedia storyworlds require an aspirational quality aligns with this notion. Clearly, what is being said in contemporary commercial transmedia is just as important as how it is being created and dispersed.

In his seminal book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Joseph Campbell (1949) used the template of the hero’s journey, a linear, recurring narrative structure in which the hero is called to action, follows the guidance of a mentor and overcomes a monumental challenge for

the betterment of society, becoming forever changed in the process. Campbell (1949) analysed the myths and stories of various cultures throughout history, finding certain common and recurring storytelling traits. This led him to term the hero's journey the 'monomyth', which serves as a set of cultural instructions to ensure the survival of a tribe or culture. These stories depict the actions of a strong individual undertaken to protect or save the wider community from harm. The model is a cultural template for the passing down of wisdom through the generations.

Campbell's work attracted wider attention when George Lucas acknowledged it as the inspiration for his *Star Wars* mythology. Hollywood screenwriters took note and began using the hero's journey as a template for films and popular commercial entertainment. As a result, the hero's journey has become ingrained in modern popular culture, with tales of individuals (typically young, white males) overcoming adversity for the good of society being repeated ad nauseam (J. Gomez, personal communication, 24 November 2018).

Although Campbell is remembered for his creation of the hero's journey, it is important to situate his storytelling template in the context of his broader body of research on comparative mythology and religion. Campbell (1949) arrived at this model through his extensive research into myths from across the globe, with the goal of identifying intercultural commonalities and obtaining deeper insights into the human experience. He did not perceive the hero's journey as a rigid or permanent cultural structure but rather a summation of historical evidence. Campbell believed that stories offered insights into the needs and concerns of societies and cultures and expected that the prevailing storytelling model would change over time to suit the needs of our evolving modern culture.

According to Gomez (2017a), the fundamental structure of our large-scale narratives has shifted from focusing on the deeds of a single heroic individual to focusing on collective action. Gomez coined the phrase 'collective journey' to describe this emerging model. These

stories are often characterised by nonlinear narratives and shifting perspectives, and the plot depends not on the actions of a single protagonist but on a community of individuals with distinct abilities and traits who must reconcile and work together to create long-term systemic change. In these stories, a greater diversity of people can play prominent roles, in contrast to the standard Hollywood trope of a white male being the singular hero. In the collective journey, the challenges that must be overcome are more complex than that presented by a single villain, meaning narratives can sprawl across eras. The actual heroes and villains are also less apparent and can change over time as the storytelling perspective shifts and the characters operate in grey areas of morality where there is no clear right and wrong. Characters can also leverage technologies and knowledge among their peers to seek answers. Gomez (2017b) points to recent popular narratives, such as *Game of Thrones*, *The Walking Dead* and *Orange is the New Black* as examples of the collective journey.

Gomez (personal communication, 24 November 2018) states that such stories do not have to be told in a transmedia fashion and can function on a single media platform. Conversely, not all transmedia stories suit the collective journey template. However, traits of the collective journey are becoming increasingly apparent in large-scale commercial transmedia storytelling franchises such as the MCU and *Star Wars*. Showcasing a wider diversity of characters allows storytellers to explore more varied plot lines and appeal to a broader fan base. Likewise, nonlinear storytelling structures allow the boundaries of a storyworld to continually expand in new directions. Given that transmedia stories require variety to sustain interest, it is reasonable to assume that a mode of storytelling that avoids the continual replication of a story focused on a singular hero may be more desirable.

Stories based on the collective journey reflect our present-day transmedial existence. Gomez (2017a) attributes the emergence of collective journey storytelling to the networked era. Through social media, audiences have a greater capacity to be seen by storytellers and

provide positive feedback when they see themselves represented in a story. Likewise, audiences have no hesitation in calling out storytellers for a lack of cultural diversity or on ethical, philosophical or practical issues. In this way storytellers can become emboldened to tell stories that go beyond the Hollywood-validated hero's journey template.

At the heart of transmedia storytelling is the aim of telling larger, highly engaging stories that encourage interaction on various levels, with a more recent focus on the notion of immersion. The term 'immersive media' is becoming increasingly common as a descriptor for novel forms of entertainment and, for some practitioners, has eclipsed 'transmedia storytelling' as the new buzzword (S. Coulson, personal communication, 15 November 2018; J. Gomez, personal communication, 24 November 2018; A. Phillips, personal communication, 18 January 2022; Rose, 2011). While transmedia storytelling and immersive entertainment share many commonalities, the latter emphasises the increasing appetite for 'realness' in people's entertainment experiences. Various scholarly and practical works elucidate some key principles on the development of immersive and influential transmedia experiences.

2.9 Best-Practice Methodologies for Transmedia Storytelling

In terms of creating a transmedia experience, the overall consensus is that providing audiences with something that is greater than the sum of its parts is what matters most (Freeman & Gambarato, 2019, p. 11). Jenkins's (2007) description of transmedia storytelling as 'a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience' (para. 2) continues to be embraced. There are some broad agreements with respect to how to achieve this experience.

2.9.1 Building a Storyworld

First and foremost, scholars and practitioners agree on the importance of world-building as a means of immersing an audience in a transmedia entertainment experience

(E. Evans, 2011; Hills, 2002; Jenkins, 2006a; Phillips, 2012). Thus, in addition to developing characters and a plot, transmedia storytellers must create an entire storyworld with a history and an inherent set of logics (Long, 2007), what *Star Wars* creator George Lucas refers to as ‘immaculate reality’ (Rose, 2011, p. 72). World-building enables storytellers to create rich narrative content and develop ideas that can function across a range of platforms. For example, deep mythologies such as *The Lord of the Rings*, *Star Wars* and *Lost* allow producers to tap into a wide range of styles, characters and eras to extend their narrative universe (Mittell, 2014). World-building enables storytellers to create an expansive environment that is both immersive and capable of sustaining audience interest. Well-crafted storyworlds also create a ‘drillable’ (Jenkins et al., 2013) experience, whereby audiences can spend time burrowing deeper and deeper into a fictional space. Hills (2002) uses the term ‘hyperdiegesis’ or ‘the creation of a vast and detailed narrative space, only a fraction of which is ever directly seen or encountered within the text, but which nonetheless appears to operate according to principles of internal logic and extension’ (p. 104) to explain how well-crafted storyworlds can stoke the audience’s imagination.

Jenkins’s earlier writings on transmedia suggest that artists can conceive a storyworld and its delivery across platforms in its entirety prior to releasing any content. Many industry bibles tend to suggest this way of working. However, the reality is that in large-scale commercial storytelling, storytellers are rarely afforded the opportunity to plan so comprehensively, and world-building frequently takes place progressively as a franchise proves itself to be financially viable.

Television is a medium with a rich history of storyworld creation from which producers can learn the fundamentals of world-building (E. Evans, 2011; Mittell, 2014). In contrast to the more linear narratives created by traditional film screenwriters, writers for TV shows often have to use inventive ways to build and explore storyworlds to meet tight

production schedules and budgets (S. Coulson, personal communication, 15 November 2018; E. Evans, 2011; Phillips, 2012).

There are some key techniques for effective transmedia world-building. Long (2007) recommends the use of ‘Barthesian hermeneutic codes’ (plot points designed to raise questions) (p. 166), ‘negative capability’ (intentional narrative gaps that prompt audiences to use their imaginations to fill them) (p. 9) and ‘migratory cues’ (signposts that encourage audiences to traverse platforms in search of answers) (p. 59). *Starlight Runner* uses the term ‘distant mountains’, taken from Tolkien’s writing method in *The Lord of the Rings*, to describe the inclusion of additional narrative elements to a storyworld that offer future story opportunities. Scolari et al. (2014) argue that basic strategies that enable transtextual expansion, such as seriality and cliffhangers, also allow for transmedial expansion (p. 4). S. Ford (personal communication, 24 January 2019) suggests that serial stories, long-term continuity, permanence and a deep character backlog are core structural elements of transmedia storytelling.

2.9.2 Consistency

Maintaining the internal logic of a storyworld is also critical for effective transmedia storytelling. According to C. B. Harvey (2014), successful transmedia storytelling depends on the degree to which the producers of the storyworld honour key elements such as the characters, narrative and plot. Jenkins (2006b) argues that fans derive pleasure from understanding the logic that guides the creation and continuation of a storyworld. They are also motivated by the desire to master a storyworld (Jenkins, 2006b; Mittell, 2014). Scolari et al. (2014) highlight the joy that can be found in collecting narrative elements and escaping into ‘far-away worlds of fantasy’ (p. 11). For fans of serial TV, ‘charting the canonical events, characters and settings featured in a storyworld is a central mode of engagement, with viewers

striving for both narrative comprehension and deeper understanding of a fictional universe’ (Mittell, 2014, p. 203).

Therefore, the onus is on the storyteller to ensure that a storyworld abides by the rules. Fans are now leveraging social media to call out producers or authors who break the rules or operate at odds with the core premise of the storyworld. In recent years, this has led to the ousting of authors from their own franchises, including George Lucas from *Star Wars* and James Gunn (temporarily) for his social media posts being apparently at odds with his responsibility to the thematic concepts of the *Guardians of the Galaxy* films (Webster, 2021). Hills (2004) argues that producers must ‘play with their own established rules and norms . . . to preserve audience interest’ (p. 511); however, this can only come from a thorough understanding of the boundaries of a storyworld.

2.9.3 Aspirational Narratives

According to Gomez (as cited in Bernstein, 2013), one of the three key components for a successful transmedia project is to create an aspirational narrative. As an intrinsically human trait, aspirational qualities can be thread into a storyworld to connect with readers on an emotional level and inspire engagement with a story. In practical terms, aspirational stories create narrative opportunities for storytellers, while pessimistic, divisive and nihilistic narratives tend to exhaust audiences and reduce their incentive to seek out additional narratives on different platforms (J. Gomez, personal communication, 24 November 2018).

2.9.4 Fan Satisfaction

Fans expect that the time and effort they spend traversing platforms or solving puzzles will be commensurately rewarded (Phillips, 2012). This means that each narrative element must have the capacity to make sense and be enjoyed on its own in the context of the wider metanarrative. Mittell (2014) asks how storytellers can create content on different platforms in such a way that it is rewarding and meaningful for those who seek it out but does not have

such a significant influence on the central narrative that those who choose not to seek it out are punished for skipping over it. *Lost* showrunners Damon Lindeloff and Carlton Cuse admit that certain elements of their transmedia efforts did not work as intended, in part because they struggled to convey important side narratives online that would not disadvantage regular viewers of the show. In addition, the mysteries that the show had set in motion, driven by the initial involvement of J. J. Abrams, became difficult to unravel for fans who had invested years into decoding them (Rose, 2011).

2.9.5 Super-producers

From a fan's perspective, it is also important for a storyworld to be directed and governed by a clear authoritative voice. This may be an individual or a small creative team that takes on the role of a 'super-producer' (Dena, 2009, p. 324), a figurehead who is seen setting the course of the storyworld and governing what is canon or non-canon. C. B. Harvey (2014) argues that the super-producer's ability to erase or alter elements of a storyworld is crucial and that forgettable elements are equally as important as those that must be recalled. C. B. Harvey notes that the legal system can affect collective memory because of its ability to restrict access to historical information. For example, while overseeing the *Star Wars* franchise, George Lucas declared that every project he had created was part of the core canon, regardless of whether it overwrote other narratives, and relegated all projects without his direct involvement to a lower level of canon (Wookieepedia, n.d.-b). Likewise, C. B. Harvey (2014) points to the *Doctor Who* stories by Big Finish Productions, which exist in non-canon or 'a state of non-memory' (p. 224).

The super-producer also establishes the acceptable terms of interaction with a storyworld (Gray, 2010). Whether or not the super-producer supports or denies fan theories or takes a stance against negative behaviour, they should communicate with fans in such a way

that the latter supports the franchise and its ethos. In this way, the super-producer is also a paratextual means by which an audience enters and understands a franchise (Gray, 2010).

Reflecting on the role of various agents (e.g. super-producers) in the transmedia ecosystem is helpful to situate transmedia storytelling in the context of cultural dynamics. Recognising the value of transmedia storytelling as a cultural process can provide new avenues of inquiry when considering best practice in a commercial context.

2.10 Recognising Transmedia Storytelling as a Cultural Process

In their struggle to find a precise definition of transmedia storytelling, many practitioners and academics have come to accept that it is a fluid cultural practice (Fast & Örnebring, 2017). In his more recent reflections on the topic, Jenkins (2013, 2019a) acknowledges that transmedia storytelling is a process rather than an end and offers several broad definitions that take this into account. At its core, transmedia storytelling is multimodal, intertextual and dispersed and requires audience participation (Jenkins, 2016). In his foreword to *The Routledge Companion to Transmedia Studies*, Jenkins (2019a) reflects on his initial conception of transmedia:

To me, transmedia was about a set of relationships across media, not a single model for how different media might ‘collide’. We need lots of different models for the forms that transmedia might take as different creative teams pursue different functions in relation to different stories for different audiences in different national contexts.

(p. xxix)

Jenkins (2016, 2019a) defends his initial theories as a provocation, not a paradigm, to incite further investigation into our networked culture and concludes that transmedia storytelling cannot be understood purely as a product of the time and Western media. However, Phillips (2016) claims that the golden age of transmedia is over, arguing that the movement peaked in 2012 before facing a ‘diaspora’ (para. 7). Key transmedia storytellers are now focused on

emerging technologies such as AR and VR (Phillips, 2016). Phillips attributes this to the collective failure to create a sustainable business model for transmedia IP, a common sentiment among transmedia practitioners.

In response, Jenkins (2016) argues that transmedia storytelling as a practice and an area of focus has moved far beyond Clark's (2011b) East Coast and West Coast subsets and is now a global phenomenon being shaped in a range of countries with different cultural and marketing practices. To gain a deeper understanding of transmedia storytelling as a cultural practice, Jenkins (2016) suggests investigating various cultures, 'from Japanese media mix to Bollywood and Nollywood, from the European Union to Latin America' (para. 24). Likewise, Freeman and Gambarato (2019) observe that the inability for practitioners and scholars to settle on a shared definition of transmedia storytelling is something to be celebrated because it indicates its true multifaceted and multidisciplinary nature.

Conducting research on transmedia storytelling is hampered by the sheer size of the field. The study of transmedia storytelling often occurs through the lens of media research, but a broader approach is warranted. Scolari et al. (2014) argue that transmedia storytelling research poses a new challenge for researchers because media studies have traditionally focused on a single medium and we have no semiotics by which to understand multiple media platforms at once (p. 5). Similarly, Freeman and Gambarato (2019) suggest that to better understand the monumental shift occurring in our cultural media, we must bear in mind that each media platform is linked to a specific scholarly lens and create a more comprehensive set of lenses through which to understand transmedia.

Despite the frustration of notable figures regarding the lack of a formal definition of transmedia storytelling, scholars and practitioners remain optimistic about what transmedia can be (Freeman & Gambarato, 2019, p. 5). While terminologies may be shifting towards notions of immersion and immersive storytelling, the underlying principles remain the same.

Chapter 3: Methodology

In the past few decades, the scope of transmedia storytelling scholarship has expanded its focus to include a variety of disciplines and varied international cultures. While initial conversations emerged around Western, predominantly American entertainment practices, transmedia scholarship now acknowledges the multitude of variations that can be found in cultures across the globe. This has allowed a diverse range of scholars to contribute to an increasingly global conversation around the application of storytelling within local industrial structures.

While this provides researchers a large and exciting canvas to draw from, I have consciously decided to concentrate my research on a small number of major American commercial entertainment franchises, namely the MCU, DCEU and *Star Wars*, for a few key reasons. Firstly, my intention has been to explore an aspect of commercial transmedia entertainment over a longer-term period than is often possible in other projects. As such, my intended goal is to achieve a degree of depth and specificity in my research that may not be possible if I were to expand the net too widely and incorporate a multitude of cultural practices. Secondly, while acknowledging that researching American commercial entertainment franchises is well-trodden academic soil, in my efforts to encourage transmedia scholars place a larger focus upon the role of transmedia entertainment in cultural systems change, analysing such commercial properties allows me to expand upon foundational transmedia research.

Three aspects of transmedia scholarship and practice have informed the methodological approach to this research project. First, while transmedia storytelling is not new, since the early 2000s, its prevalence in commercial entertainment has escalated at an unprecedented rate (Scolari et al., 2014), with a corresponding expansion in the transmedia scholarship. Second, both scholars and practitioners play a role in establishing the definitions

and best practices of transmedia storytelling, and their dialogue continues to shape modern considerations of the art form. For example, Jenkins's (2006a) definition of transmedia storytelling, based on his discussions with practitioners and scholars, is commonly used in the industry. Additionally, practitioners like Gomez often appear as guest lecturers at universities. Third, modern commercial transmedia storytelling has not advanced in the manner nor at the pace expected by early advocates, who were unified in the belief that well-executed transmedia storytelling could create monumental artistic and commercial experiences. However, many have since expressed their frustration that it has failed to emerge as a complete commercial practice, and transmedia strategies are often applied unevenly in commercial entertainment. In a blog post entitled 'What's happened to transmedia?', Phillips (2016) articulates the sense of disillusionment shared by many transmedia advocates caused by the divergence in commercial transmedia practices.

To address these three aspects of transmedia, this research is based on a qualitative mixed-methods approach that includes semi-structured interviews, a comparative case study analysis and a critical textual analysis. The rationale for these methods is drawn from Tsene (2016), who advocates for this type of approach in media studies to gain a deep understanding of a rapidly changing field, the trends, behaviours and perceptions of those involved and the 'why' of the modern transmedia phenomenon.

To best understand the 'why' of the transmedia phenomenon, I aimed to become immersed in the field over a long period, gathering data from 2016 to 2021. Ryfe (2016) argues that time is often overlooked as a valuable research tool in qualitative research, especially for researchers analysing modern media production, which continues to evolve at unprecedented rates. Ryfe claims that extended immersion in a practice helps researchers recognise broader trends and understand the core factors driving its evolution. In the spirit of transmedia storytelling, which is often employed to deepen audience immersion, I chose to

take a slow and immersive approach to explore a rapidly moving field. This decision not only enabled me to chart the significant developments in commercial transmedia practice over time but also had the unintended benefit of allowing me to gain data prior to and following several significant world events. The COVID-19 pandemic, the Trump presidency and the #MeToo and Black Lives Matter movements all provided an opportunity to observe the underlying dynamics shaping the evolution of transmedia.

3.1 Semi-structured Interviews

To explore the misalignment between the early hopes for transmedia and its current state as a commercial practice, I conducted semi-structured interviews with key individuals involved in commercial transmedia practice. The qualitative research literature refers to individuals who occupy unique positions as decision-makers and gatekeepers of information as ‘elites’ (Brunn, 2016; W. S. Harvey, 2011; Moyser & Wagstaffe, 1987). In the context of media studies, these individuals directly influence the production and content of media texts (Brunn, 2016). Thus, I sought to engage with industry elites who understood the various elements and priorities of transmedia production and had a direct influence on the production and content of commercial transmedia texts, thus could offer ‘backstage’ insights into the commercial process (Brunn, 2016).

Given that the commercial development of transmedia storytelling is still in its infancy, the pool of prospective interviewees who could offer such insights was relatively small. Further, while I acknowledge that diverse perspectives are essential to the robust exploration of ideas and gathering of data, my choice to focus specifically on American commercial franchise entertainment limited the connections I was able to make and the networks I could form. My intent was to establish and foster key relationships so that I could access a depth of knowledge in favour of a breadth of perspectives. Taking this approach to my research did mean that I engaged with a predominantly male, exclusively U.S. based

network of elites. While I recognise the limitations this created for the development of my research insights, it did align with my stated research goals and is representative of the structures of commercial Hollywood entertainment.

Over a span of 4 years, I conducted two rounds of semi-structured interviews with several prominent transmedia practitioners, all of whom occupied different roles and offered different insights into modern transmedia production. My interviewees were also involved in the production of the kinds of transmedia texts at the heart of my research. Gaining insights into their thoughts, behaviours and experiences subsequently informed the deciphering of texts and exploration of wider commercial practices (Brunn, 2016), helping to ensure the quality of my research (Moyser & Wagstaffe, 1987).

In the first round of interviews in November 2018, I travelled to New York and spent a fortnight at Starlight Runner, gaining firsthand insight into its operations. While there, I conducted face-to-face interviews with Jeff Gomez (CEO of Starlight Runner), Steve Coulson (co-director of Campfire) and Fabian Nicieza (a veteran freelance comic book writer and chief innovation officer at Starlight Runner), which was critical for building rapport and trust. These interviewees subsequently introduced me to Andrea Phillips (a freelance transmedia practitioner and author of *A Creator's Guide to Transmedia Storytelling*), Simon Pulman (an entertainment lawyer) and a senior industry professional with extensive experience in licensing and publishing who spoke with me on the condition of anonymity. In 2019, I also had the opportunity to interview Henry Jenkins. In the second round of interviews in 2022, the COVID-19 pandemic meant that I had to conduct all interviews via videoconferencing. However, because I had previously established relationships with my interviewees, this presented no major issues and, indeed, proved advantageous for efficiently recording and transcribing the interviews.

As W. S. Harvey (2011) notes in his guide to interviewing elites, the term ‘elite’ is used to describe individuals with a certain status and influence; thus, engaging with elites is inherently an exercise in navigating power dynamics. The power differential between interviewer and interviewee should be a key consideration when conducting interviews and interpreting the results; however, it can be challenging to anticipate how these dynamics may influence the process (W. S. Harvey, 2011). Participants may be motivated by the potential professional and commercial benefits that come from contributing to research in a new field. However, the goodwill and assistance I received from people from across the transmedia community implied a shared motivation to gain a deeper understanding of commercial transmedia. Interrogating these underlying motivations further informed my analytical approach.

Moreover, as K. E. Smith (2006) observes, those who hold professional positions do not necessarily exert the level of influence that their job title may imply, and considerations of influence are inherently complex. A recurring theme from the interviews was that although my interviewees had significant influence over commercial projects, they also encountered challenges directing the course of certain projects. This ongoing situation may be partly explained by the siloed state of commercial entertainment production, complicating decision-making processes (D. Johnson, 2009, 2013). It may also be attributed to the status of transmedia storytelling as a ‘fringe practice’ rather than a mainstream form of commercial entertainment (Jenkins, 2013; D. Johnson, 2013).

3.1.1 About My Elite Interviewees

My interviewees all offered a variety of experiences, perspectives and insights into commercial transmedia practice. Starlight Runner Entertainment, for example, places a strong focus on crafting the story and messaging. According to its homepage,²

² <https://starlightrunner.com/>

Starlight Runner is recognized as a premiere consultant in the fields of brand narrative, story world development, creative franchise design, and transmedia storytelling. We specialize in the expansion of entertainment properties, premium brands, and socio-political messages into highly successful multiplatform communications and international campaigns.

As the CEO of Starlight Runner Entertainment, Jeff Gomez (personal communication, 24 November 2018) is passionate about teamwork and the dynamics of storytelling and encourages corporations to adopt a holistic storytelling approach:

My philosophy and outlook around storytelling is what is reflected in the kind of work that we do. The notion that story is more than just a linear narrative with a brief beginning, middle and end is something that has always interested me, and teaching the world, big corporations [and] entertainment companies about how a story can be improved as it moves across different media platforms is kind of my specialty.

Comic book writer and chief innovation officer Fabian Nicieza (personal communication, 14 November 2018) used slightly different terms to describe the work of Starlight Runner, acknowledging that its transmedia consultancy work is often perceived to occupy the nebulous space between creative and marketing practices:

Starlight Runner is an entertainment content developer and provider. It also is a narrative manager. For me, that means that it could be a fiction or non-fiction narrative that we help manage. That means finding the right language to speak, say [and] write in order to get your message across. That can be a Hollywood feature film franchise for a big studio, or it could be a toy company's narrative, or it could be a video game company's narrative; and, as you know, it also is a university's narrative and has been a government social program narrative. It's really about managing language. It falls

between the idea of brand management and marketing but also content development and original writing for the development and dissemination of content.

In contrast, Campfire, places a greater emphasis on marketing, generating commercial interest and engaging with fans. According to its homepage,³ ‘Campfire develops award-winning strategies and campaigns to launch new products and entertainment franchises. We specialize in world-class participatory programs and immersive experiences that ignite fan cultures, encourage spread, and drive awareness’. Campfire co-director Steve Coulson (personal communication, 15 November 2018) distanced his company from the term ‘transmedia’ at the outset, preferring the term ‘immersion’ to describe its work. He outlined that Campfire projects serve to inspire greater affection for and consumption of entertainment products:

Our specialty is launching products or franchises. So, typically, a television company will come to us when they have a premiere of a show coming up in six, nine months’ time, and they’ll look to us to create content and experiences in advance of that premiere, to create conversation, to create buzzAll our work is really aimed at participation and immersion by fans, and those can be hardcore fans, or they can be mid-level fans.

Andrea Phillips is ‘an award-winning immersive experience designer and author specializing in high-profile entertainment marketing and original content’.⁴ She has considerable experience using emerging technologies for the creation of immersive entertainment. Phillips has collaborated with Campfire on entertainment projects and is the author of one of the most well-regarded industry handbooks: *A Creator’s Guide to Transmedia Storytelling: How to Captivate and Engage Audiences Across Multiple Platforms* (Phillips, 2012).

³ <https://campfirenyc.com/>

⁴ <https://deusexmachinatio.com/>

Simon Pulman is an entertainment lawyer based in New York and one the few who specialises in transmedia entertainment. According to the Pryor Cashman (2022) website, Pulman is

a partner and co-chair of Pryor Cashman's Media + Entertainment and Film, TV + Podcast Groups; he is also co-chair of the M+E Transactions and Financing Practice . . . Simon is an industry leader in rights transactions, with extensive experience negotiating deals on behalf of both rightsholders and acquiring parties in connection with the adaptation of books, articles, video games, podcasts, toy brands, and documentaries into scripted films and television productions (paras. 1–3).

My anonymous interviewee had held senior positions across a range of major publishing companies that had actively coordinated or supported large-scale transmedia entertainment franchises over the previous 3 decades. The interviewee was involved in sourcing licensed IP and navigating licensing arrangements across different media platforms.

Throughout my research, my interviewees were ready to connect me with their peers. This often occurred at their suggestion rather than my request. These new contacts were not only agreeable but usually eager to engage with a researcher. The willingness of transmedia professionals to engage with me, a representative of the academic community, is indicative of a broader set of power dynamics that continue to shape the field of transmedia entertainment.

Scholarly research can help transmedia practitioners not only advance their own practice but also, and perhaps more crucially, advocate to others in the industry the effectiveness of transmedia entertainment. In our first interview, Steve Coulson (personal communication, 15 November 2018) highlighted that Campfire uses Jenkins's research on fan behaviours to explain its immersive entertainment strategies to new clients. Clearly, the ongoing dialogue between practitioners and scholars continues to benefit both parties.

3.2 Case Study Analysis

To track the trends in the rapidly moving field of commercial transmedia practice, I selected three primary case studies—the MCU, the DCEU and the *Star Wars* franchise—and investigated the major changes and events in these franchises until the end of 2021. The individual and comparative analysis of these case studies allowed me to explore the emerging paradigms (Hamel et al., 1993; Tsene, 2016).

I recognise that these three franchises are often the basis for commercial transmedia storytelling scholarship and a lengthy scholarship exists particularly around *Star Wars*. However, the selection of these three case studies was important to my research precisely because of their degree of visibility across culture and academia. Offering an in-depth comparative study of all three would allow a greater articulation of nuanced differences in the transmedia practice and surrounding industrial structures than is often achieved.

The MCU is frequently cited as an example of best transmedia practice due to its unprecedented financial and cultural success, yet focus is regularly placed upon charting the development of the franchise as opposed to framing it in comparison to other systems of practice. Within such discourse, the less coordinated approach of the DCEU inadvertently positions it to be a lesser version of the MCU and there is far less research into the merits of the DCEU as an alternative commercial approach. After being acquired by Disney in 2012, there was an articulated shift in the production approaches applied to *Star Wars* providing a new phase of development to examine.

The opportunity to observe and analyse these three franchises over a significant time period provided me with a unique opportunity to map unique and divergent patterns evident within major commercial media. A long-term comparative study of three of the largest-scale commercial media franchises would allow me to deliver unique insights to my field of

academia. It would also allow me to recognise the limits of my research project and narrow the scope of my research to focus on a specific domain of transmedia practice.

3.3 Critical Textual Analysis

This entire research project is framed by critical textual analysis, with a particular focus on the power of language to shape our social realities (Atkinson & Coffey, 2016; Brennen, 2012). Transmedia storytelling is both a means and the result of our ability to circulate symbols and ideas with increasing speed (Jenkins et al., 2013; Scolari et al., 2014). Social media continues to play an undeniable role in transmedia practice. Therefore, in my analysis of case studies, individual texts and interview data, I acknowledge the importance of exploring the thoughts, ideas, themes and issues within not only a transmedia story but also its surrounding cultural texts, particularly those circulated through social media, to understand how socially constructed realities are created (Atkinson & Coffey, 2016; Weerakkody, 2009).

Chapter 4: Present-Day Commercial Transmedia Storytelling

The ongoing convergence of the entertainment industry has resulted in the consolidation of major global entertainment companies. Examples of these large-scale mergers and acquisitions include Disney taking over Pixar, Marvel and Lucasfilm; Amazon purchasing MGM Studios in 2021; the merging of Warner Bros. with Discovery in 2022; and Skydance Media acquiring Paramount Global in 2024. Having control over all channels of production and distribution has become increasingly essential for companies to maximise their profits in a shifting media landscape.

Among other technological innovations, streaming has profoundly influenced patterns of media production and consumption. Inspired by the global commercial success of Netflix, the so-called streaming wars intensified as every major studio sought to launch a streaming platform of its own (Lobato, 2018; Lobato & Lotz, 2021). Companies reassessed their licensing arrangements, seeking to monetise their content through their own platforms rather than through third-party platforms. To ensure that their platforms retained the attention of audiences, studios not only began producing more content than ever but also raced to find the most compelling content available.

Thus, acquiring the rights to IP has become a strategic priority for large-scale commercial entertainment producers because it not only protects proprietary products but also enables content to be multiplied and widely shared (D. Johnson, 2013, p. 5). Creating a successful IP and distributing it across multiple platforms is not only efficient but also maximises audience engagement. In essence, under the stewardship of a major media company, IP with an existing fan base is increasingly being transformed into transmedia offerings.

In the search for compelling content, companies are turning to a wider range of sources than ever. Simon Pulman (personal communication, 5 January 2022) outlined the

increasing demand for his services as an entertainment lawyer on the back of an industry-wide rush to secure the rights to established IP. He noted that producers are now turning to books, podcasts, video games and other types of media, which are often accompanied by ardent fan bases, in the search for compelling story ideas. Further, IP owners need to ensure that their ownership rights extend to new digital spaces such as non-fungible tokens and video game character skins.

There is, however, a certain irony that the centralised ownership of IP by major global media companies does not necessarily result in it being managed in a consolidated way. The entertainment industry is entrenched in a culture of territorialism and control, which often influences how transmedia IP is created. Veteran comic book writer and transmedia practitioner Fabian Nicieza (personal communication, 14 November 2018) described the competitiveness of global companies his team often faces when consulting on transmedia projects:

Too often, ironically enough, everything we preach is open borders and information for all, and then the companies that hire us hoard the information like it's in a safe or something. Why the hell did you just spend six figures to have us do this if you're not going to disseminate it to the other departments in your company? I rarely have any confidence that the client is going to apply it properly or smartly.

For reasons that will be explored further in this chapter, there is a culture of siloing and fear that often prevents major commercial IP being designed and implemented in a systematic and sequential manner, which is deemed essential by transmedia storytelling advocates.

The following sections present analyses of three case studies—the MCU, *Star Wars* and the DCEU—with the purpose of exploring the marked differences in commercial transmedia storytelling. While all three franchises have been designed to encourage continued consumption, each has a different structure and exhibits a different approach to the

production, authorial consistency and narrative design of their storyworlds. Thus, each franchise offers audiences different reasons for and means of traversing its connected content. These differences highlight the wide variations in commercial transmedia storytelling.

4.1 Marvel Cinematic Universe: Anticipation, Intersemiotic Translation and New Media Literacies

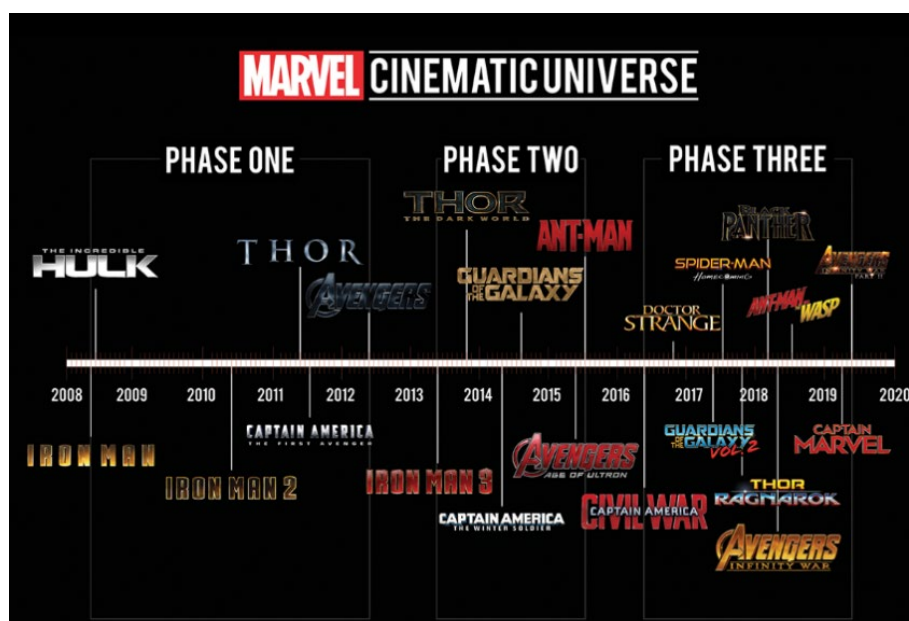
In just over a decade, the MCU has become a striking example of commercial transmedia entertainment and is vital to scholarly and industrial discussions of best practice. Based on Marvel comic book characters, the MCU began as a series of interconnected films produced by Marvel's film department, Marvel Studios, and has been so commercially successful that the team now produces texts across a variety of media. The global success of the MCU has led to the perception that it is the definitive version of Marvel's characters and storylines, all contained within a tightly controlled serial narrative. Yet, the franchise benefits from decades' worth of Marvel storytelling and content that continues to exist outside of the MCU.

Given its sheer size and frequent presence in the commercial market, the MCU was a key topic of discussion among my interviewees. Commencing with *Iron Man* in 2008, the MCU encompassed 27 films, four TV shows, one animated series, eight one-shot short films and a range of comic books, websites, place-based activations and more (Flanagan et al., 2016; Robinson et al., 2023) by the time I completed my data collection at the end of 2021. The MCU storyworld is built on the continuous introduction of new characters (Webster et al., 2022). Characters such as Captain America and Thor and teams such as the Guardians of the Galaxy first appear in solo instalments, then regularly cross over into other productions before all teaming up in the *Avengers* films. The coordinated expansion of this single storyworld over such a short period is unprecedented at a large-scale commercial level, underscoring a more fundamental shift in industrial practice that is allowing large-scale media

to be used in a more efficient and flexible way. Under the guidance of a single creative team at Marvel Studios, economies of scale have allowed the MCU to be expanded with increasing frequency over time (see Figure 4.1).

Figure 4.1

Increasing Pace of the Marvel Cinematic Universe



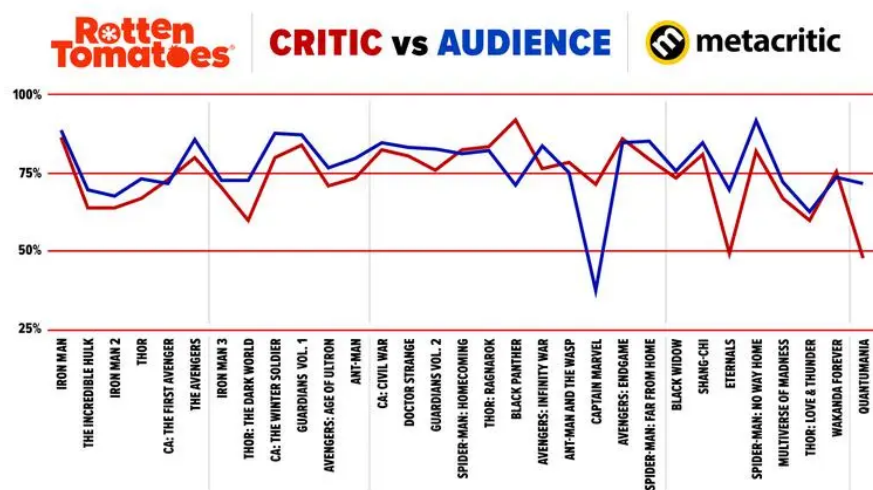
Note. Adapted from *MCU Infographic*, by S. Alvizo, 2019 (<https://www.behance.net/gallery/82661925/MCU-Infographic>). Copyright 2019 by Sean Alvizo.

The franchise has achieved substantial critical and commercial success over a relatively short period. With few exceptions, each MCU instalment has received high critic and audience ratings on Rotten Tomatoes and Metacritic (see Figure 4.2).⁵ In 2019, the MCU surpassed *Star Wars* to become the most profitable box office franchise ever (see Figure 4.3), with *Avengers: Endgame* becoming the highest-grossing film of all time (Brevet, 2019). In 2018, Marvel films comprised 18% of films at the North American box office. In 2021, while the entertainment industry was still suffering under COVID-19, MCU content occupied 30% of the global box office (Fuster, 2022).

⁵ The radical outlier of the *Captain Marvel* audience score is discussed in Chapter 6.

Figure 4.2

Marvel Cinematic Universe Films: Critic and Audience Ratings from Rotten Tomatoes and Metacritic (2008–2024)



Note. From *Uma Comparação Entre Notas dos Criticos e do Público dos Filmes da Marvel Studios*, by Coveiro, 2023 (<https://www.marvel616.com/2023/04/uma-comparacao-entre-notas-dos-criticos.html>). Copyright 2023 by Marvel616.com.

Figure 4.3

Highest-Grossing Movie Franchises Worldwide as of June 2022

| Characteristic | Total worldwide box office revenue | Average revenue of series | Highest grossing film in series |
|-----------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------|---------------------------------|
| Marvel Cinematic Universe | 26.6 | 0.95 | 2.8 |
| Star Wars | 10.32 | 0.86 | 2.06 |
| Harry Potter | 9.59 | 0.74 | 1.33 |
| Spider-Man | 8.25 | 0.83 | 1.89 |
| James Bond | 7.88 | 0.29 | 1.11 |
| Avengers | 7.76 | 1.94 | 2.8 |
| Batman | 6.81 | 0.45 | 1.08 |
| Fast and the Furious | 6.61 | 0.66 | 1.51 |
| X-Men | 6.07 | 0.47 | 0.79 |
| Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings | 5.85 | 0.31 | 1.12 |
| DC Extended Universe | 5.8 | 0.58 | 1.14 |
| Jurassic Park | 5.65 | 0.94 | 1.67 |
| Transformers | 4.85 | 0.69 | 1.12 |

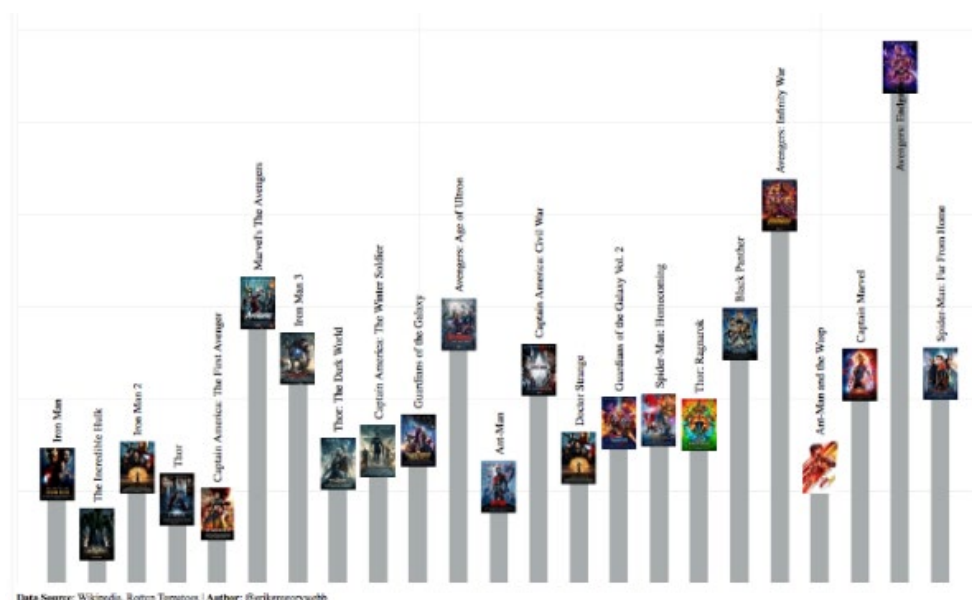
Note. From *Highest-Grossing Movie Franchises and Series Worldwide as of June 2022 (in Billion U.S. Dollars)*, by Statista, 2022 (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/317408/highest-grossing-film-franchises-series/>). Copyright 2024 by Statista.

It is undeniable that Disney's stewardship of the MCU provided it with a critical commercial infrastructure that has allowed it to flourish and become the dominant transmedia franchise. Disney purchased Marvel in 2009, shortly before *The Avengers* premiered, granting Marvel access to immense global marketing power and in-house channels of distribution well beyond what an independent studio could achieve (L. Burke, 2018; D. Johnson, 2012; Wetzel & Wetzel, 2020). Disney has also fuelled the further expansion of the MCU, requesting that Marvel create MCU projects for the Disney+ streaming platform (Robinson et al., 2023).

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of the MCU as a model of transmedia practice is its ability to generate increasing commercial interest. With only one exception (*Avengers: Age of Ultron*), every MCU film sequel has earned more than its predecessor (see Figure 4.4), a statistical rarity in Hollywood.

Figure 4.4

Worldwide Box Office Revenue for All Marvel Cinematic Films (2008–2021)



Note. From *The Marvel Cinematic Universe*, by Erik Webb, 2022 (https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/erik.webb/viz/TheMarvelCinematicUniverse_16236607800290/MCUDashboard). Copyright 2022 by Erik Webb.

While franchising led to a proliferation of sequels in the 1980s and 1990s, it also fuelled diminishing commercial returns (D. Johnson, 2013). The MCU has defied this trend,

offering multiple character franchises that are simultaneously gaining commercial momentum (Mendelson, 2019). A major reason for this trend is that the navigational architecture of the MCU is built on anticipation.

4.1.1 Anticipation and Navigation

The serial nature of the MCU generates anticipation and encourages the ongoing navigation of texts. Each MCU text creates a timeline of events that are typically presented as occurring in the present day (with *Captain America: The First Avenger* being a notable exception because it is predominantly set in the past). This begins with the introduction of a character (e.g. Tony Stark in *Iron Man*), followed by sequential texts that continue the character's adventures (e.g. *Iron Man 2* and *Iron Man 3*). Other texts occur simultaneously, such as those focused on Captain America and Thor, expanding the MCU and the timeline of major events. The deliberately designed interaction of characters, who cross into each other's films and eventually team up in the *Avengers* films, communicates to audiences that each film is consequential and critical for understanding the whole storyworld.

Every MCU film (and many of its streaming shows) features a post-credits scene as a teaser for an upcoming character or storyline, building audience anticipation for a future text. For example, Thor's hammer, Mjölnir, is revealed after the credits in *Iron Man 2*, leading audiences to anticipate not only the appearance of the character but also the associated storyline and supporting characters. Such post-credits scenes have become emblematic of MCU productions, serving as 'migratory cues' (Long, 2007) that direct audiences to other texts. Other narrative features such as 'Easter eggs' and cameos create further incentives for audiences to seek answers in other texts and use their imagination to expand their understanding of the storyworld (Long, 2007; Phillips, 2012).

These narrative elements generate ongoing conversations and speculation among fans. This keeps the MCU at the forefront of popular cultural dialogue between the release of each

new film. Steve Coulson (personal communication, 15 November 2018) explained the shifting commercial importance of fan dialogue and how Campfire takes this into consideration:

The barrier to becoming a geek has really dropped, and mass popular culture has responded to that. I absolutely believe that *Game of Thrones* and the rise of the Marvel movies and the rise of science fiction and all those things which now are part of the mainstream has completely been fuelled by social media, allowing everyone to be fans very easily and to connect with fans . . . It's not the power of social media to put messages out for free or to distribute widely. It's the way it's allowed people to connect around a water cooler—the old-fashioned way. A water cooler at work, there would be 10 people, but now you can connect with 10,000 people and discuss. Reddit is the world's water cooler now.

The ongoing serial nature of the MCU allows it to stay present in 'water cooler' conversations and expand its cultural footprint. In the age of bingeing and information overload, aligning its IP under one consistent and clear idea has allowed the MCU to stand out.

In the early days of the MCU (following the mixed critical reception to *Iron Man 2* to be exact), Marvel Studios made a concerted effort to ensure that migratory cues did not detract from the immediate narrative of a text (Robinson et al., 2023). *Iron Man 2* did not earn the same critical praise as *Iron Man*, partly because the multiple subplots and time spent setting up the wider MCU in the film detracted from the compelling primary narrative. Most of the MCU's migratory cues are now limited to post-credits scenes. This formulaic delivery of information offers audiences clear navigational instructions and sets up an expectation of how to receive them. This approach has been so effective that fans will regularly sit through the film credits at the cinema to watch the post-credits scene. Placing migratory cues outside of the main narrative ensures that audiences become immersed in the current text. This

approach provides one solution to a central query at the heart of transmedia best practice: how to simultaneously deliver an effective and enjoyable text while also enhancing the metanarrative.

Balancing audience interest in the future of the MCU without diverting attention from its most current texts has been an ongoing commercial concern for Marvel. By announcing different ‘phases’ of content, Marvel continues to outline the direction the MCU is heading. However, as storyworlds have become larger in scale and consequence, maintaining interest in smaller and less connected instalments has necessarily also been a focus.

One way the company has attempted to achieve this balance has been by offering variations in subgenre and scale. Following the MCU’s first major team-up of characters in *The Avengers*, each subsequent text has leaned further into genre diversity. For example, *Captain America: The Winter Soldier* can be likened to a spy thriller, while *Ant-Man* is a lower-budget, family-friendly tale (Robinson et al., 2023). Marvel has clear commercial incentives to continue diversifying its storytelling strategies, including maintaining audience interest and sustaining its commercial viability. However, whether consciously or otherwise, this strategy has also contributed to the franchise offering epic narrative storytelling beats that balance anticipation and intensity.

Jeff Gomez (personal communication, 24 November 2018) views the MCU as one epic narrative, similar to the *Odyssey* and grand mythic tales of the past, which is something that he advises transmedia storytellers to do when formulating their storyworlds. In the scheme of the MCU, smaller instalments such as *Ant-Man* can be understood as offering the audience respite from the action and intensity of the preceding film, *Avengers: Age of Ultron*. *Spider-Man: Far from Home* allows audiences to join Peter Parker as he grapples with the loss of Tony Stark (following Starks’s death in *Avengers: Endgame*) and serves as a text of reflection and denouement for the wider metanarrative. Offering the audience a sense of

narrative reprieve and a lull in the narrative momentum not only diversifies the entertainment experience but also creates an opportunity to rebuild anticipation.

It may seem paradoxical that the most significant and ever-present commercial global entertainment franchise of the past 10 years has been able to create a sense of anticipation and longing among audiences. However, despite the frequent distribution of MCU texts, an individual often must wait months, if not years, for their favourite character to reappear. The first three *Captain America* films, for example, were released in 2011, 2014 and 2016, leaving audiences waiting several years between instalments. This is not dissimilar to older franchises such as *James Bond* and *Indiana Jones*. However, between 2011 and 2016, Captain America also appeared in two *Avengers* films and briefly cameoed in one of the four other character films released during that period, keeping the character and anticipation for more of him at the forefront of popular culture. The MCU also benefits greatly from the fact that Marvel characters are well known and have been consistently featured in popular culture since the 1960s.

4.1.2 Adaptation and Intersemiotic Translation

In his foundational definition of transmedia storytelling, Jenkins (2003) established that it was not the same as adaptation or retelling the same story on a different platform, which he later suggested would lead to redundancy (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 105). Gomez (2009) also emphasised that transmedia storytelling must involve adding new elements to a storyworld rather than simply repeating the same content. Dena (2019) notes that it is essential to make this distinction to encourage a shift in entrenched industry practices. However, over time, this stance has softened among scholars and practitioners. As transmedia practices have become more common in commercial entertainment, the dialogue has expanded to consider the artistic merits of adaptive practices (L. Burke, 2015; Dena, 2019; Jenkins, 2017a; Voigts & Nicklas, 2013; Wolf, 2014).

Given that the MCU is based on long-established IP, adaptation is vital to the creation of modern transmedia storyworlds. The unprecedented scale and commercial success of the MCU means that practitioners and scholars often consider the franchise transformative and new. Yet, this overlooks the fact that the MCU has simply adapted the conventions and content that Marvel has long employed in other media spaces. The interconnected MCU storyworld structure emulates the tropes of comic book storytelling (Scolari et al., 2014). Veteran comic book writer Fabian Nicieza (personal communication, 10 January 2022) emphasised how the MCU systematically adapts conventions from comics:

What Feige [president of Marvel Studios and primary producer of the MCU] has done for Marvel is unmatched in the history of motion picture cinema, pretty much by anyone. You've had franchises, you've had sequels, you've had the same production people responsible for Bond for 50 years or whatever, but you've never had a cohesively planned, structured universe of titles that could interact with each other. And it's been as much the result of one person as much as the opportunity that existed for that one person to do it, combined with the fact that it is adapted from a world that had been doing the same exact thing in a different platform for 50 years that gave you the template for how to do it on another platform.

Nicieza and other comic book authors I spoke with were at pains to emphasise that the MCU storytelling template is not new. Having characters appear in their own titles, then cross over and interact in other stories has been a feature of Marvel and comic book storytelling for decades. It is also not the first time the company has adapted its comic book storytelling conventions to other media. Marvel's animated shows in the 1990s, including *X-Men*, *Spider-Man*, *Iron Man*, *Fantastic Four* and *The Incredible Hulk*, all offered serialised, interconnected storytelling to various degrees (with some of these shows interacting directly).

The MCU clearly draws from over 60 years of Marvel comic book source material. Comic book authors and artists are becoming increasingly vocal about the fact that they have not been adequately credited or compensated for the works they originally created for Marvel and that have since been adapted for the MCU, a multibillion-dollar franchise (K. Smith, 2022; Starlin, 2017). *Captain America: The Winter Soldier*, for example, is heavily inspired by the *Captain America* comic books written by Ed Brubaker and illustrated by Steve Epting, who brought Captain America's former sidekick, Bucky, back from the dead as a brainwashed Russian agent known as the Winter Soldier. While the film does not adapt the comic book panel for panel, it is clearly based on that specific piece of work. Brubaker acknowledges that Marvel owns the rights to his work and has no legal obligation to offer him more than a nominal cheque but laments that more was not done to recognise his role in the creative process (K. Smith, 2022).

While the MCU may not meet the exact definition of adaptation as used in the traditional sense, it is clear the company is intentionally remixing its own established works. Speaking from experience, my anonymous interviewee (personal communication, 14 November 2018) explained that adaptations that are inspired by publishing but not beholden to it are often much more successful:

Because if you do that sort of super-close tie-in, it takes away some of the element of surprise because the hardcore fans know what's coming. So, what you want to have is stuff that's inspired by the core product but not a direct translation of that product. While this makes commercial sense, Brubaker's situation highlights the complexity that corporate ownership casts over notions of authorship and reminds us that the MCU continually recycles and remixes established narrative content into live-action media.

The concept of intersemiotic translation helps to explain why the MCU is widely perceived to be so different from the decades of Marvel content that preceded it. Drawing on

the scholarship of the influential linguist Roman Jakobson, Scolari (2009) uses the term ‘intersemiotic translation’ to consider the cultural connotations of media and how the same message can be received differently when transmitted through different media. Scolari suggests that the success of media convergence and transmedia practice may in part be driven by these semiotic differences. In transmedia entertainment, audiences can receive messages and make meanings in varied ways when the storyworld content is delivered through diverse platforms.

Take, for example, the 11-year relationship that global audiences developed with Robert Downey Jr’s portrayal of Tony Stark compared with the comic book version of the character. Tony Stark, whose alter ego is Iron Man, was first introduced in Marvel Comics in 1963. The character has endured in comics and other media and is often portrayed as a serious inventor and entrepreneur who is prone to addictions. Tony Stark was the MCU’s first major character, appearing as a selfish weapons manufacturer in *Iron Man* (2008). This version showcases Downey Jr’s quippy mannerisms and comedic sensibilities and metatextually references the actor’s real-life struggles with addiction. In his numerous appearances in MCU productions for over a decade, Stark is transformed from a reckless, independent hero to a conscientious leader who sacrifices his life and happiness to save the universe in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). Downey Jr’s close affiliation with the character and regular media appearances allowed Tony Stark to remain prominent in the cultural psyche. The emotive qualities of cinema and live-action entertainment allowed audiences to build a long-term parasocial relationship with both the character and the actor. Seeing the character realised through film, with a finite storyline culminating in the character’s death, offers audiences a media experience that differs greatly from the cyclical, ongoing nature of comic books.

This intersemiotic translation in which characters are transposed from comic books to film and TV exposes their story to different audiences and caters to a variety of ways in which

people prefer to engage with both the character and the narrative. As my anonymous interviewee (personal communication, 25 January 2022) lamented,

It's a painful lesson for people in my industry to learn . . . there are people who may never, ever pick up a comic book in their lives because graphic fiction is not a medium that they're comfortable with. And we have to realise that that's an audience that we may not be able to access. It's something that is a constant cry of dismay from comic book retailers of like, 'Well, this film came out and I didn't see any increase in sales in my store.'

Although it is effectively replicating comic book material, the MCU may be perceived as a new form of entertainment because it offers a different cultural experience for consumers and engages different audience segments. The cultural influence of the MCU has been such that it has become the dominant gateway into the wider Marvel universe of storytelling (L. Burke, 2018). The global interest in the MCU led to *Avengers: Endgame* becoming the most commercially successful film of all time (until it was unseated by the re-release of James Cameron's *Avatar*), meaning that Stark's death became a weighty collective popular cultural experience, beyond what the comic book medium can usually achieve (see Figure 4.5).

Figure 4.5

Death of Tony Stark in Avengers: Endgame (2019)



Note. Adapted from *Avengers: Endgame*, by A. Russo & J. Russo, 2019 (2:30:29). Copyright 2019 by Marvel Studios.

Thus, the MCU has become the definitive source of stories over existing comic book content, meaning it now informs the elements of new comics. The character Star-Lord, for example, is now frequently drawn to resemble the MCU actor Chris Pratt, with past comic book depictions being set aside.

My interviewees highlighted that connecting the MCU with the original comics is too logistically difficult to coordinate, which is largely why the MCU and Marvel Comics only intersect thematically and not narratively (Anonymous interviewee, personal communication, 14 November 2018; F. Nieceza, personal communication, 14 November 2018). Moreover, Marvel would also need to understand how best to incorporate comic book content into the MCU given that not all audiences are inclined to turn to comics to complete their metanarrative experience. *The Matrix* franchise faced a similar problem when critical narrative information was delivered through a video game. Most of the cinema-going audience did not play the game, resulting in narrative confusion and audience dissatisfaction (Jenkins, 2006a).

4.1.3 New Media Literacies and Entertainment Thrills

Despite being founded on pre-existing ideas, the MCU is experienced differently from historical Marvel experiences. The use of blockbuster cinema and streaming to deliver episodic storytelling reveals a shift in popular media paradigms. Based on his evolving experience of the kinds of stories his clients seek to explore through large-scale media, Steve Coulson (personal communication, 15 November 2018) elaborates on this point of difference:

We've seen also over the last 10 years the move from cinema being the centre of the entertainment universe to quality television being a big part of that, and even our movie experience now. Look at the number one franchise in the world—the Marvel franchise. Marvel movies are not movies. The Marvel franchise is the world's biggest television series, right? And each one is an episode of an ongoing series that you see. So, the television format has taken hold, and the difference between—we work with a lot more television than we have with movies in the past, even though you would [prefer a] movie's big, big budget—I found in my work with directors and showrunners that typically a filmmaker, unless they're in charge of a franchise, a filmmaker has a story to tell, whereas a TV showrunner has a storyworld to build. Marvel's capacity to use large, expensive media channels in such a flexible and coordinated way highlights the changing relationship between the industry and technology. More importantly, as Coulson highlights, it also demonstrates a change in thinking in the entertainment industry to use established media differently for long-term engagement.

Expanding the MCU across platforms has challenged modern media conventions (Webster et al., 2022). MCU films feature a serial quality that is rare in the modern era (although it harks back to 1920s film serials and pulp fiction) and emulate the tropes of modern television. In the relatively new streaming space, Marvel has managed the production of projects in the same way it manages the production of films and experimented with the

storytelling techniques of each project. The MCU's first streaming show, *WandaVision*, parodies the various eras of television entertainment, while *The Falcon and the Winter Soldier* incorporates cinematic set pieces and production. By pushing the conventions of cinema to suit the needs of the storyworld and experimenting with streaming content, Marvel has transformed and dictated what audiences can expect from these media platforms. E. Evans (2011) argues that the blurring of media boundaries is an inevitability in transmedia storytelling practice because audiences gain multiple media literacies as they traverse platforms to follow a story, then apply these literacies when decoding content from each platform. Applying these new media literacies can also offer new kinds of narrative experiences and enjoyment.

As the MCU has progressed, texts such as *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame* have become almost entirely intertextual constructions. In her industry handbook, Phillips (2012) argues that if a storyteller asks audiences to travel across texts and platforms, the reward for doing so must be at least commensurate to the effort required. In our discussion, Phillips (personal communication, 18 January 2022) highlighted how she sees this embodied in later MCU instalments:

I maintain [that] *Endgame* is so deeply beloved not because it's actually a really fantastic film in its own right but because it was, like, the last hour-and-a-half is pay-off for 10 years of things that people have been waiting for and wanting to see, and you can't fail when you give people that much pay-off, pay-off, pay-off, pay-off, all of these things people have been waiting for.

The intense pay-off Phillips describes is a novel large-scale entertainment experience and the result of anticipation built over a long period. It is a new kind of pleasure made available through the convergence of industry, technology and media—the kind of pleasure advocates have long believed that transmedia storytelling can achieve.

These evolving forms of narrative pleasure can also be found in Marvel's efforts to retrospectively enhance the MCU storyworld. *WandaVision*, for example, focuses on the relationship between Wanda and Vision that originated in *Avengers: Age of Ultron* but occurred largely off-screen. Focusing on this relationship and the events of the film allows the show to retrospectively expand on and enhance the narrative of one of Marvel's (slightly) less well-received texts. From a commercial perspective, this strategy is sound—*WandaVision* resulted in a renewed interest in and appreciation for *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (Barnhardt, 2021), elevating its status for fans. Such storytelling also serves to enhance the MCU canon. Tracking and understanding canon is a major source of pleasure and collaboration in many fandoms (Hills, 2015b; Jenkins, 2006b; Mittell, n.d.). The scale and frequency with which the MCU operates enable traditional fan activity to become a larger, more collaborative form of popular culture engagement, enhanced by a multitude of podcasts, YouTube channels and news sites dedicated to the MCU.

The MCU is an ongoing large-scale media experiment, and only time will tell how long it can be sustained in its current iteration. Comic book companies have long had to reboot narratives and relaunch titles to manage complex continuity and renew audience interest. However, as S. Coulson (personal communication, 21 December 2021) highlighted, the MCU works to bring multiple generations of fans together. *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, for example, features three different Spider-Man actors and draws three different franchises into one continuity, extending seriality across stories that were not originally serial. This invites three generations of Spider-Man fans to become invested in the MCU. At some point, the company will have to grapple with aging actors (if they want to continue using the characters these actors portray) and may need to simplify its complex canon to ensure new audiences. While the predominantly sequential and serial storytelling strategy has worked for now, the company will need to find ways to continue building anticipation and raising the

narrative stakes without invalidating the texts that have preceded it or making them feel redundant. In these instances, one strategy may be to bring more authorial voices into the fold; however, as the next case study demonstrates, this is a situation to be addressed with nuance.

4.2 *Star Wars* and the Primal Message

In the context of large-scale commercial transmedia storytelling, few franchises offer such rich insights into maintaining clear and consistent messaging through the work of multiple authors as does *Star Wars*. Beginning with the release of the original *Star Wars* in 1977, George Lucas's storyworld has been expanded in a nonlinear transmedia fashion. While Lucas has not always overseen the transmedia growth of *Star Wars*, his fundamental philosophies for its storyworld have left an indelible mark in its continuation, cementing him as the primary authorial figure. *Star Wars* grew into such a substantial piece of IP that it has maintained multigenerational appeal and influenced a generation of transmedia storytellers.

Star Wars has experienced two distinct phases of transmedia development: the Lucas era (1977–2012) and the Disney era (2012–present). The primary focus of this section is the Disney era, which begins with Disney's purchase of the franchise from Lucas and attempt to reboot and guide it in his absence. Lucas's independently owned franchise was a proven commercial and cultural success, offering Disney a dense mythology to explore and an established, albeit messy, transmedia history. Through an analysis of Lucasfilm's production of new films under Disney's control, expansion into streaming and the paratextual authorial information surrounding these new texts, this case study explores the importance of understanding and nurturing what Jeff Gomez (2019) refers to as the 'primal message' of a franchise. This often difficult-to-define 'X factor' is the unifying message of a storyworld, which, once established, can be included in new texts and amplified through paratextual content to assert the coherence and uniqueness of the storyworld. As we explore the distinct

challenges faced by Lucasfilm as it developed a new version of *Star Wars*, it becomes clear that while issues of canon and continuity can be repaired, it is much more difficult to fix fundamental thematic deviations.

Lucas's original analogue expansion of *Star Wars* through comics, toys, action figures, cartoons, books, video games and other media was a means for him to earn the revenue required to fund more films (Taylor, 2014). It was the financial imperative rather than the creative opportunity that motivated Lucas to be so invested in ensuring that these additional elements tied into his central *Star Wars* texts (Hassler-Forest & Jenkins, 2017, p. 17). While it resulted in the growth of what we might consider a transmedia storyworld, Lucas did not regard these extensions as an equal part of his work. His business-focused approach was more akin to the historical practices of industrial franchising or media mix, where the proprietor generally does not expect expansions or merchandising to affect the narrative of the original text. However, as Steinberg (2012) and D. Johnson (2013) demonstrate, these processes often do contribute to the creative narrative.

Nevertheless, Lucas's expansion strategies formed potent world-building opportunities that invited play, participation and consumption of a connected storyworld in the predigital media landscape. *Star Wars* toys were a tacit invitation for children to imagine the backstories of characters, create new adventures (Hassler-Forest & Jenkins, 2017) and imagine the world of *Star Wars* beyond what they saw on the screen. Hills (2002) coined the term 'hyperdiegesis' to describe the phenomenon of exploring a world beyond what is depicted in the text. Hills suggests that this is achievable when a storyworld has been so well designed and has such a clear internal logic that it is easy and fun for a fan to organically imagine how the world beyond the text might be. Kinder (1993) and Jenkins (2006a) both observe the significant influence of *Star Wars* on the American commercial entertainment structures of the 1980s and 1990s and its formative influence on transmedia practice. With Lucas largely

disinterested in managing or overseeing the transmedia growth of *Star Wars*, fans were left to their own devices and free to play and imagine the world of *Star Wars* beyond his texts as they saw fit. This was exacerbated by the 16-year gap between the *Return of the Jedi* and *The Phantom Menace* and the period during which other creators (many of whom were fans) contributed to the creation of the Expanded Universe.

Despite this, Lucas maintained a dominant authorial role over the franchise during his reign. His dedication to filmmaking and willingness to disregard and overwrite ancillary texts from as early as his first commissioned novel, *Splinter of the Mind's Eye* (Freeman, 2017b), to his later Expanded Universe novels ensured that his films remained the 'mothership' (Jenkins, 2013) of the franchise. At times, this led to Lucasfilm acting adversarially towards its fans, issuing cease and desist notices to those who were using emerging web technologies to share fan-produced *Star Wars* texts and anything the company deemed a breach of copyright (Brooker, 2002; R. Pearson, 2010; Shefrin, 2004).

However, when Lucas attempted to reconfigure the narrative direction of *Star Wars* through his trilogy of prequel films, he experienced a fierce backlash from his fans, who ultimately ousted him from his own franchise (Shefrin, 2004). His outraged fan base felt that Lucas's vision was no longer aligned with their own. Amplifying their disappointment through emerging social media, they mobilised to protect the franchise from its own creator. On acquiring the franchise, Disney also took on fans who had high expectations of exerting authorial control based on their perceived understanding of the essential nature of *Star Wars* (McDermott, 2006). Thus, the continued success of the franchise would be contingent upon its new owner understanding and conveying these essential narrative qualities to the satisfaction of existing fans.

4.2.1 The Primal Message

In 2004, Starlight Runner was recruited by Disney to assist in the transmedia expansion of the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise. During this process, the team gained new insights into the functional expansion of large-scale commercial franchises. According to Jeff Gomez (personal communication, 24 November 2018), it became apparent to Starlight Runner that Disney teams were working in siloes and that following the success of the first *Pirates* film, each team was taking different directions with the franchise. This would have led to narrative and character contradictions and conflicts, which had the capacity to derail audience interest. To unite the teams under a shared creative vision, Starlight Runner developed a guide to inform the production of all *Pirates* media: ‘This guidebook that wasn’t just a bible but conveyed the essence of the brand, the true meaning of *Pirates of the Caribbean*, the way to best tell a *Pirates* story—that was a 400-page document’.

While mapping the narrative elements of the *Pirates* storyworld was relatively straightforward, understanding the unique proposition that made a *Pirates* story what it was (based on what had worked so well with the first film) led the team on a hunt for information, culminating in an interview with actor Johnny Depp, who played Captain Jack Sparrow. Depp explained that he had made unusual acting choices when portraying Sparrow because of his internal struggle to find a balance between what was ‘noble in myself with the wildness I need to bring my characters to life’ (as cited in Gomez, 2019, p.211). Starlight Runner realised that this quest to achieve a balance between nobility and savagery explained not only the character but also captured the point of the whole franchise. This ‘primal message’ (Gomez, 2019) articulated what had made the first film a success and offered a unique aspirational message that could be central to all future *Pirates* media.

According to George Lucas, the primal message of *Star Wars* is ‘that we all have good and evil inside of us and that we can choose which way we want the balance to go’ (Wagner,

1999). This sense of agency in determining one's position in the world was clearly expressed in Luke Skywalker's heroic journey in the original film and Anakin Skywalker's villainous decline in the prequel films. Lucas's focus on a universal balance between good and evil was so pervasive that his poetic use of symbols and dialogue in the films created a 'mythopoetic unity' (Canavan, 2017, p. 279) for the franchise. This was extended through Lucas's ongoing media appearances and musings upon what *Star Wars* meant. As a result, it became difficult to separate the meaning of the franchise from the creator's capacity to explain it. Without Lucas at the helm, the challenge for Lucasfilm was to demonstrate to its fan base that it had as deep an understanding of the original principles of the *Star Wars* mythology as its creator.

4.2.2 The Disney Era

Before his departure, Lucas appointed Kathleen Kennedy, a trusted friend and colleague, as the new president of Lucasfilm to shepherd *Star Wars* into a new era. Kennedy is one of Hollywood's most successful producers. Prior to *Star Wars*, she had produced over 60 films that had collectively grossed over \$11 billion worldwide and had earned 120 Academy Award nominations and 25 wins (StarWars.com, 2012). In 2019, Kennedy was ranked third (after Steven Spielberg and Kevin Feige) in terms of box office revenue in the US (Box Office Mojo, 2019). In her role as producer, Kennedy has collaborated with high-profile artists such as Lucas and Spielberg, helping them realise their creative visions. In appointing Kennedy, Lucas was not installing a creative successor to take over his IP but a trusted IP manager to keep his assets safe.

In 2014, under the stewardship of Disney, Lucasfilm announced its intention to grow *Star Wars* through a carefully orchestrated transmedia plan, which would be overseen by a core creative team:

Now, with an exciting future filled with new cinematic installments of *Star Wars*, all aspects of *Star Wars* storytelling moving forward will be connected. Under Lucasfilm

President Kathleen Kennedy's direction, the company for the first time ever has formed a story group to oversee and coordinate all *Star Wars* creative development. (StarWars.com, 2014, para. 2)

The Lucasfilm Story Group, comprising creative and strategic personnel, advises the authors who work across a variety of platforms, keeps track of continuity issues and ensures the narrative integrity of the *Star Wars* storyworld. The team works across all platforms including feature films, television, publishing, games, and more to keep everything working together within a single narrative timeline. Pablo Hidalgo, a founding member of the group, clarifies that its purpose is to support the growth of *Star Wars* lore:

We work with any creative who is wanting to tell a story of *Star Wars*, and we help them find the story that they want to tell but also make sure that story fits within the framework of *Star Wars*. (Star Wars, 2016, 14:54)

Such statements suggest that the Lucasfilm Story Group primarily manages and polices the franchise rather than leading it creatively. This implies that the creative design is outsourced to people who are subsequently brought in-house to develop their ideas. Thus, the story group is more a reactive and protective force for the company. This represents a distinct shift in the operation of the franchise compared with when Lucas managed both the creative and production elements of the franchise, although this is perhaps not an entirely unsurprising result given how hard Lucasfilm employees had to work to protect the franchise and keep its complex canon coherent when Lucas himself chose to make alterations and additions (Wookieepedia, n.d.-a).

In the same announcement, Lucasfilm informed fans that the whole 37 years of the *Star Wars* canon was being reset. Only Lucas's six films and *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* film and animated series would remain as core texts (StarWars.com, 2014), with Dave Filoni (2014) later announcing that the standalone comic series *Star Wars: Darth Maul—Son of*

Dathomir would also remain in the canon. The original transmedia content, collectively termed the *Star Wars* Expanded Universe, was rebranded as *Star Wars* Legends and relegated to the state of non-canon, allowing the company to avoid the convoluted continuity and tiered canon that developed during the Lucas era (Wookieepedia, n.d.-a). However, the company also promised to find novel ways to continue drawing from *Star Wars* Legends (StarWars.com, 2014).

Lucasfilm's decision to begin with a fresh slate and make every new text a canon would allow the company to strategically develop content across the range of media channels under Disney's control and drive continued consumption through 'commodity braiding and continuity' (Proctor & Freeman, 2017, p. 227). Under Disney, Lucasfilm now had direct access to more media channels compared with what Lucas had (or desired to have) and a unique opportunity to create a coordinated transmedia iteration of the franchise in the digital era. With the MCU gaining significant commercial prominence during this time, Lucasfilm's announcement implied to fans that *Star Wars* would operate in the same way and that every text would matter. Given that *Star Wars* had a sizeable transmedia footprint that would be entirely rebooted, Lucasfilm's intent to launch new content across all media was a substantial creative task.

When Disney announced its purchase of *Star Wars* in 2012, the press release stated that a new film was imminent, with more to follow (Walt Disney Company, 2012). In 2013, the company announced a slate sequel films and spin-off films, which would later be called 'anthology films' (StarWars.com, 2013). These films were to be written and directed by a various people. For example, *Episode VII*, *Episode VIII* and *Episode IX* were to be directed by J. J. Abrams, Rian Johnson and Colin Trevorrow, respectively (Couch, 2013; R. Ford & Siegel, 2014; Sciretta, 2015). Gareth Edwards, Phil Lord and Christopher Miller were all recruited to direct anthology films (Mengarelli, 2022). David Benioff, D. B. Weiss and Rian

Johnson were each later appointed to create a new trilogy of films (Mengarelli, 2022; Tyler et al., 2024). Taika Waititi, Patty Jenkins, Kevin Feige, J. D. Dillard, Matt Owens and Damon Lindelof have all since been announced as directors for upcoming *Star Wars* projects (Mengarelli, 2022; StarWars.com, 2020a). This approach would enable a critical mass of projects to be produced concurrently, teams to function independently and fans to experience a diverse entertainment experience. It also aligned with Kennedy's commitment to respect Lucas's approach to creating *Star Wars*, which focused on the writing and auteurship of each individual text as opposed to outlining and managing a multifaceted transmedia system. Kennedy has repeatedly stated that she encourages filmmakers to bring their own vision to each *Star Wars* project (Breznican, 2022).

However, this shared authorial system has resulted in numerous points of narrative dissonance in the more recent *Star Wars* projects, particularly in the trilogy of sequel films. In *The Force Awakens*, *The Last Jedi* and *The Rise of Skywalker*, Lucasfilm concluded the events of Lucas's original six films. However, surprising narrative turns and varied character arcs led fans to speculate that there was no overarching plan for this trilogy. The late and largely unexplained revelation that Emperor Palpatine was the ultimate villain in the sequels, for example, was mocked by fans for being narratively underwhelming (see Figure 4.6).

Figure 4.6

Fan's Use of Images from The Rise of Skywalker to Mock the Return of Emperor Palpatine



Note. From *.....somehow palpatine returned*, by Matthew [@frigginhegg], 2019 (<https://x.com/frigginhegg/status/1211356585361989632>). Copyright 2019 by Matthew.

Rey, the hero of the sequel trilogy, is introduced as an orphaned scavenger, learns that she is an empowered individual of no notable bloodline, then discovers she is a descendant of The Emperor. These narrative deviations indicate an interrupted process in the design of these texts and served as a barrier to fans becoming immersed in the story. Most egregiously, they breached Lucas's monomythic structure and the elements of logic, order and balance that fans had come to expect from the franchise (Canavan, 2017; Seastrom, 2015; Shefrin, 2004).

Fans' unmet expectations of the franchise have been reflected in the declining commercial interest in each new film. While the films have all earned significant box office revenue (apart from *Solo: A Star Wars Story*), every sequel and anthology film has earned less than its predecessor (see Figure 4.7). This pattern demonstrates a growing disinterest in and declining anticipation for the continuation of the story. Fan-circulated memes imply that the declining commercial fortunes of the rebooted franchise was a result of poorly executed storytelling (see Figure 4.8). By concluding Lucas's nine-film monomyth in such muddled narrative terms, Lucasfilm failed to offer definitive answers to what Lucas's story ultimately

meant. Thus, the trilogy of sequels deflated 42 years' worth of anticipation for audiences invested in the storyworld.

Figure 4.7

Worldwide Box Office revenue for Star Wars Films

| Release Date | Title | Production Budget | Opening Weekend | Domestic Box Office | Worldwide Box Office |
|--------------|--|-------------------|-----------------|---------------------|----------------------|
| Dec 18, 2015 | Star Wars Ep. VII: The Forc... | \$306,000,000 | \$247,966,675 | \$936,662,225 | \$2,064,615,817 |
| Dec 15, 2017 | Star Wars Ep. VIII: The Las... | \$262,000,000 | \$220,009,584 | \$620,181,382 | \$1,331,635,141 |
| Dec 20, 2019 | Star Wars: The Rise of Skyw... | \$275,000,000 | \$177,383,864 | \$515,202,542 | \$1,072,767,997 |
| Dec 16, 2016 | Rogue One: A Star Wars Story | \$200,000,000 | \$155,081,681 | \$533,539,991 | \$1,055,083,596 |
| May 19, 1999 | Star Wars Ep. I: The Phanto... | \$115,000,000 | \$64,810,970 | \$474,544,677 | \$1,027,044,677 |
| May 19, 2005 | Star Wars Ep. III: Revenge ... | \$115,000,000 | \$108,435,841 | \$380,270,577 | \$848,998,877 |
| May 25, 1977 | Star Wars Ep. IV: A New Hope | \$11,000,000 | \$1,554,475 | \$460,998,007 | \$775,398,007 |
| May 16, 2002 | Star Wars Ep. II: Attack of... | \$115,000,000 | \$80,027,814 | \$310,676,740 | \$656,695,615 |
| May 21, 1980 | Star Wars Ep. V: The Empire... | \$23,000,000 | \$4,910,483 | \$291,738,960 | \$549,001,086 |
| May 25, 1983 | Star Wars Ep. VI: Return of... | \$32,500,000 | \$23,019,618 | \$316,465,003 | \$482,365,284 |
| May 25, 2018 | Solo: A Star Wars Story | \$275,000,000 | \$84,420,489 | \$213,767,512 | \$393,151,347 |
| Aug 15, 2008 | Star Wars: The Clone Wars | \$8,500,000 | \$14,611,273 | \$35,161,554 | \$68,695,443 |

Note. This figure shows that each sequel and anthology *Star Wars* film produced in the Disney-era has earned less than its predecessor. From *Box Office History for Star Wars Movies*, by Numbers, n.d.-d (<https://www.the-numbers.com/movies/franchise/Star-Wars>). Copyright 1997–2024 by Nash Information Services, LLC.

Figure 4.8

Fan-Produced Meme Mocking the Return of Emperor Palpatine



Note. From *Somehow, Palpatine returned*, by Know Your Meme, n.d.-b (<https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/2066154>). Copyright 2007–2024 by Literally Media Ltd.

Paratextually, Lucasfilm also offered fans reasons to suspect that the company did not have a firm grasp on the franchise's direction. Lucasfilm has continued to announce, then

remove, authors from major projects. Gareth Edwards was replaced as the director of *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* after filming had been completed, with Tony Gilroy brought in to reshoot the third act and retool the story (Breznican, 2016). Phil Lord and Christopher Miller were fired in the final weeks of filming *Solo: A Star Wars Story*, with Ron Howard reshooting 70% of the film and earning the sole director credit (Tapley, 2018). Colin Trevorrow was removed as the director of *Episode IX* and replaced by J. J. Abrams when Lucasfilm decided not to proceed with Trevorrow's version of the film (shortly after Trevorrow released the poorly reviewed *The Book of Henry*) (Kit & Galuppo, 2017). Likewise, Josh Trank's Boba Fett film was scrapped moments before being announced at a *Star Wars* celebration event, right after Trank released the critically and commercially panned *Fantastic Four*. At the time of writing, most of the director-led *Star Wars* projects announced by Lucasfilm have failed to materialise.

The public hiring and firing of so many authors and directors has created a perception that Lucasfilm either does not know how to choose the right people or is unsure how to guide the franchise. In the age of social media and the 24/7 news cycle it enables, these frequent changes fuel speculation and convey a worrying corporate narrative to fans. Speaking about the work he completed on *Solo*, director Ron Howard remarked, 'Kathy [Kathleen Kennedy] is really a director's producer and filmmaker-friendly in that way, and they were looking to me to make choices and creative decisions' (Tapley, 2018). While that proposition may seem attractive to a director, for fans of the franchise it signals a lack of authorial oversight from Kennedy. After the release of *The Rise of Skywalker*, Kennedy (as cited in Hiatt, 2019) would later reflect:

Every one of these movies is a particularly hard nut to crack. There's no source material. We don't have comic books. We don't have 800-page novels. We don't have anything other than passionate storytellers who get together and talk about what the

next iteration might be. We go through a really normal development process that everybody else does. (para. 3)

While Kennedy's statement is technically true (based on Lucasfilm's decision to reset the canon), it breaks the illusion, as Lucas has always maintained, that there is an intricate mythology guiding the ongoing development of *Star Wars*. It also signals to fans that the company is failing to appreciate decades of *Star Wars* stories, which is problematic given the nostalgia surrounding *Star Wars* (Hassler-Forest & Brooker, 2017).

Further, the repeated interruption of the authorial process has produced a variety of 'what if' scenarios that draw the attention of fans away from the official *Star Wars* narrative in favour of speculating alternative scenarios. The trailers for *Rogue One* included scenes from Gareth Edwards's version that would not feature in the final cut, teasing fans with a beach-based showdown that did not appear on screen. Phil Lord and Christopher Miller's version of *Solo* was described by *Star Wars* insiders as more cavalier and riskier, thus more in line with the character of Han Solo himself (Tapley, 2018). Given that Lord and Miller earned an Oscar for their next film, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse*, speculation continues among fans as to which version of *Solo* would have been superior. Trevororrow's script for *Episode IX*, originally titled *Duel of the Fates*, was leaked in 2020 shortly following the release of *The Rise of Skywalker* and showed a significantly different conclusion to Lucas's monomyth. Fans continue to debate whose version of the film they would have preferred (Burnett, 2020).

4.2.3 A New Hope

Even in his absence, George Lucas continues to be a looming authorial presence over *Star Wars*. Lucasfilm continues to perpetuate his potency as a paratext and entry point to understanding the franchise (Gray, 2010). Lucas will forever be seen as the transmedia author of *Star Wars*, despite not overseeing nor agreeing with much of the content (Canavan, 2017). As Jenkins (2006a) highlights, a singular auteur is an effective tool in the development of

transmedia because ‘the most successful transmedia franchises have emerged when a single creator or creative unit maintains control’ (p. 106). The entertainment industry also perpetuates the notion that complicated texts are the product of a single author and encourages this form of development. According to Gomez (personal communication, 24 November 2018),

when there’s nothing at all, when we’re arriving during the scripting phase, it’s delightful in that we’re becoming involved in something from scratch, and that’s great, but the Hollywood structure for intellectual property creation tends to be solo, tends to be the purview of a visionary.

Since Disney took over the *Star Wars* franchise, no single person has occupied the role as visionary. However, this may be changing with the increasing involvement of Dave Filoni.

Lucas hand-picked Filoni, an animator, from relative obscurity to collaborate on the animated series *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*. Set between the events of Lucas’s prequel trilogy and drawing on Filoni’s animation skills, *The Clone Wars* did much to redeem Lucas’s divisive prequel films and strengthen their thematic and narrative connections to the original films. The show offered an extended exploration of Anakin’s transformation into Darth Vader and created a narrative space for deeper philosophical considerations of the *Star Wars* myth. Through projects such as *The Clone Wars* and *Star Wars: Rebels*, Filoni has arguably been better at articulating ideas to a modern audience, albeit through a different media platform.

Filoni’s involvement in *The Mandalorian*, Lucasfilm’s first *Star Wars* streaming project, has cemented his place as Lucas’s heir apparent. *The Mandalorian*, created by Jon Favreau with support from Filoni as executive producer, explores a time shortly after *Return of the Jedi* using tropes and characters familiar to fans of Lucas’s original series. Used by Disney as a vehicle to launch the streaming platform Disney+, *The Mandalorian* has attracted a substantial global audience and strong critical reviews (Rotten Tomatoes, 2019a). While

Favreau is credited as the creator of *The Mandalorian*, he credits Filoni for his deep knowledge of *Star Wars* lore and for making the show a success. With Filoni's support, the show has also mined some of the most iconic *Star Wars* elements in a way that not even the recent films could achieve, showcasing a younger and more vital Luke Skywalker at the height of his Jedi powers (see Figure 4.9).

Figure 4.9

Luke Skywalker at the Height of his Jedi Powers in The Mandalorian



Note. From 'Chapter 16: The Rescue', by P. Reed, 2020, in J. Favreau, D. Filoni, K. Kennedy, C. Wilson, & R. Famuyiwa (Executive Directors), *The Mandalorian* (34:17). Copyright 2020 by Lucasfilm.

The Mandalorian has offered Filoni a prominent platform through which to demonstrate his affinity to *Star Wars* lore and mythology. Take, for example, Filoni's explanation of how the death of Qui-Gon Jinn dooms the relationship between Anakin Skywalker and his mentor Obi-Wan Kenobi in a behind-the-scenes Disney+ featurette for *The Mandalorian* (Leon & Baruh, 2020). This clip went viral and was repeatedly praised by fans for being insightful and clearly articulated, supporting the perception that Filoni is Lucas's natural successor.

Filoni credits his time working with Lucas for his substantial insights into *Star Wars* mythology and has an ongoing relationship with the franchise creator. *The Mandalorian* attracted praise and support from Lucas himself, who expressed admiration for the narrative and technological elements of the show. With Lucas remaining largely absent from *Star*

Wars–related media, Favreau’s photograph of Lucas visiting the set of *The Mandalorian* is a powerful endorsement (see Figure 4.10). Filoni now seems poised to creatively lead the franchise, with Lucasfilm announcing he will oversee a range of forthcoming live-action *Star Wars* projects (Moreau, 2023b).

Figure 4.10

George Lucas Meets Grogu on the Set of The Mandalorian



Note. Photograph by J. Favreau, 2020 (https://x.com/Jon_Favreau/status/1217993455487475712). Copyright 2020 by Jon Favreau.

The evolution of *Star Wars* under the stewardship of Disney highlights the importance of driving a storyworld forward with a creative vision, not simply to protect its legacy. Lucasfilm’s recent struggles to maintain audience interest demonstrates how a deeper philosophical understanding of a storyworld can allow new texts to resonate with fans. It is interesting to note that at the conclusion of my research, *Star Wars: Visions*, an animated project with renowned Japanese artists reimagining elements of *Star Wars* lore, is one of the studio’s next projects. This suggests that the company may be seeking to re-evaluate the mythical components of the franchise and better understand how it resonates with global audiences. Conversely, it could be argued that this project is more akin to the Japanese media

mix, demonstrating that Lucasfilm does not have a strong transmedia development plan for the franchise.

This case study highlights an enduring tension around achieving scalability in commercial transmedia production. While conveying a consistent and compelling message is essential for transmedia entertainment to thrive (and for audiences to understand it in the case of *Star Wars*), large-scale transmedia entertainment requires the involvement of numerous authors. Leveraging the talents of great authors without compromising their ability to tell the best story possible is challenging in the transmedia environment. If authors are less restricted by a dense metanarrative and heavy intertextual needs, singular texts could perhaps have a more significant effect. To explore this concept further, we now turn to the DCEU.

4.3 DC Extended Universe: Character, Experimentation and Multiversal Architecture

Warner Bros.'s DCEU offers a different perspective on commercial transmedia construction that highlights the talents of varied authors, utilises current industry structures and emphasises the unique possibilities of different platforms. Prioritising the creative exploration of character, the DCEU includes a range of loosely connected texts across a variety of media. These texts are based on DC Comics characters such as Superman, Batman and Wonder Woman. In 2020, at its inaugural virtual fan event DC FanDome, DC announced its aim to make textual connections between a range of separate media projects, including the DCEU films and the interconnected Arrowverse TV shows. This metatextual connectivity is built on the concept of a multiverse in which different versions of well-known characters exist in different universes. In this case, shared continuity is less important because the storyworld is based on the notion of infinite possibilities.

DC is an intriguing franchise to explore in the context of transmedia scholarship for a variety of reasons. First, it has a long history with transmedia practice. Similar to Marvel's,

DC's characters and stories have endured in the popular cultural psyche since the foundation of the company in 1934 (then named National Allied Publications). Freeman (2014) cites DC's expansion of Superman across comics, newspaper and radio serials as one of the most vivid examples of modern analogue transmedia practice. This transmedial process of character expansion has continued to occur in other key DC projects.

DC has also been incredibly successful translating its characters across different media to engage with different audiences. The 1978 film *Superman: The Movie* directed by Richard Donner is often cited in the industry as being the urtext of superhero films. Kevin Feige spent his early career working with Donner. He acknowledges the formative influence *Superman: The Movie* has on the MCU. In a speech honouring Donner, Feige stated,

Superman: The Movie is still, to this day, the archetype of the perfect superhero film origin story, and we watch it before we make almost any one of our films, and that's been the case for the past 17 years since I left the fold to go work for Marvel. (Oscars, 2017, 0:43)

DC's ability to create influential popular culture texts has been demonstrated over a long period and this is evident in the character of Batman. DC has reimagined Batman over decades, from the campy 1960s TV show to Tim Burton's gothic live-action films, the interconnected animated shows stemming from *Batman: The Animated Series*, Christopher Nolan's trilogy of record-breaking films and the popular *Batman: Arkham Knight* video game. The 2008 Batman film *The Dark Knight* is only the second superhero film (along with *Superman: The Movie*) to be included in the US National Film Registry (Library of Congress, 2020). While superhero films have won Academy Awards for sound and visual design, *The Dark Knight* was the first to win an Oscar for acting (Academy of Motion Picture Arts and

Sciences, 2009), indicating it had achieved a level of cultural prestige.⁶ Texts such as these have continued to influence the DC comic books, inspiring the ongoing growth and evolution of major characters and their respective corner of the DC universe.

Second, the DCEU offers a different strategy for transmedia content production that draws on the strengths of current industry structures. Allowing different creative teams to envisage DC characters without being constrained by a single continuity means that individual texts can vary wildly in tone and structure. While one could argue that this is simply the practice of franchising as it currently exists, the point of difference is that DC has signalled its intent to offer audiences greater narrative and paratextual clarity around how and why different DC stories connect.

At the global virtual fan event DC FanDome (held online because of COVID-19) in August 2020, 7 years into the DCEU and 8 years into the Arrowverse, the head of DC Films Walter Hamada, chief creative officer Jim Lee and Arrowverse producer Greg Berlanti announced that DC was moving towards a single multiverse model that would house all DC projects (Swann, 2020). This would allow the company to continue producing multiple projects by different authors, creating separate continuities as well as opportunities for these projects to interact. For example, the DCEU version of the Flash appeared alongside the Arrowverse version of the Flash in the *Crisis on Infinite Earths* TV show storyline (see Figure 4.11). This practice replicates the tropes of comic book storytelling, where characters are continuously reimagined and reinvented by different authors while remaining within a broader storytelling universe. However, it fails to meet the best-practice criteria for transmedia storytelling outlined by Jenkins (2006a), Gomez (2012) and Phillips (2012) because there is no preplanned, overarching, coordinated narrative tying the projects together.

⁶ In comparison, Sony's first major superhero win was for *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018), which was awarded Best Animated Film by the Academy, while *Black Panther* (2018) was the first of Marvel's MCU films to be nominated for the Best Picture category.

In other words, there is not necessarily a strong incentive for fans to consume all elements of DC content unless they are interested in a particular character. At present, DC's multitude of projects offers a variety of transmedia experiences, some of which contradict each other, and an overall experience that does not prioritise continuity.

Figure 4.11

DCEU Flash Meets Arrowverse Flash in Crisis on Infinite Earths.



Note. DCEU: DC Extended Universe. From *Ezra Miller Cameos on Arrowverse's Crisis on Infinite Earths Crossover*, by IGN (n.d.) (<https://www.ign.com/slideshows/ezra-miller-cameos-on-arrowverses-crisis-on-infinite-earths-crossover>). Copyright 2020 by Warner Bros.

However, as Scolari et al. (2014) argue, there are no specific semiotics by which to understand multiple media platforms at once (p. 5), and an open-minded approach is warranted as we seek to understand patterns beyond the monomediatic research of the past. Jenkins (2019a) also calls for new models of understanding, labelling his original definition as a provocation for scholars to explore our changing media landscape. Arguably, the DCEU meets Jenkins's (2016) revised baseline criteria of transmedia approaches being multimodal (in that they deploy the affordances of more than one medium), intertextual (in that each of these platforms offers unique content that contributes to our experience of the whole) and dispersed (in that the viewer constructs an

understanding of the core ideas through encounters across multiple platforms).

(para. 5)

To achieve this would mean considering the intertextuality of DC texts a thematic and symbolic connection as well as a direct narrative connection. To expand on Gomez's (2012) analogy, if effective transmedia is an orchestra of instruments playing in symphony, then perhaps the DCEU is more akin to a jazz ensemble working together to create a shared groove within which talented soloists can perform.

From an entertainment perspective, Steve Coulson (personal communication, 15 November 2018) emphasised that Campfire's approach is to focus first and foremost on what makes for an exhilarating experience, not whether the story conforms to the rules of transmedia:

I could never write a book on transmedia or participatory culture because the answer is, it always depends. Depends each time. Each project we do breaks the rules of the last one. If you're not breaking the rules every time, you're not doing it right, right?

What you're doing is just rehashing.

Coulson's perspective emphasises the need to broaden the scope of inquiry around transmedia, recognising that if each company were to implement the same process, this may not necessarily create a dynamic entertainment environment. The 'messier' DCEU format allows us to interrogate some of the uncomfortable questions debated in transmedia circles, including how to nurture a truly collaborative corporate and creative environment, how to maximise the relevance and profitability of a franchise and how best to cater to the desires (whether known or unknown) of fans and general audiences.

4.3.1 Experimentation and Zeitgeist

The development of transmedia storyworlds relies on an inherent push and pull between consistency and experimentation. If texts are too similar, then a storyworld quickly

becomes repetitive and tiresome. In contrast, if they stray too far from the core tenets of a storyworld, it can result in a dissatisfying transmedia experience. Early transmedia planning tools such as Hayes's (2011) transmedia handbook advised writers to outline their entire multimodal transmedia production plans. However, as Pratten (2011), Phillips (2012) and Jenkins (2013) observed, it was rare for any franchise to be successfully launched as a fully formed transmedia project; more often, a storyworld had to evolve over time.

A high-profile example of this was Universal Studio's failed attempt to launch the *Dark Universe* interconnected film series based on the *Universal Monsters* characters. The studio announced a series of planned films, along with their writers and actors, and circulated a photograph of the cast, including Tom Cruise, Javier Bardem and Johnny Depp, who were set to feature in future films. However, *The Mummy*, Universal Studio's second instalment in the series starring Tom Cruise, was such a commercial and critical failure that plans for the shared universe were shelved. Similarly, Sony's plans for *The Amazing Spider-Man* universe of films were halted after *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* achieved a significant decline in commercial and critical interest compared with *The Amazing Spider-Man*. Both *The Mummy* and *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* are texts that focus on establishing Easter eggs and migratory cues for future storyworld storylines. However, if a text focuses too much on world-building at the expense of the immediate narrative, this can interfere with an audience's ability to become immersed in the experience (Gomez, personal communication, 24 November 2018; Jenkins, 2006a; Phillips, 2012). The dissatisfaction that fans expressed about the quality of these two texts supports this point (Rotten Tomatoes, 2014, 2017b) and resulted in each storyworld coming to a halt.

In our interviews, Fabian Nicieza openly discussed the frictions that he and Jeff Gomez experienced when striving to find a balance between planning and experimentation when designing transmedia projects for clients. Nicieza advocates for flexibility in the

creative process to allow stories to form organically in a way that expands a storyworld over time. Drawing on his experience of consulting with Disney on the *Pirates of the Caribbean* franchise, Fabian Niecieza (personal communication, 14 November 2018) commented,

It's an interesting discussion because there's a difference between codifying and collating a pre-existing storyworld. Let's say *Pirates of the Caribbean*, one movie with a lot of breadth and scope to it that already has two other movies planned, so that's going to be two other scripts already almost done. You know that you have 6 hours of content already in the pipeline for what your storyworld is, and that storyworld contains a lot of stuff in it. Collating that is very, very different than deciding before you start writing *Pirates of the Caribbean* . . . that you're going to create three movies' worth of detailed storyworld and drop that on the table and say, 'This is the storyworld we're going to operate in.' It doesn't allow for any kind of honest exploration. It's forced exploration. You're holding someone's hand and dragging them to what they can do instead of allowing them to explore what they might be able to do. . . That's the difference between when you can constipate yourself on storyworld transmedia development to the point where your property loses any kind of freshness, spontaneity and, as a result, life.

Niecieza advocates for the independence of creative personnel in larger projects and the space for them to explore ideas as a necessary step for the growth of a transmedia project.

S. Coulson (personal communication, 15 November 2018) offers a similar perspective: 'If you argue quite hard about what is and what isn't transmedia, then you put some barriers around yourself.' According to F. Niecieza (personal communication, 14 November 2018), 'you need to express your creative vision in something first before you know if the audience likes it and wants more of it before you know if you have more to tell in it.'

We can observe this approach in the way many DC projects are built around characters that resonate with the public. My anonymous elite interviewee (personal communication, 14 November 2018) noted how the popularity of a character can change over time:

A character where we've done so much publishing, just basically because of the fan response to it . . . I think that's a great example of something where there was a character that just tapped into the zeitgeist, [like] Deadpool [or] Harley Quinn, where there's just something about the character that has caught the imagination of a reading public. And you'll see that kind of support well up first on social media with memes and stuff like that, and then start to see it reflecting in the success of the print material. The cultural zeitgeist shows how a character can become a meaningful cultural symbol during a certain period. Focusing on a character that has cultural relevance makes commercial sense and, in theory, would allow a project to be more desirable to an existing fan base.

We can see this strategy in how DC has utilised Harley Quinn across its DCEU series of films. Harley Quinn first appeared in *Batman: The Animated Series* as a side character and love interest of the Joker. The character was so well received that she was incorporated into comics and books. She first appeared in the DCEU ensemble film *Suicide Squad* (2016), portrayed by Margot Robbie (see Figure 4.12).

Figure 4.12

Harley Quinn Portrayed by Margot Robbie in Suicide Squad



Note. Adapted from *Suicide Squad*, by David Ayer, 2016 (43:54). Copyright 2016 by Warner Bros.

Despite being commercially profitable and Robbie's portrayal of the character being well received, the film was not a critical success (Masters, 2016). The character frequently reappeared in other DCEU projects, including as a cameo in *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016), as the lead character in *Birds of Prey (and the Fantabulous Emancipation of One Harley Quinn)* (2020) and again as the lead in the ensemble film *The Suicide Squad* (2021). While Robbie's portrayal of the character has remained consistent, films featuring the character have varied wildly in tone and style. *The Suicide Squad* (2021) even rebooted or dismissed elements of the 2016 *Suicide Squad*; however, Harley Quinn has remained one of the rare consistent through lines between films. In 2019, DC launched the animated TV series *Harley Quinn*, and the character will be featured in the upcoming video game *Suicide Squad: Kill the Justice League* and the non-DCEU film *Joker: Foile à Deux* (2024). Robbie will not portray these versions, but it highlights DC's recognition that the character currently exists in the zeitgeist. Or as Fabian Nicieza (personal communication, 14 November 2018) put it more acerbically,

the real barometer for whether a Marvel or a DC have found success in something is if all of a sudden in a 6-month span you go from a couple things on this platform to 25 things on this platform, because they've always historically abused their successes.

Nevertheless, maximising the visibility of characters that fall within a cultural zeitgeist is a valid way to ensure a storyworld remains relevant for a modern audience and offers a rationale for audiences to traverse platforms.

DC's character-driven approach shares similarities with Japan's media mix and the prioritisation of character over storyworld coherence (Steinberg, 2012). To rebuild the economy after World War II, Japan's *keiretsu* approach mandated companies working together across traditional boundaries to boost their productivity (Gomez, 2009; Hoshi, 2009). It is against this backdrop that the creative industries found novel ways to combine disparate elements of storytelling. Characters such as Godzilla and King Kong began to interact through film and other media. This combination of two iconic characters with previously separate histories is emblematic of the Japanese media mix. For audiences, the immediate thrill is seeing two iconic characters interact, but each character also acts as an ambassador for its own storyworld, encouraging audiences to follow them back to their 'home' content.

Iconic DC characters such as Harley Quinn can travel between texts and remain largely separate from the storyworlds they inhabit, which often do not affect them in any lasting way. Such characters are enduring and symbolic and less anchored to issues of continuity or canon. This storytelling process is more conceptual and abstract than the more linear narrative methods of the MCU. Acknowledging the DCEU in this manner also allows us to situate this mode of transmedia storytelling within a broader spectrum of practices occurring across different cultures, in line with Jenkins's (2019a) call for us to consider the broader relationships between media.

4.3.2 Inconsistent Navigational Incentive

It is perhaps logical then that DC's flagship transmedia project, the DCEU, has continued to prioritise the exploration of character over consistent world-building strategies. By the end of this research period, the DCEU comprised 11 interconnected films (excluding

Zack Snyder's Justice League), commencing with the 2013 film *Man of Steel*, which focused solely on Superman (see Figure 4.13). The DCEU marks DC's first foray into interconnected, serialised storytelling through film and arrived soon after Marvel had found commercial success using the same approach. However, unlike Marvel, the DCEU did not have a single storyworld architect managing issues of canon and continuity. Had the DCEU emerged prior to the MCU, this would perhaps not be a major issue. However, given the significant cultural impact of the MCU, general audiences have come to assume that the DCEU would follow the same conventions, and DC have not effectively communicated otherwise. This has led to an inconsistent pattern of audience engagement with the DCEU.

Figure 4.13

DCEU Version of Superman Portrayed by Henry Cavill in Man of Steel



Note. DCEU: DC Extended Universe. From *Man of Steel*, by Zack Snyder, 2013 (1:27:45). Copyright 2013 by Warner Bros.

The DCEU has achieved dramatic variations in commercial and critical success (see Figure 4.14). *Wonder Woman* received a critical rating of 93% on Rotten Tomatoes and earned \$822 million globally, while *Aquaman* earned \$1.14 billion (despite a 65% critical rating) (Numbers, n.d.-a; a Rotten Tomatoes, 2017c, 2018a;). *Birds of Prey*, however, achieved a critical score of 78% but earned just over \$200 million (Numbers, n.d.-a; Rotten Tomatoes, 2020). Meanwhile, some DC film projects outside of the DCEU have been incredibly well received, such as the 2019 film *Joker*, which won Oscars for Joaquin

Phoenix's portrayal of the character and best original score. With its production budget of US\$70 million (compared with the \$200–300 million for modern blockbuster films) and its global earning of over \$1 billion dollars, *Joker* proved to be immensely profitable for Warner Bros. and DC (Numbers, n.d.-e). Unlike the MCU and its pattern of increasing profitability, the DCEU has achieved varied states of commercial profitability in the wider scheme of DC's efforts (see Figure 4.15).

Figure 4.14

Global Box Office Revenue for DC Extended Universe Films

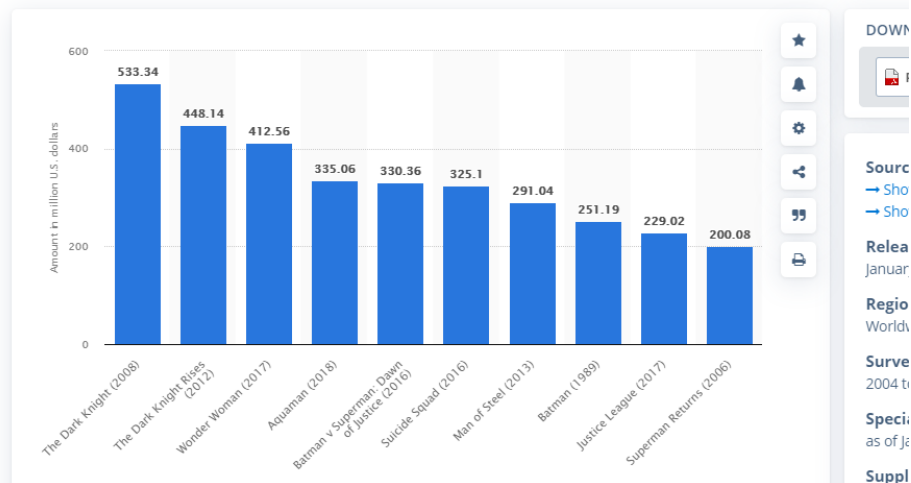
| Rank | Release | Lifetime Gross ↕ | Max Theaters ↕ | Opening ↕ | Open Th ↕ | Release Date | Distributor |
|------|------------------------------------|------------------|----------------|---------------|-----------|--------------|-----------------------------------|
| 5 | Man of Steel | \$291,045,518 | 4,207 | \$116,619,362 | 4,207 | Jun 14, 2013 | Warner Bros. ↗ |
| 3 | Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice | \$330,360,194 | 4,256 | \$166,007,347 | 4,242 | Mar 25, 2016 | Warner Bros. ↗ |
| 4 | Suicide Squad | \$325,100,054 | 4,255 | \$133,682,248 | 4,255 | Aug 5, 2016 | Warner Bros. ↗ |
| 1 | Wonder Woman | \$412,563,408 | 4,165 | \$103,251,471 | 4,165 | Jun 2, 2017 | Warner Bros. ↗ |
| 6 | Justice League | \$229,024,295 | 4,051 | \$93,842,239 | 4,051 | Nov 17, 2017 | Warner Bros. ↗ |
| 2 | Aquaman | \$335,061,807 | 4,184 | \$67,873,522 | 4,125 | Dec 21, 2018 | Warner Bros. ↗ |
| 8 | Shazam! | \$140,371,656 | 4,306 | \$53,505,326 | 4,217 | Apr 5, 2019 | Warner Bros. ↗ |
| 11 | Birds of Prey | \$84,158,461 | 4,236 | \$33,010,017 | 4,236 | Feb 7, 2020 | Warner Bros. ↗ |
| 16 | Wonder Woman 2020 Re-release | \$252,000 | 560 | \$189,000 | - | Dec 11, 2020 | Warner Bros. ↗ |
| 15 | Wonder Woman 1984 | \$46,801,036 | 2,218 | \$16,701,957 | 2,151 | Dec 25, 2020 | Warner Bros. ↗ |
| 14 | The Suicide Squad | \$55,817,425 | 4,019 | \$26,205,415 | 4,002 | Aug 6, 2021 | Warner Bros. ↗ |

Note. Adapted from *Box Office History for DC Extended Universe Movies*, by Numbers, n.d.-a (<https://www.the-numbers.com/movies/franchise/DC-Extended-Universe>). Copyright 1997–2024 by Nash Information Services.

Figure 4.15

DC's Most Profitable Films

Global box office revenue of DC comics movies from 2004 to 2020
(in million U.S. dollars)



Note. Adapted from *Global Box Office Revenue of DC Comics Movies From 2004 to 2020 (in Million U.S. Dollars)*, by Statista, 2020 (<https://www.statista.com/statistics/329199/dc-comics-films-box-office-revenue/>). Copyright 2020 by Statista.

Although companies wish to continue increasing their profits, insights can be gleaned from the performance of the DCEU (and recent DC films in general). DC's capacity to experiment so boldly across their texts offers a point of difference from other major transmedia projects. There is a striking difference between *Wonder Woman*, *Aquaman* and *Joker* in terms of their visual palette and story tone. This contrasts with the recurring criticism levelled at Marvel that all MCU films 'look' the same given that most are based on the same digital tools, story formula and conveyor belt-style production methods (Robinson et al., 2023). Therefore, the variety of entertainment offered through the DCEU (and films outside of its canon) demonstrates a greater creative freedom in the DC sandbox to explore different ideas.

The inconsistent commercial interest in the franchise demonstrates that DC has failed to install and communicate a compelling navigational architecture for audiences to follow. If DC wishes to encourage audiences to engage with its broader storytelling environment, its

storytellers must show why other texts in its transmedia ecosystem are worth pursuing. Jenkins (2006b), Phillips (2012) and Gomez (2012) highlight the joy fans derive from understanding the logic of a storyworld, thus the importance for storytellers to ensure there is a clear architecture in place. Andrea Phillips (personal communication, 18 January 2022) reflected on the lack of this structure being articulated by DC:

It's a little surprising that DC is trying real hard, but they just don't quite have it. I'm not sure why because there's no reason that they couldn't also build a similar, I guess, transmedia story world. People are kind of hungry for those connections.

Phillips gave the example of the fan-generated theory that all Disney princess films are connected and exist in the same universe. Fans will often seek out connections, whether explicit or not, and find pleasure in identifying points of connection and metatextuality (Jenkins, 2006b). While *Star Wars* and the MCU highlight how compelling the serialised storytelling of a single storyworld canon can be, DC could theoretically achieve a similar outcome if they were to offer audiences a single, coherent, overarching idea that general audiences could understand and use as 'navigational fuel'.

Multiverse storytelling is baked into the DNA of the DC Comics brand. Comic book author Grant Morrison (2011) highlights how this mode of storytelling has allowed the company to successfully engage with different generations of readers:

By spreading a given brand across multiple versions of a character designed to appeal to different sections of his audience, Julie [DC Comics editor Julius Schwartz] had invented a trick that would be adopted as the industry standard. Schwartz was a world builder, and, under his guidance, the DC universe became part of a "multiverse," in which an infinite number of alternate Earths occupied the same space as our own, each vibrating out of phase with the others so that they could never meet. The idea of

infinite worlds, each with its own history and its own superheroes, was intoxicating and gave DC an even more expansive canvas. (p. 111)

As Morrison states, the company was able to articulate a storyworld architecture, allowing readers to make informed choices. While a unified media experience like the MCU draws all of its content and audiences into one media environment, a multiverse architecture offers audiences a variety of media experiences and another viable path for the continued renewing and revitalisation of a storyworld—albeit one that may not operate in a unified manner or provide consumer consistency.

If DC can articulate an overarching framework that informs audiences that it is less concerned with continuity in favour of immediate experiences with the greatest impact, this may also encourage audiences to consider the DCEU a connected piece. Phillips (personal communication, 18 January 2022) explained that in the modern age of heightened information flow and since the pandemic, she has seen a shift in audience preferences for more symbolic and gestural kinds of entertainment:

I am seeing immersive experiences move away from a strict narrative point of view to an experience, and it might be an emotional experience, it might be thematic. . .

They're evocative, they're emotional, they're aesthetic, but they're not narrative as such.

While narrative will always be essential to the human experience, the DCEU might be well positioned to connect with shifting commercial audience preferences. Maximising the intensity of the immediate media experience, even if it means focusing less on long-term connectivity, may offer DC a greater capacity to leverage changing technologies and audience behaviours. This broader concept is explored more fully in Chapter 7; however, it is mentioned here to show that multiple approaches to transmedia storytelling are not only possible but inevitable.

4.3.3 Teamwork in Typical Industrial Structures

The DCEU is both a product of and has the potential to leverage the prevalent structures of the entertainment industry. Creating a transmedia structure that builds a consistent narrative requires teamwork and collaboration, which is not always easy in the commercial entertainment culture. While I did not gain specific insights into the corporate culture of Warner Bros., Gomez's and Niecieza's descriptions of their experiences working with Disney, Sony and Fox Studios revealed a common siloed approach to content production across media departments. Fabian Niecieza (personal communication, 14 November 2018) attributed this preference for short-term decision-making and siloed production practices to the high financial stakes within the entertainment industry:

There's not a lot of that [teamwork] in our industry, in the entertainment industry.

Selfish, yeah. It's prevalent in all industries, certainly prevalent in Hollywood studios and movie things like that, possibly more so because they're working with such giant numbers and their teams are so territorial because they stand so much . . . they have so much to lose if something doesn't succeed.

Moreover, teams in the same studio often compete for funding, fuelling competition among those expanding the same IP. As entertainment lawyer Simon Pulman (personal communication, 5 January 2022) noted, the commercial structures of industry do not typically account for cross-departmental project development:

[Commercial transmedia is] very, very hard to do, and it requires cross-departmental coordination. You don't know where the money necessarily is coming from. Is it a marketing endeavour? Is it something that has its own P&L [profit and loss]? Does it go to the P&L of the main production, in which case what's the incentive for the particular executive if their bonus is tied to the performance of movies and not other stuff? And all of these kinds of pieces.

Further, the division of responsibilities and governance over different platforms hampers the decision-making process. Heads of departments are hesitant to make deals or acquire IP that would require the involvement of other departments:

The situation is that the deal makers in big companies are in a particular department.

So they might be, 'I'm in television production,' 'I'm in motion picture finance,' 'I'm in podcast,' 'I'm in publishing.' And that's what they do. And moreover, what they cannot do from a corporate politics perspective is bind, or they're very loathe to bind other groups. Let's say, for instance, I sell to you a podcast, to you, media conglomerate. Well, of course, everyone's thinking about what happens if it's derivative? What happens if this becomes something else? (Pulman, personal communication, 5 January 2022)

In an environment of rigid responsibility and accountability, it is perhaps not surprising that transmedia consultants encounter the frustration of groups unwilling to collaborate and share resources across other teams.

DC has not been immune to these issues. Warner Bros., DC's parent company, underwent several changes of management during the period of this research, disrupting and altering the direction of projects such as the DCEU. Different leadership teams, for example, withdrew their support for contractual negotiations with actor Henry Cavill, meaning that the DCEU Superman character was portrayed by a stunt person, with their face obscured, in *Shazam!* and *Peacemaker*, reducing the immersivity of the DCEU storyworld for audiences.

One of Starlight Runner's greatest ongoing challenges in facilitating the growth of commercial transmedia IP is encouraging companies to invest in infrastructure that will allow their teams to work collaboratively across media. Hence, one of Gomez's (2012, 2019) core tenets for effective commercial transmedia practice is the establishment of a 'clearing house', a company-wide communication and teamwork strategy that allows departments to contribute

collectively to the consistent expansion of an IP. However, not all companies are receptive to the idea of making major structural changes, particularly as the concept of transmedia and its financial viability continue to evolve. As my interviewees indicated, the industry is extremely conservative, and changes will only occur when transmedia profitability is guaranteed.

DC's decision to allow multiple creative teams to operate simultaneously without an obligation to interact consistently arguably plays to the existing strengths of the company. It allows a multitude of projects to occur simultaneously, unlike Marvel's more tightly governed approach. Marvel Studios is an anomaly because it is far younger than other Hollywood studios and is purely focused on the development of a single IP under the guidance of a single transmedia architect, Kevin Feige. James Gunn, director of DC's *The Suicide Squad* (as well as Marvel's *Guardians of the Galaxy* films), commented on the difference between working with both studios as follows:

There's no doubt Kevin Feige is way more involved with editing than people are at Warner Bros. He gives more notes. You don't have to take them and I don't always take them . . . The truth is, as Marvel goes on and Kevin Feige starts to amass ownership of half of all film in general, he's more spread out. (as cited in Itzkoff, 2021, para. 43)

The implication in Gunn's observations is that Marvel may reach a tipping point where one transmedia architect cannot oversee all creative projects for the franchise. At that point, the company may have to departmentalise and distribute its creative leadership, much like the current structure that DC has and is aiming to evolve.

The DCEU illustrates the complexity of transmedia in modern entertainment, especially with respect to established franchises and traditional corporate structures. While the DCEU has performed inconsistently in a commercial and critical sense, some of DC's stand-out successes demonstrate that Marvel's centralised approach may not be the only way to

grow a creative transmedia franchise and maintain audience interest. In theory, DC is well established to produce more content across various media, and Marvel may eventually find that having one creative team overseeing most projects creates a bottleneck. Nevertheless, this analysis of the DCEU and what it could be highlights that effective transmedia practice requires a simple and consistent overarching message so that audiences know how and why they should consume content. Whether this is expressed through narrative as in the MCU or more abstractly as DC are attempting to do, there must be a degree of harmony between creative expression and a clear navigational architecture that incentivises audiences to become immersed in a storyworld.

4.4 Summary

As this chapter has demonstrated, despite the ongoing consolidation of the commercial entertainment infrastructure and IP ownership, different models of commercial transmedia practice are emerging. These processes are shaped by the existing but slowly evolving structures of the entertainment industry, which are founded upon a culture of departmentalisation. Idealised versions of transmedia require a degree of collaboration and collective decision-making that is uncommon in the corporate environment.

Nevertheless, establishing and maintaining a clear and consistent message is key for ensuring that a transmedia project can cut through the noise of the modern age of information abundance. This message provides a critical instructional cue to audiences as to how and why they should become immersed in a storyworld. When this message is infused into the transmedia narrative, the storyworld metanarrative and the paratextual elements (including all forms of communication from the owning company), audiences are incentivised to follow and explore the storyworld. Therefore, I argue that *holistic navigational design* is key to the production of successful transmedia. This means that every textual and paratextual element

should be created to emphasise the primal message of a storyworld, regardless of whether it is linear, multiversal or otherwise.

While articulating this message is most easily achieved by a single individual or small team outlining a creative vision and connecting with the audience, ultimately, the more people who can ratify a primal message, the more sustainable a franchise can become. Transmedia storytelling is not a solo pursuit, neither in its production nor its reception; so, for a franchise to continue increasing in scale, effective transmedia storytelling should be considered a team effort. The realities of commercial scalability mean a single person or small team may not be able to oversee a sprawling franchise with the consistency and quality required to maintain a clear message. Establishing a holistic navigational design approach across all levels of production would allow a multitude of people to contribute to this process.

Further, the advancement of large-scale transmedia storytelling calls for an ideological shift in department and finance structures. Traditional media companies are increasingly exposed to technological disruptions and unpredictable shifts in audience behaviours, as evidenced by the shifting patterns in global entertainment markets. Commercial storytellers must keep up with new technologies and evolving media literacies to ensure that their franchise offers the thrills commensurate with audience expectations. Emerging technologies can rapidly transform audience's expectations, meaning that the traditional structures of production and finance must be flexible enough to shift, allowing franchises to remain relevant and profitable.

There is an inherent paradox in the way a storyteller must create or acquire a compelling and audience-approved idea before a commercial transmedia structure can be established to support it. As the case studies in this chapter have shown, present-day commercial transmedia storytelling prioritises the circulation and reformatting of established ideas. Marvel, *Star Wars* and DC have long published their content in different formats, with

the MCU, Disney's *Star Wars* and the DCEU being simply the latest iterations and unlikely to be the last. However, as technology continues to evolve, so too does the way in which these commercial entertainment ideas are presented to and received by audiences. Maintaining the boundaries of commercial entertainment has become complex in the age of social media because proprietary elements can be used in the public discourse more flexibly and by a variety of people. To better understand how large franchise storytelling may continue to evolve, we must first consider the underlying cultural structures that inform storytelling as a communicative process.

Chapter 5: Transmedia, Shifting Narratives and Cultural Impact

The hype surrounding transmedia as a ‘new’ form of convergence communication often obfuscates where this modern phenomenon sits in the spectrum of our broader evolving communicative practices. Scholars have extensively demonstrated that transmedia storytelling began long before the emergence of modern technologies (Freeman, 2014; Scolari et al., 2014). Nevertheless, our use of technology has and is continuing to fundamentally alter our information flow paradigm, which, as this case study will show, is in turn influencing information itself. When we analyse the kinds of stories appearing in modern transmedia against the fact that storytelling allows us to understand the self and our community, we can identify the cultural undercurrents that are also guiding this modern phenomenon.

Shortly before I began my research project, Jeff Gomez and the Starlight Runner team engaged with Curtin University as part of a collaborative transmedia initiative designed to strengthen ties among the university community, with a focus on cohorts traditionally under-represented in higher education, namely First Nations academics and community members. This cultural exchange helped to crystallise a concept that Starlight Runner had been attempting to articulate—the trend towards collective narrative storytelling they had observed in the entertainment industry. Around the same time, Henry Jenkins shifted his research focus from understanding the mechanics of transmedia to how transmedia stories can foster change in local communities (a practice and interest also shared by Starlight Runner). Some of the largest players in the field of transmedia had shifted their focus, and I was fortunate to be able to engage with these new streams of inquiry through my research and interviews.

Throughout the next section, I consider modern transmedia storytelling and its cultural function. Despite the commercial and industrial frameworks used to ‘contain’ popular stories, examples of how modern audiences engage with this content highlight how integral this may be to the evolution of culture and lifestyle. Large-scale commercial stories create spaces in

which ambitions and desire for change can be expressed, leading to meaningful change in communities. The shift of commercial focus towards the exploration of diverse perspectives and collective action allows us to observe modern cultural forces at work and emphasises the social responsibilities shouldered by commercial storytellers in the modern interconnected age.

5.1 The Hero's Journey in Commercial Storytelling

During the period of this research, major transmedia franchises such as *Star Wars* and the MCU began exhibiting traits of the collective journey storytelling structure. The collective journey, a phenomenon observed by transmedia producer Jeff Gomez, is an evolution of the hero's journey story outlined by American scholar Joseph Campbell. Collective journey stories feature groups of people working together to solve complex non-binary issues as opposed to a lone hero defeating a villain to save their community. Using *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* and the evolution of the MCU as key examples, this section shows how elements of collective journey stories are both a requirement for effective transmedia storytelling and a cultural reflection of the significant global events shaping our modern lives.

To understand the emerging shift in popular storytelling patterns, it is important to revisit the cultural purpose of storytelling. Storytelling is a method of communication that may occur as folklore, interpersonal interaction or within a commercial context and allows for the circulation of important information across time and the preservation of human knowledge (Campbell, 1949, 1988; Hartley & McWilliam, 2009; Johnston & Forrest, 2020; Lotman et al., 1978). At its simplest, storytelling is the conveyance of a real or imagined series of events for the purposes of entertainment or instruction. Recurring narratives with significant cultural value earn the status of myth. While myth can be used colloquially to describe something fantastical and unreal or ancient and unachievable, I use the term to mean the fundamental truths and beliefs of a culture (Campbell, 1949).

According to Campbell (1949, 1988), myths serve four main tasks: (i) to create a sense of awe; (ii) to make sense of the universe; (iii) to reaffirm the social order; and (iv) to offer a set of instructions for living through the human experience. The repetition of myths is an ancient form of intergenerational communication that creates a ‘non-hereditary collective memory’ (Lotman et al., 1978, p. 213) and enables important messages to be passed down and retained within a culture.

Myths serve a function for both the individual and the community. Campbell (1949) observes that myths play a role in shaping the collective consciousness of a culture, uniting groups of people through the expression of shared experiences and values. Lévi-Strauss (1978), whose perspective on anthropology was influential, argued that myths are an expression of the fundamental structures of the human mind. Hence, they reflect underlying patterns of thought and how humans interpret the world. Therefore, myths can be understood as both an expression of and a tool to make sense of the individual experience and the collective context in which it exists. Myth is how culture understands itself.

In his seminal scholarly text *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, Campbell (1949) concludes that the predominant recurring myth was focused on the journey of the individual. Campbell’s ‘monomyth’, also known as ‘the hero’s journey’, highlights the recurring pattern of mythical storytelling Campbell observed throughout different cultures and across time (see Figure 5.1). As the name suggests, the hero’s journey is predicated on the efforts of an individual, who is typically thrust into an unfamiliar situation, guided by a mentor and forced to face their fears. They then undergo a transformation, experience a personal sacrifice and perform a heroic feat to enact lasting change for their community. Campbell (1949) describes the role of the individual as follows:

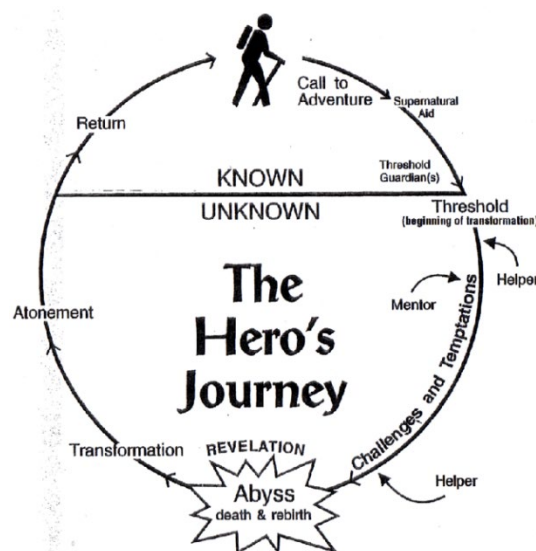
A hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero

comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man. (p. 30)

The individual achieves such substantial success that their actions single-handedly save and strengthen the community. As Gomez (2017a) points out, hero's journey stories have traditionally been useful for ensuring the survival of a tribe by imparting behavioural lessons such as how to hunt or survive in the outside world, how to protect one's tribe, knowing right from wrong and understanding one's place in the social order.

Figure 5.1

The Hero's Journey



Note. Adapted from *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, by J. Campbell, 1949 (p. 245). Copyright 1949 by Princeton University Press.

Star Wars is the pre-eminent commercial example of the hero's journey. While George Lucas's biographies offer contradicting accounts about whether he used Campbell's research during or shortly after the development of *Star Wars: A New Hope* (Baxter, 1999; Jones, 2016; Lawrence, 2006; Seastrom, 2015), Lucas was undoubtedly influenced by mythical storytelling practices. Luke Skywalker's transformation from farm boy to a mystical Jedi saviour of the universe provides a clear and compelling example of the hero's journey mythical structure. Skywalker finds a mentor in Obi-Wan Kenobi, is called to action by a

princess in need of help, overcomes numerous trials to rescue the princess, gains Jedi powers and destroys the Death Star. Despite the expansion of the *Star Wars* storyworld through the Expanded Universe, Lucas's films remained the mothership texts for the franchise (Proctor & Freeman, 2017), and for decades Luke Skywalker continued to be positioned as *the* hero of *Star Wars*. Even Lucas's prequels, which focused on the fall of Luke's father Anakin Skywalker, only served to heighten Luke's role as the ultimate saviour.

Lucas's fascination with Campbell's work led to the two becoming friends, granting *Star Wars* a unique cultural capital. Lucas would publicly refer to Campbell as 'my Yoda' (Seastrom, 2015), highlighting the scholar's influence on Lucas's storytelling approach. In turn, Campbell expressed his admiration for Lucas's ability to create a modern myth. For both the public and those involved in creating *Star Wars*, these actions amplified the perception that *Star Wars* was not merely a tale for children but rather a myth for all. As *Star Wars* composer John Williams stated, 'until Campbell told us what Star Wars meant [...] we regarded it as a Saturday morning space movie' (as cited in Seastrom, 2015, para. 11). *Star Wars* was thus positioned as the urtext for a 'new' commercial form of storytelling.

Through Lucas's commercial status, Campbell gained a public platform through which his theories became linked to commercial practice. In 1988, after concluding *Star Wars*, Lucas commissioned *Joseph Campbell and The Power of Myth*, a television docuseries exploring Campbell's research and offering deep insights into the purpose of myths and their typical structures (Lawrence, 2006).

Soon after, Campbell's work began to be translated into a simplified, commercial formula. Books such as *The Writer's Journey: Mythic Structure for Writers* by Christopher Vogler (1992) became essential industry handbooks, offering detailed steps that allowed writers to emulate the hero's journey. Vogler was a script supervisor at Disney and developed the book after receiving positive feedback from Disney staff when he summarised Campbell's

work and sent notes to the heads of the studio (Bancks, 2003). In such ways, the hero's journey became an essential template for building entertainment and is evident in much of the blockbuster films of the 1980s and 1990s.

However, the sustained application of a simplified version of Campbell's work in modern commercial entertainment has arguably resulted in this mode of storytelling being over-represented in popular culture. The commodification of communication can interrupt its cultural function (Hartley & McWilliam, 2009; Konzal, 2011). The hero's journey has been transformed into a commercial asset, thus its prominence in popular culture is driven by economic forces, not necessarily cultural needs.

It is also reasonable to question whether there are inherent biases in Campbell's model that have been amplified through its repeated use in Hollywood. Campbell was the singular cipher of mythological storytelling, and the lens through which he filtered his research data would have been inevitably influenced by his experience as a heterosexual, cisgender, Caucasian male in the early twentieth century. While Campbell sought to distil the essence of all popular myths, Toelken (1996) highlights in his study of Native American culture the need for contextual and cultural specificity to properly understand any given mythology. While Campbell's goal was one of distillation, Toelken cautions that such a process can also be reductive.

For example, Hollywood texts based on Campbell's model predominantly feature white male heroes such as Luke Skywalker, reinforcing patriarchal ideologies. While this speaks to the biases of the entertainment industry (S. L. Smith et al., 2010), it also reflects the theories on which this practice was based. As Gomez (2017b) observes, the hero's journey template prioritises the inclusion of males as heroes, with females positioned in roles that serve as either distractions or rewards for the hero. More recent works such as *The Heroine's Journey* (Murdock, 1998) and *The Queeroe's Journey* (Beckham, 2021) offer a response to

the same observation, providing gender-diverse perspectives on Campbell's model. Nevertheless, this is but one example of how the hero's journey has been used in a commercial setting to preserve hegemonic power structures. However, global events are highlighting that multicultural, gender-inclusive and diverse storytelling is becoming increasingly important for modern cultural needs.

Over the past few decades, the world has been affected by a range of increasingly frequent global challenges, requiring people to work together in complex and dynamic ways. Existential issues such as climate change and the COVID-19 pandemic require multifaceted solutions led by people from across the globe. People outside of traditional hegemonic structures are frequently required to contribute creative solutions to complex issues. Thus, leveraging the knowledge and talents of different cultures and establishing the structures for collective action are becoming increasingly important. However, Hartley and McWilliam (2009) argue that in the modern digital era, the architecture of social media has resulted in there being 'too much attention to self-expression; not enough to the growth of knowledge' (p. 15). Similarly, Gomez (2016) argues that the popular commercial myths of our time focus on the cyclical repetition of ideas that do not always reflect or offer helpful insights into our increasingly networked lives or immediate future.

Given that storytelling is fundamentally a cultural, not a commercial, tool, we can look to other cultures and back through history to determine how storytelling evolves. Globalisation and digitisation have led to people who were traditionally outside of hegemonic power structures becoming increasingly visible in the public domain. Therefore, we can expect to see stories that highlight the needs of the wider community and articulate how people from diverse backgrounds can work together to bring about change.⁷

⁷ Campbell (1949) did suggest that the hero's journey was a product of the needs of cultures up to that point and that a new model would arise when required.

Working with First Nations Australians at Curtin University highlighted to Gomez (personal communication, 24 November 2018) that humanity's oldest continuous culture has deeply ingrained traditions of storytelling and a lifestyle that reflects a model of shared responsibility and collective action. This revelation was critical to the formation of his evolving theories and observations of modern storytelling processes. The importance of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture in the wider scheme of storytelling tradition is a topic I also wish to advance.

5.1.1 Reciprocity and Collective Action in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Culture

Campbell acknowledged the importance of Indigenous storytelling traditions and the prevalence of myths across cultures that focus on the collective experience. For example, his work highlights the motif of the 'cosmic egg' in myths pertaining to birth and existence, myths of a god working alongside humans to achieve a shared outcome and epic tales of group adventures such as Jason and the Argonauts (Campbell, 1949). Campbell observed a recurring pattern of understanding and depicting the communal experience; however, his monomyth overshadowed a deeper consideration of this.

Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, who represent the world's oldest continuous living culture, espouse a deeply ingrained 'community-first' approach in which each individual has an awareness of the environment and their responsibilities to their community (Johnston & Forrest, 2020). Australian academic Tyson Yunkaporta (2009), a member of the Apalech clan in Far North Queensland, offers a pedagogical approach to Indigenous systems thinking (see Figure 5.2), describing the systemic use of symbols, coded messages and stories in Australian First Nations culture that allows all members of a community to understand their role in relation to other people and their environment. This complex system of symbolic information sharing enabled hundreds of First Australians from different nations on the same continent to communicate across their borders, ensuring that

they could collectively care for their environment and manage their limited resources (Yunkaporta, 2019).

Figure 5.2

Yunkaporta's Model of Indigenous Systems Thinking



Note. Adapted from *Aboriginal pedagogies at the cultural interface*, by T. Yunkaporta, 2009. Copyright 2009 by Tyson Yunkaporta.

Australian academics Johnston and Forrest (2020)⁸ explain:

Reciprocity is at the heart of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and is related to kinship networks. Reciprocity describes an obligation for all Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people to share and distribute resources and this responsibility extends to animals and care for country. (p. 3)

For members of this culture, operating with a considered approach to the world is both a cultural inheritance and an ongoing way of life.

Storytelling continues to be used in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture to provide insights into the recurring events of the world and how groups and individuals can navigate them accordingly. In his work on Indigenous Australian culture, Swain (1993)

⁸ Simon Forrest is a Whadjuk Ballardong Noongar with kin connections to the Badimia and Wongutha peoples.

observed the importance of recurring seasonal events (which he calls rhythmic events) as a way to understand existence, growth and change:

I suggest it is best to state that [First Nations Australians] operate from an understanding of *rhythmed events*. The semantic clarity is important in order to avoid giving time an unfounded ontological autonomy in Aboriginal life . . . There was no fashioning of time, linear or cyclical, but rather a sophisticated patterning of events in accordance with their rhythms. (p. 19)

Swain suggests that First Nations Australians observe and respond to recognisable patterns of the Earth, with the notion of time being arbitrary. He further observes that they draw from a deeper philosophical notion, referred to as ‘abiding events’, that enables individuals to understand their interconnectedness to the environment, their tribe and the cosmos. Abiding events relate to knowledge built upon fundamental truths that transcend time. These are the experiences that allow individuals to derive a deep sense of being and experience resonance with the world around them.

Academic scholar and novelist Kim Scott, who is descended from the Wirilomin Noongar people, drew inspiration from Noongar storytelling traditions to tell a nonlinear and cyclical tale in *That Deadman Dance* (2012). K. Scott (personal communication, 12 September 2023) explained that his work was an attempt to explore the rhythms of traditional storytelling. He wrote the novel using cycles of information that were repeated, offering more context and reinforcing key messages each time. Scott used this writing style to emulate the profound sense of being and resonance that this form of cultural exchange can provide. Attaining such deep insights can allow people to ‘improvise’ in their environment based on a deep understanding of cosmic rhythms and place.

Swain (1993) also highlights the critical importance of place, suggesting that both abiding and rhythmic events are understood through interaction with and experience of place:

Abiding events and rhythmic events are coterminous, linked not through time but place. It becomes evident, therefore, that the entire discussion of time—linear, cyclical or Dream—has diverted our attention from the uncompromising position of place in Aboriginal worldviews. (p. 23)

Thus, Indigenous Australian culture, according to Swain, is deeply focused on understanding the environment and how to ‘be’ within it.

These learnings are taught, shared and enacted in kinship pairs and groups. Returning to the pedagogy of Indigenous knowledge systems thinking (see Figure 5.2) and the central cultural value of reciprocity, this deep knowledge is used in Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture to enable collective action. The actions of tribes are informed by seasonal events; kinship groups perform complementary tasks to protect and sustain flora and fauna; and groups work together to exist harmoniously in and sustain the natural world, of which they are an integral part.

The community-centric focus of Indigenous knowledge systems provides a deep and enduring foundation of cultural structure and mythical storytelling and a strong basis to analyse the wider trends in community cooperation emerging in popular culture. Transmedia storytelling places importance on a systemic and communal process and results in stories that focus upon groups of people, not just individual heroes, becoming popular.

5.1.2 The Collective Journey

In 2017, Jeff Gomez proposed a storytelling model named the collective journey to reflect the shifts he was witnessing in the entertainment industry. Highlighting the trend of complex, interconnected storytelling appearing in popular shows such as *Game of Thrones*, *Orange is the New Black* and *The Walking Dead*, Gomez (2017b) suggests that this is proof of the cultural shift foreseen by Joseph Campbell. These stories do not conform to the usual hero’s journey template but instead focus on groups of diverse people working together to

overcome systemic issues, whether it be the politics of a mythical kingdom, life in prison or a zombie apocalypse. In these stories, heroes can die, and villains can become heroes (or vice versa), and affecting any substantial change against such overwhelming threats can only be achieved through individuals collectively harnessing their unique abilities. Adopting a similar series of sequences to the monomyth, Gomez outlines a new storytelling model to describe what he was witnessing (see Table 5.1). This mode of storytelling focuses on the recognition of systemic flaws and the complex input of many people to achieve systemic change or overcome cultural inertia. Gomez (personal communication, 15 December 2023) notes that the narrative elements shown in Table 5.1 may not necessarily occur in sequence because large storyworlds often traverse multiple media. Therefore, they do not focus solely on a single protagonist but instead on the wider processes that occur at a cultural level and the role that many people can (and must) play if such processes are to change. Gomez argues that systemic narratives are recognisable by focusing on systemic issues, exploring multiple perspectives and developing a new ‘third’ perspective, and reconciliation occurs between characters as they attempt to implement solutions and break the recurring cycle of systemic flaws.

Table 5.1*Collective Journey Storytelling Structure*

| | Narrative sequence | Difference from the hero's journey |
|----|----------------------------|--|
| 1 | The old world | The starting point is the state of a world as opposed to the state of an individual |
| 2 | The shift | The call to action is the result of a systemic issue, not a singular or simple villain |
| 3 | Tapping the digital oracle | Characters must determine how to navigate overwhelming amounts of information, representing our ability to research and become literate in modern issues. They do not act alone or in isolation. In this process, mentors may be peers, not necessarily someone older |
| 4 | Adapt or succumb | Systemic flaws become apparent, and characters must either adapt to a new way of thinking or 'die' through inaction and become victim to the chaos of a dysfunctional system |
| 5 | Different paths | There are different viable paths to achieving success, leading to conflicts. Not all characters will take the same path. Those who benefit from systemic flaws will defend the system as it stands or seek greater power within it |
| 6 | Signs and images | In our postmodern environment, symbolic communications allow messages to be shared at a global level, beyond the limits of a single tribe or nation. Supernatural intervention or coincidence is not required to advance a story |
| 7 | Multiple solutions | The diversity of humanity is an asset, and different pathways are available. No solution will be perfect because taking action to create systemic change is complex. Solutions do not need to emerge from masculine impulses, so people from all spectrums of life can be active agents with valuable perspectives |
| 8 | Paths will cross | The characters all exist within the same system and can influence each other, directly or indirectly. This highlights the participatory nature of the storyworld and allows the audience to participate |
| 9 | Anyone can die | The story does not hinge on an individual hero, and everyone is vulnerable to mortality. Therefore, main characters may die. |
| 10 | Deconstruction | Characters must learn to deconstruct the challenge, examine the root causes and understand why and how the flaws exist. Through this process, they begin to recognise commonalities (even with their perceived enemies) |
| 11 | Embracing the reversal | By understanding the system and its oppositional forces, the perspectives of others can be considered when addressing systemic flaws |
| 12 | Reaching plurality | Characters must explore multiple conflicting ideas and set aside 'rightness' (predetermined self-interest) in favour of a 'third' way of being that offers mutual benefit |
| 13 | Super-positioning | Reflecting the multiple roles we play in social media, characters can use different manifestations of themselves across their networks to express ideas, amplify messages, draw support and activate others |
| 14 | Endless universe | The system is bigger than any one individual. Narratives can be multidirectional, nonlinear, epic and shift across time and space |

| Narrative sequence | | Difference from the hero's journey |
|--------------------|---------------------|--|
| 15 | Collective movement | The protagonist(s) confront the antagonist or issue, which may not happen in concert. A movement can be triggered by an idea. The narrative is participatory, both within and between the storyworld and the real-world audience |
| 16 | Momentum | The opposition of the flawed system against the growing collective means that the characters accelerate towards a tipping point. This can be expressed through time, space, physical or intellectual battles or transformation |
| 17 | Change making | Either the action taken by protagonists will transform the flawed system, or those perpetuating the flaws will win (or something in between). Collective journey stories do not require protagonists to win, so there may be success, an incremental difference or failure |
| 18 | The new world | A new status quo evolves through the journey of the protagonist and the collective, demonstrating a new mode of wisdom and process of thinking for the audience |

Note. Adapted from *The collective journey: Transmedia and the rise of a new form of story*, [Keynote address] by J. Gomez, 2016. Copyright 2016 by Jeff Gomez.

We can see elements of collective journey storytelling appearing in major commercial transmedia franchises such as *Star Wars*. *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* significantly disrupts the norms of the *Star Wars* franchise, removing its reliance on Luke Skywalker as the main protagonist. When Lucasfilm, under the guidance of Disney, released a series of sequel films beginning with *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, the Jedi hero Luke Skywalker had disappeared and is spoken of with the reverence of a mythical legend. Rey, a new female protagonist of unknown heritage, spends the duration of the film searching for Skywalker, finally locating him in the final moments. Rey (and the audience) expects Skywalker to be a willing mentor; however, in *The Last Jedi*, we discover that Skywalker has become a hermit, disconnected from the Force and resenting his inability to train his nephew Ben Solo (who now identifies as the villain Kylo Ren). Luke Skywalker, *the* hero of *Star Wars*, has become both fallible and an unreliable saviour of the universe. Despite Skywalker's mythical status, Rey, a figurative everywoman, is now positioned to be the new hope for the universe. Both Luke and Rey are seen to be participants in a wider galactic system of events as opposed to singular drivers of change.

However, 'saving the universe' does not come from a binary decision to be good or evil. In *The Last Jedi*, both Rey and Kylo Ren question their respective roles as hero and villain. Rey learns that despite her growing Jedi powers, she is of 'inconsequential' heritage, not from a noble bloodline. Her journey to resolve the trauma of her unknown parentage demonstrates the tension between the perceived sense of destiny inherent in the hero's journey (and *Star Wars* itself) and the experience of being a common 'everyperson' in the collective journey. Kylo Ren also struggles to determine his place in the universe. Being from a prominent heroic lineage but also drawn to the dark side and responsible for killing his father, Han Solo, Ren feels conflicted about his place in the universe. He and Rey share a strong connection to the Force, and Ren suggests that together they start a new movement

separate from the Jedi–Sith dichotomy: ‘Let the past die. Kill it if you have to. That’s the only way to become what you were meant to be’ (R. Johnson, 2017, 1:12:57). Ren expresses discomfort with the binary order of good and evil, and Rey must reckon between her individual desires and her collective responsibilities.

Both Rey and Luke Skywalker shift their perspectives through the events of the film. Through interactions with Kylo Ren, Luke Skywalker and herself (metaphorically expressed through her experiences in the cave on the isolated planet Ahch-To), Rey finds a third perspective where she recognises the recurring flaw of the *Star Wars* galaxy (two hubristic factions asserting their rightness against each other in an ongoing cycle of cosmic violence) and resolves to take a stand against it. Likewise, through his interactions with Rey, counselling with his mentor Yoda and personal introspection, Luke comes to view his role as a Jedi as an arbiter of balance—even if that means he must sacrifice himself to allow other protagonists to resolve this systemic battle.

The Last Jedi presents a version of the storyworld in which everyone has the power to improve the galaxy. Luke Skywalker’s journey culminates with him sacrificing himself to save Leia and his friends (where it is inferred that he releases the Force back into the universe). The film concludes with an unnamed stableboy raising his broom to the sky like a lightsabre (see Figure 5.3), symbolising a new era in which the Force is now accessible to ordinary people. While there are pragmatic reasons for Lucasfilm to kill the character of Skywalker (namely the actor Mark Hamill aging), this film intimates a more equitable distribution of power in the universe going forward. Thus, the power to make a difference exists not only in an elite group of heroes but in everyone. Moreover, the closing scene also suggests that it is the *responsibility* of ordinary people like Rey and the stablehand pictured in Figure 5.3 to find ways to reconcile warring factions and create lasting peace in a post–Luke Skywalker era.

Figure 5.3

Closing Shot of The Last Jedi: A Stablehand on Canto Bight Wields a Broom Like a Lightsabre in a Galaxy no Longer Occupied by Luke Skywalker



Note. From *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, by R. Johnson, 2017 (2:23:33). Copyright 2017 by Lucasfilm.

The message that an ordinary person can be part of something greater may be interpreted as a cultural response to a range of recent ‘cultural explosions’, a term used by Lotman (1990) for massive transformative events that result in a culture undergoing a period of intense analysis to make sense of a new reality. Stories and storytelling are prominent cultural tools used in this process. Globalisation, digitisation, climate change and COVID-19, for example, have meant that modern humanity has had to make sense of several seismic shifts in rapid succession. Managing the influx of globally diverse information and data and facing the uncertainty of worldwide threats creates an environment that can be overwhelming and induce anxiety for many people.

Stories implying that anyone can help to solve large, galaxy-wide issues and that the efforts of an individual may be a critical part of the solution offers a reassuring and culturally important message. It can help individuals feel as though they are part of something larger than themselves and that their efforts, no matter how small, can contribute to an outcome far larger in scale. On a cultural level, this can play a meaningful role in inspiring individuals to become active agents who are responsible for their own actions instead of relying on a heroic saviour to take care of the hard work (Gomez, 2018a).

This analysis highlights the similarity between collective journey stories and Indigenous systems thinking, which empowers individuals to become agents of change through a deep appreciation for the relation between people and the environment (Yunkaporta, 2019). Collective narratives have the capacity to demonstrate the opportunities to find purpose, connection and being as part of a larger community. ‘Broom Boy’ is therefore a message of hope for those feeling disillusioned in the face of existential threats and a call to action and purpose. If, as Hartley and McWilliam (2009) suggest, our public discourse does not currently serve the needs of the collective in the face of critical global issues, it is not inconceivable that we are witnessing a cultural course correction through the evolution of popular cultural stories designed to inspire collective action.

Taking us beyond the central Skywalker storyline, *The Last Jedi* questions the recurring cycle of war waged between good and evil in the *Star Wars* storyworld. The death of Luke Skywalker and the distribution of the Force signals an end to this era of the universe while keeping the door open to an endless universe of stories (Step 14 of the collective journey model in Table 5.1). ‘Everyperson’ characters such as Rey are called to question the state of the universe and fix a broken system using a new approach. The approach these new characters take will differ from that of Skywalker because they are living in different circumstances, in the same way that the methods Indigenous communities have used to manage finite resources and teach collective responsibility will differ from strategies used in the present-day digital age.

5.1.3 The Collective Journey and Our Present-Day Networked Existence

Our present-day networked existence allows us to access a plethora of information and form varied local and global communities. Referring once again to Lotman (1990), the internet and social media are two of the greatest ‘cultural explosions’ to have occurred in the past few decades. Understanding and harnessing this new reality could be a significant

rationale for new models of popular culture storytelling to emerge. Indeed, Gomez (2017a) attributes the emergence of the collective journey to our increasingly networked lives: ‘The Collective Journey model helps us explore a new way to look at story, tell stories, and participate in narrative, which has all been made possible by interactive media technologies, and how interconnected we have become’ (para. 2).

The steps of the collective journey (see Table 5.1) are largely predicated on navigating a technologically networked existence. Tapping the digital oracle (Step 3) refers to the challenge of navigating abundant information; the use of signs and symbols (Step 6) reflects the need to communicate in globally accessible terms; and super-positioning (Step 13) addresses our ability to amplify our communicative powers through social media. In theory, stories such as these can educate audiences about the effective and considered use of present-day global digital communications systems.

The need for such education is imperative in an era where ordinary citizens have the capacity to create cultural disruptions. While it is important to acknowledge the inequities in terms of access to the internet (Couldry, 2011; J. Thomas et al., 2023) and the biased voices present in social media platforms (M. Brough et al., 2020), the internet has dramatically increased the ability of individuals to actively engage in popular culture compared with the era of broadcast media. Modern digital tools offer the capacity to create, contribute to or radically disrupt vital cultural discussions. The democratisation of the Force through Rey and ‘Broom Boy’ mirrors this notion that everyday people now have the capacity to access a transformative power previously only available to the elite.

The increasing moral ambiguity of the *Star Wars* universe depicted in *The Last Jedi* reflects the modern anxiety of navigating overwhelming amounts of uncategorised information. *The Last Jedi* premiered a year following the election of Donald Trump as president of the US. Trump’s chaotic use of social media and the national and international

turmoil it caused during his nomination and tenure (Lockhart, 2019) is representative of our unregulated digital communication systems. Managing information chaos became an even greater global issue during the COVID-19 pandemic, when accessing genuine health information and avoiding misinformation became a matter of existential urgency (Tian & Yang, 2022).

The Last Jedi explores a far more morally ambiguous universe compared with the binary good and evil of Luke Skywalker and Darth Vader. Kylo Ren, Rey and even the most steadfast of characters, Luke Skywalker, all experience moral confusion, and each major character must reconsider their respective roles and reassess who they want to be. In the film, Finn and Rose encounter an elite independent class of people profiting from the ongoing war between the First Order and the Resistance. While there, they are betrayed by a Resistance informant who is offered money by the First Order to do so. The events of the film reflect the modern difficulty of knowing one's place and who to trust in a world full of overwhelming and conflicting information.

The Last Jedi emphasises the importance of being present in the moment as opposed to relying on systems of information during moments of upheaval. Luke Skywalker struggles to resolve his perceived failure to rebuild the Jedi. Struggling to find answers in ancient Jedi texts, he instead chooses to burn them. His former master, Yoda, tells him he is not wrong for doing so: 'Time it is. Hmm. For you to look past a pile of old books . . . Page-turners they were not' (R. Johnson, 2017, 1:22:29). Yoda gives Skywalker permission to rely on his gut instinct instead of slavishly adhering to outdated traditions. After this revelation, Skywalker reconnects with the Force, saves and re-energises the Resistance and releases the Force to the universe in a noble act of selflessness. Thinking deeply, listening to others and being adaptable to change demonstrates the importance of critical thinking, research and social engagement during times of uncertainty.

The diversity of *The Last Jedi* cast also reflects a shift in cultural expectations of who should be represented in modern media. Social media allows globally diverse people and perspectives to be made publicly visible, outside of the staid boundaries of commercial media. Therefore, stories that focus predominantly on heroic white men no longer meet the expectations of global audiences (Gomez, 2017a; Ramón et al., 2023). People who historically have not been represented in mainstream media now have a much greater capacity to express dissatisfaction if excluded. Thus, it is not surprising that legacy franchises such as *Star Wars* are evolving to reflect this change and remain culturally and commercially relevant. While the primary characters of Lucas's original trilogy—Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia and Han Solo—are all Caucasian, the trilogy of sequel films is led by a female character (Rey), a Black stormtrooper (Finn) and a Latino pilot (Poe). While this shift in the franchise attracted vitriol from a minority of fans, it would be logical for Lucasfilm to assume that audiences would expect that 'a galaxy far, far away' would have room for the range of people visible on the internet.⁹ The formation of such a diverse team of new heroes is representative of our increasingly interconnected state of modern living.

5.1.4 The Collective Journey and Commercial Transmedia

The increasing emergence of the collective journey narrative is logical when we consider the storytelling strategies required to create effective transmedia storyworlds. To avoid repetition and redundancy, transmedia stories require a diversity of characters, perspectives and storylines. Creating redundant texts in a transmedia environment is the ultimate 'sin' and a quick path to ruining the immersive qualities of a storyworld and weakening a franchise (S. Coulson, personal communication, 15 November 2018; J. Gomez, personal communication, 24 November 2018; Jenkins, 2006a; Phillips, 2012; Pratten, 2011; Wolf, 2017). Gomez (2018a) refers to *The Last Jedi* as the 'self-disruption' of *Star Wars*—a

⁹ Inequitable access and opportunity continue to exist, restricting some groups and people from being fully represented (J. Thomas et al., 2023).

text that was required to shake up the franchise formula and keep the brand ‘evergreen’. As Hollywood studios continue to mine existing IP, the longevity of these franchises depends on their ability to create new storylines and new reasons for audiences to remain invested in them. The increasing diversification of the MCU offers a clear example of this process.

The MCU approach to world-building is driven by character (Webster et al., 2022), and over time the franchise has introduced increasingly diverse characters. The commercial and critical success of *The Avengers* demonstrates that Marvel was able to combine the established storyworlds of Iron Man, the Hulk, Thor and Captain America. However, bringing these characters together also makes clear that most MCU heroes were male and white (see Figure 5.4).

Figure 5.4

The Avengers Cast with Director Joss Whedon Posing for a Photo at San Diego Comic-Con



Note. From Las Vegas Review-Journal, 2010 (<https://www.reviewjournal.com/news/samuel-l-jackson-announces-avengers-cast/>). Copyright 2010 by Las Vegas Review-Journal.

If the MCU storyworld were to grow, avoid excessive repetition and appeal to broader markets, it would require a greater level of diversity, something that fans have demanded.

While Marvel biographies indicate that Marvel CEO Ike Perlmutter hampered the development of female and racially diverse character-led films (Flanagan et al., 2016; Robinson et al., 2023; Wetzel & Wetzel, 2020), when Kevin Feige was given full control of

the franchise, *Black Panther* and *Captain Marvel* soon emerged. By the conclusion of The Infinity Saga, the MCU had become more racially and tonally diverse (see Figure 5.5).

Figure 5.5

Cast and Key Directors and Producers of the Marvel Cinematic Universe Showcasing Greater Diversity



Note. From Marco Grob, 2018 (<https://variety.com/2018/film/news/marvel-class-photo-10th-anniversary-celebration-1202692301/>). Copyright 2018 by Marvel Studios.

In Phase 1 (2008–2012) of the MCU, initial films such as *Iron Man*, *Thor* and *Captain America: The First Avenger* were deeply rooted in hero's journey structures. However, the MCU soon evolved to feature more aspects of collective journey storytelling (see Table 5.2), with *The Avengers* beginning the shift towards collaborative team adventures. In Phase 2 (2013–2015) the *Guardians of the Galaxy* followed suit. By Phase 3 (2016–2019), the major characters were so well established that they could address complex social issues. *Captain America: Civil War*, for example, focuses on Captain America and Iron Man exploring the moral differences between their approaches to heroism, forcing a range of fellow MCU characters to choose sides (see Table 5.2).

Table 5.2*Marvel Cinematic Universe and the Trend from the Hero's Journey to the Collective Journey*

| Phase | Film (in order of release) | HJ | More HJ than CJ | More CJ than HJ | CJ |
|-------|--|----|-----------------|-----------------|----|
| One | <i>Iron Man</i> | X | | | |
| | <i>The Incredible Hulk</i> | X | | | |
| | <i>Iron Man 2</i> | | X | | |
| | <i>Thor</i> | X | | | |
| | <i>Captain America: The First Avenger</i> | X | | | |
| | <i>The Avengers</i> | | | X | |
| Two | <i>Iron Man 3</i> | X | | | |
| | <i>Thor: The Dark World</i> | X | | | |
| | <i>Captain America: The Winter Soldier</i> | | X | | |
| | <i>Guardians of the Galaxy</i> | | | X | |
| | <i>Avengers: Age of Ultron</i> | | | X | |
| | <i>Ant-Man</i> | X | | | |
| Three | <i>Captain America: Civil War</i> | | | | X |
| | <i>Doctor Strange</i> | X | | | |
| | <i>Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2</i> | | | X | |
| | <i>Spider-Man: Homecoming</i> | X | | | |
| | <i>Thor: Ragnarok</i> | | | X | |
| | <i>Black Panther</i> | | X | | |
| | <i>Avengers: Infinity War</i> | | | | X |
| | <i>Ant-Man and the Wasp</i> | | X | | |
| | <i>Captain Marvel</i> | X | | | |
| | <i>Avengers: Endgame</i> | | | | X |
| Four | <i>Spider-Man: Far from Home</i> | | X | | |
| | <i>Black Widow</i> | X | | | |
| | <i>Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings</i> | X | | | |
| | <i>Eternals</i> | | | | X |
| | <i>Spider-Man: No Way Home</i> | | | X | |

Note. HJ: hero's journey; CJ: collective journey. Scores were calculated against Gomez's model.

The MCU storyworld has become an increasingly collective metanarrative experience as characters' storylines continue to intersect with greater frequency. Later Phase 3 films such as *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Avengers: Endgame* are intersemiotic texts that need a range of characters to navigate their ideologies and unite against a common existential threat embodied

in the villain Thanos. Marvel's plans for Phase 4 aims to further this trend, signalling a myriad of diverse characters and interconnected character experiences (see Figure 5.6).

Figure 5.6

Marvel Cinematic Universe's Phase 4 Line-Up of Films and Shows Includes a Diverse Range of Characters



Note. From 2019 Comic-Con International—Marvel Studios Panel, by Kevin Winter, 2019 (<https://www.gettyimages.com.au/photos/kevin-winter-marvel-phase-four>). Copyright 2019 by Kevin Winter.

However, the MCU still draws heavily on the structures and tropes of the hero's journey. Superheroes have long been associated with this storytelling style, and modern audiences have been taught by corporations to expect this combination to be repeated across a range of media. Marvel typically introduces new MCU characters with a hero's journey-style text (e.g. *Iron Man*, *Ant-Man*, *Doctor Strange*) to establish the hero's credentials against a familiar superhero archetype and encourage audiences to invest in their journey. Hero's journey tropes are also abundantly familiar in Marvel's use of villains. With few exceptions, the primary goal of an MCU text is for the hero to defeat the villain in a spectacular battle. This is reflective of the comic book experience and the myriad Marvel adaptations that draw from this trope. However, in an ongoing storyworld, defeating a villain does not necessarily

bring about lasting change. In the collective journey model, the equivalent to defeating a villain is what Gomez (personal communication, 17 February 2022) refers to as

dynamic reconciliation [or] solving the problem or conflict or crisis in such a way as to prevent its direct repetition. Doing this requires multiple characters or factions from several sides of the system to come to a greater understanding and insight into the underlying causes and to make reparations as a process of healing and societal evolution.

While achieving this new state of understanding and change could well include violence and the defeat of a villain, this is not sufficient on its own to achieve a satisfactory narrative outcome. The key ongoing criticism of Marvel is that the MCU has a ‘villain problem’ because its villains are underdeveloped foils that only exist for the development of the hero. If we consider this criticism from the perspective of dynamic reconciliation, it can also be understood as a disappointment that MCU villains do not necessarily move the storyworld further or help the hero establish a new perspective as much as they allow a hero to move further through the storyworld. A rare exception to this rule is Killmonger, the villain in *Black Panther*, who despite being defeated in a climactic showdown, fundamentally alters Black Panther’s world view. Thus, it is perhaps logical that Killmonger is one of the most well-regarded of the MCU villains.

It is fair to say that some collective narrative tropes may be commercially unattractive. Modern blockbuster cinema is built upon spectacle and battles between heroes and villains. *The Last Jedi* leaned heavily into collective narrative tropes, and Luke Skywalker’s non-combative defeat of Kylo Ren may have been anticlimactic for fans who were anticipating the spectacle of a lightsabre duel. Dynamic reconciliation does not need to be non-combative (although it made sense for Skywalker at that point in the narrative), but this example highlights how tricky it can be to deliver something different from audience expectations in

blockbuster films (in this case, what *Star Wars* fans expected from the franchise). The death of too many superhero characters would also be commercially undesirable. Allowing Tony Stark to die limits Marvel's capacity to use this immensely profitable character (outside of flashback sequences) until such time the MCU decides to recast actors, reboot the storyworld timeline or bring forth a different narrative device from that of the comic books.

Nevertheless, both of these examples demonstrate that audience expectations and commercial preferences can evolve. Comic books have regularly found innovative ways to revive popular characters and keep them commercially viable for decades. Collective narrative storytelling is also already apparent in other media; for example, *Game of Thrones* and *The Walking Dead* originated as a series of novels and comics, respectively. The evolution of the MCU highlights the push and pull of an emerging cultural process within the boundaries of a commercial setting run by a highly risk-averse industry. However, as the next section argues, there are potential commercial benefits for those willing to explore the affective traits of storytelling while paying heed to present-day cultural requirements.

5.2 Aspiration, Inspiration and Activation: Storytelling and Active Citizenship

Throughout the period of this research, there has been a discernible shift among both scholars and practitioners to better understand how commercial transmedia entertainment can foster active citizenship. Active citizenship involves individuals and communities fully engaging with their community and environment and challenging the status quo to improve local and global problems. Fan communities can be safe spaces for the exploration of identity and cultural values, and commercial transmedia entertainment can offer enduring and globally recognisable tools for cultural dialogue. Together, fan practices and the cultural content produced through entertainment can create a potent foundation for community-minded discussion and activism.

In this section, I explore the affective qualities of transmedia entertainment and how it can foster and support active citizenship, with the recognition that fan practices are fundamentally similar to activism. By considering audience engagement with *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and *Black Panther* alongside cultural movements such as Black Lives Matter and #MeToo, I propose three affective states evident in commercial transmedia: aspiration, inspiration and activation. Using this three-tier structure, I explore the (admittedly blurry) transition points between the different modalities of audience participation in the transmedia environment and reflect upon the responsibilities and opportunities that commercial storytellers have to merge entertainment with community-minded practice.

5.2.1 Active Citizenship, Fan Practices and Social Media

Active citizenship is a broad term related to one's ability to control elements of one's daily life and assume responsibility as a member of a local, national and global community. It describes the importance of understanding local systems of governance and policy and the philosophical imperative for members of society to act with consideration for their community and environment (Crick & Lockyer, 2010; Kenny et al., 2015, 2020; Sivesind & Saglie, 2017; Tisch, 2010). The term has been used to describe Scandinavian citizens actively engaging with their welfare system (Sivesind & Saglie, 2017), minority groups in the United Kingdom engaging with the political system (Crick & Lockyer, 2010), socially responsible community engagement practices in Australia (Kenny et al., 2015, 2020) and volunteering practices in the US (Tisch, 2010). It involves making informed choices for a better collective future and ensuring that more people have the agency and ability to contribute to these efforts.

The notion of active citizenship can be seen in Rubenstein's (2018) examination of the Uluru Statement from the Heart¹⁰ and its capacity to offer First Nations Australians greater

¹⁰ The Uluru Statement from the Heart (n.d.) was written and endorsed by 250 senior leaders from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities across Australia at the National Constitutional Convention held at Uluru in 2017. The document invites the Australian people to take steps to better recognise the rights of Australia's First Nations peoples and includes the suggestion to implement a 'Voice to Parliament', a permanent advisory body

agency in their home country. Rubenstein argues that the implementation of a constitutionally enshrined Voice to Parliament, an advisory body comprising Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander representatives, would create a new legal framework by which First Nations Australians could be afforded the power of active citizenship in Australia. According to Rubenstein, having ongoing representation at the highest levels of government would provide legal legitimacy, social empowerment and self-determination for First Nations Australians. Her case study highlights how an individual's agency becomes exponentially more powerful when supported by the dominant hegemony. Thus, power differentials are a key concern when considering the capacity for individuals to engage in active citizenship.

Fandom is also often characterised as a site of both participation and resistance. For example, in *Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: Exploring Participatory Culture*, Jenkins (2006b) explores the dynamics of fandom, romanticising it as a balanced cultural system in which creative works attract a yin and yang of love and hate, producing compelling creativity in its own right. He acknowledges that his work is driven by his love of popular culture, positioning himself as an 'aca/fan' (a hybrid between an academic and a fan), thus someone who has a vested interest in understanding affirmational fandom practices.¹¹ With reference to fans 'poaching' digital content to suit their interests, Jenkins acknowledges that not all fans will find suitable content, and some may need to repurpose it to suit their needs. Transformative fan practices, in which marginalised fans make do with popular cultural content but transform its messaging to suit their needs, has continued to flourish as a scholarly concept (Gray, 2021). However, for scholars who identify as a member of a marginalised group, the

comprising representatives from Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities who would offer guidance to the Australian Parliament on Indigenous issues. The Voice would be enshrined in the Australian Constitution. However, on 14 October 2023, the Australian public voted against this proposition in a federal referendum (Maguire, 2023).

¹¹ This is but one example of the simplification of the cultural dynamics of fandom and Jenkins has not single-handedly popularised this practice. Jenkins has done much to promote a diverse range of scholarly voices. He also acknowledges his privilege as a white, heterosexual, cisgender male for whom much Western commercial entertainment is designed (Jenkins, 2023).

fundamental premise that fans have to make do in the first place highlights a raft of cultural issues ignored in popular culture and academia.

Both Wanzo (2015) and Pande (2020) highlight that the mainstream scholarly discourse on fandom often overlooks the true experience of marginalised fans by privileging certain voices and research methodologies. For example, Wanzo (2015) highlights how the Black scholarship has been systematically disregarded in the discussion of key theories of fandom and invites academics to consider more diverse scholarly voices. Pande (2020) outlines how the predominant methodological approaches used in fan studies are underpinned by an unseen 'whiteness', limiting the capacity to capture different racial perspectives. She invites scholars to consider fandom through the lens of decolonisation to counter this approach. While fan-centric academia has been key to understanding the power structures in fan studies, there is an opportunity to consider the privileging and silencing of certain voices in fan communities and new methodologies for understanding transmedia participation.

The use of advocacy and activism to challenge dominant power structures that do not meet the needs of the community is a critical component of both active citizenship and fandom. van Zoonen (2004) argues that both fans and community activists use social organisation and activism skills in a similar way:

Fans have an intense individual investment in the text, they participate in strong communal discussions and deliberations about the qualities of the text, they propose and discuss alternatives which would be implemented as well if only the fans could have their way. (p. 46)

With reference to these commonalities, fandom has repeatedly been likened to politics, and the research shows how these fields may overlap (Jenkins, 2006b; Sandvoss, 2005a; van Zoonen, 2004). However, the collation of information, discussions about alternatives and advocating for change by fans bear many of the hallmarks of advocacy and

activism. Through the course of my interviews, it became apparent that there was a shared desire to better understand how entertainment can support a broader spectrum of active citizenship practices beyond the traditional confines of politics. Further, there was an awareness that such groups were likely to appear and self-organise with increasing frequency (Gomez, personal communication, 24 November 2018; Jenkins, personal communication, 30 September 2019).

Throughout this research project, a range of global movements were amplified through social media, increasing the urgency to understand the relationship between fandom and active citizenship. The Black Lives Matter movement was formed in 2013 to fight racism, racial violence and police brutality against Black people. After footage of the murder of George Floyd at the hands of Minneapolis police went viral in 2020, the movement inspired a series of international protests, including the largest ever experienced in the US, and fostered global conversations around the rights of minority groups (Black Lives Matter, n.d.). In 2017, the hashtag #MeToo went viral after actress Alyssa Milano encouraged her followers to acknowledge if they had experienced sexual assault or violence in reference to the 'Me Too' movement founded by survivor and community activist Tarana Burke (n.d.). This resulted in several high-profile men being fired or imprisoned for historical offences over the next few years. In 2019, climate activist Greta Thunberg inspired a series of youth-led protests across 185 countries, with citizens protesting government inaction on climate change, amplifying the issue in the modern news cycle (Laville & Watts, 2019). During his term of presidency (2017–2021), Donald Trump's confrontational Twitter posts eroded soft power in the US (S. Collins & DeWitt, 2023) and led to social division (Lockhart, 2019). Trump's failure to be re-elected resulted in some of his supporters rioting and attacking the US capitol in 2021 (9 News, 2020). These examples demonstrate how digital technologies enable movements to

spread quickly and mobilise large groups to action more than ever before (Gomez, 2017a; Jenkins, personal communication, 30 September 2019).

In this section, I consider the intersection between commercial entertainment and these global issues and movements. As cultural theorist John Fiske (1989) argues, popular culture presents itself not as ‘a completed object to be accepted passively, but as a cultural resource to be used’ (p. 72). By considering the elements of storytelling that inform and activate, it is possible to explore not only how transmedia entertainment content and symbols can be utilised for a cause but also how storytellers may motivate audiences to become more invested in active citizenship. The increasing intersection between entertainment and active citizenship is fostered by the blurring of fandom and digital activism practices (M. M. Brough & Shresthova, 2012) and may be a commercial boon if implemented correctly.

5.2.2 Categorising Degrees of Affective Transmedia Practice

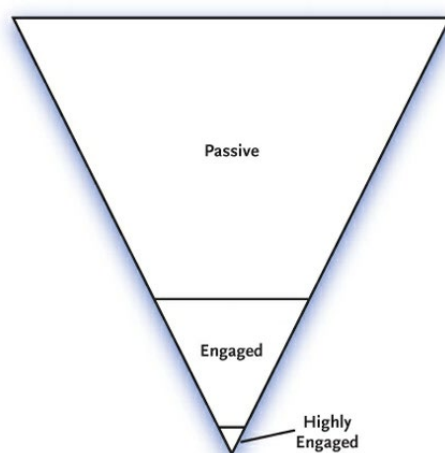
Transmedia storytelling has been consistently characterised as an inherently participatory activity (Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b; Phillips, 2012; Pratten, 2011). Unlike the ‘lean-back’ behaviours of traditional broadcast media, transmedia audiences are required to engage in a range of active behaviours through the process of storyworld consumption. This can vary from deciding on the order in which to consume texts to more complex fan behaviours such as creating paratextual content to demonstrate mastery over the logic of a storyworld or guide other fans through it (Gray, 2010; Hills, 2015b; Jenkins, 2006a, 2006b).

According to Coulson (as cited in Hassler-Forest, 2016), Campfire uses the terms ‘skimmers’, ‘dippers’ and ‘divers’ to describe the three levels of fan engagement when consulting on entertainment projects. Phillips (2012), who frequently collaborates with Campfire, uses an inverted pyramid to describe the levels of fan engagement in transmedia ecosystems (see Figure 5.7), showing that the majority of fans engage only superficially, while a minority participate intensively. This concept aligns with scholarly arguments made

by Scolari et al. (2014) and Hills (2015b). Similar to most transmedia practitioners, Campfire aims to create projects that increase the number of ‘divers’ (S. Coulson, personal communication, 15 November 2018; J. Gomez, personal communication, 24 November 2018; F. Niecieza, personal communication, 14 November 2018; Phillips, 2012).

Figure 5.7

The Fan Engagement Pyramid



Note. Adapted from *A Creator's Guide to Transmedia Storytelling: How to Captivate and Engage Audiences Across Multiple Platforms*, by Andrea Phillips, 2012 (p. 80). Copyright 2012 by McGraw-Hill.

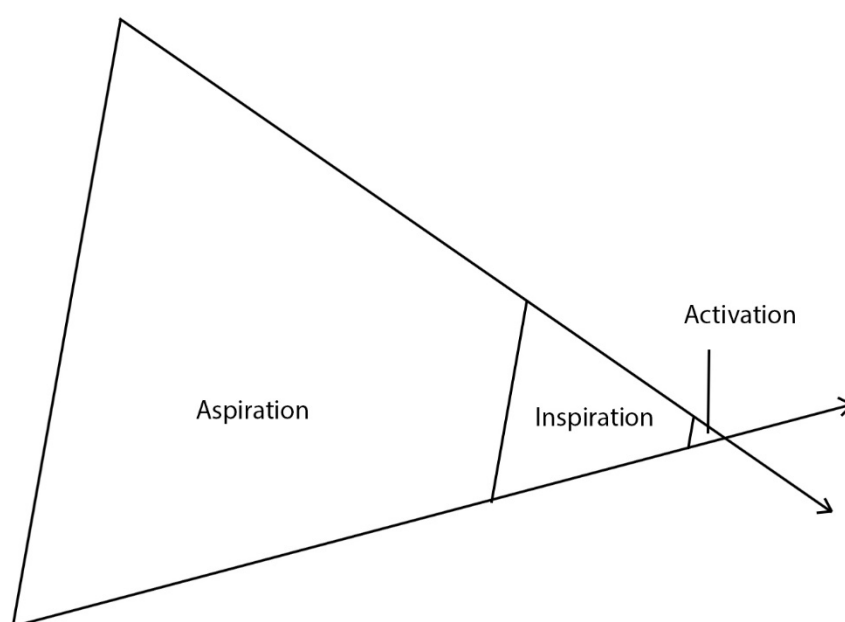
On the surface, this approach ratifies the predominant discourse of fandom being focused on practices of affirmation, where levels of engagement correspond with levels of interest. However, fan participation is not necessarily this clear cut. Barriers to digital participation, for example, can hinder some fans from engaging in fandom practices. Couldry (2011) reminds us that inequitable access to digital tools or opportunities to develop digital literacy can restrict some fans from being fully and actively engaged. Digital and social media platforms are commonly biased towards the preferences and attributes of majority groups, meaning that they often fail to cater to the needs of under-represented groups or provide the tools required for full expression (M. Brough et al., 2020). Gray (2021) also argues that audiences who do not feel represented in a media text may engage in activities such as

poaching, transformative fandom or the active avoidance or rejection of texts, which is often unseen and difficult to measure when considering audience engagement with a text.

Acknowledging these complexities and in the spirit of prompting further discourse, I propose a three-tier inverted pyramid to describe the phases of *affective transmedia storytelling* in relation to active citizenship (see Figure 5.8).

Figure 5.8

Model of Affective Storytelling



The first phase is aspiration, defined as the ambition or hope of achieving something (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.-b). This is a broad outcome predominantly centred on an emotion. The second phase is inspiration, defined as the urge to actually do something (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.-c). This transitory phase crystalises how aspiration can be directed towards a specific goal or cause. The third phase is activation, which is when action

is realised (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.-a). This can be expressed as either the affirmative or the transformative use of a text in the realm of active citizenship. These three phases can be understood through the lens of both what a storyteller may seek to achieve and the experience of an audience member. The remainder of this section discusses each phase, drawing on key case studies used in this research.

5.2.3 Aspiration: Connecting with the Individual

Aspiration—the establishment of a hope or ambition—is the first phase of affective audience engagement. Media scholar Roger Silverstone (1994) highlights that all media consumption is driven by ‘a transcendent hope, a hope and desire that something will touch us’ (p. 55). Many fan studies are focused on understanding how this desire is manifested, recognising the role of fandom and social media in the formation of identity and personhood (M. Brough et al., 2020; Gray, 2021; Sandvoss, 2005a). Hills (2015a) discusses how the ‘sperosemic’ qualities of popular texts offer audiences hope for the future and create a sense of comfort and safety.

Historically, storytelling has been a significant cultural tool to prompt an individual to engage with the world around them. Storytelling in Australian Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, for example, allows individuals to construct a sense of self and purpose in relation to their tribe, their environment and the rhythmic events of life (Johnston & Forrest, 2020; Swain, 1993; Yunkaporta, 2019). Audiences often seek a similar function from commercial media (Silverstone, 1994). Narratives that are representative of and relatable to audiences serve as a ‘calling in’ (Walker, 2019), inviting individuals to recognise their place in either a fictional or a non-fictional space. This cultural process can provide an individual with an existential thrill, offering a role and purpose that might be possible within the tapestry of their community.

Aspirational ideas also serve an important commercial function: they are fundamental to the effective operation and endurance of a transmedia system. Producing and marketing a compelling message is the first step to connecting a consumer with a storyworld. Conveying a consistent message through a range of media is vital to both ensure the cohesion of a storyworld and compel audiences to continue consuming the text across the transmedia environment. Gomez (as cited in Bernstein, 2013) offers the following advice to his fellow commercial transmedia producers:

Your story needs to have some kind of aspirational quality. It needs to be meaningful. If your story is violent and really a downer, it's not going to be enough of a draw for people to follow it across multiple platforms. There's an upbeat quality to most successful transmedia stories. It's got to be a story world you want to spend time in. (para. 10).

Therefore, Starlight Runner advocates for the intentional development and continued application of 'aspirational drivers' (Gomez, personal communication, 24 November 2018, 2019) across the entire production of a transmedia storyworld. This does not mean that a storyworld cannot address dark issues. Both *Game of Thrones* and *The Walking Dead*, for example, explore dark and violent subject matter while maintaining an element of hope that the darkness in their respective worlds will one day be resolved. Expanding on the discussion in Chapter 4, understanding and consistently applying aspirational qualities throughout a storyworld ensures that the primal message will 'cut through' in the age of information abundance.

Transmedia storytelling also enables the potency of an aspirational message to be amplified over time (Jenkins, 2019a; Scolari et al., 2014). As Campbell (1949) notes, myths are the stories that endure across generations and hold deep cultural meaning. Reverse engineering Campbell's theory of myth, Jeff Gomez (personal communication, 24

November 2018, 17 February 2022) advocates for storytellers to continue mining the deeper meaning in their work based on the premise that the continuous exploration of an idea over time will allow the message to connect with audiences at a deeper level than is possible over a short period.

Marvel and DC characters have endured for decades, which may in part be attributable to the aspirational qualities of superheroes (L. Burke, 2015). The MCU, Marvel's extension of this concept, incorporates a consistent aspirational quality in each of its texts. The superheroes featured in this storyworld regularly overcome adversity and their own weaknesses to protect others, making the MCU a consistent commercial and critical success. The DCEU, however, does not have the same degree of aspirational messaging and has been less commercially and critically successful compared with other DC projects. This is perhaps best exemplified by the portrayal of Superman in the DCEU storyworld.

Superman is a symbol of hope for humanity and a model of how restraint, optimism and compassion can be used to make the world a better place. In *Man of Steel*, while Superman is mainly introduced in these terms, he allows his father to die rather than publicly reveal his powers and kills the villain Zod when he cannot think of another solution. In *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, Superman loses faith in his abilities when blackmailed by Lex Luthor and is beaten up by Batman before being killed by the villain Doomsday. Superman's behaviour and fate in the DCEU does not represent the hope and optimism audiences have been taught to associate with the character over decades of various incarnations of the character. By extension, many fans believed that the DCEU failed to meet their storyworld expectations. The middling commercial and critical response to this film drove studio executives to demand that Snyder make changes to the tone of the DCEU (O'Connell, 2021).

Fans can react with disappointment and protectiveness if they perceive that the meaning of a franchise is damaged and their ontological safety threatened (Gray, 2021; Hills, 2015b). The selection of media texts to consume (where audiences have the agency to do so) is in itself an act of citizenship because it can inform our mental maps of the world (Gray, 2021). In crude terms, the commercial and critical response to a work may be considered an endorsement or rejection of the work by the public or the ability of the work to deliver hope or continue exploring a concept through transmedia. Therefore, being aware of the aspirational qualities of a text is an important commercial consideration.

Beyond their capacity to aid in marketing and enhance the audience enjoyment of texts, aspirational messages can also perform an educational function. During our discussions, J. Gomez (personal communication, 24 November 2018) referred to the educational power of storytelling. He described his goal to create transmedia entertainment that would allow audiences to experience different states of being, recognise their ability to move beyond their perceived limitations and implement these newfound skills into their lives—a concept he phrased as ‘breaking the experiential manifold’. Gomez highlighted how storytelling has historically been used in psychology, self-improvement and career development to teach confidence and self-efficacy. Authors and lecturers such as Dale Carnegie in *How to Win Friends and Influence People* (1936) and *How to Stop Worrying and Start Living* (1948), Og Mandino in *The Greatest Salesman in the World* (1968), Werner Erhard, who founded the intensive life coaching program ‘The est Training’, later renamed ‘The Forum’, which now continues globally as Landmark Education, and neurolinguistic programming lifestyle guru Tony Robbins all use the power of storytelling (directed inwardly and outwardly) as a means of manifesting a different lifestyle. When we consider the use of storytelling for purposes other than entertainment, we can see it is often used to incentivise action.

The commercial entertainment industry primarily focuses on how transmedia storytelling can inspire deeper levels of content consumption (Coulson, personal communication, 15 November 2018; Phillips, 2012), while scholars often focus on its influence on fandom and fan behaviours (Hills, 2015b; Mittell, n.d.; Sandvoss, 2005b). However, the internet has allowed fan discourse to become more visibly intermingled with a range of other cultural conversations (Jenkins & Shresthova, 2012). Therefore, it is pertinent to consider how the aspirational components of transmedia entertainment can more readily inspire audiences to consider future states of being.

5.2.4 Inspiration: Situating the Individual Within the Collective

The second phase of affective engagement relates to the capacity of commercial entertainment to prompt a collective imagining of new realities and develop strategies to build them. Inspiration, or the urge to do something (Cambridge Dictionary, n.d.-c), is the moment when audience members move beyond a general state of aspiration and become motivated to create plans to address specific issues. Alluding to politics, Gray (2021) explains how fan sites often nurture constructive discourse around community-based issues:

Acts of audiencing always carry with them the potential to be sites at which larger commitments variously begin, amplify, quieten, or end, such that audience behavior is often a rich site both for feeling the tremors and after effects of the political realm—the realm where groups make decisions and work toward turning thought, belief, and conviction into action—and in turn for feeling where various tremors that will in due course hit the political realm originate. (p. 214)

Here, Gray identifies the transition point at which talk begins to turn into a strategy for action (or inaction). In this phase, individuals who have previously felt a sense of aspiration now begin to contribute to a process of collective dreaming.

Storytelling and popular entertainment can provide compelling spaces for cultures to imagine and explore different states of being. In his analysis of fictional utopias in popular media, Duncombe (2012) argues that such spaces provide a helpful dissonance between fiction and reality to allow the safe exploration of ideas. Referencing *Star Trek* and *Doctor Who*, Duncombe argues that the utopian ideals proffered in these shows are simultaneously earnest and absurd, and the kitsch style of the shows undermines the seriousness of their subject matter. Duncombe argues that these texts are effectively inspiration-building tools because rather than presenting a closed story idea, they ensure that audiences understand that they are engaging with fantasy, prompting them to continue imagining possibilities. Thus, entertainment is also a tool that can be used intentionally to explore new realities.

Through their exploration of the ‘civic imagination’, Jenkins, Peters-Lazaro & Shresthova (2020) call for further inquiry into how entertainment can both model and support people connecting with each other and working together towards real-world goals. Citing *Star Trek* and its fully realised racial harmony, they argue that popular media can offer powerful examples of what is possible and that embracing the civic imagination allows one to move beyond the ‘tyranny of the possible’ (p. 12). Jenkins (personal communication, 30 September 2019) notes that ‘we see this notion of the civic imagination being the ways we conceptualise freedom and equality before we directly experienced that.’ In this sense, entertainment provides not only a way to collectively dream but also a possible road map to a real-world destination. In response to criticisms that the use of entertainment to dream of future possible states are simply ‘fantasy’, Jenkins (personal communication, 30 September 2019) responded,

I think that grows out of a lack of understanding of the value I see of the utopian discourse as a way of modelling and thinking through change. I fall on Stephen Duncombe’s perspective here—the open utopia is not a blueprint, it’s a provocation,

it's a way of provoking a conversation about the nature of change. So, we need the critique, we need the open utopia, and it's the space in between that we need to occupy if we're going to actually understand in an applied way the changes necessary to bring about a better society.

In this argument, Jenkins builds on Fiske's (1989) foundational premise that popular culture provides audiences with a language through which to explore new ideas. Storytelling can provoke new ideas, compel audiences to discuss evocative concepts and provide symbols for conversation and strategy. For example, during this research project and alongside the increasing prominence of the Black Lives Matter movement, Black characters were increasingly foregrounded in *Star Wars* and the MCU. While both instances offered new sites for cultural inspiration, each example produced different affective results.

In 2015, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* introduced Finn, a Black character poised to play a major role in the new trilogy. In the marketing for the film and film events, Finn is presented as one of three new lead characters alongside a Caucasian female scavenger, Rey, and a Latino male pilot, Poe. Finn is a stormtrooper who has a crisis of conscience when Kylo Ren orders him to execute innocent civilians. In an act of defiance, he decides to escape from Ren and the First Order, resulting in him teaming up with Poe, Rey and Han Solo and becoming a reluctant member of the Resistance. When Finn brandishes Luke Skywalker's original lightsabre to stand up to Ren in the third act of the film, it is hinted that he possesses a sensitivity to the Force, which is also suggested in paratextual content (see Figure 5.9). These events offer exciting aspirational potential for a traditionally under-represented audience in the *Star Wars* universe and positions Finn as an entity for collective inspiration moving forward.

Figure 5.9

Early Marketing for Star Wars: The Force Awakens, Showing Finn Brandishing Luke Skywalker's Lightsabre



Note. Adapted from *It's calling to you. #TheForceAwakens*, by Star Wars, 2015 (<https://x.com/starwars/status/672905503270297600>). Copyright 2015 by Lucasfilm.

In 2018, Marvel released *Black Panther*, the eighteenth MCU film and the first to feature a Black lead character. The film included a predominantly Black cast and crew and depicted an Afro-futuristic society in the MCU storyworld. My anonymous interviewee (personal communication, 14 November 2018) noted that the Black Panther character was already held in high regard by members of the Black community, whose expectations for the film were high:

For my African American friends, as soon as they announced that there was gonna be a Black Panther film, they were all sort of, 'You know guys at Marvel, right?' They're like, 'Tell them not to fuck it up, okay?' I was like, 'Okay, I'll tell 'em.' But there was something about that character that really resonated with that community, and I loved just the idea that they hold a sense of ownership with that character.

Based on the global response to the film, it may be assumed that my interviewee's friends were both relieved and happy. Earning over \$1.3 billion globally, *Black Panther* is the second highest-earning solo-character MCU film (Numbers, n.d.-b)¹² and was the first MCU film to

¹² Surpassed only by *Spider-Man: No Way Home* in 2021.

be nominated for and win an Academy Award (it won three) (Hollywood Reporter, 2019).¹³ At the time of writing, *Black Panther* also retains the highest critical rating for an MCU text on Rotten Tomatoes (2018b). The film depicts a futuristic African society with a deep cultural identity, technocratic sensibility and access to nearly infinite resources. Black Panther defeats the villains Killmonger and Ulysses Klaue, who jointly represent colonialism, dispossession and capitalism. The text offers an optimistic and affirmative vision of what African societies could have achieved had they not been crushed by colonisation. Not only is Black Panther presented as a character with full agency (see Figure 5.10), but Wakanda, his home country, is presented as the most enviable place to live in the MCU storyworld.

Figure 5.10

Black Panther, Portrayed by Chadwick Boseman, is a Powerful Marvel Superhero and King and Leader of a Secret Technocratic African Community



Note. From *Black Panther*, by Ryan Coogler, 2018 (1:42:34). Copyright 2018 by Marvel Studios.

In her analysis of activity linked to #BlackPantherSoLIT, Walker (2019) explores the cultural movement that has formed around Marvel's *Black Panther*. She points out that the hashtag was formed 2 years before the film was even released by an under-represented audience mobilising around their excitement and shared cultural dream to see Black

¹³ *Black Panther* was nominated for seven awards, including Best Picture. The film won three awards, and several winners were the first African American people to win an award in their respective categories.

characters fully realised on screen. This movement was generated and buoyed by fan labour, not simply a reaction to the film. The wealth of paratextual content created by the movement amplified the sense of importance this film held for members of the Black community. After its release, the film culturally resonated with many members of the Black community, allowing a traditionally under-represented audience (Ramón et al., 2023) to use selective ‘poaching’ (Jenkins, 2006b), ‘restorying’ (E. E. Thomas & Stornaiuolo, 2019) or ‘narrative extraction’ (Walker, 2019) to transform an inadequate text into something culturally meaningful. *Black Panther* was a text that offered a ‘calling in’ (Walker, 2019) experience for fans who rarely see themselves represented in popular media. Symbols from the film spilled out into the public discourse, including the Wakandan salute, where characters cross their arms over their chest in a display of strength and respect. The salute became synonymous with not just the film but also the broader concept of Black pride. Fans posted countless images of the salute (see Figure 5.11) and stars of the film, particularly lead actor Chadwick Boseman, at public events.

Black Panther’s effectiveness as a source of inspiration was further heightened by the tragic and untimely death of Chadwick Boseman in 2020, shocking those who had been unaware that the actor had been battling a serious illness. A series of social media posts appeared depicting children making the Wakandan salute and mourning his death (see Figures 5.12 and 5.13). The salute and the raw grief expressed by these children shows the deep affection for Boseman and the cultural grief at losing his character as an example of Black representation and pride. It is a compelling demonstration of how effective Boseman and the Black Panther character had been in creating inspiration in a short space of time. The intense grief also highlights how rare and important such examples are for this under-represented demographic.

Figure 5.11

Fans Gathering Outside a Screening of Black Panther in Japan



Note. Adapted from *Black Panther FINALLY out in Japan*, by Vlad C, 2018 (<https://x.com/vladtweets/status/969241225407721473>). Copyright 2018 by Vlad C.

Figure 5.12

Marvel Cinematic Universe Actor Mark Ruffalo Posts Photographs of Children Recognising the Importance of Boseman's Passing



Note. Adapted from *This is his power and impact on the next generation. #ChadwickForever*, by M. Ruffalo, 2020 (<https://x.com/MarkRuffalo/status/1300110581266092033>). Copyright 2020 by Mark Ruffalo.

Figure 5.13

Actor Halle Berry Posts an Image of a Child Mourning the Loss of Boseman, Highlighting the Importance of Racial Representation



Note. Adapted from *why this matters so much. rest in heavenly peace*, by Halle Berry, 2020 (<https://x.com/halleberry/status/1299844032693022721>). Copyright 2020 by Halle Berry.

Unlike *Black Panther*, the *Star Wars* trilogy sequel did not build on the promise of Finn as a source of inspiration. Across the next two films, *The Last Jedi* and *The Rise of Skywalker*, Finn was separated from the other lead characters and his narrative arc was reduced in favour of a storyline focused on Rey and Kylo Ren. By the conclusion of the trilogy, audiences do not learn whether there was a mythical reason for Finn defecting from the First Order, and the true nature of his relationship with the Force is not explored. With such a lack of narrative agency, Finn is relegated to the role of supporting character. Rather than symbolising a new era of diversity in *Star Wars*, John Boyega, the actor who portrays Finn, experienced constant racial abuse from a segment of the *Star Wars* fan base (Famurewa, 2020). Against the backdrop of the Black Lives Matter movement, failing to make Finn a fully realised character created a cultural disconnect between the story and the cultural moment. Given his inability to depict a fully realised Black character in the *Star Wars*

universe, Boyega (as cited in Famurewa, 2020) was publicly vocal about his disappointment and frustration with Disney:

What I would say to Disney is do not bring out a black character, market them to be much more important in the franchise than they are and then have them pushed to the side. It's not good. I'll say it straight up. (para. 20)

Boyega attended a Black Lives Matter protest in London in 2020, capturing media headlines with an impromptu speech voicing his frustration as a person of colour working in the entertainment industry (see Figure 5.14). Having only recently completed the sequel trilogy, Boyega's speech only amplified the perceived failure of Finn as an inspirational *Star Wars* figure.

Figure 5.14

John Boyega Speaking at a Black Lives Matter Rally in London



Note. From *Black Lives Matter Movement Inspires Protest in London*, by D. Kitwood, 2020 (<https://www.gettyimages.com.au/detail/news-photo/actor-john-boyega-speaks-to-the-crowd-during-a-black-lives-news-photo/1243459406>). Copyright 2020 by Dan Kitwood.

The crushing disappointment articulated by Boyega is a symptom of a franchise offering hope to a marginalised audience, only to fail in its delivery. In his exploration of dislike, Gray (2021) observes that marginalised audiences reserve their greatest disappointment and dislike for texts that offer the hope of inclusion, only to deliver something underwhelming. Williams (2015) writes of the ‘loveshock’ that occurs at such moments, the

ensuing ‘period of mourning’ when a formerly happy object loses its ability to represent ontological security and the renegotiation of not only one’s relationship with a text but also one’s self-identity.

Historically, *Star Wars* has been predominantly populated with Caucasian lead characters. While the inclusion of Finn in *Star Wars* had lower stakes than bringing all of Wakanda to the screen, Lucasfilm’s failure to give the character a meaningful arc inadvertently reinforced a hierarchy of character agency based on race. While the absence of representation is historically a reason for activation and protest (as Boyega demonstrated), a generative campaign that produces symbols and messages of hope such as #BlackPantherSoLIT can create space for groups to discuss future possibilities and content that help normalise a path towards this destination.

5.2.5 Activation: Participating in Active Citizenship for the Collective Good

The final phase of affective entertainment relates to how storytelling can lead to fully realised community-based activity. At this stage, individuals or groups move into a phase of intentional action, often with the goal to affect change, becoming an active citizen and accepting a level of social responsibility. This phase may be driven by an investment in fandom and its related goals but translates into activities that go beyond the borders of traditional fan activism.

By seeking to identify a distinct phase of active citizenship, I acknowledge that I am drawing a line that may be specific to Western culture. Aswin Punathambekar (2012) argues that making such a distinction between cultural and political or community-based participation is unique to Western culture. Through his exploration of the social actions of fans of *Indian Idol 3*, Punathambekar demonstrates that active citizenship is built into Indian culture and argues that the Western assumption that active participation requires intense political action does not necessarily apply in non-Western contexts. Duncombe (2012) makes

a similar point in his exploration of popular culture as a tool to inspire cultural discourse, recognising that politics are usually left to professionals in the US and that ‘fandom can offer a familiar, first, cultural step (albeit one not always taken) toward the more unfamiliar political work of activism’ (para. 6).

Additionally, it is important to acknowledge that audiences may choose to participate in a spectrum of behaviours. Returning to Phillips’s (2012) fan engagement pyramid (see Figure 5.7), the highly engaged fan represents the peak of affective engagement. This is an individual motivated to engage in ‘forensic fandom’ (Mittell, n.d.), one who seeks to consume every aspect of a storyworld and evangelically encourages others to emulate their behaviour (S. Coulson, personal communication, 15 November 2018). When considering the intersection between commercial storytelling and active citizenship, it is helpful to distinguish between individuals formulating ideas and those implementing solutions and encouraging others to join. Further, there is a variety of ways in which engagement with a transmedia franchise can lead to real-world action.

First, the inherent ideas in a story can provide a toolkit for action. Take, for example, the story of a young American boy who was bullied, beaten and hospitalised but refused to fight back because ‘it was not the Jedi way’ (Perez, 2018). Mark Hamill retweeted the story, causing it to go viral. While there have numerous reports of *Star Wars* inspiring people to adopt a ‘Jedi way of life’ (Ehlers, 2019), this instance is notable because the boy’s behaviour was acknowledged and deemed noble by Hamill (on behalf of *Star Wars*) (see Figure 5.15). This is an example of fandom going beyond the performative and being applied to a lived experience, then being validated and endorsed by the storyteller.

Figure 5.15

Mark Hamill Tweets About a Fan who Drew on the Jedi Ethos to Act Peacefully in the Face of Conflict



Note. Adapted from *SHOUT OUT to Aiden Vazquez for his courage & wisdom in the face of adversity*, by M. Hamill, 2018c (<https://x.com/hamillhimself/status/1034708134751883264>). Copyright 2018 by Mark Hamill.

Similarly, many participants in #BlackPantherSoLIT became evangelists for their cause, drawing people from outside of the fandom into a cultural activity. Walker (2019) cites examples of people taking their relatives to see *Black Panther*, particularly senior family members who had rarely seen themselves represented in film, despite them having no interest in superhero cinema or the MCU. These family members reportedly found the experience novel and profound. As part of the movement, fans regularly posted images of themselves attending a screening with groups and loved ones (see Figure 5.11), making the Wakandan salute and demonstrating the cultural influence of the film beyond the pleasures of fandom. These examples show how participation in the campaign shifted from an enthusiastic discussion of ideas to community-minded behaviours. This affirmative fan behaviour effectively mobilised a whole new audience demographic for Marvel, contributing to *Black Panther* becoming one of the MCU's most profitable films to date (Numbers, n.d.-b).

Second, a writer's creative vision may be the motivating factor for an audience to take action. Jenkins and Shresthova (2012) identify the difference between grassroots fan activism inspired by the content of a storyworld (as in the examples above) and activism led or inspired by franchise celebrities such as Kevin Smith and Joss Whedon. Bennett (2012) also explores how activism led by franchise celebrities can be fuelled by a perceived sense of intimacy between celebrities and fans. The fandom around Zack Snyder, for example, rallied behind the #ReleaseTheSnyderCut movement to petition Warner Bros. to release the version of the *Justice League* film that Snyder had directed for the DCEU before he left the project. In support of Snyder and his creative vision, his fans also raised over half a million dollars for the prevention of youth suicide in memory of Snyder's daughter (Gebbia, 2021). Despite the fans engaging in a spectrum of positive and toxic behaviours (explored further in Chapter 6), the significant funds raised by the group goes beyond the standard boundaries of engagement with DC content. The fans' efforts to contribute to a social cause were motivated by their sense of being the rare few who truly understood Snyder (O'Connell, 2021).

Third, entertainment provides potent symbols that can be incorporated into active citizenship. For example, Gray (2012) explores the use of *Star Wars* iconography in a labour dispute in the United Kingdom, where images of Darth Vader on placards offered a shorthand way of highlighting the 'villainy' of the government, fostering a sense of unity in the movement and boosting morale for those protesting a serious issue. Likewise, James Gunn (2019) tweeted the use of *Guardians of the Galaxy* iconography at a youth climate change rally (see Figure 5.16). In these examples, entertainment is repurposed into communication about the need for change.

Figure 5.16

Placard Images of Star-Lord and Rocket Raccoon with Modified Dialogue at a Climate Change Rally in Los Angeles



Note. Adapted from *From the kids' #climatearch in LA*, by J. Gunn, 2019 (<https://x.com/JamesGunn/status/1175155428184997895>). Copyright 2019 by James Gunn.

Digital technologies and global transmedia entertainment have enabled these symbols to spread further and faster than ever. In our interview, Henry Jenkins (personal communication, 30 September 2019) stated,

Marvel in particular has awakened storytellers all over the planet. Much of the global south did not have access to Marvel Comics before the films opened, but now the genre is across Africa, across the Arab world, across Asia and Russia. We're seeing really interesting examples of local mobilisation using superheroes for political purposes.

Kirkpatrick (2023) argues that despite the perception that superheroes stand for radical change, they often function to reinforce hegemonic ideas. Nevertheless, the examples to which Jenkins refers showcase audiences merging the symbols of archetypal characters or

popular cultural references with their message for change. In such instances, we see the attempted reclamation of the superhero as a figure of radical progress.

Finally, there have been recent examples of fans campaigning media enterprises to improve the presentation of a character, which may be interpreted as a form of activism beyond merely fandom. M. M. Brough and Shresthova (2012) highlight that modern activism need not necessarily be aimed at government institutions, and private institutions are increasingly being targeted by consumers. In these instances, citizens make demands of a company or stop purchasing its items to affect community change. Both Marvel and Lucasfilm, for instance, have attracted backlash for neglecting female characters in their paratextual content. For example, despite Black Widow being a founding member of the Avengers, Gamora being central to the *Guardians of the Galaxy* and Rey being the lead character in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, all three female characters were significantly under-represented in the films' official merchandise. Following the release of *The Avengers* (2012), *Avengers: Age of Ultron* (2015), *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014) and *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015), the hashtags #WheresNatasha, #wheresgamora and #WheresRey appeared in online discussions, with fans calling out Marvel and Lucasfilm for their lack of merchandise representing these female characters and collections that only featured male characters (see Figures 5.17, 5.18 and 5.19).

Figure 5.17

Example of Fan Activism in the #wheresgamora Movement



Note. Adapted from *Hey Marvel, me and my daughter loved your movie, it's a damn shame you seem to have only made merch*, by Victoria K, 2014 (<https://x.com/VictoriaKM777/status/496889554767319040>). Copyright 2014 by Victoria K.

Figure 5.18

Example of Fan Activism in the #WheresNatasha Movement



Note. Adapted from *@Marvel @Target You have the entire team—including Hawkeye and Ultron, but no Black Widow?*, by Heroic Girls @SDCC 2024—#MoreThanCute, 2015 (<https://x.com/HeroicGirls/status/592590841845194752>). Copyright 2015 by Heroic Girls @SDCC 2024—#MoreThanCute.

Figure 5.19

Example of Fan Activism in the #WheresRey Movement



Note. Adapted from *Avengers set—no Black Widow / Guardians set—no Gamora / Star Wars—no Rey. She’s THE MAIN CHARACTER. #WheresRey*, by J. Ford, 2015 (<https://x.com/JamieFord/status/664824284938809345>). Copyright 2015 by Jamie Ford.

Fan activism can also be about making invisible audiences visible. In 1999, comic book writer Gail Simone coined the term ‘fridged’ to bring attention to the frequency with which female characters were disproportionately harmed to motivate male characters in comic books (Scott, 2013). Scott (2013) traces the subsequent efforts of fangirls to become increasingly visible and vocal in comic book culture. She argues that these efforts have created, and are likely to continue creating, a greater awareness of this invisible market segment and a change in how gender is represented in both comic books and the scholarship. Nevertheless, commercial entertainment can be slow to change. Scott (2017b) highlights the value of the #WheresRey movement in criticising Lucasfilm’s assumptions about *Star Wars* audiences. The #WheresRey movement highlighted not only the existence of many long-term female *Star Wars* fans and Disney’s broken promise of greater representation but also the

practically non-existent paratextual content featuring Rey, implying that Lucasfilm was seeking to cultivate a young male market. Given the prominent role Leia Organa played in the original trilogy of films the decision to exclude a prominent new female character from paratextual content seemed shortsighted. Scott (2017b) concludes by suggesting that this campaign may be read as ‘a broader critique of the gendered logics of media franchising’ (p. 146). Arguably, the examples Scott investigated are different forms of active citizenship, couched in the language of fandom.

In the digital age, the boundaries between fan participation and active citizenship are eroding. The internet and social media have allowed the commonalities between these communicative practices to publicly align. The performance of the #WheresRey and #MeToo campaigns in social media, for example, enables them to be considered together. Jenkins and Shresthova (2012) observe that this has led to similarities between how these processes occur. Not only do fandom practices lend themselves well to activism, but activist causes are also adapting the digital languages of fandoms to recruit and mobilise participants. Ito et al. (2015) propose a model of ‘connected civics’ to describe the modern activism available to young people through digital media. Connected civics describes the ever-present opportunity to participate in social issues with the same level of ease as digital fan engagement. Further, M. M. Brough and Shresthova (2012) argue that the ‘porous boundaries between cultural and political concerns, as well as the overtly political orientation of many fan activist campaigns’ (para. 6) serve to blur the intent and content of these communicative practices. Therefore, it is wise for commercial storytellers to remain cognisant of the increasingly close relationship between fandom and active citizenship and how this may benefit or harm a franchise.

5.2.6 Responsibilities and Opportunities for Commercial Storytellers

By understanding the affective qualities of transmedia storytelling, commercial storytellers can intentionally embed educational components in their stories or at least be

aware of how audiences may choose to repurpose their content. Both Jeff Gomez (personal communication, 24 November 2018, 17 February 2022) and Henry Jenkins (personal communication, 30 September 2019) described their aspirations to guide commercial storytellers towards a better understanding of the culturally transformative power of transmedia entertainment.

Starlight Runner Entertainment (n.d.-b) works with international governments, non-government organisations and universities to develop transmedia storytelling strategies to address complex local issues. Using deep listening, the team works with its partners to understand prevalent issues and design transmedia strategies that will harness collective efforts to make change. A self-proclaimed social outsider, J. Gomez (personal communication, 24 November 2018) spoke openly about the confidence and self-efficacy he gained by being deeply invested in commercial entertainment as a child. Working from this perspective, the team designs entertaining narratives to drive active citizenship opportunities in different international communities. Such is the uniqueness and apparent effectiveness of this process that the team has been invited by the US, Mexican and Colombian governments to help address critical social issues such as international relations, crime and violence.

In recent years, Jenkins has shifted his focus to the Civic Imagination Project, which uses storytelling to address issues in local communities. According to its website,¹⁴ the project ‘activates people’s visions for what a better tomorrow might look like as a necessary step to connecting with others and taking action to achieve real-world goals’. Expanding on the genesis of the project and his hopes for its future, H. Jenkins (personal communication, 30 September 2019) commented,

We’re very interested in transmedia and participatory culture—how do you have a decoding model where you build civic imaginations through stories, but then you’re

¹⁴ <https://www.civicimaginationproject.org/>

recognising the partnership with fan groups and other audiences to decode it in ways to take action on the ground? That's a way of closing that gap between the storyteller and the activist.

Here, Jenkins speaks to the desire to ignite action through stories. When we spoke in 2019, it was during an era of heightened political discourse in the US, and Jenkins was acutely aware of the growing reports of social disharmony in many American towns. His project had been running workshops in different regions of the US, including towns with high levels of disillusionment. Jenkins reported that when bringing together diverse groups of people and encouraging them to create stories to describe their ideal future, many wanted the same things but used different language to express their goals. The ability to fuse these conversations with the concept of storytelling allowed these groups to depoliticise certain concepts and unite around their collective ideals.

Even though storytelling tools may prove to be effective in active citizenship, it does not necessarily imply that the commercial entertainment industry will choose to start using entertainment for social change. As explored further in the next chapter, when companies choose to do so, it can be a complex process. Regardless, there is a pressing need for commercial storytellers to recognise that the intersection between entertainment, fandom and active citizenship is becoming increasingly close. This should be of paramount concern to storytellers seeking to design transmedia entertainment. Transmedia storyworlds can lead to fandom and active citizenship practices over long periods, especially in the age of digital media (Jenkins & Shresthova, 2012).

The convergence of fan activism and active citizenship highlights the conflation of social discourse that digital platforms allow. Commercial entertainment offers a language and symbology that are well suited to digital communications and provide a rich space for communities to find meaning, imagine change and convert ideas into action. For these

reasons, it is unsurprising that key creative figures in the field of transmedia storytelling have shifted to using transmedia entertainment for social causes. Yet, as this chapter has demonstrated, the cultural implications of entertainment are not always front of mind in the commercial entertainment industry. At times, commercial storytellers may be ignorant of or downright contradict existing cultural interests, highlighting the traditional art-versus-commerce paradigm. Yet, commercial storytellers can no longer ignore that entertainment has an advanced cultural utility in the digital era, and the growth of transmedia systems is making it easier for storytellers to embrace and seek activated audiences.

5.3 Modelling Diversity and Reconciliation for a Global Audience

From 2018 to 2022, major commercial transmedia franchises shifted to include more diverse perspectives and personnel. While globalisation, digitisation and COVID-19 pandemic were all contributing factors, so too has been the gradual recognition by the entertainment industry that diversity can lead to greater commercial profitability. However, the risk-averse nature of Hollywood and the varying cultural expectations of international markets mean that the diversification of a franchise can be a slow and complicated process. By considering representation in *Star Wars* and the MCU, the complexities of engaging with Chinese audiences and the difficulties embedding LGBTQIA+ content in major franchises, we can see how creating storyworlds for global audiences can be complex. However, as transmedia franchises become increasingly prominent in global entertainment, commercial storytellers can model the harmonious coexistence of different perspectives to ensure the integrity of an ongoing storyworld.

There has been a noticeable trend towards greater diversity in major transmedia franchises such as *Star Wars* under the guidance of a new generation of leaders. Since Kathleen Kennedy took over the leadership of Lucasfilm from George Lucas in 2012, the company has recruited more women to key positions in the company. As the CEO of

Lucasfilm, Kennedy has placed women in a range of key decision-making positions and has encouraged gender parity across all divisions of the company (Sun, 2016). Senior Lucasfilm executives are predominantly women and people of colour (Holt, 2017; Sun, 2016). The Lucasfilm Story Group, which is responsible for managing the transmedia continuity of the *Star Wars* franchise, is 50% female (Wookieepedia, n.d.-c). Moreover, six of the eight key people involved in developing *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* were women (Martinson, 2015). At a number of corporate and fan-focused events, Kennedy has spoken about her desire to improve the representation of women in the entertainment industry and find a female director for a *Star Wars* film (Martinson, 2015). At *Star Wars* Celebration 2023, Kennedy (as cited in Taylor-Foster, 2023) reflected,

I'm pleasantly surprised to see there's a balance in the Force, let's put it that way. Because in everything that we've been doing, I think we have attracted some really strong women both in front of the camera and behind the camera and that's been thrilling. (para. 3)

Kennedy's recurring references to women and *Star Wars* has created a paratextual message of female empowerment in the era of *Star Wars* under her management (see Figure 5.20).

Figure 5.20

Kathleen Kennedy Attending the Archer Film Festival as Keynote Speaker



Note. The speaking event was sponsored by Nike, and the T-shirts are a reference to Nike's Air Force 1 shoe line. While this image serves as a paratext supporting Kennedy's public statements, it has also been weaponised by

disgruntled *Star Wars* fans to highlight Kennedy's 'woke' agenda. From Archer Film Festival, 2017 (<https://filmfreeway.com/TheArcherFilmFestival/photos/3190172>). Copyright 2017 by Archer Film Festival.

There has also been a quantifiable increase in female representation in the *Star Wars* films during Kennedy's era. Under Kennedy's guidance, *Star Wars* has featured a range of female lead characters across a range of media, including Rey (*Star Wars* sequel trilogy), Jyn Erso (*Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*) and Ahsoka Tano, who was initially an unpopular character but one that the Lucasfilm Story Group fought to develop and is now a fan favourite (Holt, 2017). Princess Leia has also been elevated to General Leia, the leader and primarily military strategist of the Rebel Alliance.

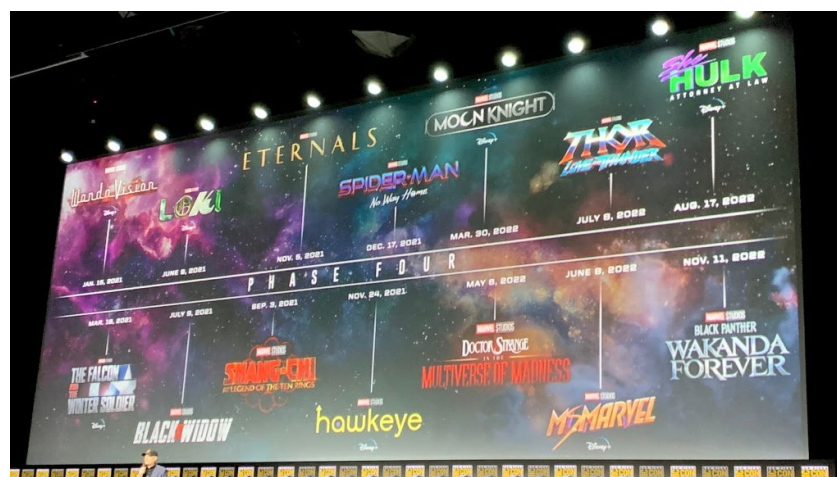
In a comparative study focusing on the centrality (importance to the plot) of male and female characters in modern films, the Media Informatics and Content Analytics (2018) team from the University of Southern California's Signal Analysis and Interpretation Laboratory found that the *Star Wars* franchise has an unusually high degree of female centrality that appears to be increasing. In *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, women speak 27.8% of all dialogue compared with only 6.3% in the original *Star Wars* (although this is on par with broader developments in Hollywood) (Holt, 2017). As the #WheresRey campaign demonstrates, not all elements of the *Star Wars* paratextual content are governed with the same degree of oversight. Nevertheless, there is a demonstrable trend towards greater female representation in the franchise.

Similarly, when Kevin Feige assumed full control of the MCU in 2019, he began instituting a range of projects featuring diverse lead characters, including *Black Panther* and *Captain Marvel* (Robinson et al., 2023). The first three phases of the MCU, collectively known as 'The Infinity Saga', featured white male leads. This was mandated by Marvel Entertainment CEO Ike Perlmutter to the extent that Disney CEO Bob Iger ultimately neutered Perlmutter's creative control so that the franchise could diversify (Flanagan et al., 2016; Robinson et al., 2023). When Feige unveiled the projects slated for Phase 4 (see

Figure 5.21), it became apparent that Marvel was planning to include a far greater diversity of characters. Of the 17 media elements included in Phase 4 (seven films, eight streaming shows and two special presentations), four were led by a female character (*Black Widow*, *WandaVision*, *Ms. Marvel* and *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law*), five featured ensemble casts (*Eternals*, *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever*, *What If...?*, *The Guardians of the Galaxy Holiday Special* and *Guardians of the Galaxy Volume 3*), four had a non-white male lead (*The Falcon and the Winter Soldier*, *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, *Moon Knight* and *Werewolf by Night*) and one was led by a tree (*I am Groot*), leaving five projects featuring a white male lead character (*Loki*, *Hawkeye*, *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* and *Thor: Love and Thunder*).

Figure 5.21

Marvel Cinematic Universe Phase 4 Films and Television Shows Announced at the 2022 San Diego Comic-Con



Note. From *Marvel Studios' Phases 5 and 6: Everything we Learned at Comic-Con About the Multiverse Saga*, by A. B. Vary, 2022 (<https://variety.com/2022/film/news/marvel-studios-phase-5-phase-6-multiverse-saga-comic-con-1235323893/>). Copyright 2022 by Variety.

Feige's commitment to diversity may in part be explained by his role as Marvel's 'fanboy auteur' (Salter & Stanfill, 2020; Scott, 2012), one who is uniquely suited to guide a storyworld because of their ability to speak the same language as fans, garner trust with the audience and generate participation.

Publicly, Feige presents as a common fan wearing a baseball cap and jeans. His well-established credentials as a comic book and film fan are regularly endorsed by his cast and crew, who credit him with being the ‘secret sauce’ of the MCU (B. Davis, 2022; Robinson et al., 2023; Weintraub, 2022). Feige’s decision to explore a diverse range of heroes was not necessarily an intentional strategy but was perhaps the result of his excitement to explore the deep reservoir of Marvel characters that had previously been denied by Ike Perlmutter. As Feige (as cited in Donnelly, 2021) explained,

We’re lucky that we have the comics to guide us. They have been relatively progressive over the decades for their time. The character lineup allows us—we’re not creating full-cloth any of our characters, they’ve been in the comics for years—and we’re finally able to tell those stories. (para. 18)

Feige’s stance is further endorsed by Marvel’s fan-centric public relations strategy, which seeks to convey the company as a simple team of fans working to honour the source material (D. Johnson, 2012).

In contrast, DC has incorporated diversity into its DCEU through the lens of artistic interpretation (Webster et al., 2022). Zack Snyder played a major role in casting diverse actors to portray DC’s superheroes and combining the qualities of the actors into the characters (see Figure 5.22). For example, Jason Momoa’s Hawaiian heritage is incorporated into the traditionally white character of Aquaman, while Ezra Miller’s Jewish identity is incorporated into the non-Jewish character of the Flash.

Figure 5.22

Main Cast of the DC Extended Universe



Note. From left to right: Jason Momoa, Ezra Miller, Ben Affleck, Gal Gadot, Ray Fisher, Henry Cavill. From *Ben Affleck, Henry Cavill, Jason Momoa, Ezra Miller, and Ray Fisher in Justice League*, by D. Dettmann, 2017 (<https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0974015/mediaviewer/rm693590016>). Copyright 2017 by IMDb.

However, the growing diversity in major franchises may also be attributed to the commercial drivers to engage with a greater range of markets. Diverse films attract larger and more diverse audiences, are more successful at the box office and promote higher levels of social media engagement (Ramón et al., 2023; Ramos, 2023; Screen Australia, 2023a). The first two MCU films to include diverse lead characters were major financial successes. *Black Panther* was Marvel's second highest-earning solo-character MCU film, surpassed only by *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, which featured three versions of the company's most profitable character (Block, 2014). Despite featuring a relatively unknown character, *Captain Marvel* earned more than \$1 billion at the global box office, making for one of the most profitable MCU character debuts (Box Office Mojo, 2024). Led by a female character, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* is the most profitable *Star Wars* film and has the fifth-highest global box office of all time, while *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* earned more than \$1 billion dollars globally to become the third highest-grossing *Star Wars* film (Box Office Mojo, n.d.-b, 2024). Given that these films are part of a significant global franchise with a long-established fan

base, diversity may not be the only reason for their commercial success; however, these examples demonstrate that it caused no harm and is likely to have benefited the franchise.

The increasingly diverse characters appearing in these major franchises is indicative of a larger trend. Between 2019 and 2021, the representation of women and people of colour increased in the US feature film industry, with an even larger measurable shift occurring in films made for streaming (Motion Picture Association, 2022; Ramos, 2023).¹⁵ Similarly, in Australia, there has been an increase in on-screen diversity since 2016, with more First Nations peoples, people with disabilities, LGBTQIA+ people and non-European people being featured in Australian TV shows (Screen Australia, 2023a). However, both Ramos (2023) and Screen Australia (2023b) report that while these results are encouraging, they are still a long way behind accurately depicting current Australian demographics. Nevertheless, in my conversations with my interviewees, it became apparent that there has been a noticeable shift in the entertainment industry to focus more on diversity as a commercial strategy, which was amplified by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated the globalisation trend in the entertainment industry. When I conducted my second round of interviewees in 2022, the industry was still being profoundly affected by the pandemic. According to my interviewees, many people were still working from home (both *Campfire* and *Starlight Runner* decided to permanently close their physical offices in favour of working fully online), the production and release of commercial entertainment was facing ongoing delays, and audiences remained hesitant about attending cinemas or place-based entertainment venues. Given the forced closure of cinemas, Hollywood studios prioritised streaming to remain connected with audiences. During this period, traditional marketing and entertainment practices had to be reconsidered, and the

¹⁵ For reasons not yet understood, the reverse occurred in 2022 (Ramos, 2023).

immediacy and utility of streaming opened new opportunities for distribution (Webster et al., 2022).

When we first spoke in 2018, Steve Coulson (personal communication, 15 November 2018) explained that much of his work in commercial entertainment had shifted from film to TV as part of a larger Hollywood trend towards prioritising television. After the pandemic had broken out, Coulson (personal communication, 21 December 2021) reflected on the increasingly global scope of entertainment his clients were seeking, highlighting the role that streaming had played in this shift:

Entertainment has definitely become less regional, more global. I think the streaming companies really tried to extend their footprint as much as they could. Whereas once upon a time we were working for very traditional, I would say, US-based marketing activities, now all of our briefs include—a lot of those include global targets and global reach.

Steve Coulson (personal communication, 21 December 2021) also highlighted that the ease with which international groups could communicate online during the pandemic further emphasised the focus on global opportunities. As an entertainment lawyer, Simon Pulman (personal communication, 5 January 2022) had observed a dramatic shift towards the acquisition of IP and talent that would appeal to a global market. When describing the kinds of deals he was being asked to pursue for his clients, Pulman responded,

What is an absolute unequivocal trend is the trend towards diversity. And it's a requirement. Everybody is looking for diverse stories, and, moreover, not only diverse stories but diverse stories told by diverse people. What has happened over the last 12 to 18 months is it's become very competitive to get, say, the top Black screenwriters because everybody wants them, because they know how important that piece is. And the idea is to tell authentic stories, to empower diverse creators. A lot of the projects

that are coming across that I think about—that we’ve done deals with—they’re not things that are expressly about race per se or gender. They’re genre stories that happen to be told from a particular perspective.

This ‘goldrush’ for diverse content followed a tumultuous era in global history during which the disruption of major commercial media channels allowed other platforms to gain greater cultural currency. According to Simon Pulman (personal communication, 5 January 2022), producers began canvassing a broader range of media platforms such as podcasts and graphic novels in the search for content to which they could acquire full and exclusive rights and then distribute in a transmedia fashion. This brought different perspectives and ideas to the fore.

These changes have also been attributed to a creative reckoning following the cultural upheaval that occurred during the pandemic. My anonymous interviewee (personal communication, 25 January 2022) described a period of soul-searching among comic book and other content creators during this time:

Diversity and inclusion is something that’s been on the mind of everybody in the entertainment industry. And I think the pandemic to a certain degree accelerated that because—especially here in the United States, where there’s been a reckoning as far as race relations go and the Black Lives Matter movement and the protests around George Floyd and stuff like that—definitely has kind of amplified an urgency among entertainment companies to both provide representation not only in the storytelling but also in the people creating these stories. But, also, to kind of make up for lost time to a certain degree.

While my interviewees noted that the commercial shift towards diversity was already underway, the sequence of globally disruptive events provided additional motivation to ensure such a shift would be handled well. My anonymous interviewee (personal communication, 25

January 2022) expanded on this point, citing that the pandemic caused many to reflect on the nature of their creative work:

Obviously, we all work from home, and there's a little, sort of, more time for reflection. That's become a big thing, both creatively and editorially, to sort of address issues that maybe hadn't been addressed as thoroughly in the past. The one thing [the] pandemic certainly brings home is mortality to people. And I think a lot of people have looked and . . . wanted to (a) create more meaningful work and (b) also think about their legacies and sort of say, 'Well, is my chapter going to be a meaningful chapter of the story that I'm contributing to?'

My interviewee identified that the creative community had more motivation and awareness to tell more interesting and culturally empowering stories. It is the kind of social responsibility that key transmedia figures such as Jenkins and Gomez are eager to infuse into the Hollywood system more broadly. However, numerous factors inform commercial entertainment and complicate creative ideals, which becomes increasingly apparent when attempting to cater for a global audience.

5.3.1 The Difficulty of Making a Storyworld for a Global Audience

Creating transmedia entertainment for a global audience can be difficult. As Simon Pulman's observations and D. Johnson's (2009, 2013) research into franchising testify, franchised IP remains a priority in Hollywood. As the transmedial expansion of IP has become more common, Hollywood has demonstrated a preference for expanding its existing IP. Doing so enables storytellers to engage with a guaranteed audience (Salter & Stanfill, 2020), negating the financial risk of investing in a new idea and reducing the work of establishing a fan base.

However, reworking established franchises to cater for broader audience segments can be a complicated process. Speaking about these challenges on behalf of a team that specialises

in maximising audience engagement, Steve Coulson (personal communication, 21 December 2021) commented,

Hollywood and TV—the world has become increasingly franchise driven and increasingly driven by conversion of a property rather than creating original IP, and a lot of that material has traditionally not included a diverse set of characters. So, that increasingly has become not an issue, but it's become a challenge to make sure that we are telling stories that all kinds of people can see themselves within.

Lucasfilm, for example, faced some challenges when introducing increasingly diverse *Star Wars* characters, with some actors receiving intense racist harassment and abuse from fans who had a fixed notion of what *Star Wars* should be (Chuba, 2018; Famurewa, 2020). Even though Marvel can draw from a range of diverse established characters, the company has also had difficulty positioning the MCU for some international audiences.

Under the stewardship of Disney and in line with a broader Hollywood trend, Marvel Studios has made efforts to gain greater traction with the Chinese box office. China has the second largest film market outside of the US, thus has become an increasing priority for Hollywood (McMahon, 2021; Motion Picture Association, 2022). While Disney has long operated as a global entertainment company (Freeman, 2017a; Wills, 2017), over the past decade, Hollywood has made a noticeable effort to engage with China in recognition of the growing importance of the Chinese box office as an international source of revenue, potentially surpassing the US box office (Li, 2023; Robinson, 2016). Films such as *Looper* (2012) and *Godzilla* (2014) featured additional sequences designed specifically for Chinese audiences (Tsui, 2013).

Iron Man 3 was Marvel's first major attempt to follow this trend. The film was co-produced by Marvel Studios, the Walt Disney Company China and Chinese company DMG Entertainment (Business Wire, 2012). Additional filming was completed in China with the

Chinese actors Fan Bingbing and Wang Xueqi, and the film was heavily marketed in China, touting that these actors would have a major presence. *Iron Man 3* was released with an additional 4 minutes of footage that was screened exclusively for Chinese audiences. This footage featured Fan and Wang's characters performing complex surgery on Tony Stark, Mandarin dialogue and Wang drinking a Chinese milk product (Tsui, 2013).

Despite the film's financial success, Chinese audiences responded to this tactic as insincere. The appearances of Fan and Wang and the sequences set in China were largely confined to the additional footage, with Chinese bloggers noting these elements were superfluous to the narrative (Tsui, 2013). This was considered egregious by the fans given that the marketing had implied otherwise. Likewise, the extensive product placement within the film seemed to only pay lip-service to the culture.

In a PEN America report on the influence of China censorship of Hollywood practices, Tager and Landreth (2020) observe that to 'pander' to the Chinese market, commercial storytellers are motivated by three key elements: 'telling more authentically international stories, appealing to Chinese audiences, and staying on the good side of the Chinese government' (p. 30). While Marvel's attempts with *Iron Man 3* may have failed to address all three of these priorities, the company has made more concerted efforts to do so as their strategy to realise more diverse characters has evolved.

The next major milestone for the MCU was Marvel's announcement of a Phase 4 film featuring Shang-Chi, the MCU's first Asian superhero (the only other Asian character in the MCU at that point was Doctor Strange's sidekick, Wong). Shang-Chi was created as a comic book character in the 1970s as part of the American craze for Hong Kong's kung fu culture and has been considered by some a fetishisation of Asian culture and orientalism (Lee, 2012; Martin, 2018). Having found success hiring a diverse creative team for *Black Panther*, Marvel sought to improve the quality of its storytelling by continuing this trend (Robinson et al.,

2023). *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, directed by Japanese American filmmaker Destin Daniel Cretton, features China-born Canadian actor Simu Liu as the eponymous hero and two of China's most well-known actors, Tony Leung and Michelle Yeoh, in prominent roles. Referencing common themes and tropes from Asian cinema, the film includes Mandarin dialogue (subtitled for Western audiences) and a cast of Asian characters. In his comic book manifestation, Shang-Chi was the son of Fu Manchu, a historically problematic character widely regarded as a racist stereotype (Frayling, 2014). In contrast, the film replaces Fu Manchu with Xu Wenwu (portrayed by Leung) as Shang-Chi's father. Describing the film, Kevin Feige (as cited in Samuel, 2021) stated, 'It's about having a foot in both worlds, in the North American world and in China' (para. 11).

However, a large segment of fans did not embrace the resulting film. After being cast in the role, Liu received criticism from Chinese people who believed he was 'too ugly' to portray the Asian hero. In a now-deleted YouTube video, people on the streets of Beijing were asked to rate Lui on his attractiveness, with many offering a low rating (St. Clair, 2021). Lui (as cited in St. Clair, 2021) recalls,

I got a *ton* of trolls . . . They'd leave Chinese comments on my page, and I'd be so excited to translate them, because I thought 'ooh they must be voicing their support.' And it would be like, 'Your face looks like a dog's anus, you don't deserve this role.' (para. 2)

The same YouTube video suggests that Lui meets the American standards of an attractive superhero, which differ from Chinese standards (St. Clair, 2021).

More problematically for Marvel, the Chinese film authority banned the film from being screened in China. Prior to the film's release, a Chinese nationalist account on Weibo posted screenshots of an interview broadcast on Canadian television¹⁶ in which Liu (as cited

¹⁶ The recording was later removed from the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation website (CBC, 2017).

in R. Davis, 2021b) said, ‘When I was young, my parents would tell me these stories about growing up in Communist China. They lived in the third world where you have people dying of starvation’ (para. 15).

In response to criticisms by the US business news channel CNBC of China’s decision to ban the film, the Chinese newspaper *Global Times* published a response, calling *Shang-Chi* tone-deaf and racist (Upright, 2021). Referring to the racist stereotypes that informed the character’s original comic book incarnation, the article argued that the film only sought to reframe the content in a way pleasing to American values:

This American media even arrogantly criticized China’s film introduction model in its report, and misrepresented China’s recent actions to rectify chaos in the entertainment industry as ‘political suppression of the entertainment industry’, and indiscriminately linked it to regarding the release of ‘Shang-Chi’, it showed an attitude that it was wrong for China not to release ‘Shang-Chi’.

But when the Chinese also began to protest against the ‘racism’ issue that Americans and the American media were protesting against, the American media instead labelled the Chinese as ‘nationalist’ and ‘political suppression.’ This kind of ‘double standards’ can only show that the American media’s ‘protests’ on the issue of racism are not sincere, but are more catering to a marketable political sentiment in American society. Many American media practitioners are still racist to their core.

In fact, the same is true for ‘Shang-Chi’. Marvel seemed to want to establish an ‘Asian superhero’ in this movie to cater to the current politically correct appetite in the United States. However, this movie has further encouraged the anti-Chinese mentality. Racism is vilified.

How can Chinese people be insulted like this while at the same time we let you take our money? (Upright, 2021)

Despite some Chinese fans praising the film for its depiction of Chinese culture (R. Davis, 2021b), Marvel had clearly failed to address the three requirements for ‘pandering’ (Tager & Landreth, 2020) to this market.

China’s stance against *Shang-Chi* was part of the greater three-and-a-half-year ban placed on Marvel films, which was speculated to be in response to the MCU’s inclusion of LGBTQIA+ characters and comments perceived to be critical of China, such as those made by *Eternals* director Chloé Zhao. *Eternals* features an ensemble cast of superpowered immortals that are racially, sexually and ability diverse. Prior to the release of the film, netizens unearthed an old interview in which Zhao had referred to China as ‘a place where there are lies everywhere’ (Macauley, 2013), leading to a social media backlash in China. Zhao’s Academy Award–winning film *Nomadland* as well as *Eternals* were subsequently banned in China (R. Davis, 2021a).

This created a scenario in which Marvel’s strategy of tightly interwoven transmedia storytelling created a commercial disadvantage for the company. In total, China banned the release of six MCU films: *Black Widow*, *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, *Eternals*, *Shang-Chi and the Legend of the Ten Rings*, *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* and *Thor: Love and Thunder* (even though only two had attracted the ire of the Chinese government). This resulted in a significant commercial loss for the company because an entire segment of storytelling was unavailable to the Chinese public. Marvel films were banned from being screened in China for three-and-a-half years, after which the Chinese film authority agreed to screen *Black Panther: Wakanda Forever* and *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania* (Cain & Davidson, 2023).

The censorship of international content in China is not new. Since the late 1970s, numerous films have been prohibited in China, not always for clear reasons. That said, the interruption to a continuous franchise such as the MCU can be problematic. The first six *Star*

Wars films were also banned in China; hence, Chinese audiences have little familiarity with the brand or interest in new *Star Wars* content (Yuhás, 2020). Only time will tell how this disruption has affected Chinese audience engagement with the MCU, but this demonstrates the sensitivity with which global storytellers should regard international markets.

Nevertheless, there has been a growing concern that Hollywood is possibly making too many creative concessions to appease Chinese authorities (Tager & Landreth, 2020). For example, the writer of Marvel's *Doctor Strange*, C. Robert Cargill (as cited in Double Toasted, 2016), explained why he changed the ethnicity of Doctor Strange's mentor, the Ancient One, from Tibetan to Celtic:

If you acknowledge that Tibet is a place and that he's Tibetan, you risk alienating 1 billion people who think that that's bullshit and risk the Chinese government going, 'Hey, you know one of the biggest film-watching countries in the world? We're not going to show your movie because you decided to get political.' (19:19)

In this example of self-censoring, Hollywood is complicit in reinforcing China's soft political power while in the pursuit of profit. The PEN America report (Tager & Landreth, 2020) queries whether Hollywood is losing the capacity for free creative expression. This concept is further explored when considering the expansion of commercial transmedia franchises.

International politics aside, creative censorship can also influence the formation of coherent transmedia storyworlds. Both *Star Wars* and the MCU, for example, have limited representation of LGBTQIA+ characters. The exclusion of such characters and storylines has been a longstanding trend in Hollywood, and progress towards inclusivity is slow (Townsend et al., 2022). Again, the risk-averse nature of Hollywood in both domestic and international markets is often a major factor. Some international markets will censor or ban content if it includes gender and sexually diverse characters, relationships or content. However, the absence of LGBTQIA+ characters in massive transmedia franchises such as *Star Wars* and

the MCU creates an increasingly significant gap in their respective storyworld logics. It also risks alienating an increasing number of people in Western countries who identify as LGBTQIA+ and those who expect the media to depict LGBTQIA+ people (Townsend et al., 2022).

While both the MCU and *Star Wars* have promised a greater representation of LGBTQIA+ people, their recent efforts have been underwhelming. In the lead-up to *Avengers: Endgame*, Marvel allowed a *Deadline* reporter to tease out the first appearance of an explicitly gay character in the MCU (Fleming, 2019). What transpired was the brief appearance of an unnamed gay character portrayed by one of the film's directors, Joe Russo (who is not gay and has appeared in brief cameos in other MCU films) in a scene with Captain America. Similarly, in the lead-up to *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*, director J. J. Abrams (as cited in Vary, 2019) teased audiences in an interview with *Variety*:

In the case of the LGBTQ community, it was important to me that people who go to see this movie feel that they're being represented in the film . . . I will say I'm giving away nothing about what happens in the movie . . . But I did just say what I just said.
(para. 12–14)

What eventuated was a blink-and-you'll-miss-it shot of two women kissing in the background of a scene towards the end of the film (a shot that could easily be cut for international audiences) (see Figure 5.23).

Figure 5.23

Spouses Larra D'Acy and Wrobie Tyce Kiss in The Rise of Skywalker



Note. From *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*, by J. J. Abrams, 2019 (2:07:36). Copyright 2019 by Lucasfilm.

While the MCU has alluded to the presence of queer characters (e.g. Loki and Valkyrie, who are portrayed as bisexual in Marvel Comics), and *Star Wars* has featured LGBTQIA+ characters in other media (e.g. the Imperial turncoat Sinjir Rath Velus in the novel *Star Wars: Aftermath* and Orka and Flix in the animated series *Star Wars: Resistance*), teasing audiences that fully realised queer characters will appear in their films is tantamount to queerbaiting. In each case, the promise of LGBTQIA+ representation offered hope to an under-represented audience. The prevalent use of queerbaiting in official paratexts (Ng, 2017) is often a means to add a queer perspective to major texts that do not make queerness explicit. Both *Avengers: Endgame* and *The Rise of Skywalker* delivered the equivalent effect of ‘multiversal queerbaiting’ (Bagger, 2019) in which an inconsequential character is revealed to be queer but can be dismissed as unimportant to the story.

Both occasions led to deep disappointment for marginalised fans whose hopes of being represented in popular media were dashed (Gray, 2021). Reflecting on the backlash and underestimating the level of hope these fans had invested in the appearance of a queer character in *Avengers: Endgame*, Kevin Feige (as cited in Lussier, 2019) explains, ‘It was never meant to be looked at as our first hero. I guess it’s the first reference so it does, of

course, get a lot of attention’ (para. 6). This was arguably an even more bitter pill for some *Star Wars* fans to swallow. When *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* introduced the male characters Finn and Poe, the on-screen chemistry (and off-screen interactions) between the actors led to fans ‘shipping’¹⁷ the characters, with the hashtags #FinnPoe and #Stormpilot being prominently featured online (Romain, 2019). Speaking on the press tour for *The Rise of Skywalker*, Oscar Isaac (as cited in Vary, 2019), the actor who portrays Poe, lamented that this was not acknowledged by Lucasfilm:

Personally, I kind of hoped and wished that maybe that would’ve been taken further in the other films, but I don’t have control . . . It seemed like a natural progression, but sadly enough it’s a time when people are too afraid, I think, of... I don’t know what.
(para. 5)

As Isaac suggests, this is an instance where the perceived ‘natural progression’ of a story was interrupted by fear of commercial damage to the franchise. For those interested in seeing a gay couple feature centrally in a *Star Wars* story, this was a missed opportunity.

5.3.2 Modelling Reconciliation and Divergent Perspectives

From her observations working in the entertainment industry, transmedia practitioner Andrea Phillips (personal communication, 18 January 2022) is concerned that commercial entertainment will become governed by data and algorithms above all else, resulting in a dearth of creative innovation:

I’m seeing a lot of extruded entertainment product come out now that doesn’t seem to have a point of view, that doesn’t seem to have any sort of idea of the internal state of any of the characters, and there are explosions and it’s cool, and there are people doing sneaky things and it’s cool, and, oh, hey, they were double-crossed, and oh, hey, actually, no, it was the plan the whole time. It’s fine, but it’s definitely lacking

¹⁷ Derived from ‘relationship’, ‘shipping’ refers to fans fanaticising about characters being in a romantic or sexual relationship.

something. I'm concerned that somebody at Netflix, at Hulu, at Amazon, is going to take all of their data and try and build the MCU, but it won't have a heart to it.

In light of the examples of self-censorship discussed above and Hollywood's goal of reaching the largest possible global audiences, it is reasonable to follow Phillips's logic to this dystopian endpoint. One strategy for catering to global audiences is to focus more on experiential entertainment and less on narrative. In our discussion, Steve Coulson (personal communication, 21 December 2021) outlined the utility of non-narrative storytelling strategies for groups working in this domain:

When you're talking to an English-speaking audience, you can rely on the written and spoken word a lot more, but as soon as you start to think globally, you have to start to think more visually, probably a little bit more abstract. Campfire's work has always been experiential I think in the truest sense in that it's less about creating narratives and more about creating storyworlds for our participants to write their own story within. So, it's always been very tactile and very sensory, and that travels much more easily, actually, than trying to tell a narrative journey, so that helps us.

Enhancing the experiential qualities of entertainment and reducing the focus on a specific narrative is an elegant solution to the concerns of different international markets. As discussed further in Chapter 7, it is also a mode of entertainment that can foster deeply personalised sensory experiences. However, for the time being at least, narrative storytelling in videogames, streaming and film continues to dominate the commercial media. To construct global narratives that appeal to a wide range of audiences, storytellers should consider explicitly addressing issues of tolerance, reconciliation and collaboration to showcase how multiple perspectives can come together.

Showing that people with varying perspectives can navigate their differences to work together effectively is an important educational function of commercial (and non-commercial)

stories in the modern digital age. Such narratives could be a panacea to the overwhelming focus on the individual, which Hartley and McWilliam (2009) attribute to the rise of social media. It could also combat the perception, perpetuated through divisive social media messaging, that we are living in an age of cultural division. Step 12 of Gomez's collective journey model is 'reaching plurality' (see Table 5.1), where characters reconcile, compromise and reach a new, shared point of view.

An example of this trope appearing in modern commercial transmedia storytelling is the relationship between Tony Stark (Iron Man) and Steve Rogers (Captain America) in the MCU. Over the course of several films, the characters develop a mutual respect (*The Avengers*) and later become close friends (*Avengers: Age of Ultron*). However, in *Captain America: Civil War*, the heroes disagree over whether to sign the Sokovia Accords, which mandate that superheroes register with the government and act in a sanctioned capacity. Iron Man supports the accords, in part because of the guilt he feels for the collateral damage caused by his heroics. Captain America opposes them, having lived through the First World War and seeing governments abusing their power. This division is exacerbated when it is revealed that Steve's best friend Bucky murdered Tony's parents. The two come to physical blows (see Figure 5.24), and Tony subsequently distances himself from Steve. After a long period apart, the pair are reunited in *Avengers: Endgame*. Tony still harbours deep resentment towards Steve, refusing to rejoin the Avengers and work with him to defeat Thanos. Over time, Tony realises it would be selfish for him to not contribute his knowledge and expertise to the mission and is reminded of the responsibility he has for his community. He chooses to forgive Steve for his perceived transgressions, and Steve welcomes him back. The two rebuild their trust and reconcile (see Figure 5.25) with a new awareness of and appreciation for each other's point of view.

Figure 5.24

Captain America and Iron Man Fighting in Captain America: Civil War



Note. From *Captain America: Civil War*, by A. Russo & J. Russo, 2016 (2:07:03). Copyright 2016 by Marvel Studios.

Figure 5.25

Iron Man and Captain America Reconcile With Each Other in Avengers: Endgame



Note. From *The reunion we were waiting for* (:, by Marvel Cast, 2019 (<https://www.instagram.com/p/BvxO8rglM7n/>). Copyright 2019 by Marvel Studios.

While Marvel paratextually encouraged audiences to side with either #TeamCap or #TeamIronMan, neither character was vilified through the events of *Avengers: Civil War*. Each character's beliefs had been well established over several years of development in the MCU. Both were shown to hold valid perspectives, which has continued to fuel fan debate and conversation in the years since over who was 'right'.

The long-form narrative (whether via transmedia storytelling, collective journey storytelling or both) creates opportunities to offer meaningful insights into managing differences and valuing diversity as a strength. This is a storytelling trope that both Jeff Gomez (personal communication, 24 November 2018) and Henry Jenkins (personal communication, 30 September 2019) believe should be included in commercial entertainment for its capacity to activate audiences in culturally meaningful ways. For example, Jenkins's Civic Imagination Project 'helps communities use storytelling and pop culture to come together across divisive issues' (MacArthur Foundation, 2021), and Jeff Gomez (personal communication, 17 February 2022) notes that he has observed an increase in the trope appearing in popular commercial entertainment. Many practitioners and scholars believe that Hollywood has a golden opportunity to infuse a deeper social consciousness into commercial entertainment.

5.4 Summary

Since a series of globally disruptive events, collective narratives and increasingly diverse stories and representation have emerged in commercial entertainment. The growing popularity of and possibility for transmedia stories to be told, enabled by emerging technologies, may in part be attributed to this pattern. However, as this chapter has shown, these changes suggest a more profound underlying cultural shift, instigating a new mode of storytelling. As my interviewees have indicated, there is a commercial opportunity available to those willing to embrace these complex storytelling challenges.

Nevertheless, commercial and cultural systems are often out of sync. Designing storyworlds that appeal to global audiences is a complex process. The demands of global markets are contradictory at times, creating new avenues of undesirable commercial risk. However, as this chapter has also demonstrated, commercial storytellers have an inherent cultural responsibility that is increasingly coming to the fore. Storytellers and companies must

decide what their storyworld will stand for, which may include intentionally focusing on some audiences over others. The challenge is amplified by the unregulated flow of information that can occur online, which, as explored in the next chapter, is one of several reasons for the need for commercial storytellers to proactively incorporate notions of community engagement into the storytelling process.

Chapter 6: Transmedia Storytelling, Participation, Social Media and Authorial Control

Modern transmedia offers audiences both a personalised and a participatory entertainment experience. Audiences have the agency to navigate stories in whichever sequence or through whichever platforms they desire. The participatory culture of the digital era also enables fans to engage in play, speculation and socialisation around texts and storyworlds. Therefore, participation, as it relates to transmedia, is a concept that describes a range of experiential states when engaging with entertainment. However, the term ‘participation’ can imply that audiences have a degree of autonomy in a storyworld that may not necessarily be available to them.

We can begin by distinguishing between ‘participation’ and ‘interaction’. In our conversation, Henry Jenkins (personal communication, 30 September 2019) stated, ‘to me, interactivity is about what’s preprogrammed in technology, and participation is what is emergent from social and cultural practices that grew up around narratives.’ Much of Jenkins’s scholarly work acknowledges the messy cultural dynamics of fan participation. However, elements of his work that have informed the transmedia scholarship show that participation is anything but preconfigured engagement.

E. Evans (2011) argues that as long as audiences experience states of immersion, agency and immediacy—irrespective of whether or not it is participatory—this will achieve the desired effect of transmedia storytelling. From his perspective as a creator of immersive entertainment, Steve Coulson’s (personal communication, 15 November 2018) view is that audiences can experience a sense of participation in different degrees:

The ethos of transmedia . . . is really all about you as a participator in the story. When you choose to move from platform to platform, you’re participating. The question is, are you a player character or a non-player character? Where do you sit on that realm?

In essence, both Evans and Coulson suggest a spectrum of participatory modalities (some of which may be illusory), with audiences possessing different levels of agency.

In the context of commercial entertainment, fan participation is often viewed as a strategy to drive ongoing consumption (Jenkins, 2006a; Phillips, 2012; S. Scott, 2012). Providing fans with the tools to play with and promote a storyworld is a commercial tactic that can expand the appeal of a franchise to a wider audience. Steve Coulson (personal communication, 15 November 2018) described his team's fan engagement strategy as follows: 'There's layers of conversion there. So, what you can do is target divers with smart, very participatory types of transmedia, and then they will bring in skimmers, and then they will bring in others down the [fan engagement] pyramid.' He was also explicit about his team specialising in fan engagement because it increases consumption: 'Know that I'm coming at this from a marketing perspective. A very hardcore marketing perspective . . . to promote a show or an object or get them to buy another bottle of liqueur or whatever it happens to be.' From this perspective, fan engagement is about using entertainment to encourage certain behaviours. In these instances, a strong degree of authorial control is required to direct fan traffic towards the goals of a commercial team.

However, for some in the field, providing fans with creative autonomy could be a path to a heightened entertainment experience. For transmedia practitioner Jeff Gomez, his utopian transmedia structure sits at the far end of the spectrum, where audiences have maximum agency and an ability to directly influence the narrative. When I asked him to describe his favourite type of commercial transmedia, Gomez (personal communication, 24 November 2018) responded,

It's funny, the true wish has yet to be fulfilled, and that wish would be for what I call the porous transmedia universe, the idea that there can be a creator, a visionary who can build a storyworld, but that the storyworld would genuinely be incomplete

creatively without the participation of the audience, of participants, of a number of creative people who are third party, who are outside looking in and then get to participate. I would like to see that; it's one of my personal goals to be involved in something like that. It's very difficult to pull off—you need legal models so that your intellectual property doesn't get dispersed and owned by everyone.

The state that Gomez describes is what Wolf (2014) defines as a 'participatory world' (p. 280) in which audiences can make permanent changes that result in canonical additions to a storyworld. This is most often seen in tabletop games and massive multiplayer online role-playing games. However, as Gomez highlights, the commercial and legal realities of commercial entertainment often pose a barrier to true audience participation. While participatory engagement is both a compelling form of entertainment and an inherent byproduct of transmedia practice, allowing audiences to have high levels of autonomy is generally considered a threat to the commercial objectives and creative aspirations of an IP owner.

In a commercial context, authorship grants a degree of commercial entitlement. Entertainment lawyer Simon Pulman (personal communication, 5 January 2022) notes that an IP owner has a duty to assert their rights, which often means instructing fans to desist in making derivative content. Should the IP owner fail to do so, they risk surrendering their rights. However, there is often a push–pull dynamic between the creative and legal departments in commercial entertainment enterprises:

I spend enough time in the creative industry sector to see complex dynamics there, where there are people inside every media company who want to enable participation. There's a legal department that wants to restrain it, who are uncertain about what happens when they let go of control over the brain children. (H. Jenkins, personal communication, 30 September 2019)

Evidently, when it comes to considering how porous a storyworld should be to fans, the structures of commerce stoke fear within the entertainment industry.

Yet, transmedia spaces are inherently sites of authorial struggle. As Wolf (2014) observes, ‘imaginary worlds are often not only transmedial and transnarrative, but transauthorial as well’ (p. 269). This has become increasingly evident as modern audiences find new ways to engage with commercial entertainment in the age of social media. Designating transmedia authorship becomes even more complex when fan practices become increasingly public and influential. Wolf (2014) utilises the concept of ‘authorial circles’, arguing that storyworld creation is a collaborative authorial process that begins with the originator and extends with concentric circles of reducing size and authorial influence from the authorised storyteller to franchisers to merchandisers and others, ending with the fan, who represents the final, essential, albeit small, circle of authorship. While the notion of authorship is already complex in the context of transmedia, the capacity for fans to contribute in at least a paratextual manner is undeniable.

However, the commercial boundaries of storytelling and the associated constructs of authorship were designed in the not-too-distant-past broadcast era, where authors were usually shielded from instantaneous audience feedback, making the division between audience and author clear. Yet, in the modern age, an author is inevitably exposed to and involved in the reception of a text by an audience.

In this chapter, I seek to re-establish commercial storytelling as a conversation rather than a broadcast, highlighting how social media has enabled audiences to collectively participate in large-scale commercial storytelling. Audiences are now ever-present for storytellers and must be acknowledged as if they were in the room. Complicating this process is the fact that modern technological tools privilege certain voices and silence others. Whether storytellers want their fans to influence the storyworld narrative or not, issues of authorial

control have become more complex in the modern environment. To explore the issue further, the following sections discuss the MCU, *Star Wars* and the DCEU in terms of the systems they use to maximise authorial control and guide audience behaviour.

6.1 The Merry Marvel Marching Society: Celebration, Validation and the Impression of Fan Agency in the Marvel Cinematic Universe

While the MCU is frequently cited as an example of well-executed transmedia storytelling, there is less discussion about the participatory fan practices it evokes and suppresses. The MCU has increasingly dominated Marvel's creative output and market presence, with the authorship of its major creative projects assigned to a small creative team. The fan engagement strategies used by this team assign authorial control to Marvel and position the fan as a spectator and consumer. The company's wide range of promotional paratexts expands the breadth of coordinated commercial entertainment while also controlling the narrative of the MCU across social media. Through an analysis of Marvel's authorial consolidation and the official paratexts of the MCU, this section interrogates the author–fan power dynamics in one of the most prominent modern commercial transmedia franchises.

6.1.1 Consolidation of Marvel's Authorial Control Under Marvel Studios

The origins of the MCU are rooted in Marvel's desire to regain creative and commercial control over its own IP after outsourcing these rights through licensing. Throughout the 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s, Marvel sold the cinematic rights to its most profitable characters to a range of Hollywood studios. While the initial goal of this strategy was to raise the profile of these characters, it later became necessary to ensure that the company remained solvent. While licensing their characters eventually became a profitable venture,¹⁸ the company only received a small percentage of the overall profits.

¹⁸ By 2008, Marvel had rebounded from its 1996 bankruptcy and was the fourth largest licensor in the global popular cultural industry (J. Collins, 2009), with 83% of its profits coming from these deals (D. Johnson, 2012).

More problematically, these licensing arrangements interfered with Marvel's ability to release merchandise alongside their films. Hollywood had a limited interest in bringing superheroes to the screen, doing so infrequently and haphazardly.¹⁹ Marvel had no control over the greenlighting of films, was not always informed about projects in production and had to react to decisions made by third parties. Merchandising was Marvel's greatest source of profit at that point; however, commissioning merchandise could be a 9-month process. For example, when 20th Century Fox released *X-Men* months earlier than planned, it meant that Marvel missed the window to release merchandise alongside the film, much to their chagrin (Robinson et al., 2023). Marvel's inability to control the logistical and creative elements of cinematic projects limited its ability to coordinate merchandising in a timely fashion or ensure a project even had a toyetic quality. These licensing arrangements were ultimately damaging to Marvel's ability to manage its brand and achieve consistent sales of related merchandise and media (D. Johnson, 2012).

Producing its own films allowed Marvel to regain control over its brand and commercial products. Marvel sought independent financing to produce a series of films based on the remaining C-grade characters for which it still held the rights, including Captain America, Black Panther and Ant-Man (Wetzel & Wetzel, 2020). In doing so, Marvel inverted the traditional Hollywood paradigm, moving from a content house to a company that contractually employed traditional screen production companies (D. Johnson, 2012). The resounding commercial success of *Iron Man* (and to a lesser degree *The Incredible Hulk*) secured its ongoing finance and validated its novel approach.

¹⁹ Stan Lee spent the latter years of his Marvel career based in Los Angeles, where he tried to convince film studios that Marvel superheroes would adapt well to cinema but was frustrated by their lack of interest. After being appointed head of Marvel Studios, Avi Arad had more success selling character rights to larger studios in the 1990s and early 2000s, particularly following the commercial and critical success of the *X-Men* cartoon, demonstrating the advantages of licensing (Robinson et al., 2023).

Marvel Studios soon developed a unique system of operations that fostered the continuous development of projects with a consistent style. Following the success of *Iron Man*, Kevin Feige, president of Marvel Studios at the time, offered Louis D'Esposito and Victoria Alonso ongoing roles as the president of physical production and executive vice-president of visual effects and post-production, respectively. This triad of executives managed the elements of production in a methodical and segmented manner, with Feige overseeing storytelling, D'Esposito managing operations and Alonso managing visual effects and post-production. Over time, Feige assembled a core team of producers to oversee individual films and a roster of core staff who would continue pitching, designing and developing new projects. Robinson et al. (2023) highlight the importance of Marvel Studio's previsualisation department, which is responsible for designing the look and feel of characters and upcoming projects. This team consistently works on active and future projects, allowing appointed directors to inherit a range of preconceived ideas and designs. The Marvel Studios house style is effectively an assembly line that allows the company to simultaneously and efficiently build numerous projects from one IP.

While this process may appear novel compared with the project-by-project nature of other modern studios, it aligns with a range of preceding commercial entertainment practices, including those adopted by Marvel. It echoes the 'Marvel Method' storytelling style pioneered by Stan Lee at Marvel Comics, where Lee would give artists an outline for a story, allow the artist to draw and contribute ideas, then return to add dialogue. This enabled stories to be produced quickly and leveraged the creative talents of artists more so than the traditional author-dictated approach (Wetzel & Wetzel, 2020). It is also similar to the studio system that dominated the golden age of Hollywood, where major film studios governed all aspects of production in-house and contracted staff (including actors) as long-term employees to work across a range of projects. Marvel's creation of a system that focuses on solely mining its IP is

not as much a novel approach as a demonstration of how technology and production methods have advanced to a point where this is possible in large-scale commercial transmedia entertainment.

The early growth of the MCU's transmedia entertainment was overseen by several teams directed by Marvel's chief operating officer. Marvel Studios began as a department of Marvel Entertainment, which was owned and managed by CEO Ike Perlmutter. Perlmutter had a background in toy sales, thus prioritised merchandise as the main source of revenue for the company (Robinson et al., 2023). Combined with Perlmutter's reported frugality (Masters, 2014), this led to his office constantly interfering with Marvel Studio's plans, both commercially and creatively. Perlmutter formed the Marvel Creative Committee, an advisory body comprising himself, Marvel president Alan Fine, Marvel Comics writer Brian Michael Bendis, Marvel Comics publisher Dan Buckley and Marvel Entertainment chief creative officer Joe Quesada to monitor all aspects of Marvel for its creative consistency and financial savvy (Linebaugh & Knutson, 2023). This included providing feedback on MCU projects, which slowed production and interfered with the studio's plans. Perlmutter forbade Kevin Feige from casting women or people of colour as lead characters,²⁰ placed financial limitations on deals with actors and creative staff and made MCU story requirements inferior to merchandising. Perlmutter later created the Marvel Television department and encouraged it to produce a variety of shows (some spinning out of the MCU, others featuring characters yet to appear in the MCU) through a range of licensing deals (Robinson et al., 2023). These corporate decisions generated creative barriers for Marvel Studios, resulting in the team establishing tight boundaries around the canon of the MCU, choosing only to include elements they could directly control (Robinson et al., 2023).

²⁰ Leaked emails between Perlmutter and Sony following the hacking of Sony's servers revealed Perlmutter's opposition to featuring women because of his perception it would reduce their profits (WikiLeaks, 2014).

Marvel Studios' decision to ignore works they had not created relegated other transmedia components to lower levels of narrative and commercial importance. Some shows produced by Marvel Television included references to the MCU, such as *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.*, which featured Agent Coulson from Phase 1 of the MCU, and *The Defenders* series, which featured the characters Daredevil and Jessica Jones. However, the MCU did not acknowledge these shows in return. As Wolf (2014) asserts, a transmedia story must be endorsed by a significant authorial figure for the audience to accept that it forms part of a storyworld: 'For a work to be canonical requires that it be declared as such by someone with the authority to do so; authorship alone is not sufficient to determine the work's status' (p. 271). Despite being Marvel productions and building ardent fandoms, these projects failed to maintain the same degree of audience interest as those in the MCU because they were unable to leverage the central MCU narrative or gain the authorial endorsement of Kevin Feige.

The hierarchical structure of these transmedia works underscores D. Johnson's (2017) assertion that the construction of storyworlds is inevitably a site of contested authorial struggle and that incongruent 'world-sharing' practices can reveal the power struggles between authors vying for creative authority within their shared media space. The narrative dissonance between these Marvel texts reveals the underlying disharmony and inadvertently signalled that the MCU creative team had become the leading authorial voice of Marvel.

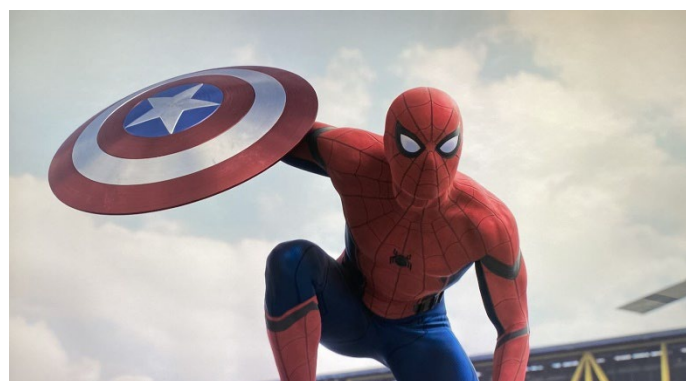
When the MCU's creative team decides to include a character or text in the MCU, the character or text is granted an aura of authorial legitimacy. As L. Burke (2018) contends, the MCU has surpassed comics as the primary gateway into the Marvel universe of stories. The MCU has amplified the company's global reach, and the Marvel brand (as employed by Marvel Studios) has become synonymous with quality because every MCU film has been a

commercial and critical success. Thus, when a character appears in the MCU, it is presented to audiences as the definitive article.

The MCU's capacity to 'legitimise' creative works has even crossed the boundaries of corporate licensing. For example, Marvel Studios brought Spider-Man, the company's most lucrative hero, into the MCU, despite the cinematic rights belonging to Sony. Under Sony's stewardship, global box office profits for the character had been declining.²¹ Through an unprecedented interstudio arrangement, Marvel convinced Sony to share the character. Both studios would split the finance for new projects, and Marvel was granted creative control (Sony Pictures, 2015). Since the character was brought into the MCU (see Figure 6.1), each film has surpassed its predecessor in earnings, and most have outperformed any of Sony's efforts (Numbers, n.d.-c). Although the initial deal awarded Sony the lion's share of profits, Marvel Studios recognised the importance of regaining creative control over Marvel's crown jewel. Since striking the deal, Marvel has been able to leverage Sony's catalogue of *Spider-Man* films to grow the MCU further.

Figure 6.1

Marvel Cinematic Universe Version of Spider-Man Introduced in Captain America: Civil War



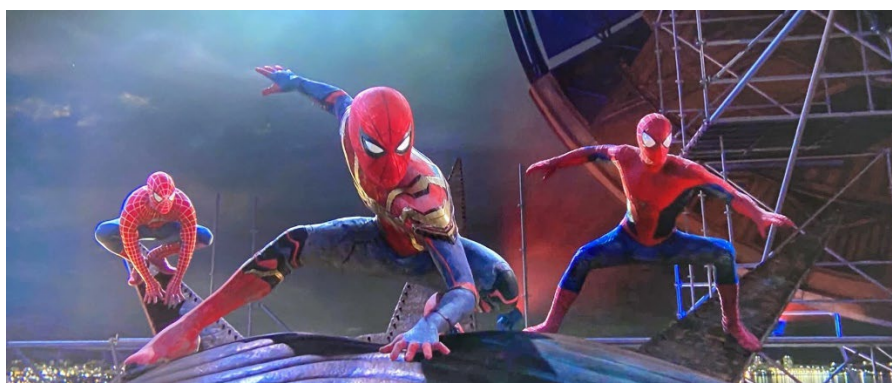
Note. Adapted from *Captain America: Civil War*, by A. Russo & J. Russo, 2016 (1:29:35). Copyright 2016 by Marvel Studios.

²¹ After a trilogy of increasingly commercially successful *Spider-Man* films featuring Tobey Maguire, Sony rebooted the franchise with two *The Amazing Spider-Man* films starring Andrew Garfield. *The Amazing Spider-Man* earned less than any of the Maguire films, and *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* earned less than its predecessor (Numbers, n.d.-c).

In 2021, Marvel Studios took creative control of Spider-Man's entire cinematic history, bringing Sony's two prior *Spider-Man* franchises into the MCU. *Spider-Man: No Way Home* featured both Tobey Maguire and Andrew Garfield, who had starred in two Sony-produced *Spider-Man* franchises, alongside the current MCU Spider-Man, Tom Holland, in a multiversal adventure (see Figure 6.2). The inclusion of these characters retrospectively canonised each *Spider-Man* franchise in the MCU. By continuing the narrative in this way, Feige's team asserted authorial control over each version of Spider-Man, retroactively shaping both Sony franchises and influencing how Sony or Marvel can use these characters in the future.

Figure 6.2

Spider-Man: No Way Home (2021) Features Three Versions of Spider-Man



Note. Adapted from *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, by Jon Watts, 2021 (1:42:30). Copyright 2021 by Marvel Studios.

Simultaneously, Marvel was able to leverage Sony's prior works for its own commercial gain. Bringing Maguire and Garfield into the MCU allowed Marvel to appeal to the generation of *Spider-Man* fans who had grown up with different versions of the character (Maguire's and Garfield's versions of Spider-Man debuted in 2002 and 2012, respectively). The film was released in December 2021, coinciding with one of the most contagious periods of the COVID-19 pandemic with the spread of the Omicron variant in the US (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2022). Despite this, and in contrast to the significantly

reduced global box office revenue during 2020 and 2021 because of the pandemic, (Tartaglione, 2022), Marvel's twenty-seventh film in the MCU became the sixth highest-grossing film of all time, the third-highest total for a Marvel film (Box Office Mojo, 2024) and the first pandemic-era film to surpass \$1 billion in global revenue (Rubin, 2021). Such was the intergenerational appeal of *Spider-Man: No Way Home* that it was a substantial commercial success, even by MCU standards, at the height of COVID-19.

Characters featured in Marvel Television shows have recently begun to appear in the MCU. Blind lawyer Matt Murdock (aka Daredevil), portrayed by Charlie Cox, who starred in the Netflix show *Daredevil*, appears briefly in *Spider-Man: No Way Home*. Vincent D'Onofrio reprises his role as *Daredevil* villain Kingpin in the MCU streaming show *Hawkeye*. Both cases offer clues that these characters were slightly revised to adhere more closely to the overall tone of the MCU and move away from their gritty Netflix appearances. Marvel Studios can now create official MCU versions of the characters, with the opportunity to reference elements already established in these other texts. As in the previous discussions of the MCU's adaptation practices, this is yet another (and recent) example of how the MCU adapts, remixes and benefits from the wider ecosystem and lengthy history of Marvel's commercial storytelling.

Kevin Feige now has full control over Marvel's transmedia strategy. In 2019, on the eve of the launch of Disney+, Feige was promoted to Marvel's chief creative officer, awarding him oversight over all Marvel departments following a series of corporate decisions made by Disney CEO Bob Iger to remove Perlmutter's control over creative decisions (Iger, 2019; Kit, 2019; Masters & Belloni, 2015). With full creative autonomy, Feige immediately diversified his main cast, pushing *Black Panther* and *Captain Marvel* into production. In quick succession, Marvel Television was dismantled, licensing deals were cancelled, and Marvel Studios took over all major media production, meaning that films, streaming shows

and animations could all be officially incorporated into the MCU. Full authorial control over Marvel's IP now rests firmly with Kevin Feige and the MCU creative team.

In line with best-practice guidelines for transmedia storytelling, Marvel's unified creative vision enables the company to deliver a more coherent and immersive transmedia experience and encourage the continued consumption of its stories (Gomez, 2019; Phillips, 2012; Scolari et al., 2014; S. Scott, 2012). Yet, when we consider the power struggle that Marvel has undergone, both internally and externally, to bring its creative control under Feige and distil almost a century of storytelling into a definitive project, it is unlikely that the company would actively seek assistance from its fans to inform elements of the MCU storyworlds. As we explore Marvel Studio's fan engagement strategies, it is apparent that the company has no plans to share authorial control with its audiences.

6.1.2 Validating and Celebrating

Throughout the development of the MCU, Marvel Studios has proactively sought to communicate with its fans, often giving the impression that fans are integral to its formation. In his analysis of the company's approach to public relations, D. Johnson (2012) concludes that Marvel Studios uses multiple levels of discourse to position itself as being outside of Hollywood, despite using traditional Hollywood production practices. With fan-targeted events and paratextual content that showcases knowledge of and affection for Marvel's IP, the studio has perpetuated a corporate narrative that it has more in common with its fanbase than it does with corporate Hollywood. Marvel Studio's paratextual communications lean into this narrative, presenting the MCU as a site of communal celebration with its fans.

As the MCU's transmedia storytelling architect and primary spokesperson, Kevin Feige leads these celebratory proceedings. Despite his significant creative and commercial governance over the franchise, he takes pains to emphasise his status as a fan of the material, attending events wearing a blazer, jeans and Marvel-adorned baseball cap (see Figure 6.3). In

interviews, Feige demonstrates his deep knowledge of Marvel lore, while Marvel casts and crews publicly endorse Feige's geeky nature and passion for the material (Robinson et al., 2023). Feige occupies the cultural role and industrial construct of the 'fanboy auteur' (Scott, 2011, 2012), one who can appeal to fans and gain their approval to move a commercial project forward. Notable examples of fanboy auteurs include Kevin Smith, Joss Whedon and Peter Jackson, all of whom have a demonstrated ability to speak the same language as fans and communicate with them to gain commercial support for their projects. Gomez has recently been able to do the same for *Ultraman* and its expansion into the US market. Fanboy auteurs have traditionally operated independently in a larger studio system. Feige's situation is rare given that he performs this role on behalf of an entire studio, seeking the support of a well-established fan base for large-scale commercial projects.

Figure 6.3

Kevin Feige Introducing Fans to Marvel Cinematic Universe's Phase 3 Films



Note. Adapted from *Marvel Reveals its Future Movie Schedule Through 2019*, by K. Acuna, 2014 (<https://www.businessinsider.com/marvel-film-schedule-through-2018-2014-10>). Copyright 2014 by Marvel Studios.

From this position, Feige regularly communicates to Marvel fans that their passion for the IP is warranted and legitimate. Jeff Gomez (personal communication, 24 November 2018,

17 February 2022) considers this a vital component of fan engagement, what he refers to as ‘validating’ the fan. Feige, for example, regularly speaks publicly about his team’s shared love and appreciation for the comic books and the effort they make to honour the source material while developing the MCU. In an interview with Fleming (2016), Feige explained:

We’ve always said if there’s any ‘secret’ it’s respect the source material, understand the source material and then, any adaptation you make from the source material should be done only to enhance whatever the original pure spirit of the source material was.
(para. 29)

Implying that existing material is worthy of praise communicates to fans that their love of the source material is justified and recognised by the company. It also diverts attention from the significant authorial power the studio wields over its IP and Feige’s personal creative agenda, instead creating the impression that any creative liberties would only be taken in the collective interests of the fan community. Drawing from Hills’s (2002) assertion that fans can find ontological safety in an IP, Feige’s statement implies that he only intends to enhance what fans already love about Marvel, extending this sense of safety and security among existing fans.

This message has been amplified by the studio’s willingness to disrupt Hollywood norms to recreate comic book storytelling tropes. This includes signing up actors for nine-film contracts, stoking ire among Hollywood talent agents (Jeff Gomez, personal communication, 24 November 2018), and combining franchises to create super-franchises such as *The Avengers*. As argued earlier, the studio is merely following a proven commercial formula; therefore, while these corporate strategies signal to fans that Marvel Studios is committed to honouring the source material, its ongoing fan support has also allowed the studio to use industry resources differently from their contemporaries and maximise their commercial prospects.

From the outset, Feige took a leading role in announcing new MCU projects at events that would soon become sites of spectacle and celebration. Events that positioned Feige as the lead authorial voice for the MCU, such as the 2014 event at Hollywood's El Capitan Theatre where Feige outlined Phase 3 of the MCU, were considered a strategy to wrest creative power from Perlmutter in the public eye (Robinson et al., 2023). They were also useful for making Feige the leading creative face of the franchise once Joss Whedon and James Gunn had become prominent creative voices. Nevertheless, having actors and directors attend major fan conventions such as the San Diego Comic-Con (SDCC) and presenting insights into the production process gives fans the impression that Marvel prizes their endorsement above all else.

Marvel leverages the fan hype generated by paratexts such as new project announcements to fuel further endorsements and hype among the wider fan networks. Both the official and the fan-generated recordings of these announcements feature ear-splitting cheers and videography that shakes with uncontrollable excitement, allowing fans from across the globe to feel that they are part of a grassroots movement into Marvel's future. When announcing Marvel's post-Infinity Saga plans, for example, Feige showed fan footage of an audience erupting in the cinema during the *Avengers: Endgame* 'assemble' scene, where the entire cast of characters appears on screen together. In such ways, the company utilises the work of its own fandom to perpetuate a cycle of excitement and support. Thus, Marvel leverages fanboy auteurism as a corporate strategy.

From this perspective, Marvel continues to position itself as the ideal candidate to stop the pattern of its IP being treated poorly by other studios. Prior to working at Marvel, Feige had served as an intern for *Superman* director Richard Donner before joining Lauren Shuler Donner, a senior Hollywood producer who had found Feige's insights invaluable when consulting with 20th Century Fox on the production of the *X-Men* films. Avi Arad, CEO of

Marvel Studios, noticed Feige's aptitude and invited him to join Marvel (Flanagan et al., 2016). Feige's first role at Marvel was to consult with other studios that were producing Marvel works. While Feige rarely makes negative public comments, he reflected with vitriol that other studios were not necessarily portraying characters in line with their comic book versions: 'We suggested but they didn't listen. We didn't have the control. I hated that' (as cited in Robinson et al., 2023, p. 72). In sharing such insights (and on the back of the substantial success of the MCU), Feige perpetuates the notion that prior to the MCU, Marvel films were not as high quality as they could have been and that he could have made them better. Gray (2010) argues that understanding a transmedia storyworld relies on a deep understanding of its primary author. Feige's paratextual positioning as Marvel's 'saviour' invites fans to interpret the MCU as the definitive and best version of Marvel's IP. The fan catch cry 'In Feige We Trust' illustrates that Feige's message has been received loud and clear.

This narrative has allowed Marvel to continue securing the commercial support to produce its own texts and govern its IP. *Spider-Man: No Way Home* is a major example of Feige and his team 'upgrading' a Marvel text that was held in lower regard by the fan base. Sony's *The Amazing Spider-Man* franchise was not well received by fans, who questioned the need for a franchise reboot so soon after the well-received Sam Raimi *Spider-Man* films and took umbrage with Sony's creative decisions and unceremonious dumping of actor Andrew Garfield. In *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, Garfield's Spider-Man was given a redemptive arc and the chance to resolve unresolved plot lines from the previous franchise. While this cemented Feige's status as a 'fixer', the opportunity for Marvel to work with Sony to achieve this was only made possible by the vociferous support of fans and the pressure they placed on other rights holders to let Marvel do it 'properly'.

Fan conventions have long been used as a space to sell new projects to fans, and Marvel is not the only studio to engage in this practice (Kohnen et al., 2023). However, the frequency and reliability with which Marvel announces and actually delivers projects (with the exceptions of *Ant-Man* and *Inhumans*) sets the company apart from many of its competitors. DC, for example, announced a slate of 10 films in 2014 (Beedle, 2014); however, of these, three were never made, one (*The Flash*) arrived 5 years later than planned, and one was changed from a two-part film to a single film (*Justice League*). Similarly, Lucasfilm announced a range of *Star Wars* projects that have since been quietly shelved (Mengarelli, 2022). Thus, showcasing the fan-generated audience footage from *Avengers: Infinity War* was as much Marvel reflecting on and celebrating the MCU as it was flexing its authorial muscles and reinforcing the support it continues to attract from its fanbase.

This celebration is carried out by a range of Marvel's team members, including the cast of MCU actors who regularly engage in paratextual play and performance. The key *Avengers* cast members demonstrate their close and affectionate rapport when promoting the films. They have matching tattoos (apart from Mark Ruffalo), share an ongoing group chat (which continues to be mentioned when promoting other projects) and banter with each other on social media. They display a sense of joy and camaraderie when they interact (see Figure 6.4), emphasising the celebratory tone of the MCU. This is also apparent in how the *Guardians of the Galaxy* cast demonstrates a familial bond through their social media and promotional appearances. Such events ratify the fictional MCU relationships as 'real', adding paratextual layers to the relationships between the characters outside of official MCU texts.

Figure 6.4

The Avengers Cast Posing for a Photograph



Note. Left to right: Chris Evans, Scarlett Johansson, Jeremy Renner, Robert Downey Jr., Chris Hemsworth, Mark Ruffalo. From *Candid*, by R. Downey Jr, 2018 (<https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=834800743355059&id=154213784747095&set=a.156205521214588>). Copyright 2018 Robert Downey Jr.

In their public interactions, these actors also continue to portray the values of their respective characters. The MCU is a storyworld founded on character (Webster et al., 2022), and when the actors that portray them showcase key aspects of their characters across social media, the characters are amplified in the public consciousness. Jeff Gomez (personal communication, 24 November 2018) agrees that the MCU cast plays a substantial role in shaping public perceptions of the MCU:

Feige has always insisted on a certain geniality in the storytelling, which he has then encouraged his performers to project. There is the warmth and connection with the fans, something that the mass media has picked up on very easily. Even though there isn't an actual dialogue, there is the impression of dialogue with a clever use of media coverage and with choosing actors who, I believe, understand and are committed to the maintenance of the integrity of the character's persona.

For instance, Chris Evans, who portrays Captain America, demonstrates the earnest qualities of his character in his personal social media interactions. During Donald Trump’s presidency, Evans began a podcast to educate Americans about the democratic process and posted messages of optimism to direct audiences to it (see Figure 6.5). In this way, the virtues of the MCU characters are extended through the public actions of the actors portraying them. This also expands the opportunity for audiences to build up affection over an extended period for the actors and the characters they portray.

Figure 6.5

Chris Evans Posts a Message of Optimism During an Era of Political Upheaval in the United States



Note. From *To the younger generation still choosing a path: don’t be consumed by anger, fear and hate*, by C. Evans, 2017 (<https://x.com/chrisevans/status/897451120343236609>). Copyright 2017 by Chris Evans.

6.1.3 Speaking to (Not With) the Fans = Impression of Fan Agency

Marvel’s fan-centric communication strategy differs from the fanboy auteur approach in one major way—the company does not directly engage in dialogue with its fans.

Screenwriters and directors Kevin Smith, Peter Jackson and Josh Whedon are renowned for using chat boards, fan forums and social media to insert themselves among the fans of their work. However, Marvel uses social media to spread fan enthusiasm to a wider audience and exert an influence over resulting discussions. To borrow from Campfire terminology, ‘divers’ are used to attract ‘dippers’ and ‘skimmers’:

The divers are your biggest evangelists. The divers are the ones who will go out and say, ‘Prepare ye the way of the Lord.’ The divers are those that are at the church and will go out and be missionaries for you. So, what divers can do is . . . attract dippers. And dippers can attract skimmers. The dippers are talking about something on Facebook, and somebody that hadn’t really paid attention to a movie will start to pay attention to it. (S. Coulson, personal communication, 15 November 2018)

The depth and complexity of the MCU storyworld significantly drives diver behaviours and continues to attract fan interest. The second time we spoke, S. Coulson (personal communication, 21 December 2021) explained that Marvel’s approach has been so successful that it is ‘birthing divers’ and influencing the wider industry to cater more to these intensely passionate fans.

Marvel’s efforts to proactively engage its fanbase also allow it to model and direct fan behaviour. Scott (2017a) explores how the MCU narrative positions the fan as a spectator, a collector and a consumer, similar to the character Agent Phil Coulson, who serves a similar function and acts as an allegory for the audience. The audience’s function is to watch and adore the characters, not necessarily be the characters, drawing from a longer tradition of Marvel Comics inviting its fans to celebrate their affection for the material. Under Stan Lee’s tenure, Marvel Comics encouraged its fans to join the Merry Marvel Marching Society, the official fan club spearheaded by Lee (see Figure 6.6). The inclusion of Lee in cameo appearances in MCU films right up until his death served not only to reinforce the legitimacy of Feige’s MCU as a Marvel property but also to leverage the gleeful practices of celebratory fandom Lee had instigated for decades.

Figure 6.6

Official Membership Badge of the Merry Marvel Marching Society



Note. Photograph of a Merry Marvel Marching Society badge, uploaded by B. Baker, n.d. (https://the-stan-lee-wikia.fandom.com/wiki/Merry_Marvel_Marching_Society?file=56786556754876.jpg). Copyright n.d. by Brandon Baker.

In this way, the MCU transmedia approach has a performative quality more akin to the broadcast media and serials of 1920s Hollywood than to the participatory qualities of AR gaming experiences or the fully participatory transmedia models described by Wolf (2014) and aspired to by J. Gomez (personal communication, 24 November 2018). The MCU invites a celebratory kind of fan performance that amplifies goodwill for the franchise (and the direction in which Feige steers it) without interfering with it. It invites participation through consumption while keeping control of the narrative in the hands of a select few.

As Marvel continues to expand the MCU, the company would be wise to invest more time into speaking directly with fans to ensure the storyworld is continuing to be received in the way its authors intend. By failing to give audiences a space for direct feedback (similar to the ‘letters’ column in comics), the company must rely on commercial trends or the observation of fan activity from afar to identify fan concerns. Given the scale at which the MCU is now operating, if an issue is discovered, it could take many years for the storyworld to pivot or address it. For example, one concern is that the MCU is becoming too big to keep up with:

A lot of people, at least in my set [of transmedia producers], are kind of experiencing Marvel overload. You may as well. There are simply too many films and TV shows now, and it's starting to feel like homework and not like a delightful event when one of these things comes out. Nothing to do with the quality of any particular piece of it. It's just that it is so much that it crowds out anything else. (A. Phillips, personal communication, 18 January 2022)

If this sentiment is shared by fans, then Marvel is taking a risk by not directly communicating with them through social media. There is currently no major forum for dissatisfied fans to engage in dialogue with Feige's team. In other words, Marvel Studios has no clearly defined platform for listening to its fans, a major risk for such a large commercial enterprise.

Marvel's consolidated authorship also has the potential to lead to what Scott (2020) terms 'Moore-ing', which refers to how fanboy auteur Ronald D. Moore exerted his authorial control and left fans with no narrative ambiguities to explore after he took control of the *Battlestar Galactica* franchise, eventually leading to a somewhat adversarial relationship with fans (R. Pearson, 2010). Marvel Studios could fall afoul of the same result as it continues to overwrite almost a century of storytelling with one definitive creative project. Andrea Phillips (personal communication, 18 January 2022) conveyed this concern to me when highlighting that even she in her professional capacity could not conceive of a way to expand the MCU:

Marvel obviously has a very meticulously interwoven universe, which means that if I were hired in to do some sort of smaller scale experiential marketing component, which is the role that I usually am slotted into, it would be really, really hard to come up with a way to insert the audience into that world without screwing something up, without—You, ah, remember the 'Why so serious?' [transmedia campaign used to promote *The Dark Knight*], like, you were minions of the Joker, right? But I don't know that there's a place like that anywhere in the MCU. You can make the players be

Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D., but if you're taking story beats off the screen, you're losing Marvel money for something that they would've made into a show.

The narrative impenetrability that Phillips describes counters the motives of transmedia advocates who continue to promote modes of entertainment that offer deep experiential entertainment. This insight highlights how the ongoing linear production of the franchise limits participatory opportunities for fans and negates the additional entertainment experiences made possible by transmedia practice.

Marvel's targeted use of social media to perform for its fandom, encouraged by its casts, has allowed the company to maximise its ability to entertain. Disney has also formed partnerships with social media influencers such as Screen Crush and New Rockstars, allowing them early access to films so that they can post YouTube video reviews that stoke fan conversations and excitement.

These paratextual elements of the MCU not only form an integral part of the transmedia experience (Gray, 2010; Scolari et al., 2014), combine elements of narrative and marketing and build hype for Marvel projects (Mittell, 2014), they also imbue Marvel's corporate narrative with the themes of the MCU itself. This allows the company to continue placing its attention on the storyworld instead of its corporate machinations and leveraging the 24/7 news cycle to generate goodwill from its fan base. As we have explored here, fostering a parasocial relationship with its audience has allowed the company to garner the support and goodwill of its fans, an essential undertaking for any group seeking to steward an IP, especially a legacy IP, in the age of social media (S. Coulson, personal communication, 15 November 2018; J. Gomez, personal communication, 24 November 2018; Gray & Johnson, 2013; Salter & Stanfill, 2020; S. Scott, 2011).

Marvel's approach utilises the traditional practices of broadcast media. Content is conveyed to the audience, and social media is used to distribute and reinforce key messages.

Audience dialogue is not instigated nor made possible. Ultimately, like Loki's appearance at the 2013 SDCC International (see Figure 6.7), Marvel is encouraging its fans to listen and be compliant. Feige and his team have rarely had reason to address fan discord (apart from the misogynistic backlash directed at *Captain Marvel*), so it is difficult to evaluate how the company would respond if such a situation were to unfold. The following section explores other franchises for examples of how such fan activity can affect the storyworld narrative or derail a franchise and how this social energy can be redirected and harnessed.

Figure 6.7

Actor Tom Hiddleston Silences Fans While Appearing as Loki at the 2013 San Diego Comic-Con International



Note. Photograph by K. Winter, 2013 (<https://ew.com/movies/2019/04/29/avengers-endgame-time-travel/>). Copyright 2013 by Kevin Winter.

6.2 Finding Balance in Fandom: *The Last Jedi* and Lucasfilm's Fear Of The Dark Side

The commercial and critical backlash to Lucasfilm's most recent *Star Wars* films underscores the expedience of maintaining a dialogue with fans in the social media era. *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* was the first major *Star Wars* project produced by Disney to sow division among fans. The film deconstructed many of the long-held tropes associated with the franchise, provoking outrage among a segment of fans. *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*, the

sequel to *The Last Jedi* and the conclusion of the nine-film Skywalker Saga, addressed many of these complaints; however, it earned less revenue compared with its predecessor and divided both fans and critics. Lucasfilm's actions suggest that it attempted to address fan dissatisfaction; however, the results indicate that it did not sufficiently understand the reason for fans being upset or the true essence of the franchise to produce a meaningful response.

Dialoguing with fans has proven to be an essential tool for many storytellers, particularly independent artists seeking to build audience interest and commercial support for their projects (Salter & Stanfill, 2020). However, stewards of large-scale franchises, who have access to finance and an existing storyworld fan base, may not instinctively use this strategy. Yet, as the cultural influence of social media continues to expand, so too does the capacity for disgruntled fans to make their views heard and for this to negatively affect the commercial success of a franchise. Through an analysis of fan activity surrounding *The Last Jedi* and Lucasfilm's lack of response, this section explores the value of social media as a tool for listening to fans, understanding their perspectives and guiding them towards activities that support the endurance of a franchise.

Under the guidance of George Lucas, Lucasfilm held such firm authorial control over *Star Wars* to the point of it becoming adversarial with its fan base. During the 1980s and 1990s, the company even issued cease and desist notices to its fans and policed the creation of content (Brooker, 2002; Shefrin, 2004). As the creator and architect of the franchise, George Lucas regularly asserted authorial control, overriding creative decisions made by licensors and Extended Universe storytellers, leading Lucasfilm to create a complex database known as the Holocron that identified numerous tiers of the *Star Wars* canon (C. Baker, 2008; Wookieepedia, n.d.-b).

However, when Lucas began releasing a trilogy of prequel films 16 years after the release of *Star Wars: Return of the Jedi*, he encountered a level of fan backlash that even he

was unable to withstand. Using emerging web technologies, fans expressed their extreme displeasure with Lucas. A 2001 fan petition demanding that Peter Jackson take over Lucas's prequel trilogy ('Peter Jackson to write and direct *Star wars episode III*', 2001) popularised the phrase 'raped childhood', describing the strongly held beliefs of some fans that Lucas's prequels were ruining the franchise. This notion of raped childhood maintained cultural relevance, with a 2008 episode of *South Park* depicting Lucas literally raping a stormtrooper (Parker, 2008). The 'ruined childhood' meme, which became popular in Tumblr and other sites, became heavily associated with Lucas and *Star Wars* before becoming a shorthand expression for the collective disappointment in a sequel to a nostalgic film (Know Your Meme, n.d.-a). When asked about his future with *Star Wars* in a 2012 *The New York Times* interview, Lucas (as cited in Curtis, 2012) lamented, 'Why would I make any more, when everybody yells at you all the time and says what a terrible person you are?' (para. 28). While Lucas's vision for the franchise had not changed, the generation of fans who grew up playing with action figures from the original films had vastly different expectations.

By targeting his new films towards children rather than the adults who had grown up with the original films, Lucas was perceived to be insulting a large segment of fans. Lucas even dared to alter the original films to align with his newer works, further annoying the fans. In response to questions about fans re-editing his work, Lucas (as cited in Curtis, 2012) restated his uncompromising authorial desire:

On the Internet, all those same guys that are complaining I made a change are completely changing the movie. I'm saying: 'Fine. But my movie, with my name on it, that says I did it, needs to be the way I want it.'

However, the fan feedback and Lucas's somewhat baffled response highlight just how much social media has changed the environment in which the entertainment industry now operates.

Social media enables fan feedback to be amplified, and as Lucas experienced, authors cannot simply strongarm fans into submission.

The resetting of the *Star Wars* canon under the stewardship of Disney (StarWars.com, 2014) indicated to fans that every new text would matter, echoing the same fan engagement format that was unfolding in the MCU. J. J. Abrams, a self-identified *Star Wars* fanboy turned fanboy auteur (Salter & Stanfill, 2020; S. Scott, 2012), was announced as director of the first film in the sequel trilogy and placed at the forefront of redesigning *Star Wars*. Abrams went to great lengths to reassure fans that *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* would return to the origins of the franchise, stating that any new content is ‘really the fan’s story’ (as cited in Breznican, 2015, para. 4). He joked that his film would dismiss midi-chlorians and Jar Jar Binks (two of the most divisive characters of the prequels) and return to the practical costumes and effects of the original films, such as a fully functioning BB-8 droid, which appeared onstage with him at key events (Breznican, 2015; Moore, 2015). The trailer for the film leaned heavily into nostalgia and classic *Star Wars* tropes. Disney CEO Bob Iger (2019) would later state that to commercially reinvigorate the franchise, Disney had ‘intentionally created a world that was visually and tonally connected to the earlier films, to not stray too far from what people loved and expected’ (p. 76). The strategy worked, with the film becoming the third highest-grossing film of all time and remaining the highest-earning film in the US box office (Numbers, n.d.-d, 2024; Rotten Tomatoes, 2015). The paratextual messaging from Disney was clear: the franchise was returning to the aesthetics of the original films.

However, the sequel that followed, *Star Wars: The Last Jedi*, written and directed by Rian Johnson, departed from the conventions established by Lucas and Abrams, fuelling renewed controversy around the franchise. *The Last Jedi* offered unexpected answers to or completely dismissed many of the plot lines established by Abrams. However, for some fans, the most egregious changes made by Johnson were those made to the character of Luke

Skywalker, the original hero of the franchise. Apart from a brief silent cameo appearance in the final scene of the previous film, Luke Skywalker's appearance in *The Last Jedi* was his first since *Return of the Jedi* in 1983. For decades, fans had embraced the wholesome, pure-hearted version of the hero featured in Lucas's original films, which continued across the Expanded Universe texts. Johnson's version of Skywalker—a cynical hermit who has disconnected from the Force and is racked with guilt—was an unexpected shock to fans.

Mark Hamill, the actor who portrays Skywalker, has a prolific Twitter presence and is an ardent torchbearer for Lucas's original franchise. Prior to the release of *The Last Jedi*, Hamill (as cited in Stolworthy, 2017) publicly implied his dissatisfaction with Johnson's interpretation of the character: 'I almost had to think of Luke as another character. Maybe he's Jake Skywalker—he's not my Luke Skywalker' (para. 5). For Hamill to speak negatively about the franchise was notable in its rarity and held alarming ramifications for fans who were keenly anticipating his return. Taking a lead from Hamill's comments, the hashtag #NotMyLukeSkywalker began trending in advance of the film and carried on afterwards as a segment of fans coalesced around their shared disappointment at Skywalker's transformation. Hamill would later apologise for his statements, declaring that Johnson's vision was superior to his own (see Figure 6.8). However, the fan movement had already gained momentum, expressing a degree of disappointment and negativity that would be revealed in more sinister ways, most notably towards actress Kelly Marie Tran.

Figure 6.8

Mark Hamill Apologising for his Public Comments and Stating That Johnson's Vision of Luke Skywalker was Better than His Own



Note. From *I regret voicing my doubts & insecurities in public*, by M. Hamill, 2017 (<https://x.com/MarkHamill/status/1004142281048244224>). Copyright 2017 by Mark Hamill.

6.2.1 'The Fear of Loss is a Path to the Dark Side'—Yoda

Kelly Marie Tran was the first woman of colour to be cast in a major *Star Wars* role, and the social media harassment and abuse she experienced highlighted a toxic undercurrent of misogyny and negativity among the fan base. Tran was cast to play Rose Tico, the first major Asian character in *Star Wars*, in *The Last Jedi*. However, despite her cheerful and unguarded social media posts about her inclusion in the franchise,²² the bullying and

²² Tran (2018) only established a social media presence once she learned she would appear in *Star Wars*.

harassment she received even before the film was released and following its debut led her to delete her accounts entirely (Tran, 2018).

Some fans directed hateful abuse towards Tran, perceiving her inclusion in *Star Wars* as a departure from the core meaning of the franchise. Similar to the attacks levelled at Lucas, Tran was accused of ‘ruining’ the franchise. However, the vitriol against Tran went further and included racial slurs and body shaming (see Figures 6.9 and 6.10). For example, racist and ableist changes were made to Rose Tico’s Wookieepedia page: ‘Ching Chong Wing Tong is a dumbass fucking character Disney made and is a stupid, retarded, and autistic love interest for Finn. She better die in the coma because she is a dumbass bitch’ (D. Moye, 2017). Tran later reflected on the pain caused by these targeted attacks and both the responsibility and the vulnerability she felt as a representative of Asian culture in a global franchise (Sun, 2021; Tran, 2018). Tran was bullied for her physical appearance and literal presence in the franchise, making the attacks deeply personal and targeted.

Figure 6.9

Hateful Edits Made to Rose Tico’s Wookieepedia Page



Note. From Kelly Marie Tran of 'Last Jedi' Facing Racist, Sexist Comments Online, by D. Moye, 2017 [Screenshot from Rose Tico’s Wookieepedia page] (https://www.huffpost.com/entry/kelly-marie-tran-racists-last-jedi_n_5a4400fee4b06d1621b6b2bb). Copyright 2017 by HuffPost.

Figure 6.10

Body Shaming Commentary Directed at Rose Tico by a Social Media Influencer



Note. Adapted from *Battlestar Galactica Asian vs. #LastJedi Asian*, by RAMZPAUL, 2017 (<https://x.com/ramzpaul/status/942992274232836096>). Copyright 2017 by RAMZPAUL.

Fans harassing and bullying actors is not new to *Star Wars*. Child actor Jake Lloyd, who starred in Lucas's first prequel film as Anakin Skywalker, experienced significant mental harm from the relentless bullying ('Star Wars star Jake Lloyd: I will never act again', 2012), as did Ahmed Best, who portrayed the franchise's first entirely digital character, Jar Jar Binks (Best, 2018). Lead actors in the sequel trilogy have also received hateful abuse and harassment, with John Boyega highlighting the racist response to his character Finn²³ (Famurewa, 2020) and Daisy Ridley, who portrays the lead character Rey, also leaving social media to avoid harassment (A. P. Davis, 2017).²⁴

²³ Following the release of the first trailer for *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, the hashtag #BlackStormtrooper became a talking point on news sites reporting on both canonical concerns about a Black stormtrooper appearing in *Star Wars* and the racist responses from fans. Proctor (2018) argues that many journalists over-hyped the racism attached to this dialogue, and the event was subsequently blown out of proportion as a representation of *Star Wars* fandom. Nevertheless, Boyega reports receiving racist backlash throughout his tenure.

²⁴ Ridley deleted her Instagram account in 2016 after being harassed for her support for stricter gun laws; however, she also experienced a backlash from *Star Wars* fans (A. P. Davis, 2017).

In his book *Dislike-Minded: Media, Audiences, and the Dynamics of Taste*, Gray (2021) explores how the lens of fan disillusionment can be used to explain why these reactions occur. While noting that outright hateful behaviour is entirely unacceptable, Gray (2021) argues that scholars should take note of ‘dislikes’ (as opposed to ‘likes’) when considering fan behaviours and how social media platforms often fail to measure them (being instead geared towards measuring ‘likes’). From this perspective, we may consider the abuse directed at Lloyd and Best to be the result of some fans perceiving that the prequel films had infantilised the franchise, with Anakin Skywalker and Jar Jar Binks being the main perpetrators. Likewise, the inclusion of Boyega, Ridley and Tran in the franchise represents a shift from the white male being the primary hero of *Star Wars*. Gray argues that fans can express their dislike (or outright hatred in this case) when they feel they are being alienated from a franchise that had given them a sense of ontological safety and identity formation (Gray, 2021; Hills, 2017; Sandvoss, 2005a; Williams, 2015). While understanding the motives for these toxic behaviours does not excuse them, it can allow a franchise steward to respond in a considered way.

The misogynist and hateful abuse directed at Tran is one incident of a few that occurred at around the same time. These included the 2014 Gamergate campaign, which took umbrage with diversity and feminism appearing in video games (Mortensen, 2018); the backlash to the 2016 all-female *Ghostbusters* reboot, which was particularly targeted at Black cast member Leslie Jones (Schowalter et al., 2021); and the coordinated bombarding of Rotten Tomatoes in 2019 with negative reviews for the MCU’s first female-led film, *Captain Marvel*, before it had even premiered (Schowalter et al., 2021).²⁵ Collectively, these events

²⁵ This led to Rotten Tomatoes implementing changes to how its reviews are collated and published (Buckley, 2019). The star of *Captain Marvel*, Brie Larson, then became a target of misogynistic fans following a series of speeches she made advocating for greater female representation in Hollywood (Schowalter et al., 2021).

highlight a recurring pattern of misogynistic behaviours among fans and the perception of some that women pose a threat to the sanctity of both popular and general culture.

This issue is compounded by non-transparent social media algorithms and inconsistent social media etiquette, which can disproportionately amplify certain opinions and foster a divisive online environment. For instance, in the lead-up to and following the election of Donald Trump as US president in 2016, Twitter became host to a range of deeply politicised and divisive conversation, much of which was instigated by Trump himself, whose online influence was substantial (Lockhart, 2019; Ross & Caldwell, 2020). Much of the rhetoric in these discussions centred on people feeling overlooked and unheard, despite these messages frequently being delivered by people with large platforms and many followers. Both Jeff Gomez (personal communication, 24 November 2018) and Henry Jenkins (personal communication, 30 September 2019) noted their fascination with Trump's use of the narrative technique to curate an emotional connection with disaffected voters, drive counternarratives and leverage anti-Establishment rhetoric. Both identified that his engagement techniques as compelling, confounding and worthy of critical attention. These responses also underscore how complex, confounding and significant social media can be in the dissemination and amplification of information.

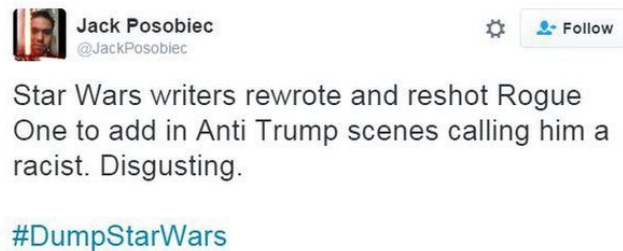
This issue is further evidenced by the chaotic flow of information associated with the alt-right movement, described by Hawley (2018) as a loose arrangement of people that includes 'anyone with right-wing sensibilities that rejects the mainstream conservative movement' (p. 11) and is generally concerned with issues of race. Nagle (2017) describes the movement as a 'leaderless digital counter-revolution' (p. 12) with a strong anti-Establishment sensibility that has forged a reciprocal relationship with Trump. Many aspects of Trump's Make America Great Again campaign are supported by alt-right activists. Tracing the movement from the early internet subcultures that focused on irony and satire to modern

cohorts of ironic, in-joke trolls engaged in culture wars, Nagle (2017) attributes the rise of this group to the destabilisation of truth and meaning in online spaces. She also highlights how those in the alt-right movement became emboldened when they saw ‘their guy [Trump] take the office of US president’ (p. 11). In a sense, the alt-right can also be understood as a group of people who are rallying against the perception and fear that they are being pushed out of their place at the centre of the dominant culture, albeit using discourse that regularly confounds whether this is true. The Gamergate campaign, the Ghostbusters backlash and the review bombing of *Captain Marvel* can all be attributed to this wider movement.

A common criticism levelled at some commercial entertainment franchises by alt-right activists is that they are too ‘woke’, a term that originated in African American culture to describe a sensitivity to racial prejudice and discrimination. In its present-day context, the term is often used by hegemonic groups seeking to criticise popular entertainment for forcing inclusion and diversity in their texts at the expense of the ‘true’ storyworld narrative. Kathleen Kennedy is regularly accused as the person responsible for making *Star Wars* ‘woke’ (Hibberd, 2023; Schowalter et al., 2021). Some fans have acted to repair the ‘damage’ to the franchise under Kennedy’s reign. For example, an anonymous fan created a 46-minute edit of *The Last Jedi* women entitled ‘The Last Jedi: De-Feminized Fanedit (aka The Chauvinist Cut)’ in which all scenes featuring women were cut and released it on The Pirate Bay, (r/moviescirclejerk, 2018). However, there is no consensus on whether this was a serious effort or an elaborate satirist prank typical of the alt-right movement. A petition to have the film removed from the *Star Wars* canon was signed by 150,000 people (Walsh, 2017), and high-profile alt-right influencers have also alleged that the franchise is anti-Trump (see Figure 6.11).

Figure 6.11

Pizzagate Conspirator Jack Posobiec Posted a Fictional Star Wars Conspiracy Designed to Motivate Trump Supporters to Boycott the Franchise



Note. Adapted from *Star Wars writers rewrote and reshot Rouge One*, by J. Posobiec, 2016. (<https://x.com/JackPosobiec/status/806854629459918848>). Copyright 2016 by Jack Posobiec.

Yet, accusations of wokeness in popular culture overlook (and are likely fuelled by) the fact that there is now a greater diversity of people in a range of roles across the entertainment ecosystem (Ramón et al., 2023; Ramos, 2023; Screen Australia, 2023b). There has been a generational shift towards fanboy (and less commonly fangirl) auteurs from diverse backgrounds, who are bringing their perspectives to established franchises and media IP (Salter & Stanfill, 2020; S. Scott, 2012). This has naturally led to a greater diversity in storyworlds, increased profits for Hollywood by connecting with traditionally overlooked audiences and an increased commercial appetite for more diverse stories (S. Pulman, personal communication, 5 January 2022). Like many legacy franchises, *Star Wars* has organically entered a phase of cultural transformation, and the social media space, while clearly fickle, provides an opportunity for the franchise to bring audiences along for the ride in a way that Lucas could not.

Over time, it has become evident that it is only small groups of fans that are driving the kinds of misogynistic campaigns outlined above. Proctor (2018) highlights how journalists regularly overstate, skew and sensationalise the size of such movements, granting them more legitimacy in the eyes of scholars and the general public. He cautions that researchers should apply closer scrutiny to these campaigns to better determine their true scale. Nevertheless, as

Proctor's work also demonstrates, once an idea is formulated, it can take root and spread exponentially, thereby inflicting damage to a text. As Jeff Gomez (personal communication, 24 November 2018) highlighted, enraging fans is risky:

They are so capable of generating colossal amounts of user-generated content [and] YouTube videos which are beautifully produced and poignant—they are emotionally powerful, even though they're largely inaccurate . . . We are all underestimating how compelling that content is.

Thus, motivated fans can give the illusion of having an oversized presence and a disproportionately large influence. Quite simply, fan discord, whether or not it is warranted, poses a major commercial risk to franchises, especially when movements such as the alt-right can destabilise notions of truth, fact and reality. Therefore, it is critical that franchise owners consider social media a vital tool to manage the commercial health of their franchise. Given that social media 'noise' can drown out legitimate fan feedback or criticism, engaging in nuanced social media dialogue with fans is an important part of this process.

6.2.2 An Overwhelming Silence

Neither Lucasfilm nor the official *Star Wars* social media channels have directly addressed the misogynistic behaviour of fans or the controversy surrounding *The Last Jedi*. Unlike Kevin Feige, who took a leading role in articulating the MCU storyworld to fans, Kathleen Kennedy has assumed a more traditional Hollywood producer role, giving her lead creatives responsibility for the story and allowing them to be at the forefront when promoting their *Star Wars* projects.²⁶ Rian Johnson (2018b), who maintains an active social media presence, did address the controversy attached to *The Last Jedi*, alluding to the troll-like

²⁶ In fairness, MCU directors are still heavily involved in the promotion of new transmedia content. Moreover, by the end of the data collection period, the MCU had not attracted commercially damaging fan vitriol that required Feige to intervene.

reactions to Luke Skywalker and Rose Tico in an X post: ‘What we talk about when we talk about manbabies.’ He followed this up with a longer post:

On social media a few unhealthy people can cast a big shadow on the wall, but over the past 4 years I’ve met lots of real fellow SW [Star Wars] fans. We like & dislike stuff but we do it with humor, love & respect. We’re the VAST majority, we’re having fun & doing just fine. (R. Johnson, 2018a)

Mark Hamill (2018a) responded to this post with, ‘Same here, but over the past 40 years for me’ and later followed up with a more pointed defence of Tran (see Figure 6.12).²⁷

Figure 6.12

Mark Hamill Defends Kelly Marie Tran, Posting ‘What’s Not To Love? #GetALifeNerds’



Note. Adapted from *What’s not to love?* by M. Hamill, 2018b (<https://x.com/MarkHamill/status/1004482255295692802>). Copyright 2018 by Mark Hamill.

These interactions with fans are either adversarial (calling out a portion of the fan base for being ‘wrong’) or aimed at brushing aside poor behaviour and communicating to the wider

²⁷ It is worth noting that many fans defended Tran and expressed their disgust for the abuse she was experiencing. However, for the purposes of this chapter, I am focusing on social media users with a high degree of authorial authority in the *Star Wars* universe and their associated responsibilities.

audience that everything is fine.²⁸ Without a holistic response from Lucasfilm, Johnson's and Hamill's responses may be read as a defence of a divisive text rather than statements supporting the franchise.

Rather than creating unity, such communications risk entrenching further divisions among fans. A recurring topic in my conversations with Jeff Gomez (personal communication, 24 November 2018) was his strong advice to studios that they avoid becoming adversarial with their fan base because it would alienate fans and lead to commercial harm:

We see the same antagonism between the producers of *The Walking Dead* and their fan base. They sometimes seem to take delight in alienating the fans with the turns of story. Instead of educating the fans about what it is that's being communicated and why it's being communicated the way it is, they simply are sticking their middle fingers up at the fans, and we're seeing a drop-off in ratings.

As Gomez illustrates, a franchise may be harmed if fans simply choose to disconnect, reducing the size of the audience. Being a fan is fuelled by an underlying sense of hope (Silverstone, 1994). In his exploration of dislike, Gray (2021) notes that fans who choose to leave a fandom often do so because their hope for what a text might achieve has not been met. The choice may be driven by the sense that the fan is no longer represented in the storyworld, that the franchise has missed an opportunity to offer better representation or that the fan's expectations (either individually or collectively) have been breached.

When fan hopes are crushed, the expression of these feelings can suppress the participatory qualities of a franchise. Disillusioned fans may simply withdraw from the fandom, reducing the scope of the conversation between creators and fans. However, when fans employ abuse and bullying to express their pain and fear, it can create barriers to the

²⁸ As Proctor (2018) notes, the fan engagement experienced by Rian Johnson and Mark Hamill as white, heterosexual, cisgender males is likely to be different from that experienced by Tran.

participation of others. This occurs when creative personnel are forced to disconnect (by closing their social media accounts or reducing their public appearances) or when other fans are actively discouraged from participating. As Jenkins (personal communication, 30 September 2019) states,

on the fan side, we've got the toxic, angry, white, male fanboys who are wanting often to limit participation or [are] more interested in mastery than participation and more interested in mastery than moving forward toward a more diverse and inclusive set of representations. So, they're often the ones you have to fight against in order to open up a space where more people can tell their stories, whether within the industry or outside the industry looking in.

Through the act of asserting their 'mastery', such fans often act as gatekeepers and reduce the desire or ability of other fans to participate in their own way. The problem with the suppression of participation is twofold. First, it reduces the flow of information across the fan base, decreasing the vitality and 'spreadability' (Jenkins et al., 2013) of a franchise and its capacity to attract skimmers and divers. Second, social media offers the unique ability to connect and converse with a wide range of people. If a conversation is suppressed or an essential party leaves, then producers lose a powerful communication tool with which to support and grow their storyworld.

At present, the entertainment industry is underutilising social media as a tool to engage with and understand its fans. As S. Coulson (personal communication, 15 November 2018) outlined, much of Campfire's work involves helping major companies understand the benefits of speaking with their fans and educating them on how to do so:

Well, you have to definitely talk to fans like a fan. Everybody at Campfire are fans. We're fans. And knowing and understanding what fans want, understanding how to involve yourself in the conversation with them without imposing a conversation, that's

a lot of the art of what all the companies that work in this space, obviously Campfire, do. And sometimes I think companies go, ‘We don’t really understand our fans enough. Maybe you can help us navigate that.’ So, often we’ll just do strategy work up front that says, well, this is what fans are talking about, this is what they hope, this is their fear, and this is how we counteract that fear. And it might be through authenticity. It might be being real. Making something real. It’s about celebrating things that we know they love and trying to change the things that they don’t to get in amongst them.

Coulson’s sentiments reflect the way in which Lucasfilm and Marvel use social media—as a tool to promote and broadcast messages rather than to converse with their fans. Some individuals, including Dave Filoni (Lucasfilm) and James Gunn (Marvel/DC), engage heavily with a segment of their respective fandoms, but neither Lucasfilm nor Marvel has a concerted top-down dialogue strategy. A major reason for a studio initiating a strategy such as this is that it will allow it to harness fan energy and stop problems before they arise.

6.2.3 Social Media Jujitsu

Henry Jenkins’s (2006a) observation that fandom is a balance of ‘fascination and frustration’ (p. 258) has informed much of the fan research. This inherent dichotomy can be seen in the simultaneous adoration and condemnation expressed by fans (J. Gomez, personal communication, 24 November 2018) and unequal measurement of social media likes and dislikes (Gray, 2021). Yet, both fascination and frustration grow from the same seed of hope and exist on a spectrum of possible expressions. Social media has made these fascinations and frustrations visible, enabling fan practices to become mainstream (Gray, 2021; Jenkins, 2006b). Therefore, in the age of social media, fan fascination or frustration can generate greater social energy than ever before. While fascination, adoration and likes can buoy the

commercial and cultural success of a storyworld, frustration, condemnation and dislikes, if unmitigated, can derail this process.

In jujitsu, the energy of an oncoming assailant is leveraged and redirected for personal gain. Thus, ‘conversational jujitsu’ can be used to intercept negative social energy before it inflicts damage and redirect it in a direction that suits the storyteller. Gomez’s (2017c) term for this process is to ‘embrace the narrative reversal’, something that Starlight Runner vociferously advocates that companies do:

Peter Jackson showed us what the potential was with dealing with negative fan feedback and turning that around, and that is, to us, a model that we’ve advocated ever since. What happened with Peter Jackson and the angry *Lord of the Rings* fans was that he reached out and said, ‘Hey, I understand that you’re upset about this. If I were you, I’d be too.’ In other words, he acknowledged and validated their negative feelings. But because he had confidence in the quality of the narrative, the quality of his art, he was able to say, ‘Come here, take a look, and everything’s going to be okay, you’ll see.’ (J. Gomez, personal communication, 24 November 2018)

Jackson’s proactive use of social media to win over sceptical *Lord of the Rings* fans when adapting the novels into films is widely cited as a successful example of a commercial storyteller ‘speaking in fan’ for commercial and auteuristic gain (Gray, 2021; Salter & Stanfill, 2020; S. Scott, 2011; Shefrin, 2004). However, Gomez (personal communication, 24 November 2018) highlights that this approach has rarely been applied since and is a concept that major companies struggle to comprehend.²⁹ The approach used by Jackson and Starlight Runner is to leverage social media to directly address unmet fan hopes by either reassuring fans or making adjustments based on feedback. By acknowledging fans’ emotions, a

²⁹ These discussions highlight a common refrain from my interviewees—that the entertainment industry is highly conservative and risk averse, with entrenched systems of power. Whether engaging with fans for their own projects or from within a major commercial franchise, fanboy auteurs act independently and have an ability to lead or break through the usual corporate structures of communication.

storyteller can highlight their shared hopes (and how they can be expressed in a healthy manner) and commonalities, not differences, to allow the franchise to move forward with greater unity. Thus, the flow of energy is intercepted and redirected.³⁰

The controversy surrounding *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* could have been an opportunity for Lucasfilm to galvanise, educate and harness the passion of the fan base. For example, emphasising the importance of the Force as a universal concept and highlighting previous examples of women in *Star Wars* lore may have been effective strategies to deepen the discussion of *Star Wars* mythology. Referencing and reinforcing the values of the Jedi and encouraging fans to apply these codes of behaviour would have been ‘on brand’ for the franchise, allowing Lucasfilm to bring an element of play to the social media space (Gomez, 2018a). While this may not necessarily prevent alt-right or other trolls from using the franchise as a political talking point, it would incentivise the fandom to express a more unified perception of what the franchise is, thereby giving external operators less leeway to produce counternarratives.

This does not mean that a franchise should be conservative to avoid upsetting fans. On the contrary, franchises must evolve to stay relevant. My interviewees also expressed a strong belief that authors must maintain ultimate creative control over a storyworld and follow their storytelling instincts (Anonymous, personal communication, 14 November 2018; F. Nicieza, personal communication, 14 November 2018). However, validating fans via social media is

³⁰ These concepts and strategies predate social media. In our discussion, J. Gomez (personal communication, 24 November 2018) elaborated:

I didn’t just study Homer’s *Odyssey*; I studied as much as I could about the way that Homer communicated the epic narrative of the *Odyssey* to his audience, and there are long stretches of the *Odyssey*, hours of oration where it gets pretty grim—it’s dark. And Homer would note the fact that there would be some who would leave, who wouldn’t want to stay through, or others in certain areas where he performed the *Odyssey* who would get angry with him because they didn’t like the fact that certain characters were dead and so forth. So, he would have to either during the oration say, ‘Stick with me, I hear you, I see you, it gets better, I promise’, or he would do it in between sittings because these orations would take days. So, he’d go to the tavern and get the feel of the crowd, and in doing so, he would pass certain assurances to the crowd and acknowledge their feedback. Over the course of years, he’d adjust the way that he told the story in slight ways, so that works to this day.

important to shepherd them alongside the franchise. Lucasfilm did not prepare its fan base for the seismic storyworld change in *The Last Jedi*, which breaks the historical association between *Star Wars* and the hero's journey, thus could easily be read as a critique of both the existing franchise and its fan base. It would have been prudent for Lucasfilm to foresee the potential divisive impact this might have on fans, which could have been mitigated through careful messaging (Gomez, 2018a).

Lucasfilm would do well to appoint a definitive authorial figure who can speak on behalf of the whole *Star Wars* brand and storyworld. While this does not limit a range of cast and crew members contributing to important and central messages, it is helpful to have a singular super-producer or small team that sets the agenda for acceptable behaviours in a storyworld and rules on issues of canon (Gray, 2010). Some members of the Lucasfilm Story Group such as Leeland Chee and Pablo Hidalgo do engage in some of these discussions. More recently, Dave Filoni has gained a higher profile in the company and has been one of the most engaged creative staff members speaking to issues of *Star Wars* mythology and Lucas's intent. However, as an analysis of *The Rise of Skywalker* will show, *Star Wars* arguably needs a mythological guide more than ever.

6.2.4 The (Attempted) Rise of Skywalker

In the absence of direct dialogue with fans, Lucasfilm apparently addressed the controversy surrounding *The Last Jedi* through its subsequent film: *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker*. Announced as the film's director in 2015 (Sciretta, 2015), Colin Trevorrow departed in 2017, citing creative differences (Kit & Galuppo, 2017). J. J. Abrams was reinstalled to complete the trilogy (Kroll, 2017b). While there is likely to be a variety of reasons for this decision, it unavoidably communicated to fans that Lucasfilm wanted to make a sequel that was more like *The Force Awakens* than *The Last Jedi*. Abrams and co-writer Chris Terrio discarded Trevorrow's draft and created an entirely new story for the sequel,

which took plot points from *The Last Jedi* in surprising and contradictory directions. Luke Skywalker, for example, reappears as a Force ghost, with the sunny disposition and enthusiasm for the Jedi he last had exhibited in Lucas's original trilogy. Kylo Ren, the white male villain in the sequel trilogy, was redeemed and turned into a heroic martyr, while Finn, the Black lead character, was further sidelined from the central story. Rose Tico barely featured at all, appearing on-screen for exactly 76 seconds (Kim, 2019). While Terrio attributed this to the story requirements, stating that the limited footage of Carrie Fisher affected Rose's role in the film (C. Moye, 2019), many interpreted Rose's absence differently. Following the release of the film, the hashtag #RoseTicoDeservedBetter demonstrated the collective disappointment of fans, many of whom had not previously been vocal, that the character had been treated poorly by the franchise. Rian Johnson tweeted his support for Tran (see Figure 6.13), suggesting to fans that he and Abrams had vastly different visions for the franchise. The net result was that Lucasfilm had ostensibly offered a tone-deaf response to fan discord and addressed fan outrage over elements of race and gender through obfuscation and avoidance.

Figure 6.13

Rian Johnson Posts an Image of a Resplendent Tran with a Crown Emoji Following the Release of The Rise of Skywalker



Note. Adapted from X post by R. Johnson, 2019 (<https://x.com/rianjohnson/status/1208493658334486528>). Copyright 2019 by Rian Johnson.

More problematic for Lucasfilm, *The Rise of Skywalker* was the least commercially successful of their trilogy of Skywalker Saga films. Although the films were highly profitable, each earned less than its predecessor (Numbers, n.d.-d), and neither *The Last Jedi* nor *The Rise of Skywalker* achieved the near unanimous critical and audience praise of *The Force Awakens* (Rotten Tomatoes, 2015, 2017a, 2019b). A trend indicating that *Star Wars* was in commercial decline was quickly emerging. My interviewees noted that Hollywood regularly operates in a risk-averse and short-sighted manner to protect its immediate financial concerns (S. Coulson, personal communication, 15 November 2018; J. Gomez, personal communication, 24 November 2018; F. Nicieza, personal communication, 14 November 2018; S. Pulman, personal communication, 5 January 2022). While there is no evidence that

Lucasfilm made last-minute changes to *The Rise of Skywalker* to address the controversies associated with *The Last Jedi* and mitigate potential damage to the franchise, if that was indeed its goal, then it appears to have failed.

The Rise of Skywalker and surrounding events also damaged Lucasfilm's authorial control over the franchise. *Star Wars* has always been steeped in dense mythology and a sense of destiny (Wagner, 1999). The final film veering away from the tone and themes of *The Last Jedi* and towards the 'more traditional' *Star Wars* of *The Force Awakens* created the perception that the company had kowtowed to what turned out to be a small but vocal minority of angry fans. More egregiously, this reverse course also implied that Lucasfilm did not have a clear creative vision for Lucas's franchise, amplified by the fact that *The Rise of Skywalker* functioned as the conclusion 42 years of storytelling instigated by Lucas. While the film was still showing at the cinemas, information about Trevorrow's planned film (entitled *Duel of the Fates*) was leaked, showcasing a vastly different vision of how the saga might have concluded (Burnett, 2020). *Duel of the Fates* would reportedly have progressed many of Rian Johnson's plot points, with many fans on social media expressing that they would have preferred to have seen this version instead. Ending the Skywalker Saga with a 'what if' scenario, which was deemed more interesting by some segments of the fan base, further undermined the support for Lucasfilm stewarding the franchise forward.

Since the release of *The Rise of Skywalker*, the *Star Wars* franchise has been at a crossroads. Lucasfilm has pivoted away from the Skywalker Saga to explore other timelines and storyworlds on other platforms. Streaming shows such as *The Mandalorian* and the multimedia project *Star Wars: High Republic* are enabling the company to reconsider how best to move the franchise forwards and maintain audience interest. Disney CEO Bob Iger believes that he pushed Lucasfilm to produce too many *Star Wars* films too quickly, resulting in *Star Wars* fatigue (Dowd, 2019). However, this also exposes a one-sided corporate

approach focused only on issues of production and distribution and ignoring the role of audience dialogue. It also overlooks Lucasfilm's failure to design a coherent and compelling sequel trilogy narrative.

Star Wars has proven to be an enduring storyworld and brand. Although Lucas's prequels were not universally adored at the time of their release, they are now embraced by different generations and certain segments of the fandom. Over time, Lucasfilm can use its transmedia abilities to enhance the narrative elements of the sequel trilogy texts and improve fan perceptions of the storyline. However, the franchise must continue evolving if it is to stay relevant and interesting. Perhaps a more considered approach to dialoguing with fans will enable Lucasfilm to avoid the fan discord surrounding the prequel and sequel trilogies and ensure that a connected storytelling strategy is implemented. While this may appear risky to a studio, the next case study highlights that leaving such audience outrage unchecked can result in even worse outcomes.

6.3 Super-divided: #ReleaseTheSnyderCut and the Runaway Fandom of the DC Extended Universe

The #ReleaseTheSnyderCut movement and its profound influence on DC's commercial storytelling projects is a cautionary tale for companies who choose to ignore the vocal segments of their fandoms. The movement originated from a contingent of fans who were admirers of Zack Snyder's work in the DCEU and were upset when Snyder was ousted from the franchise. Their petition to see the unfinished cut of his version of *Justice League* is an example of the significant effect that fan activism can have in the modern digital age. The movement ultimately influenced the design of the DCEU storyworld but in a way that Warner Bros. would find unhelpful.

The #ReleaseTheSnyderCut movement demonstrates the effectiveness of social media in organised fandom and activism. While the movement profoundly amplified a passionate

fan message, it also facilitated toxic behaviours that resulted in threats to Warner Bros. staff, deep divisions in the DC fandom and tactics being used to draw attention away from new DCEU projects. The formation of this movement and its ability to have such a profound negative impact highlights the importance of maintaining a degree of authorial control over a transmedia storyworld, regularly engaging with the fanbase and establishing a paratextual culture that encourages appropriate behaviours.

6.3.1 DC's Foray into a Shared Cinematic Universe

After directing *Man of Steel* and launching a new era of cinematic storytelling for DC, Zack Snyder became the de facto architect of a new DC storyworld that would come to be named the DCEU. Snyder was chosen to direct *Man of Steel* after Christopher Nolan endorsed the production of a new Superman film outlined by his *Batman Begins* co-writer, David S. Goyer. While Nolan would have no direct involvement in the film, this iteration would embody the gritty, grounded tone of Nolan's commercially and critically successful trilogy of *The Dark Knight* Batman films. Therefore, Snyder inherited a concept only and played a major role in establishing a new cinematic version of *Superman*. With Snyder's experience adapting the DC comic book series *Watchmen* (regularly cited as the pinnacle of its medium) to cinema and his well-established fan credentials, DC's major characters appeared to be in safe hands. Keen to establish a film series that could rival the MCU, Warner Bros. tasked Snyder with the expansion of a wider storyworld. Thus, Snyder became responsible for setting a storytelling tone that would be incorporated into other DCEU projects.

Initially, the DCEU was to have one shared continuity, similar to the MCU. In 2014, Warner Bros. CEO Kevin Tsujihara announced the production of 10 interconnected films that would expand the DCEU (Beedle, 2014). Aside from initiating the project with *Man of Steel*, Snyder was listed as the director of key team-up films that would form the narrative backbone of the storyworld and be responsible for introducing major characters such as Batman and

Wonder Woman. These characters would then spin out into solo films. David Ayer's *The Suicide Squad*, for example, was to be the first of many films building on Snyder's DC storyworld (Beedle, 2014). Snyder and his wife Deborah would later serve as producers on several projects. Therefore, it was suggested to audiences that the DCEU would operate in the same way as the MCU, despite its different structure.

The DCEU has had no single person overseeing the authorship of the entire project. Unlike the consolidated corporate structures supporting the MCU and *Star Wars*, the DCEU is located within the broader departmentalised structure of Warner Bros. Similarly, while Kevin Feige and Kathleen Kennedy oversee the MCU and *Star Wars*, respectively, it was never made explicit to the public who was ultimately responsible for the DCEU. After Snyder took on *Man of Steel* and Nolan expressed no interest in managing another superhero project, Snyder became the default transmedia architect of a new era of DC films. However, other directors, including *Wonder Woman* director Patty Jenkins, would speak publicly about veering away from or dismissing Snyder's work. Complicating matters further, the DC Films division went through three separate changes of management during this period of research, and Warner Bros. was sold and merged with another company to form Warner Bros. Discovery in 2022. This meant that the DCEU continued to be reshaped as a range of people took corporate control over the Warner Bros. film division over time.

James Gunn, who has made both MCU and DCEU films, offers further insight into how the industrial environment varies between Marvel Studios and Warner Bros. Specifically, Gunn (as cited in Davids, 2021) suggests there is a greater separation between the creative process and corporate machinations at Warner Bros.:

Kevin Feige is the producer on the *Guardians* movies. Peter Safran is the producer on this movie [*The Suicide Squad*]. At Marvel, they serve the role of producer and of

studio, really. And at DC, there's a studio and then there's a producer, so it's very different in that respect.

Gunn's comments could be interpreted as him having greater creative autonomy while at Warner Bros. or that his project was not as 'plugged in' to all the aspects of the studio compared with what he experienced at Marvel. It may be fair to assume that Snyder also experienced various levels of oversight from the teams managing his DCEU projects.

Warner Bros. failed to develop a strong paratextual narrative to communicate that the DCEU films were part of a larger coordinated plan. Instead, over time, the opposite narrative became prevalent. For example, in 2013, Ben Affleck was cast to play Batman in Snyder's films and, having won the Best Picture Academy Award for *Argo*, was also recruited for his strong directorial skills to direct a solo Batman film. However, Affleck's commitment to the project was tenuous and by 2017 he had relinquished his role as director (Kroll, 2017a). Eventually, the project became an entity separate from the DCEU and featured a different version of Batman. The hype surrounding Affleck's potentially Oscar-worthy Batman subsequently dissipated. Similar uncertainties permeated the larger development of the DCEU; for example, *The Flash* was announced for release in 2016 but only made it to the cinemas in 2023, having been shepherded by six different directorial teams (Crow, 2023).

Promotion of the DCEU did not strike an aspirational tone either. When Snyder announced his sequel to *Man of Steel* at the 2013 SDCC, he signalled his plans for the film by reading a passage and referencing imagery from Frank Miller's *The Dark Knight Returns* comic book series. This series, while highly regarded among fans, portrays a bitter showdown between Superman and Batman at the end of their careers. It deconstructs the heroes and is effectively set outside of the main comic book storyworld. The announcement that the nascent DCEU storyworld would begin with a grudge-fuelled fight between two of DC's most iconic heroes set a dark and oppressive tone for the franchise and the first official joint appearance of

the two characters in a film. The resulting film, *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice*, was critically slammed and, despite being profitable, was not as commercially successful as Warner Bros. had hoped (O'Connell, 2021). Snyder's choice to base his film (and the DCEU storyworld by extension) on a dark alternative take on DC's iconic characters made it clear to the fan base that he was interpreting the source material with a unique vision. Snyder's Batman was jaded, violent and willing to overlook his usual no-kill rule, while his Superman was perceived by other characters as a threat and an untrustworthy alien. With the characters being so well entrenched in popular culture and with other concurrent DC projects largely adhering to their traditional character traits, Snyder's vision for Batman and Superman did not resonate with all segments of the DC fandom.

Yet, as Salter and Stanfill (2020) observe, Snyder's creative decisions were consistent with his previous history of amplifying the qualities of existing IP. Snyder had built up an ardent fanbase of his own with *Watchmen* and *Dawn of the Dead*, his adaptation of George Romero's zombie franchise. The appeal of Snyder's work for established fans was its 'essential fidelity to the source material he loves and a desire for more: . . . more sex, more violence, more hypermasculine affirmation' (Salter & Stanfill, 2020, p. 108). *Batman v Superman* asked the age-old geek question, 'Who would win in a fight?', pitting arguably the two biggest heroes against each other. In this way, his work did appeal to a segment of fans who resonated with these sensibilities.

In contrast to the celebratory tone of MCU actors in their public and press engagements, many DCEU cast members created paratextual counternarratives to their DC characters. Ezra Miller, who portrays the Flash, attracted continued negative publicity for their bizarre and criminal behaviour (Masters & McClintock, 2022); Ben Affleck, DCEU's Batman, underwent a period of personal turmoil and became tabloid fodder; and there was continued speculation that the absence of Henry Cavill's Superman in the DCEU was the

result of his behind-the-scenes feuds with Warner Bros. Ray Fisher (2020), who portrayed Cyborg, had a public spat with Warner Bros., accusing the company of racism and mistreating his cast and crew. While this disharmonious press aligned with the more combative and bleak nature of Snyder's world, it did little to build affection for the franchise or extend the mythos of the characters these actors portrayed.

The apparently uncoordinated approach to the development of the DCEU was exacerbated by Warner Bros. placing significant pressure on Snyder to transform his vision, ending with Snyder deciding to leave the franchise. Given the poor commercial performance of *Batman v Superman*, Warner Bros. executives lost faith in Snyder's approach and pressured him to shift the tone of *Justice League* by asking Joss Whedon, who had directed Marvel's *The Avengers*, to contribute new material (O'Connell, 2021; M. Ryan, 2021). Following the sudden death of his daughter, Snyder walked away from the unfinished project, and Whedon was appointed as his successor.

The resulting film, *Justice League*, was a critical and commercial disappointment for Warner Bros., which had hoped that the first cinematic appearance of DC's most popular team of heroes would be a feat similar to *The Avengers* (O'Connell, 2021). The film earned even less than *Batman v Superman* and included a colour palette, tone and humour that was not found in Snyder's earlier works. Subsequent films such as *Aquaman* and *Shazam!* were vibrant, commercially successful and featured only loose connections to Snyder's work, suggesting that the DCEU was moving in a different creative direction and leaving Snyder's most ardent fans to wonder what might have been.

6.3.2 #ReleaseTheSnyderCut and Divisive Energy

Salter and Stanfill (2020) identify Snyder as a prominent fanboy auteur given his demonstrated ability to garner support through his engagement with fans: 'Snyder has built his brand on this direct appeal and acclaim from fans rather than critics, as can be seen from

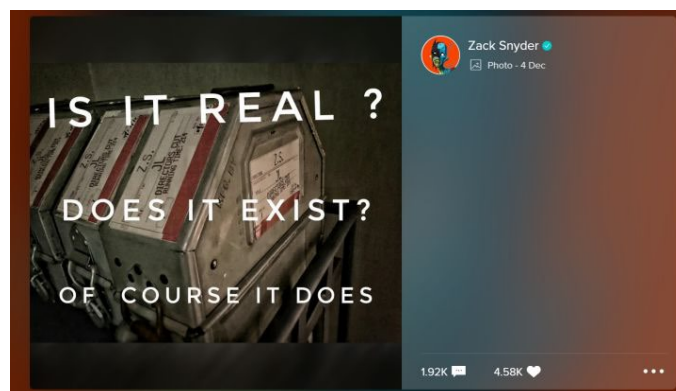
his online reviews' (p. 108). The authors assert that his work is often childish, misogynist and violent, embodying 'the very worst stereotypes of fandom' (Salter & Stanfill, 2020, p. 108). Thus, it may be inferred that fans of Snyder's work may also exhibit some of these traits.

In his absence, Snyder's fans began the #ReleaseTheSnyderCut campaign. United in their shared disappointment and hope, they collaboratively pieced together clues from trailers and other paratexts to theorise the existence of an alternative cut of *Justice League*. Many of these fans expressed their anger and frustration towards Warner Bros., alleging that the studio was obstructing their access to a superior version of the text (O'Connell, 2021).

During his 'exile' from DC, Snyder used his social media savvy to stir hope and energy among his fans, posting messages of support for the campaign in the niche social media site Vero. He also fuelled hope in his fans, posting cryptic messages that became increasingly brazen, sharing unseen materials and eventually confessing that possessed of a completed copy of the film (see Figure 6.14) (Snyder, 2019). Many of Snyder's collaborators joined the campaign, and he encouraged prominent figures such as Ben Affleck to support it (O'Connell, 2021). Over a 2-year period, the hype had built to an unforeseen level for the now mythical film.

Figure 6.14

Zack Snyder Posts Cryptic Messages in Niche Social Media Site Vero



Note. Adapted from *Is It Real? Does It Exist? Of Course It Does*, by Z. Snyder, 2019 (<https://vero.co/zacksnyder/7q-RGHf7qKDvh2dS3J8Jn7xz>). Copyright 2019 by Zack Snyder.

During this period, the #ReleaseTheSnyderCut campaign mobilised significantly, with the petition against Warner Bros. being widely publicised. Collectively, the group raised sufficient funds to erect #ReleaseTheSnyderCut billboards in Times Square and close to the SDCC (see Figure 6.15), fly a plane with a banner over Warner Bros. offices and donate over half a million dollars to the American Foundation for Suicide Prevention in memory of Snyder's daughter (Gebbia, 2021; O'Connell, 2021). However, toxic behaviours also became prominent. The group regularly crippled Warner Bros. social media channels and harassed key studio executives to the extent that they closed their social media accounts (Arvedon, 2018; Robinson, 2020). The campaign was relentless, often involving anger and bullying. What began as a somewhat baffling campaign for Warner Bros. executives was morphing into something alarming.

Figure 6.15

#ReleaseTheSnyderCut Trends Across America



Note. Photograph of #ReleaseTheSnyderCut billboard, by ForSnyderCut.com, n.d. (<https://www.forsnydercut.com/announcement/the-snyder-cut-the-walking-deads-creator-robert-kirkman-is-a-supporter/>). Copyright 2019 by ForSnyderCut.com.

In the face of this fan activism, Warner Bros. mostly remained silent. There was no coordinated response from the studio nor a figurehead for the DCEU who could have delivered one. On occasion, studio executives would admonish the movement. Ann Sarnoff (as cited in Lang, 2021) from WarnerMedia stated the following in an interview with *Variety*:

We're not tolerating any of that. That behavior is reprehensible, no matter what franchise you're talking about or what business you're talking about. It's completely unacceptable. I'm very disappointed in the fans that have chosen to go to that negative place with regard to DC, with regard to some of our executives. It's just disappointing because we want this to be a safe place to be. We want DC to be a fandom that feels safe and inclusive. (para. 8)

However, aside from public statements such as these, the studio did not deliver these sentiments directly to fans. Rather than engaging in dialogue with fans and redirecting their passion, Warner Bros. attempted to block the immense social energy generated by the campaign.

Eventually, WarnerMedia, a division of Warner Bros., asked Snyder whether it could release his unfinished film to attract viewers to its new streaming platform, HBO Max. Snyder countered by highlighting that the #ReleaseTheSnyderCut campaign had become larger than Netflix's highest-profile shows or any film Warner Bros. had ever released (Couch, 2021; O'Connell, 2021). Snyder was granted the funds to complete the film on the condition he shoot no new footage. The film would be called *Zack Snyder's Justice League*.

Given the decision by Warner Bros to release all of its films and TV shows through HBO Max during the COVID-19 pandemic, *Zack Snyder's Justice League* was given greater cultural capital and public visibility than WarnerMedia may have intended. The studio had publicly stated that this film would be a 'storytelling cul-de-sac' (Barnes, 2020), signalling that it this format was not something they intended to continue exploring. However, Snyder had filmed new sequences that hinted at future plotlines and character arcs. Appearing alongside other DCEU titles being released that year, *Zack Snyder's Justice League* teased audiences with narrative pathways and clues as to where Snyder had planned to take the franchise next.

While *Zack Snyder's Justice League* temporarily appeased a vocal segment of DC fans, it also emboldened them. Immediately following the release of the film, the hashtag #RestoreTheSnyderVerse began trending alongside a range of petitions for Warner Bros. to restore other promised DCEU projects. Fans of the Snyder cut have continued review-bombing DCEU projects that do not have Snyder's involvement, including the 4K re-release of *Justice League* and other unrelated films from the studio. At the time of writing, this segment of fans is still creating discord, sending the studio chaotic signals and fostering the perception that the DCEU franchise is unhealthy.

6.3.3 Porous Storyworlds

Ultimately, the DCEU was shown to be a porous storyworld, influenced by the desires of a segment of its fandom. However, this form of participatory storyworld creation is far from the scenario advocated by J. Gomez (personal communication, 24 November 2018) and conceptualised by Wolf (2014). #ReleaseTheSnyderCut was an example of a fan campaign bullying a studio into surrendering to their demands. It was also a campaign built to support a specific author, not necessarily the franchise. While *Zack Snyder's Justice League* was perceived as a more coherent text than *Justice League*, it did not generate increased interest in the franchise or shift the existing sentiment across the broader DC fanbase.

When I asked Fabian Nicieza (personal communication, 14 November 2018) how much input fans should have in the development of a story, he responded,

Screw the fans, man. To hell with the fans. I don't care because personally I'm creating the content and ultimately, I am generally doing it for an audience of one: me. I understand what my audience might want out of it, might need out of it, might deserve out of it, might not want, and you're going to do it anyway, because sometimes you have to give them what they don't want in order to get to the next point in your narrative.

Based on his experience as a commercial storyteller, Nicieza spoke consistently of the need for a storyteller to have the creative autonomy to explore ideas and the ability to clearly express them. From his perspective, pandering to fan desires or incorporating fan suggestions will dilute the potency of a story. F. Nicieza (personal communication, 14 November 2018) expressed less concern with audience sentiment than with the commercial bottom line as a metric of success:

Ultimately, if people are purchasing your entertainment content, then that is the master you have to serve, because that means that whether they like it or not, whether new people are coming in, whether old people are leaving, none of that matters as long as it's producing at a quantitative level that allows it to continue to exist.

Salter and Stanfill (2020) highlight that Snyder's work has always generated lower profits than expected, particularly in light of the ardent fandom he has built around his work. Snyder has been able to leverage his highly engaged fan base to continue creating new texts, even in a major commercial franchise such as the DCEU. However, even *Zack Snyder's Justice League* did not generate the revenue the studio needed for Snyder to continue with his DCEU plans.

Once again, this outcome highlights the need for studios and storytellers to maintain consistent fan engagement practices that involve deep listening. Although the #ReleaseTheSnyderCut movement became too big for Warner Bros. to ignore, it did not represent the wider DCEU fan base. In the context of social media, Gray (2021) encourages us to consider who is not being heard. Social media's non-transparent algorithms and biased design mean that it has the capacity to disproportionately amplify certain voices. As we have seen, this can warp public perceptions of what a group may think. I asked Steve Coulson (personal communication, 21 December 2021) whether he had encountered divided fandoms and divisive fan practices:

Fan communities have always been collective experiences. You don't really get into a fandom to fight each other—you get into a fandom to celebrate your shared love . . .

By and large, I'm not seeing the politicisation of storyworlds to the extent that you might think. I think certainly on the ground, within the world, it's really hard to not be fooled into thinking that Twitter is the world, whereas Twitter is actually the vocal minority.

Coulson's insights ratify that the social energy produced by social media is difficult to verify. However, it is social energy nonetheless, with the capacity to influence commercial decisions and the broader cultural perception of how a franchise is functioning. Commercial storytellers would be well advised to anticipate, direct and mitigate social energy flow to manage the health of their franchise.

6.4 Summary

The case studies presented in this chapter demonstrate the industry preference to suppress or outright ignore fan activity. Nevertheless, they show that the *social energy* generated by passionate fan discourse can influence a franchise's cultural and commercial position. Therefore, it is in the best interests of franchise managers to proactively harness this energy and direct it to best serve their goals. However, the fact that consultancy groups such as Campfire and Starlight Runner need to teach industry practitioners how to do so highlights the apprehension and fear of managing fandoms, let alone how to incorporate fans into the construction of a storyworld.

In part, these examples also demonstrate how the entertainment industry misunderstands how to productively intersect with modern technologies. While each case study shows examples of companies speaking to fans, they rarely use social media to actively listen to their fans in a consolidated top-down fashion. 'Power users' such as Zack Snyder, James Gunn, Dave Filoni and Rian Johnson may offer this to fans, but this can be problematic

if the vision of a single artist does not align with the overarching storyworld goals of the franchise. The fact that Marvel has not yet encountered major issues with the MCU fan base seems somewhat fortunate, but the company would be at risk if an issue were to arise.

However, social media sites are often biased and portray messages in a disproportionate way. Social media alone is not an effective way for storytellers to understand their fan base. Not all fans are effectively seen or heard through these channels, so while social media is incredibly useful, online fandoms represent only a segment of the overall fan base. This research has shown a recurring finding—that while technology is not the only solution to effective communication, it can be a major asset when used well.

Chapter 7: Transmedia, Technology and Future Trends

While modern transmedia storytelling is commonly linked to advances in modern technology, technology is not the only key to creating potent entertainment experiences. The term ‘immersion’ has become increasingly prevalent in the discourse and often points to the lack of depth of commercial transmedia storytelling. A consideration of the immersive qualities of physical and place-based entertainment experiences can help reframe conceptual discussions of transmedia storytelling and highlight the importance of immediacy, personalisation and socialisation in commercial entertainment.

Over the past decade, industry practitioners have come to a consensus that the term ‘transmedia’ is rarely used as intended in commercial settings, a notion supported by all of my interviewees. During the 2010s, studios and Hollywood press releases regularly used the term ‘transmedia’ to describe new projects (Pulman, personal communication, 5 January 2022). However, as transmedia projects such as Universal’s Dark Universe and Sony’s *Spider-Man* franchise and Valiant Universe failed to gain commercial traction, it became apparent that the term ‘transmedia’ was being used by the industry to describe textual interconnectivity without producers necessarily having the knowledge or infrastructure to create a cohesive transmedia experience. These nascent franchises failed because audiences perceived them as low quality.

The industry assumption that technological advancements will make entertainment more exciting is not surprising given that technology is intertwined with conceptual discussions of transmedia storytelling. According to Jenkins (2003, 2006a), technological convergence is a major reason for transmedia storytelling flourishing faster and easier than ever before. It was not until Scolari et al. (2014) released *Transmedia Archaeology* that the scholarly discussion shifted to consider transmedia storytelling a cultural practice that

preceded the digital age.³¹ As Jenkins (2006a) predicted, the proliferation of new media technologies has resulted in an explosion of transmedia projects. The increasing commercial incentive to populate current and emerging platforms with more content often results in franchises being expanded into transmedia structures (Brooker, 2001; E. Evans, 2011). Therefore, many large-scale commercial transmedia applications blur the cause-and-effect relationship between transmedia and technology.

The COVID-19 pandemic had an undeniable influence on modern commercial entertainment. During a period when many forms of entertainment were unavailable, technology was used successfully (and unsuccessfully) to create entertainment, demonstrating the underlying traits that ensure quality. These traits can and should be incorporated into large-scale experiences.

From my first round of interviews to my second, I observed a noticeable shift from the use of the term ‘transmedia’ to the use of ‘immersion’ to describe the goals of large-scale commercial entertainment. This change was based on a growing awareness that commercial transmedia projects had not been fully realised in the way that many transmedia advocates had hoped, and the industry use of the term had taken on a different meaning. Jeff Gomez (personal communication, 24 November 2018) stated that while ‘transmedia’ had been a useful term for provoking change in the entertainment industry, it is often not employed to its full creative extent. In our first discussion, Steve Coulson (personal communication, 15 November 2018) noted that his company had always preferred to use the terms ‘immersion’ and ‘participation’ to describe its aims, with the former more closely aligned with the artistic side of the transmedia movement. In our second discussion, Andrea Phillips (personal communication, 18 January 2022) explained that the term ‘immersion’ had replaced the term

³¹ Jenkins has responded to this argument on multiple occasions, clarifying that he never suggested that modern transmedia storytelling is a complete break from historical practices (Jenkins, 2017b) and that modern scholarly work offers a toolkit for retrospectively considering ‘earlier media ecologies’ (Jenkins, 2019a, p. xxix).

‘transmedia’ in the industry because it was a more accurate descriptor of the kinds of projects in which she was involved. Likewise, Henry Jenkins (personal communication, 30 September 2019) highlighted his growing interest in understanding the cultural evolution of entertainment experiences as opposed to debating the logics of transmedia interconnectivity.

7.1 Physical Immersion: Personalisation, Exclusivity and Immediacy

The concept of immersion has a long history in media studies and is frequently seen in the transmedia scholarship. Rose’s (2011) *The Art of Immersion*, for example, is a comprehensive resource for understanding the concept of immersion as it is used in entertainment. Rose defines immersion as a state of consciousness in which one is fully absorbed in a particular experience to the point of losing track of one’s surroundings and sense of self. E. Evans (2011) argues that audiences navigate transmedia texts through immersion, agency and immediacy, with immersion being the ability of audiences to lose themselves in a fictional world. To describe this sensation, Evans draws on Mittell’s (2006) description of the ‘paranoid mist’ (para. 2) that develops as audiences move between platforms and dive further into a fictional world, embracing the feeling that it is real despite knowing it is not.

The correlation between immersion and technology must be considered. Rose (2011) argues that technological advances have enabled entertainment to become increasingly immersive. Tracing the history of modern media, he explores how each new era, from books to radio to television to film to video games, has enabled progressively deeper immersive experiences. Rose (2011) argues that the hyperlinked, nonlinear, multilayered, participatory storytelling of the internet age has led to the creation of ‘deep media’ (p. 3), which is far more immersive than historically possible.

Through this lens, immersion can be understood as the separation of an individual from reality. M.-L. Ryan’s (1999) exploration of VR and literary theory praises technology as

a means by which players can access alternative worlds with greater speed than through literary immersion. M.-L. Ryan argues the immediate sensory data that present-day technology can provide does not require the effort of the imagination to reduce the impulses of self-reflexivity that can interrupt processes of immersion (p. 133). Similarly, Rose (2011) characterises immersive experiences by their ability to engage the senses and evoke strong emotional responses, making the participant feel as if they are fully present in a virtual environment. Providing audiences with an escapist experience is an aspirational pursuit in the context of entertainment. However, more broadly, technology and immersion may also be perceived as seductive tools that can remove the participant's agency. For example, Rose (2011) traces the social panic that each new type of media, from books to VR, will be 'too immersive' and prone to removing participants from everyday reality.

However, perceiving immersion as a purely escapist venture is overly simplistic. Deep immersion requires active participation (Rose, 2011), and for many of my interviewees, designing experiences in the physical realm that maximise audience agency is the key to success. Therefore, technology is not always the answer to creating agency and, in some cases, may even be a barrier. For example, while both Steve Coulson and Andrea Phillips spoke about creating entertainment using AR and VR, neither was fully confident in these technologies to provide deep media experiences in their current state. As Steve Coulson (personal communication, 15 November 2018) explained,

Arthur C. Clarke had that great quote about sufficiently advanced technology seeming like magic. So, the best thing about VR and AR is not the technology—it's when it makes you feel like it's magical, and the closer we can get to it being indistinguishable from magic, which is a real and authentic experience, the better . . . We're not there yet with AR and VR. Certainly not because we haven't experienced it enough. It's not

seamless enough that you can put it on and forget about it. So, until that point, I think it's going to be very difficult to truly create immersive moments.

Beyond the limitations of the current state of technology, Steve Coulson (personal communication, 15 November 2018) also highlighted how technological innovations continue to create new issues that his team must consider when designing immersive entertainment experiences:

A book—very immersive medium, all right? Books, difficult for a book to be immersive now because I'm reading a book on my iPad, and my Twitter pops up. So, it is difficult. So, I think those technologies sometimes get in the way of immersion.

Coulson's example highlights how technological convergence can create distracting and disruptive spaces that detract from some forms of entertainment. Contrary to the predominant commercial interest in achieving entertainment at scale, the design of physical or place-based immersive experiences continues to be front of mind for *Starlight Runner* and *Campfire* because they can offer heightened sensations that can focus participants' attention and remove other distractions.

7.1.1 Personalisation and Agency

For over half a century, the pinnacle of Disney's entertainment experiences has been its theme parks. Freeman (2017a) emphasises the importance of Disneyland as a place where audiences can become immersed in the 'plausible impossible' (p. 102), a blend of the real and imaginary in a single site. This peak entertainment concept has permeated other aspects of the company's output. After enabling fans to literally walk through Mickey Mouse's neighbourhood, Disney has attempted to propagate the same sense of world-building immersion in its films, cartoons and other media content (Freeman, 2017a). While this was originally achieved by connecting media featuring Mickey and his pals, the company has since applied the same strategy to numerous franchises developed under the Disney umbrella.

Freeman draws on Jenkins's (2009) argument that transmedia storyworlds must offer a balance between immersion and extractability. A peak immersive experience such as visiting a theme park can subsequently be carried into a participant's everyday life through items such as theme park merchandise. From this perspective, place-based immersion is positioned as the ultimate storyworld experience.

When I arrived in New York in 2018, Starlight Runner was acutely interested in the new Disney theme park attraction *Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge*, which would expand the legacy franchise through a place-based immersive experience. Jeff Gomez (personal communication, 24 November 2018) had consulted on the project, describing its appeal as follows:

I think there is a yearning for becoming physically involved . . . We have a generation that's been brought up on video games, where the distinction between the player and the action on screen almost dissolves as this is happening, and still there are limits. So, with such a massive generation worldwide of people who are weaned on that kind of experience, what can be better but then to physically move into that experience?

Here, Gomez notes the participatory limitations imposed by technology and the higher value of in-person experiences for invested fans. While the *Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge* attraction would not be entirely technology free, similar to Disneyland, technology would be used to deepen the physical experience in service of the storyworld narrative:

I'm talking about the use of many different mixed media, all in the service of simulating a fictitious world as if it's real around you, and then moving through it and engaging sometimes with artificial characters, animated or animatronic, and then perhaps with live actors dressed in costume [who are] able to improvise encounters with you. (J. Gomez, personal communication, 24 November 2018)

This entertainment experience described by Gomez is more akin to deeply immersive role playing. The Disney Parks (n.d.) website promotes the attraction as follows: 'Discover *Star*

Wars: Galaxy's Edge at Walt Disney World Resort and the Disneyland Resort, where you can live out your own *Star Wars* story, fly the *Millennium Falcon* and explore a remote outpost where adventure awaits' (para. 1).

The invitation to 'live out your own *Star Wars* story' goes beyond the usual remit of a theme park ride. As Gomez suggests, it is important to consider how the participatory quality of video games and similar media formats may be informing theme park attractions. This, again, is an example of media boundaries blurring as audiences traverse different sites of entertainment and producers seek to offer heightened experiences (E. Evans, 2011).

Jeff Gomez (personal communication, 24 November 2018) strongly believes that audiences are keen to become more deeply invested in the narrative development of a storyworld and was excited about *Star Wars: Galaxy's Edge* being able to offer not only a physical immersion in a storyworld but also a meaningful narrative participation:

We have the technology to allow for someone to learn more about their favourite storyworld and even somehow interact with it in a physical way, in an environmental way, in an immersive way, so that they are not simply bearing witness to the actions of a hero or a villain but making similar kinds of choices and actions right there, live in the venue.

Gomez's eagerness to see such nuanced participation relates to the idea that participatory entertainment can advance an individual's experience in manifold ways; that is, it can teach them new skills and create spaces where they can try out these skills, which they can then use to create meaningful change in their own lives. However, this goal is not necessarily shared by Gomez's contemporaries. While Steve Coulson (personal communication, 21 December 2021) acknowledged that modern transmedia projects such as the MCU are 'birthing more divers' (fans who seek a deep level of participatory engagement),

both he and Fabian Niecieza (personal communication, 14 November 2018) spoke about the importance of catering for fans who do not crave such deep involvement.

My interviews yielded a range of views on the virtues of interactive and participatory media, including different rationales for pursuing physical immersion. For example, when I asked Steve Coulson (personal communication, 15 November 2018) about his favourite Campfire projects, he referred to a scent-based experience the team had designed to promote *Game of Thrones* and offer participants a strong world-building experience:

The way I pitched that project was that it's [*Game of Thrones*] a very complex story . . . You don't want them meeting those characters before they've set foot on the TV show. That was a world-building exercise. I think my pitch to the client was [that] travel is a very sensory experience. You smell the smell of the marketplace, the smell of the fish market when you walk through it or [hear] the sound of the sea. It's a very sensory experience. Can we create a nostalgia for a place that not only have people never visited but has never existed? So, that led to a five-part sensory program. And the reason for the senses is that [it] invokes a memory, and we tried to invoke a memory. So, we did the scent box, and there were three different scents for, say, the Dothraki playing the Game of Thrones. So, there would be [a] scent box, and there would be one vial of grass and one vial of campfire and one vial of horses, and each one smell all those things, and you mix them together and that's what it would smell like if you stood in a Dothraki camp.

Offering entertainment through the sense of smell is a highly accessible and primal style of storytelling. Manifesting a storyworld through the sense that is most closely linked to memory shows how physical immersion can be used to forge deep individual connections with a story.

As entertainers seek to engage with global audiences and explore the boundaries of immersion, non-narrative entertainment experiences are becoming more prominent. In our

conversation, Andrea Phillips (personal communication, 18 January 2022) highlighted that many of her projects feature no narratives but instead focus on sensory immersion: ‘I’m seeing and I’m doing a lot of things that have that, sort of, underlying thematic feeling. They’re evocative, they’re emotional, they’re aesthetic, but they’re not narrative as such.’

Steve Coulson also highlighted this trend, directing me to the company Meow Wolf, which creates place-based, immersive art experiences, where visitors are invited to navigate imaginative warehouse-sized spaces that have been transformed through artistic installations.

7.1.2 Exclusivity and Socialisation

Irrespective of the style of immersion they offer, given their exclusive nature, place-based experiences are highly valuable transmedia tools. While transmedia storytelling provides an infinite expansion of and access to a storyworld, physical immersion enables access to the finite moments that make a storyworld unique. Physical immersion can involve not only story-based sites such as theme park attractions but also place-based activities such as conventions and fan events, which offer an exclusive immersion in their own right (Jenkins, 2012; Kohnen et al., 2023). Access to place-based experiences is naturally limited by geographical, cost and time barriers. In the context of major commercial franchises, they are a premium product available only to select fans. In 2019, Disney’s Parks, Experiences and Products division, which includes its global theme parks and cruises, accounted for almost 40% of the company’s revenue (Walt Disney Company, 2019), which is substantial given that it is derived from only a small fraction of Disney’s total audience. The global immersive entertainment market was valued at over US\$95 billion in 2023 and is expected to continue growing substantially (Polaris Market Research, 2024; Vision Research Reports, 2023).

For those who can afford it, participating in premium experiences has the potential to offer a heightened transmedia experience commensurate with the effort and good fortune required to participate in it (Phillips, 2012). These experiences provide fans with a unique

opportunity to amplify their digital persona and social capital when sharing them through social media (Jenkins, 2006b). Media producers, in turn, often harness this fan labour to generate buzz for their work (Salter & Stanfill, 2020; Stanfill, 2019). For example, Steve Coulson (personal communication, 15 November 2018) explained the rationale for commissioning place-based experiences at conventions:

Fear of missing out is one of our metrics of success for some of our clients. It was interesting—I saw that tweet the other day by one of our clients from HBO; he talked about FOMO being one of the metrics for success, which was certainly a measure of success when we worked with them on *Westworld* because that was an experience at San Diego that, I mean, 500 people or 600 would go to by design.

Thus, social media can generate the fear of exclusion, compelling individuals to pursue more exclusive entertainment experiences and place a higher value on these experiences.

Witnessing fans partaking in an immersive experience is both enjoyable and a way to incite buzz. This is a core driver of Campfire’s approach to creating place-based experiences. For this reason, in 2022, Starlight Runner began staging live shows for the *Ultraman* franchise. Announcing new projects in theatres full of fans and then sharing footage of the event (and the raucous fan responses), as both Marvel and Lucasfilm have done, is a way for fans who are not present to vicariously experience the thrill of an exclusive experience. It is also a unique way to leverage genuine fan enthusiasm and amplify this across a global audience (Stanfill, 2019).

Disney’s efforts to showcase fans who are physically present at key sites and during key moments of franchise development demonstrate that building sites of physical immersion has become part of the corporate strategy. Steve Coulson (personal communication, 15 November 2018) has observed a sharp industry-wide increase in small, location-based transmedia experiences:

I think they're driven by that need to create a physical experience that amplifies your digital and social persona. And we've also been blessed with the rise of tribal gatherings where you can target that, for example. I think up until 3 or 4 years ago, we hadn't done a comic con, and now every year we're doing something, or even more than one thing. But now we're starting to see it more in cities, right? Major cities and not-so-major cities as well.

The recent commercial demand for place-based experiences is interesting because much of the grassroots transmedia experimentation, which was based on hybrid offline and online engagement, did not cross over to commercial entertainment. One of the largest commercial transmedia experiments, Warner Bros.'s 'Why so serious?' campaign, involved fans working collectively online to find clues around the US in the lead-up to the release of *The Dark Knight*. However, projects such as these were costly and difficult to scale to mass audiences, thus were mostly considered marketing endeavours (S. Coulson, personal communication, 15 November 2018; Jenkins, 2013). Therefore, transmedia storytelling has largely remained a digital endeavour. The increasing demand for place-based events reported by Campfire suggests that industry paradigms are shifting and new models of profitability for fan engagement are being explored.

Henry Jenkins (personal communication, 30 September 2019) has also experienced a shift in preferred fan engagement strategies among his students, whose projects were gravitating more towards location-based experiences:

In the transmedia class, the students do projects where they take existing media properties and pitch by the end of the semester transmedia strategies for extensions of those properties. The last couple of rounds teaching the class, the students have overwhelmingly focused on location-based experiences.

This observation deserves further critical inquiry. While it may seem counterintuitive that a generation raised with technology may prefer non-technological entertainment, the fact that place-based entertainment is growing in commercial and conceptual popularity indicates that there are types of immersion that modern technology cannot fully replace. However, shortly after my interview with Jenkins and halfway through my research project, there would be a global event that would radically disrupt the feasibility of all physically immersive experiences.

7.1.3 COVID-19 Disruption and Digital (Dis)Connection

In 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic brought the entertainment industry to a standstill and ushered in the greater use of technology for creating immersive experiences. Physical and location-based projects initiated by Campfire and Starlight Runner came to a halt or were drastically altered. The need for social distancing, compounded by people choosing to avoid crowds, made group events difficult to coordinate. Steve Coulson (personal communication, 21 December 2021) explained:

While there have been experiments during the pandemic, and we can talk about cities not being as important as they were—I haven't been in the centre of New York in 12 months, even though it's, like, 9 miles away, I haven't been there just because I haven't needed to—so, traditionally we would think about doing something where there's a lot of foot traffic. Foot traffic is something that has really changed, certainly in the US . . . Where is [the] foot traffic? And is there foot traffic? Do you have to worry about foot traffic? Are we thinking about something that's purely ticketed or something that we're trying to get people off the street? So, there have definitely been changes and definitely COVID protocols with every activation we do. We're trying to do more outside, not packing it in the way we used to, packing people in the way we

used to, but I do think we're still in a wait-and-see period because it's very difficult to predict.

However, alternative virtual experiences were not always successful. Steve Coulson (personal communication, 21 December 2021) also spoke about the difficulty of replicating large-scale events with technology at the time:

There was still [a] strong appetite amongst our clients to continue that work. I don't see that they have permanently shifted their strategy, certainly the clients that we have been working with, to focus on just digital experiences. A lot of them have tried immersive online screenings that combine viewing content with some kind of storyworld exploration. We've been a part of those, but by and large, they're not attended in the same kind of numbers that a physical experience is. You would think that a digital experience would expand reach dramatically, but there's a much lower interest level . . . I think it's very difficult to generate FOMO for a digital event.

To understand why digital experiences may be less desirable than physical experiences, it is important to consider what they are missing. One of the largest physical immersion entertainment experiences to transform into a fully online experience was the SDCC, the largest and longest running convention for fans of comic books and science fiction (Jenkins, 2012). Kohnen et al. (2023) argue that the annual convention was primed for platformisation given that fans were already accessing vendors and content in a platform-like manner. However, the authors conclude that the virtual SDCC held in 2020 felt more like an exercise in brand promotion than the social experience many fans expected. This is because the online experience was missing the interstitial elements that gives the SDCC its sense of spectacle. The organisers presented a digital map of the booth layout, with storefronts linked to the exhibitors' websites. In the absence of many of the usual major exhibitors,³² much of

³² Marvel and DC chose not to attend the virtual event, instead opting to coordinate events of their own.

the traffic was diverted to the Amazon website for media content. Subsequently, the SDCC became little more than a directory to a range of disparate sites (Kohnen et al., 2023). While Kohnen et al. (2023) acknowledge that this event was a type of ‘disaster platformisation’ in light of the pandemic, the failure of this experience to replicate the convention highlights the importance of socialisation to the process of immersion.

DC’s FanDome held in August 2020 was arguably a more successful event and offered fans a deep dive into the DC storyworld (see Figure 7.1). Presenting various categories that allowed fans to enter the different ‘worlds’ of DC, DC offered a more connected experience of its overall content than it had done in preceding years (Swann, 2020). The company presented a schedule of panels and previews and focused on global audiences by including panel members and presenters from locations around the globe, Spanish-speaking panels and questions from fans in various countries. While it represented a cohesive global event for the company, FanDome was only run once more in 2021 before DC chose to abandon the concept.

Figure 7.1

DC FanDome 2021 Offered Users Access to the Different Worlds of DC



Note. Adapted from *DC FanDome homepage*, by DC, 2021 (<https://dcfandome.com>). Copyright 2021 by DC.

7.1.4 Immediacy and Intimacy

Beyond the mixed fortunes of large events going virtual, my anonymous interviewee (personal communication, 25 January 2022) noted that the pandemic had also had a surprising effect on the traditional comic book industry:

I'm grateful to say that we were all very pleasantly surprised that a different thing happened, that the . . . pandemic led to a surge of interest in really pretty much all entertainment product[s]. Certainly, for publishing, the last couple of years have been boom times. We've seen double-digit growth, both in the book market and in the specialty comic book market. We lost very few retail stores, even though there was a disruption in the distribution channels at the start of the pandemic . . . and in fact most publishers have been reporting record years the last couple of years.

These insights demonstrate not only the increased desire for escapism during the pandemic but also the need for distraction-free immersive experiences, reinforcing the importance of immediacy in entertainment experiences. Andrea Phillips (personal communication, 18 January 2022) also observed an increased desire for smaller, more exclusive digital entertainment events during the pandemic:

When the pandemic hit, we started seeing a lot of ticketed online experiences, not free on the web in the old ARG [AR gaming] style but using a lot of those same tools, where you'd be searching up websites and looking for clues, but kind of predicated—like, there's an Isklander trilogy by Swamp Motel, and it's really lovely—you wouldn't have seen that as a ticketed experience previously. I think there was a fear that you couldn't charge people money for stuff like that in the olden days, but people are willing to pay money for an hour of being charmed and delighted.

These kinds of events would offer participants a truncated AR gaming experience (compared with the months-long games in previous years) in an ‘intimate’ digital setting. The appeal of these experiences were their ‘live’ and exclusive nature:

Ticketing sets up a specific time and a specific group of people [with] a place to participate in the experience, where previously, internet stuff was just sort of always there whenever you got to it. And ticketing makes it feel like an event, so it makes it feel more valuable, even if it’s just a set piece that’s always kind of there and doesn’t require live performers. Although, all of the things that I’ve been participating in too require live performers. I don’t think that’s actually necessary. It’s the bounding of the event in a time box that tells you [that] you have to devote your attention to it. In that moment, it makes it feel exclusive, and so you’re not going to click away to something else. (A. Phillips, personal communication, 18 January 2022)

Phillips’s insights demonstrate the heightened demand for personalised, intimate modes of entertainment for which audiences were willing to pay during the pandemic. Given the loneliness and isolation that many people endured during the pandemic, these reported shifts seem logical. However, they also underscore the most important elements people seek through entertainment, regardless of the platform.

While it is too soon to know whether these reported shifts will result in long-term change, both Phillips and Coulson suggest that the pandemic has allowed for many artists to explore new financial models for transmedia production. As Steve Coulson (personal communication, 21 December 2021) stated,

I don’t know about paid transmedia experiences, but I’ve seen more transmedia artists being able to make money from their work. I’ve seen a lot of people give up their jobs and go full time on their passion, probably because the standard of living has changed, so they can afford to live a little bit more cheaply; but more, I think, as well, the

streaming services that you pay for on a regular basis as opposed to being funded by commercials . . . is creating a generation that's much more used to micro-payments for storytelling experiences.

Looking forward to a post-pandemic era, Steve Coulson (personal communication, 21 December 2021) sees physical immersion becoming even more important for the industry:

I do think there's definitely an appetite with every activation that we've done or [that] we do—an appetite to extend that, in a way, that means it's more permanent, that has higher entertainment value, that functions less like an installation and more like a theme park ride. I think it's going to take another 5 to 10 years, but I think you will definitely start to see the kind of things that Campfire have been doing at a con as a standalone ticketed extension of a storyworld or a footprint in the world that you can step into.

As Coulson suggests, the pandemic highlighted the demand for and the importance of physical immersion, which is likely to be a significant focus of many future commercial projects.

When thinking about the future of transmedia development, we can start by considering what is presently lacking, which was made more apparent during the pandemic. The pandemic highlighted how meaningful and effective personalised sensory entertainment experiences can be as tools to foster socialisation.

The modern digital age is characterised by overwhelming amounts of information and sensory experiences. Thus, it is perhaps not surprising that modes of entertainment that provide a deep experience of the present moment have proven to be popular, particularly during a sustained period of global chaos. Creating experiences in which audiences can become more deeply immersed should be the goal of a storyteller or artist. From this perspective, it is easy to understand why so many of my interviewees were most excited about

projects that involved physical and place-based experiences. This increased commercial and public trend towards physical immersion experiences may also be considered a wider reaction to the distraction and overwhelming information created by digital media.

Using immersion as a framework by which to understand the evolution of commercial transmedia entertainment helps to reframe the discussion as an inherently human process. It reminds us that technology should only be used in entertainment to enhance the fundamental qualities audiences are seeking. Thus, technology should not be misunderstood as the key to effective transmedia; rather, it should be considered a useful tool for effective storytelling.

7.2 Platformed Immersion: Streaming, Rhythm, Repetition and Overflow

Nevertheless, the emergence of new technologies allows for new kinds of immersive experiences to occur. Streaming technologies, for example, have enabled—and encouraged—commercial transmedia storytellers to produce increasing amounts of content, which, in turn, hastens the rate at which audiences can consume it. The COVID-19 pandemic led to streaming platforms being the primary portal through which commercial transmedia entertainment is accessed. The commercial imperative to keep audiences subscribed to streaming platforms has motivated studios to find new ways of repurposing existing content. As a result, the streaming environment facilitates frequent and repeated audience engagement.

This section establishes the concept of *platformed immersion*, which, in the context of transmedia entertainment, encourages audiences to engage with a storyworld with increasing frequency. Effective platformed immersion relies on efficient navigational systems that allow audiences to easily traverse an increasing deluge of content. Through an analysis of the immersive qualities of streaming and its role in modern transmedia storytelling, this section shows how the use of technology must be tempered by its ability to maintain storyworld immersion.

7.2.1 Streaming

The COVID-19 pandemic fast-tracked commercial investments in streaming services and increased the importance of streaming in major commercial transmedia franchises (Webster et al., 2022). The global closure of cinemas, theme parks, cruises and other modes of place-based entertainment severely affected traditional revenue streams. For example, in 2019, Disney's Parks, Entertainment and Products division earned \$26.2 billion, but this reduced to \$16.5 billion in 2020 (Walt Disney Company, 2020). Streaming platforms remained one of the few viable media distribution platforms and were vital for studios to keep audiences connected to their franchises. However, the pandemic also caused significant delays in major Hollywood productions. Studios had to adapt to new production conditions, with many choosing to delay the release of major projects while determining how best to maximise profits in the absence of cinema. This led to a 2–3 year lag in the release of new major television and film projects (S. Coulson, personal communication, 21 December 2021; J. Gomez, personal communication, 17 February 2022), creating a popular cultural vacuum at the height of the pandemic.

In this environment, Disney and Warner Bros. prioritised their then nascent streaming services, Disney+ and HBO Max, respectively. Disney released a select range of films, including *Artemis Fowl*, *Hamilton* and Pixar's *Soul*, to boost its platform subscriptions and revenue (D'Alessandro & Hipes, 2020). It then experimented with charging additional fees for new releases such as *Mulan* (Hughes, 2020). Meanwhile, Warner Bros. Discovery (2020) announced that all of its films would be simultaneously released both in theatres and on HBO Max in 2021, triggering an industry-wide scramble to determine new models of attribution and payment (Ziffren, 2020).³³ To illustrate how disruptive this process was, after the MCU

³³ At the time of writing, the effects of this transition are still being felt. The Hollywood writer's strike of 2023 highlights the ongoing disruption of traditional modes of compensation and stable work from the shift to streaming-based projects.

film *Black Widow* was released on Disney+, the star of the film, Scarlett Johansson, sought financial compensation from Disney for her reduced box office percentage earnings (Masters & Siegel, 2021). Disney CEO Bob Chapek chose to make this disagreement public, resulting in a rare public feud between Disney and a prominent member of the MCU. Similarly, Warner Bros. director Patty Jenkins was vocal in her displeasure that the DCEU film *Wonder Woman 1984* had been released via a streaming platform instead of the cinema, despite the studio offering her an upfront payment of \$10 million (Barnes & Sperling, 2020).

However, the projects that Marvel, Lucasfilm and DC had already designed for release on their streaming platforms offered them new opportunities during this unique period. Accompanying the launch of Disney+, the first season of the *Star Wars* streaming series *The Mandalorian* premiered in late 2019, immediately following the conclusion of the Skywalker Saga films and just before the onset of the pandemic. The second season premiered amid the pandemic in October 2020. In both instances, the show was released in weekly instalments. *WandaVision*, also released weekly, was Marvel's first MCU streaming show and premiered in January 2021 after a full year of no new MCU content. The show featured Wanda Maximoff and Vision, two major Avengers characters who had previously only featured in MCU films. In March 2021, Warner Bros. released *Zack Snyder's Justice League*—a 4-hour director's cut that showcased Snyder's original vision for the film—on HBO Max. Allowing Snyder to assemble and edit existing footage proved to be a project well suited to the pandemic lockdowns (Couch, 2021).

While the commercial move towards streaming predated the pandemic, streaming platforms became the main access portal and the effective 'home' for many commercial transmedia franchises during the pandemic. Both the *Star Wars* and MCU storyworlds are now encapsulated in Disney+, where audiences can access films, TV shows, animated series and specials. Likewise, HBO Max offers a curation of DCEU media and other DC

productions.³⁴ While transmedia fans have traditionally had to ‘hunt and gather’ (Jenkins, 2006b) individual texts, streaming offers immediate access to a substantial proportion of official texts. Therefore, shows like *The Mandalorian*, *WandaVision* and *Zack Snyder’s Justice League* serve to draw audiences into the wider catalogue of storyworld content.

7.2.2 Rhythm

At the 2019 SDCC, Marvel presented its plans for Phase 4 of the MCU, which included not only films but also shows that would be developed for streaming (Marvel, 2019) (see Figure 7.2). This moment heralded not only a major shift in the transmedia structure of the MCU but also a wider industry transformation. Marvel was able to generate significant buzz by announcing whole slates of projects at fan-focused events (D. Johnson, 2012), a practice that DC and Lucasfilm are also emulating (see Figure 7.3). In 2020, Lucasfilm announced a slate of new *Star Wars* projects, the majority of which would be streaming shows (StarWars.com, 2020b). While DC already creates streaming content such as *Titans*, *Doom Patrol* and *Pennyworth*, the company announced a plan to use streaming to extend stories that originated in film (Swann, 2020). The release of *Zack Snyder’s Justice League* and the forthcoming TV series *Peacemaker* suggest that the company will continue to create more DCEU content for streaming.

³⁴ Given the usefulness of streaming as a direct portal into a studio’s commercial ecosystem, it may be assumed that streaming platforms will incorporate more media in the future. DC launched and then quickly abandoned a streaming platform dedicated entirely to DC content named the DC Universe. The platform featured DC films, TV shows, animations and a range of digital comic books. It was envisioned that an advanced editorial feature would direct audiences to different media to deepen their knowledge of characters and story events. Most of this content, excluding comics, is now housed on HBO Max. The streaming service Amazon Prime is located in the broader commercial Amazon ecosystem, allowing audiences to navigate between and purchase a variety of connected media. In 2020, Netflix expanded beyond films and shows to include video games and podcasts for subscribers.

Figure 7.2

Marvel Phase 4 Timeline Revealed at the 2019 San Diego Comic-Con, Including Five Films, Four Live-Action Streaming Shows and One Animated Show



Note. Adapted from 2019 Comic-Con International—Marvel Studios panel, by K. Winter, 2019. Copyright 2019 by Kevin Winter.

Figure 7.3

Lucasfilm's 2020 Announcement of New Projects, Including One Film, Seven Streaming Shows and Three Animated Shows



Note. Other Lucasfilm projects also pictured. Adapted from *Disney investor day*, by The Walt Disney Company, 2020 [Video] (<https://thewaltdisneycompany.com/disney-investor-day-2020/>) (1:30:22). Copyright 2020 by The Walt Disney Company.

The subscription-based streaming model means that studios must continue populating their streaming platforms with new content to retain audience interest. To satiate this hunger for more content, deriving new projects from established storyworlds such as *Star Wars*, the MCU or the DCEU makes business sense. Compared with films, streaming content can be produced more quickly and distributed in customisable patterns that keep audiences engaged over an extended period between the release of shows. Through streaming, large commercial franchises can deliver a variety of content with increased frequency, creating a new rhythm of consumption and audience expectations for what a modern cinematic storyworld can offer.

With the acceleration of new content creation, audiences are increasingly being conditioned to expect narrative intersections. For example, *The Mandalorian* included a surprise cameo from an original *Star Wars* character, Boba Fett (see Figure 7.4), who would then feature in a connected spin-off show, *The Book of Boba Fett*.

Figure 7.4

Star Wars Legacy Character Boba Fett Appearing in Season 2 of *The Mandalorian* Prior to Headlining His Own Spin-Off Show



Note. Adapted from ‘Chapter 14: The Tragedy, by R. Rodriguez, 2020, in J. Favreau, D. Filoni, K. Kennedy, C. Wilson, & R. Famuyiwa (Executive Producers), *The Mandalorian* (19:52). Copyright 2020 by Lucasfilm.

The raft of shows announced by Lucasfilm are set at different points in the *Star Wars* timeline, suggesting likely intersections with existing texts (e.g. the TV series *Star Wars*:

Lando is likely to be linked to the film *Solo: A Star Wars Story*; the TV series *Andor* will be a prequel to the film *Rogue One*; and the series *Obi-Wan Kenobi* is likely to connect events in the prequel films with the original *Star Wars* film). The rapid release of these streaming shows in one digital ecosystem creates a new paradigm for media interconnectivity and audience expectations of modern transmedia rhythms.

Streaming platforms, in which a variety of media texts are co-located, reflect the media blurring that occurs through transmedia storytelling (E. Evans, 2011) and how media companies are also blurring the boundaries between their own products. *Zack Snyder's Justice League* is a case in point. While director's cuts are not unprecedented, they have traditionally been released directly to home video as a curio for interested fans (such as the Warner Bros. release of *Superman II: The Richard Donner Cut* 26 years after Richard Lester's version was released). However, releasing a 4-hour IMAX ratio director's cut so soon after the original and showcasing a different vision of an ongoing cinematic storyworld to boost subscriptions for a platform amid a dearth of new content is a different proposition. In this instance, streaming was used to offer an 'Elseworlds'-style³⁵ exploration of the DCEU. To use a different example, *WandaVision*'s ability to recreate various TV sitcom eras before transitioning into a modern cinematic sensibility, all within a single series, presents a literal sliding scale of TV and cinematic tropes available via streaming. Thus, the streaming space offers a media flexibility in what it can offer and mix in a singular catalogued experience.

Yet, for all its novelty and flexibility, streaming also allowed *Star Wars* and Marvel to leverage traditional rhythms of media consumption during a period of deep cultural nostalgia. In contrast to the binge-watch type of streaming pioneered by Netflix, Disney's episodic release of *The Mandalorian* and *WandaVision* harks back to the traditional rhythms of broadcast television. During the pandemic, there was heightened nostalgia for familiar modes

³⁵ In reference to the DC Comics stories that take place outside of the DCEU canon.

of entertainment. For example, my anonymous interviewee (personal communication, 25 January 2022) observed an unexpected but welcome boost in comic book sales during the pandemic:

This is a trend that's gone across publishing, is we've seen this massive growth, but a lot of that growth has been driven by backlist material. So, it's less a case of people sort of wanting to explore and discover new product[s] as kind of revisit things that they've previously consumed. And that sort of brings back a good feeling for them. So certainly, nostalgia is always a powerful driver in entertainment. Properties have been constantly revived or revisited or remade. But I think the pandemic has really sort of fuelled that. On the publishing side there's increasing interest, especially in nineties nostalgia right now, we're seeing. That's a generation that hasn't really sort of been of the age to experience nostalgia before.

The weekly streaming of *Star Wars* and Marvel content, both already legacy media franchises, extended the ability for these shows to thrive in a nostalgia-rich environment. *Star Wars* is inherently a nostalgic franchise (Hassler-Forest & Brooker, 2017), and with *The Mandalorian* following the adventures of a mysterious hero traversing the *Star Wars* universe during the period of the original films, the show offers a staggered exploration of Lucas's original premise. *WandaVision* was a show *about* television and its historical importance as a site of family bonding (Webster et al., 2022). The story centres on Wanda, who creates a magical reality and leads the audience through different eras of sitcom TV to process the trauma of the death of her partner, Vision. She finds safety in TV tropes because she spent time bonding with her family around the TV as a child.

More significantly, the episodic distribution of *The Mandalorian* and *WandaVision* allowed the respective franchises to remain prevalent in popular culture for an extended period. During the pandemic and in the absence of competing content, both *The Mandalorian*

and *WandaVision* dominated the popular cultural conversation for months, in the same way that shows like *Lost* did on network TV (Mayberry, 2021). Both shows generated the kind of fan labour explored by Jenkins (2006b), such as fans using social media to collectively solve puzzles, anticipate narrative arcs and share their affection for the show through memes and fan-generated content. For example, the enigmatic *Star Wars* character Grogu and his likeness to Jedi master Yoda led to him becoming a site for memes and show discussion (see Figure 7.5).

Figure 7.5

The Memification of Grogu



Note. Adapted from ‘Chapter 2: The Child’, by R. Famuyiwa, 2019, in J. Favreau, D. Filoni, K. Kennedy, C. Wilson & R. Famuyiwa (Executive Producers), *The Mandalorian* (9:19). Copyright 2019 by Lucasfilm.

The capacity for *The Mandalorian* and *WandaVision* to keep audiences engaged over time meant they were also likely to keep audiences subscribed to Disney+. Both shows ranked as the most-watched show globally during their period of release (Chitwood, 2023; Mayberry, 2021). In contrast to the immediate gratification associated with Netflix’s binge-watch culture and digital media more generally, the sustained cultural conversation and storyworld immersion achieved by *The Mandalorian* and *WandaVision* highlights the value of building anticipation in modern entertainment. It also demonstrates the ability for streaming to create space for fan engagement and time to foster community around a text.

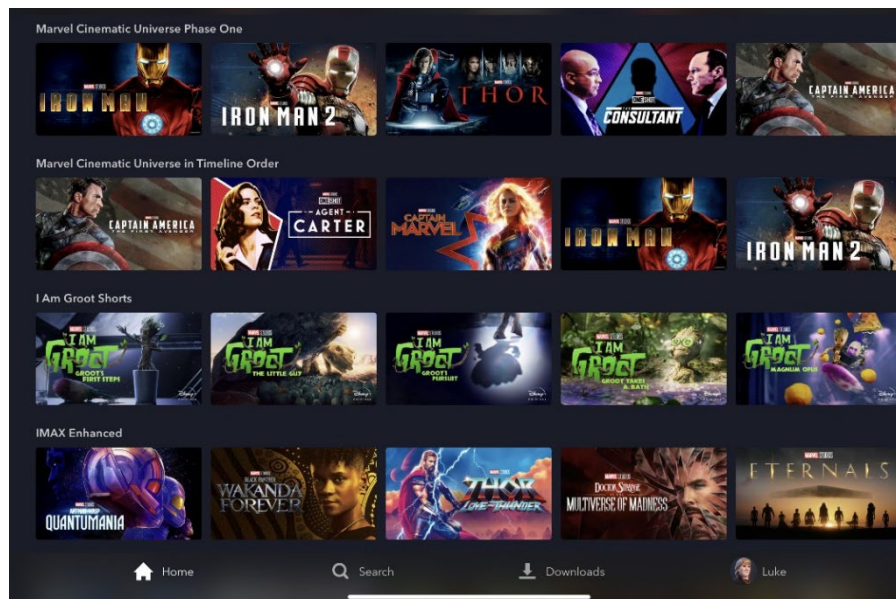
7.2.3 Repetition

The rhythm of sustained engagement is key to platformed immersion and is further enhanced through repetition. Wolf (2014, 2017) argues that the repeated exposure to a storyworld is key to world-building because it allows audiences to become deeply immersed in a storyworld. Likewise, from a semiotic perspective, Ojamaa and Torop (2015) suggest that culturally important messages should be repeated so that they remain active in our cultural memories. I argue that the intentional repetition of a message or story will allow it to gain cultural prominence. Transmedia franchises are well suited to inspiring repeated consumption. New texts can forge new narrative paths, inspiring audiences to revisit earlier texts and deepen their narrative immersion through ‘additive comprehension’ or even the ‘origami unicorn’ effect (Jenkins, 2006a, p. 127-8), where new pieces of information change the perception of a character or story and invite audiences to rewatch a text with a new perspective. Streaming allows audiences to immediately navigate texts in a progressive or retrospective manner, facilitating and encouraging the repeated consumption of the same texts.

First and foremost, streaming platforms play a role in categorising transmedia texts and creating new categories, suggesting to audiences that their consumption of a franchise is never complete. Take, for example, the menus offered for navigating the MCU. The platform lists MCU titles in order of release, chronological order based on the timeline of the MCU, by the appearance of different characters and so on (see Figure 7.6). Audiences are invited to view texts in different sequences to gain greater insights into the development of the overall MCU storyworld, specific character arcs or something else entirely. By creating these paths, the platform enhances the ‘drillability’ (Mittell, n.d.) of texts, offering audiences different ways to apply forensic fandom as they traverse the various narrative paths of the MCU.

Figure 7.6

Disney+ Offers Users Multiple Viewing Orders for the Marvel Cinematic Universe



Note. Screenshot showing some of the different Marvel Cinematic Universe viewing orders available on Disney+. Adapted from Screenshot of MCU menu, by Disney+, 2023 [Screenshot]. Copyright 2023 by The Walt Disney Company.

Marvel is also creating drillable pathways beyond official MCU texts by repurposing texts that Marvel Studios did not create. When Andrew Garfield and Tobey Maguire appeared as their respective versions of Spider-Man in *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, it immediately canonised two separate Sony-produced *Spider-Man* franchises into the narrative fabric of the MCU. The film also included the character Matt Murdock, whose superhero alias is Daredevil, previously seen in the Marvel television production of the same name. These texts are now becoming available on Disney+, categorised under different headings such as Marvel Legends, alongside Marvel films previously produced by 20th Century Fox. While not all texts are connected by narrative, the curated streaming space allows users to make their own connections.

Following the completion of a film or series, the platform suggests to audiences what to watch next, in support of additive comprehension (see Figure 7.7). For example, after finishing *WandaVision*, audiences are directed to watch *Avengers: Age of Ultron*, the MCU

film in which Wanda and Vision debuted. *WandaVision* explores the relationship between these two characters, which develops off-screen between their subsequent appearances in *Captain America: Civil War* and *Avengers: Infinity War*. Revisiting these earlier texts with the knowledge gained from *WandaVision* enables fans to consider the journey of these characters and their interactions in a new light.

Figure 7.7

At the Conclusion of WandaVision, Viewers are Recommended to Watch Avengers: Age of Ultron



Note. Screenshot of Disney+ encouraging viewers to watch *Avengers: Age of Ultron* at the end of *WandaVision*. Adapted from 'Because you watched' card, by Disney+, 2021 [Screenshot]. Copyright 2021 by Disney.

7.2.4 Overflow

The rate at which *Star Wars*, Marvel and DC projects are being produced continues to increase, so it is reasonable to wonder whether we may reach a point where audiences become overwhelmed by excessive platformed immersion. Under Disney's stewardship, the MCU continues to expand at an increasing pace, maintaining a dominant market share of the global box office and showing no signs of slowing down (apart from the interruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic). Conversely, Disney released more cinematic *Star Wars* content in a 5-year span than Lucas produced over 30 years but has experienced declining revenue and mixed critical success. Former (and now returned) Disney CEO Bob Iger (2019) has assumed

responsibility for this result, stating that it was his error to push for so much content to be released so quickly. While *Star Wars* audiences may be attuned to different rhythms, it may not be the speed of new content as much as its perceived quality that is the problem.

For Jeff Gomez (personal communication, 24 November 2018, 17 February 2022), if the primal aspirational message remains in place, franchises can continue expanding indefinitely. However, when a storyworld becomes a self-parody and begins disregarding the critical rules around narrative continuity or the avoidance of contradictions and redundancy, then audiences face barriers to narrative immersion, and a storyworld may lose its attractiveness. Increasing the pace of transmedia production enhances the risk of production teams overlooking such narrative breaks if there is not a comprehensive plan in place.

Scolari et al. (2014) remind us that the underlying pulp fiction on which many of these franchises are based have endured for decades. However, comic books, for example, have always been produced with the understanding that readers will eventually ‘grow out’ of the format (Anonymous, personal communication, 25 January 2022; S. Coulson, personal communication, 15 November 2018; F. Nicieza, personal communication, 14 November 2018), and comic book companies use different tactics, including narrative breaks, to attract new readers. At present, modern transmedia franchises are endeavouring to keep multiple generations of fans engaged, and the limits to their capacity to do so have not yet been defined.

One way in which studios can ensure that transmedia storyworlds remain accessible to vast audiences and are managed effectively by production teams is to ensure that clear navigational architectures are built into their franchises. Wolf (2017) argues there are limits to the sensory capacity of audiences, leading to the ‘chunking’ of information in amounts that suit them. For example, a comic book fan might read books written about a certain character or by a certain author to access a larger storyworld in a meaningful way. Fans are certainly

capable of hunting and gathering across large selections of content, but it is still in the best interests of the company to ensure that content can be found easily and effectively when contained in a digital streaming environment. Marvel has steered the MCU through phases, which may also serve as jumping-on points for new fans. Likewise, *Star Wars* is often clustered around different segments of its timeline, such as the prequel trilogy, the original trilogy and the sequel trilogy. The ‘behind-the-scenes’ *Star Wars* and Marvel shows on Disney+ are also navigational strategies, specifying where and how new shows connect to previous texts and within the timeline of major events (Leon & Baruh, 2020).

Notably, both Marvel and DC are now developing multiverses to categorise their narrative content and continuities within their storyworlds. The concept of a multiverse—multiple coexisting universes that carry separate continuities—has long been a narrative structure delineating vast segments of comic book storytelling. After Marvel introduced the multiverse concept in *Doctor Strange* and *Avengers: Endgame*, it then had the current Spider-Man portrayed by Tom Holland interact with the previous Sony-produced versions of the character portrayed by Tobey Maguire and Andrew Garfield in *Spider-Man: No Way Home*. The film brought together almost 20 years’ worth of characters and three different continuities, allowing them to both exist separately and connect. Based on its title, *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* is expected to further demonstrate Marvel’s multiverse strategy.³⁶ Likewise, DC’s upcoming *The Flash* has been promoted as a time-travelling, multiverse-spanning adventure that will bring the DCEU into a new era (Swann, 2020).³⁷

These franchises are also exploring the creation of content beyond the bounds of official continuity. *Star Wars: Visions* explores non-canonical interpretations of the *Star Wars* universe. Marvel’s *What If...?* goes beyond the sacred timeline of the central MCU narrative to explore alternative storylines. *Zack Snyder’s Justice League* exists as a non-canonical

³⁶ It did not.

³⁷ It also did not.

adventure that expands on and culminates Snyder's vision for the DC franchise. While this kind of storytelling is common in media such as comics, its recent inclusion in major cinematic transmedia suggests that studios will continue to experiment with new strategies for creating content beyond the limitations of canon and in categories that clarify where content sits for audiences.

Platformed immersion offers repeated and frequent exposure to a storyworld, often driven by underlying commercial imperatives. Bolstered by a period of exclusivity during the pandemic, streaming has become the key portal connecting fans and studios. Streaming sites may evolve to include a variety of additional media and increase the exclusivity of this creative and commercial bond between studio and fan. Platformed immersion is a fusion of creative and commercial engagement, geared towards keeping audiences situated within the bounds of a commercial franchise. Streaming is also representative and symptomatic of the modern drive to produce more commercial content. The use of streaming platforms by major transmedia franchises implies not only that will audiences come to expect frequent engagement with major commercial projects but also that franchises must exist in these spaces to ensure maximum storyworld immersion in an environment of exponentially increasing content.

7.3 Summary

Technology is irrevocably attached to modern conceptions of transmedia storytelling and commercial entertainment. However, while it is currently allowing transmedia storytelling to rise to prominence, storytellers must ensure that the fundamental logic underlying their entertainment goals is sound. Effective transmedia stories are those that harness the immersive qualities of new media. They enable each medium to do what it does best without allowing users' interactions with the technology to distract from their immersion.

As the rising interest in physical immersion demonstrates, the most influential storytelling experiences are those that can be deeply felt. These are absorbing, distraction-free experiences that prioritise immediacy and personalisation. Yet, this apparently sits at odds with our current technology-infused state of living, which offers access to more experiences more frequently. People can receive more information than ever before and experience new kinds of pleasures such as platformed immersion in which entertainment delivered frequently creates a new rhythm of enjoyment. These findings suggest that there is enjoyment to be found in both fast and slow modes of entertainment, and as technology continues to evolve, so too will the opportunities to explore different experiences. Ultimately, ensuring immersion in all (rather than only some) elements of transmedia storytelling will provide audiences with a greater thrill.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

Building upon the rich scholarly foundations of transmedia storytelling inquiry, the unique contribution of my research has been to situate commercial transmedia entertainment within a wider context of cultural systems change. Present-day transmedia storytelling is both a product of our constantly evolving culture and a tool that can be harnessed to affect cultural change.

As this thesis has demonstrated, inquiries into transmedia and media convergence are ultimately an exploration of relationships: the relationships between different types of media, between cultures and fundamentally between people. By discussing transmedia storytelling through this lens, this research has offered new perspectives into what can be considered best practice for commercial transmedia. Considering the nuances of human behaviour ahead of system logics can allow storytellers to navigate the formation of narrative and the inclusion of technology in the most impactful manner possible.

Furthermore, my research makes a connection between established transmedia scholarship and an emerging undercurrent of scholarly enquiry into issues of active citizenship and systems change that have not, as yet, been clearly connected.

The early transmedia dialogue was formed around a shared excitement for idealised combinations of media logics and systems of production that could achieve unprecedented entertainment experiences. However, as the models of transmedia presented in this thesis show, the realities of large-scale commercial media have instead resulted in varied models of media convergence that lean closer to the familiar than to the experimental. The significant global role that modern large-scale commercial entertainment plays means that modalities of transmedia storytelling flow down to other industry conceptions of the practice.

I am grateful to my interviewees, all of whom offered unique behind-the-scenes insights into industrial practice, helping to bridge some gaps in the literature on commercial

transmedia entertainment. Collectively, these industry elites articulated that the modern commercial concept of transmedia storytelling rarely aligns with that conceived by early transmedia advocates. Yet, by speaking with these insightful and motivated professionals, I find cause for hope that commercial entertainment will evolve to suit our cultural needs and leverage technological advancements. However, as this research also shows, this is likely to be at a slower pace and in a less straightforward manner than some would like.

8.1 Main Findings

Returning to my main research goal to understand how information can effectively travel and be received in the age of information abundance, I henceforth outline my findings.

My exploration of the MCU, *Star Wars* and the DCEU in Chapter 4 demonstrated the breadth of the transmedia storytelling concept. In all three examples, a different industrial architecture has been applied to transmedia storytelling (whether intentionally or not), with different priorities being placed on authorial structures, the use of media platforms and narrative design. However, all three demonstrate how integral the recycling and remixing of both content and media conventions are to modern commercial entertainment. In doing so, I encourage broader concepts of transmedia practice to be embraced, highlighting how metanarrative linkages can generate excitement, whether they fit established logics of transmedia practice or not. All three franchises offer an experiential thrill for fans based on the realisation of established narratives in different media formats.

My research demonstrates the need for holistic navigational design in transmedia projects. This term highlights the importance of the story itself informing all aspects of design and communication. As evidenced through my case studies, when audiences have a clear understanding of both how and why they should traverse a storyworld, this can lead to commercial and cultural success. Combining elements of Long's (2007) identification of intertextual navigation types, Gray's (2010) exploration of navigation through paratext,

Gomez's (2019) concept of the primal message and Phillips's (2012) industry handbook, which highlights the need to reward audiences for traversing texts at a level commensurate to the effort required to do so, a holistic navigational design calls for explicit story components and conceptual design elements to work in alignment. I draw this argument from my observations that these qualities are rarely applied in equal measure and the industry (Gomez, 2012) and scholarly (Jenkins, 2019a) consensus that transmedia entertainment has a greater impact when a unique storyworld quality is identified and then consistently applied. My research advocates for storytellers to consider audiences through the lens of human behaviour and find ways to place the needs of affective storytelling above entrenched industrial practices that can restrict the flow of information.

Chapter 5 discussed the importance of understanding commercial transmedia storytelling as a conversation, not simply the broadcasting of ideas. Building on research highlighting the importance of storytelling in First Nations cultures as a tool for education, identity formation and establishing cultural norms (Johnston & Forrest, 2020; Yunkaporta, 2009), I considered how modern popular entertainment performs a similar cultural function (Gray et al., 2007; Hills, 2002). From this perspective, the re-emergence of collective journey storytelling (Gomez, 2017a) and the efforts of the industry to better represent diversity (S. Coulson, personal communication, 15 November 2018; A. Phillips, personal communication, 18 January 2022; S. Pulman, personal communication, 5 January 2022) are significant cultural phenomena. I demonstrate that the commercial and technological drivers of transmedia storytelling both facilitate and are reflected in evolving commercial entertainment but argue that the influence of culture is often overlooked in the large-scale industrial approach. Viewing commercial entertainment as part of an ongoing cultural dialogue would enable storytellers to appreciate that popular entertainment is both informed and supported by the audience.

My model of affective storytelling practice demonstrates the importance of commercial storytellers understanding the intersection between entertainment and active citizenship. Identifying three stages of fan engagement behaviours—aspiration, inspiration and activation—I argue that commercial storytellers will not only benefit from understanding the link between entertainment and community engagement practice but also, and more importantly, have a social responsibility to do so. Further, the examples highlight how all commercial media is inherently participatory, whether commercial institutions acknowledge it or not. Social media is demonstrated to be a powerful, although often misunderstood, tool for understanding and addressing emerging social issues. My research indicates that those willing to embrace affective storytelling stand to gain cultural and commercial capital.

In Chapter 6, I explored why companies may be reticent to use social media in a more effective way while also highlighting the dangers of ignoring its power in the context of fan discourse. With their different power dynamics, the MCU, *Star Wars* and the DCEU all attempt to assert authorial dominance over their audience. However, their methods range from tightly coordinated fan-compliance strategies to mismanaged ignorance of fan activity. While franchise owners often perceive fan engagement to be a high-risk proposition, these examples demonstrate that even small groups of disgruntled fans can threaten the commercial health of a franchise through social media.

Therefore, I argue that commercial storytellers can and must engage in conversation with their fans. I draw from my interviewees' insights to remind readers that transmedia and media consumption is inherently a social activity (S. Coulson, personal communication, 15 November 2018; J. Gomez, personal communication, 24 November 2018; Jenkins, personal communication, 30 September 2019). I also build on the scholarly notion that social media has irrevocably amplified the social nature of entertainment consumption (Jenkins, 2006b) and argue that it has changed the author–audience dynamics in the process. For authors to

enter these conversations in a meaningful way, they should approach fan engagement from the perspective of a relationship as opposed to the management of the consumer. However, storytellers should also be mindful that social media is an imperfect tool that disproportionately amplifies certain voices (Gray, 2021). This means that storytellers should seek out dialogue with marginalised groups and less vocal fans to best understand and guide audience reactions and construct inclusive and representative texts. Storytellers who avoid doing so risk encountering fan discord, which can create perceived and real damage to a franchise.

I reinforce the argument that fan dialogue can be understood as a flow of social energy. Given that the commodification of storytelling disrupts the free flow of information (Hartley & McWilliam, 2009), commercial transmedia producers may benefit from incorporating audience feedback rather than trying to block or ignore it. Recognising the value of regenerative listening and narrative reversal as practical solutions to managing fan discourse (Gomez, 2017c, 2018b), I extend on these concepts with reference to semiotics and the metaphor of social energy flow. I also observe that specialist groups such as Campfire and Starlight Runner currently engage in this kind of work for the entertainment industry, highlighting the reticence towards and lack of knowledge of fan engagement strategies in standard commercial practice.

Finally, I acknowledge the paradox at the heart of transmedia in that it represents both future states and recurring patterns of communication. While emerging technologies are indelibly affiliated with transmedia practice, in Chapter 7 I argue that technology is often a distraction to achieving the primary purpose of transmedia as envisioned by early transmedia advocates. I revisit the original goal of industry and scholarly partners who envisioned transmedia as a new mode of deeply immersive entertainment and explore the qualities of immersion (Rose, 2011). Building on the work of Scolari et al. (2014), I recognise the

ongoing importance of place-based and physical experiences in the context of transmedia, consider how new technological sensations can inform experiential design and clarify the relationship between transmedia and technology.

My research highlights that entertainment can have a greater impact when technology is used to facilitate a deeper state of immersion. New platforms offer new kinds of entertainment experiences (e.g. platformed immersion) and shape our media expectations. However, if the fundamental human principles of effective communication and storytelling are not embedded in these entertainment experiences, the growth of the transmedia storyworld will be inhibited, irrespective of the platform. I conclude by suggesting that the term ‘transmedia’ is no longer useful and indeed seems to have already been discarded in favour of the term ‘immersion’. The transmedia scholarship offers a unique snapshot of communication practices in the modern era, and other fields of inquiry are likely to emerge.

8.2 Future Research Directions

The field of media convergence offers rich opportunities for ongoing research, including on the ongoing evolution of *Star Wars*, the MCU and the DCEU. Investigating the evolving industry and audience appetites for large-scale interconnected storytelling projects compared with other immersive entertainment experiences will enable a deeper analysis of our digitally connected culture. As Jenkins (2006a) originally predicted, while our culture of convergence has created media conglomerations, complex and personalised practices of communication will always be needed.

Undoubtedly, the emergence of new media will continue to influence the opportunities for and our expectations of entertainment experiences. Beyond cinema and streaming, many of my interviewees highlighted the increasing prevalence of video gaming as a source of IP and profit. Yet, the enduring appeal of place-based experiences appears to be growing; thus,

ongoing investigations into issues of scale, immersivity and accessibility will continue to shape future research.

8.3 Final Thoughts

My hope is that this research has highlighted that despite the rapid evolution of the modern culture, there are fundamental human qualities that will remain consistent. When storytellers are empowered to embrace the social energy that storytelling can generate and employ technology in a way that supports this endeavour, entertainment experiences can be profound. Technology and commerce are powerful forces that shape our entertainment experiences; however, we must remember that we have the capacity to influence and control them. While the high financial stakes of commercial entertainment mean the industry is slow to enact change, we are already witnessing generational changes in some domains.

Simplifying corporate structures to enable creators to more easily navigate and coordinate transmedia collaborations may soon be a reality. Likewise, the use of social media to engage in dialogue with fans may become more routine under a new generation of leadership. While a fear of failure permeates the commercial entertainment industry, for those brave enough to collaborate, listen and reciprocate, commercial entertainment may not only be a capitalist pursuit but also a socially conscious endeavour.

Afterword

At the conclusion of this project in October 2024, there have been significant developments in large-scale commercial transmedia entertainment that support the findings of this thesis and suggest areas for further research.

While continuing to grow the MCU, Marvel has struggled to maintain the principles of effective transmedia practice. Marvel was given a mandate by Disney CEO Bob Chapek to produce more content for Disney+ (Kit & Couch, 2024), and Phases 4 and 5 have introduced a range of diverse new heroes and concepts across more platforms. However, unlike The Infinity Saga, which focused on Thanos and his quest for the infinity stones, the MCU is currently lacking a dominant connected narrative thread. Thus, many plotlines remain unresolved, newly introduced characters are yet to reappear, some plot points are contradictory, and fans are beginning to lose interest. Without the careful narrative planning of the prior phases, the MCU transmedia system is becoming unstable.

Therefore, Marvel's previously unprecedented string of commercial and critical successes has been interrupted by several poorly received texts. Fans have taken issue with the quality of visual effects (in *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania* and *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law*) and storytelling (in *Thor: Love and Thunder* and *Secret Invasion*). Now that much of the MCU is available through streaming, fans and critics are reportedly feeling overwhelmed by the number and duration of new texts and are unable to keep up with the storyworld. Marvel's second most recent film, *The Marvels*, a highly intertextual entry drawing from one film and two streaming shows, attracted the MCU's lowest ever box office result (Box Office Mojo, n.d.-a).

While these developments have reportedly caught Marvel off guard (C. Ryan & Greenwald, 2023), they are testament to the lack of direct fan dialogue. Joanna Robinson,

author of *Reign of the MCU*, relayed the confusion she observed following the release of *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania*:

My understanding, having talked to some people, is that *Quantumania* really shook them, and I'm sure *Secret Invasion* shook them further, but *Quantumania* really shook them because they felt like they had something good. Because they all internally thought, 'Everyone's gonna love this.' And then they put it out and people didn't. And then they were like, 'Oh no, our internal barometer is not attuned to what people want anymore.' (C. Ryan & Greenwald, 2023, 1:00:29)

Thus, while it did not occur during my research, the potential harm associated with Marvel not engaging in direct dialogue with its fan base has since materialised.

Marvel's celebratory corporate narrative has also been bruised. The actor who was to portray the MCU's next major villain has been fired after being charged with assault (Couch & Kit, 2023). Both *She-Hulk: Attorney at Law* and *The Marvels* have attracted a misogynistic backlash, which neither Kevin Feige nor Marvel have directly addressed. Marvel has also been forced to shift release dates and alter projects, in part from the ongoing effects of COVID-19, tarnishing the company's reputation for delivering content as promised. These demanding and reportedly disorganised production schedules have prompted the unionisation of visual effects workers. Victoria Alonso, president of physical and post-production, visual effects and animation at Marvel Studios, has been fired by Disney, removing one of Kevin Feige's top two lieutenants and raising questions about how Marvel will continue to manage its unique conveyor belt-style production process in her absence (Kit, 2024; Moreau, 2023a). In this environment, some MCU stars have also spoken about their dissatisfaction with their projects. Elizabeth Olsen, for example, has expressed frustration that her character, Scarlet Witch, had a repetitive character arc in *WandaVision* and *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of*

Madness because the writers of *Doctor Strange* had not previously seen *WandaVision* (Vanity Fair, 2023).

The MCU is starting to move towards more traditional media tropes. Disney has signalled that the MCU will slow down with Bob Iger, who was reinstated as CEO after Bob Chapek was fired (Walt Disney Company, 2022), stating that Marvel will produce fewer MCU projects (Kit & Couch, 2024). Marvel has also suggested that it will revert to a more traditional style of TV storytelling for its streaming projects, appointing showrunners (rather than the Marvel Parliament) to oversee whole series and commissioning lower-budget projects. The borders of the MCU canon are softening, and the message that not every text is essential is starting to permeate. Marvel has introduced its Spotlight label to demarcate standalone MCU texts and separate Marvel Television and Marvel Animation designations. Simultaneously, non-Marvel Studios texts are becoming part of the MCU canon through the notion of a Marvel multiverse.

Meanwhile, Warner Bros. has officially terminated the DCEU and announced a coordinated company-wide transmedia project known as the DC Universe (DCU). James Gunn and his production partner Peter Safran will oversee the DCU, splitting creative and producorial duties between them, and have already announced their first 10 projects (Gunn, 2023). Gunn is a prolific social media user and is already communicating frequently with fans about his plans, representing a significant shift from the inconsistent and often non-existent social media engagement that occurred during the production of the DCEU.

Set to begin in 2025, the DCU is arguably more ambitious compared with the case studies explored in this thesis. Gunn and Safran have been awarded full authorial control, and the DCU will incorporate a range of interconnected media from its launch, traversing film, streaming and animation. Gunn (2023) has announced that actors are being recruited to portray their characters across all media. Gunn has also signalled his intent to direct audiences

to and acknowledge the role of comics in the formation of the DCU. He has indicated that this project will have its own continuity but has also suggested that some elements of the DCEU may connect.

Time will tell whether Gunn and Safran remain in control. Alongside the DCU, Warner Bros. will also continue to produce standalone DC projects. Successful projects such as *Joker* and *The Batman* will continue in separate continuities. Using the term ‘Elseworlds’ from the comics, these projects will be presented as alternative reality texts. It will be interesting to observe whether audiences will find the creative vision of the Elseworlds texts more appealing than that of the DCU, potentially leading to antagonistic divisions in the DC fan base, as happened during the DCEU. The ever-changing media landscape means that maintaining a consistent revenue is becoming more complex. Warner Bros. is heavily in debt (Isidore, 2024), so the studio may eventually merge with or be acquired by another company with a different vision.

Lucasfilm has apparently regained authorial control over *Star Wars* and plotted a new trajectory. Lucasfilm has not yet released any new *Star Wars* films, and Disney’s premium immersive experience—the *Star Wars*: Galactic Starcruiser hotel—has been closed because it was too expensive for most fans (Kelleher, 2023). However, a range of *Star Wars* shows has premiered on Disney+, with most attracting high viewership and positive reviews (D’Alessandro, 2023; Rotten Tomatoes, n.d.). These shows have mined well-known characters and are set in well-established eras, allowing the franchise to focus on elements familiar to fans. Some shows have also experimented with different tones (*Andor*), brought fan favourite characters into live action (*Ahsoka*) or explored what makes *Star Wars* *Star Wars* (*Star Wars: Visions*).

Dave Filoni has also been promoted to Lucasfilm’s chief creative officer, positioning him as the leading creative voice for *Star Wars*. Filoni will have creative input into all

projects going forward (Moreau, 2023b), and his appointment recognises his role as Lucas's creative successor. Despite a plethora of announced films failing to materialise, Lucasfilm has now committed to moving forward with three films that will expand the main timeline before and beyond the Skywalker Saga, with production currently underway (StarWars.com, 2023).

Marvel, DC and Lucasfilm are all recognising the need for careful narrative planning in an era of information abundance. Three of the world's largest media franchises are all under the creative control of white men: Kevin Feige (MCU), James Gunn and Peter Safran (DCU) and Dave Filoni (*Star Wars*). While the field of transmedia storytelling continues to move with pace, many of these initiatives are underpinned by familiar patterns of governance and control. The recent events outlined above highlight that the fortunes of a franchise can change quickly if the transmedia principles I have outlined in this thesis are not applied and consistently maintained. However, the reverse also applies, and to finish with an optimistic perspective on this issue, applying and reinstating these principles offers the hope and promise that transmedia systems can work in a synchronous and harmonious way.

References

- Abrams, J. J. (Director). (2019). *Star wars: The rise of Skywalker* [Film]. Lucasfilm; Bad Robot.
- Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences. (2009). *The Oscars: February 22nd, 2009*.
<https://web.archive.org/web/20090304014303/http://www.oscar.com/>
- Acuna, K. (2014, 29 October). *Marvel reveals its future movie schedule through 2019* [Photograph]. Business Insider. <https://www.businessinsider.com/marvel-film-schedule-through-2018-2014-10>
- Alvizo, D. (2019). *MCU infographic* [Infographic]. Behance.
<https://www.behance.net/gallery/82661925/MCU-Infographic>
- Archer Film Festival. (2017). [Photograph of women wearing 'The force is female' t-shirts]. FilmFreeway. <https://filmfreeway.com/TheArcherFilmFestival/photos/3190172>
- Arvedon, J. (2018, 24 September). *Former DC president harassed off Twitter by angry Zack Snyder fans*. CBR. <https://www.cbr.com/former-dc-president-harassed-off-twitter-by-angry-zack-snyder-fans/>
- Atkinson, P., & Coffey, A. (2016). Analysing documentary realities. In D. Silverman (Ed.), *Qualitative research* (4th ed., pp. 56–75). SAGE Publications.
- Ayer, D. (Director). (2016). *Suicide squad* [Film]. Warner Bros. Pictures; RatPac-Dune Entertainment; DC Films; Atlas Entertainment.
- Bagger, C. (2019). Multiversal queerbaiting: Alan Scott, alternate universes, and gay characters in superhero comics. In J. Brennan (Ed.), *Queerbaiting and fandom: Teasing fans through homoerotic possibilities* (pp. 171–176). University of Iowa Press.

- Baker, B. (n.d.). [Photograph of a Merry Marvel Marching Society badge]. The Stan Lee Wikia Wiki. https://the-stan-lee-wikia.fandom.com/wiki/Merry_Marvel_Marching_Society?file=56786556754876.jpg
- Baker, C. (2008, 18 August). *Meet Leland Chee, the Star wars franchise continuity cop*. Wired. <https://www.wired.com/2008/08/ff-starwarscanon/>
- Bancks, T. (2003). Beyond the hero's journey: 'Joseph (Campbell) is my Yoda'. *Australian Screen Education Online*, 33, 32–34. <https://search.informit.org/doi/10.3316/informit.820824742803865>
- Barnes, B. (2020, 27 December). Managing movie superheroes is about to get a lot more complicated. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/27/business/media/dc-superheroes-movies.html>
- Barnes, B., & Sperling, N. (2020, 7 December). Trading box office for streaming, but stars still want their money. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/07/business/media/warner-bros-hbo-max-movies-pay.html>
- Barnhardt, A. (2021, 27 February). WandaVision fans are falling in love with Avengers: Age of Ultron all over again. Comic Book. <https://comicbook.com/movies/news/wandavision-fans-love-age-of-ultron-twitter-trend/#10>
- Baxter, J. (1999). *George Lucas: A biography*. HarperCollins.
- Beckham, D. K. (2021). *The queeroe's journey: A gender-diverse perspective on the hero and heroine's journey* [Doctoral dissertation, Pacifica Graduate Institute]. ProQuest.
- Beedle, T. (2014, 15 October). *A full slate of DC entertainment movies are on their way*. DC. <https://www.dccomics.com/blog/2014/10/15/a-full-slate-of-dc-entertainment-movies-are-on-their-way>

- Bennett, L. (2012). Fan activism for social mobilization: A critical review of the literature. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2012.0346>
- Bernstein, P. (2013, 3 December). *The 3 rules of transmedia storytelling from transmedia guru Jeff Gomez*. IndieWire. <https://www.indiewire.com/2013/12/the-3-rules-of-transmedia-storytelling-from-transmedia-guru-jeff-gomez-32325/>
- Berry, H. [@halleberry]. (2020, 30 August). *Why this matters so much. Rest in heavenly peace* [Image attached] [Post]. X. <https://x.com/halleberry/status/1299844032693022721>
- Best, A. [@bestahmed]. (2018, 4 July). *I've been thinking of doing a twenty year #ThePhantomMenace solo show next year* [Image attached] [Post]. Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BkyD0IUgWI1/>
- Black Lives Matter. (n.d.). *About Black Lives Matter*. <https://blacklivesmatter.com/about/>
- Block, A. B. (2014, 13 November). *Which superhero earns \$1.3 billion a year? In the battle of Marvel vs. DC Comics, there is one clear winner*. The Hollywood Reporter. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/superhero-earns-13-billion-a-748281/>
- Booth, P. (2010). *Digital fandom: New media studies*. Peter Lang.
- Box Office Mojo. (n.d.-a). *Franchise: Marvel Cinematic Universe*. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/franchise/fr541495045/>
- Box Office Mojo. (n.d.-b). *Franchise: Star wars*. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/franchise/fr3125251845/>
- Box Office Mojo. (2019). *People index: Producers*. <https://web.archive.org/web/20190327112051/https://www.boxofficemojo.com/people/?view=Producer&sort=sumgross&order=DESC&p=.htm>

Box Office Mojo. (2024). *Top lifetime grosses*.

https://www.boxofficemojo.com/chart/top_lifetime_gross/?area=XWW

Brennen, B. S. (2012). *Qualitative research methods for media studies*. Routledge.

Brevet, B. (2019, 21 July). *'The lion king' debuts with record \$185M & 'Endgame' becomes global #1*. Box Office Mojo. <https://www.boxofficemojo.com/article/ed1432421380/>

Breznican, A. (2015, 14 August). *Star wars: The force awakens: J. J. Abrams on fans, spoilers, puzzles, and the value of fear*. Entertainment Weekly.

<https://ew.com/article/2015/08/14/star-wars-force-awakens-jj-abrams/>

Breznican, A. (2016, 3 June). *Rogue one reshoots: What's true and false about the changes to the Star wars film*. Entertainment Weekly. <https://ew.com/article/2016/06/03/rogue-one-reshoots/>

Breznican, A. (2022, 17 May). *Star wars: The rebellion will be televised*. Vanity Fair.

<https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2022/05/star-wars-cover-the-rebellion-will-be-televised>

Brooker, W. (2001). *Living on Dawson's creek*. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 4(4), 456–472. <https://doi.org/10.1177/136787790100400406>

Brooker, W. (2002). *Using the force: Creativity, community, and Star wars fans*. Continuum.

Brough, M., Literat, I., & Ikin, A. (2020). *'Good social media?': Underrepresented youth perspectives on the ethical and equitable design of social media platforms*. *Social Media + Society*, 6(2), 1–11. <https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305120928488>

Brough, M. M., & Shresthova, S. (2012). *Fandom meets activism: Rethinking civic and political participation*. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 10.

<https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2012.0303>

- Brunn, H. (2016). The qualitative interview in media production studies. In C. Paterson, D. Lee, A. Saha, & A. Zoellner (Eds.), *Advancing media production research: Shifting sites, methods, and politics* (pp. 131–146). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Buckley, C. (2019, 13 March). When ‘Captain Marvel’ became a target, the rules changed. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/13/movies/captain-marvel-brie-larson-rotten-tomatoes.html>
- Burke, L. (2015). *The comic book film adaptation: Exploring modern Hollywood’s leading genre*. University Press of Mississippi.
- Burke, L. (2018). ‘A bigger universe’: Marvel Studios and transmedia storytelling. In J. C. Chambliss, W. L. Svitavsky, & D. Fandino (Eds.), *Assembling the Marvel Cinematic Universe: Essays on the social, cultural and geopolitical domains* (pp. 32–51). McFarland & Company.
- Burke, T. (n.d.). *History & inception*. Me Too. <https://metoomvmt.org/get-to-know-us/history-inception/>
- Burnett, R. M. [@THEBURNETWORK]. (2020, 13 January). *Pt. 1: A look at the Star wars episode IX: Duel of the fates screenplay—Robservations S2 #317* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=5ShS32kJclU>
- Burns, C. (2016, 15 November). Transmedia: Art forms created in real time. *Medium*. <https://immerse.news/transmedia-art-forms-created-in-real-time-4943648389a4>
- Business Wire. (2012, 16 April). *Marvel’s Iron man 3 to be co-produced in China* [Press release]. <https://www.businesswire.com/news/home/20120416005439/en/Marvel%E2%80%99s-IRON-MAN-3-Co-Produced-China>
- Cain, S., & Davidson, H. (2023, 18 January). China ends de facto ban on Marvel films after more than three years. *The Guardian*.

- <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2023/jan/18/china-ends-de-facto-ban-on-marvel-films-after-more-than-three-years>
- Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.-a). Activation. In *Cambridge dictionary*. Retrieved 2 November 2023 from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/activation>
- Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.-b). Aspiration. In *Cambridge dictionary*. Retrieved 2 November 2023 from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/aspiration>
- Cambridge Dictionary. (n.d.-c). Inspiration. In *Cambridge dictionary*. Retrieved 2 November 2023 from <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/inspiration>
- Campbell, J. (1949). *The hero with a thousand faces* (2nd ed.). Princeton University Press.
- Campbell, J. (1988). *Joseph Campbell and the power of myth. Program 2, the message of the myth: Transcript* [Interview]. <https://doi.org/10.7916/D8GT5MZJ>
- Campfire. (n.d.). *About us*. <https://campfirenyc.com/about/>
- Canavan, G. (2017). Fandom edits. In D. Hassler-Forest (Ed.), *Star wars and the history of transmedia storytelling* (pp. 277–288). Amsterdam University Press.
- CBC. (2017, 3 March). ‘Kim’s convenience’ star Simu Liu thanks his immigrant parents for his Canadian life. <https://www.cbc.ca/2017/whatsyourstory/kim-s-convenience-star-simu-liu-thanks-his-immigrant-parents-for-his-canadian-life-1.4007124>
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2022). *Omicron variant: What you need to know*. <https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/variants/omicron-variant.html>
- Chitwood, A. (2023, 30 December). ‘The Mandalorian’ tops list of the most-watched streaming originals in 2023. TheWrap. <https://www.thewrap.com/most-watched-streaming-shows-2023/>
- Chuba, K. (2018, 5 June). ‘Star wars’ actress Kelly Marie Tran leaves social media after months of harassment. Variety. <https://variety.com/2018/biz/news/star-wars-kelly-marie-tran-leaves-social-media-harassment-1202830892/>

- Clark, B. (2021a, 14 March). *Transmedia is a lie* [Post]. Facebook.
<https://www.facebook.com/notes/brian-clark/transmedia-is-a-lie/10150841850433993>
- Clark, B. (2021b, 6 May). *Reclaiming transmedia storyteller* [Post]. Facebook.
<https://www.facebook.com/notes/brian-clark/reclaiming-transmedia-storyteller/10150246236508993>
- Collins, J. (2009). Hero worship. *License! Global*, 12(6), 26–31.
- Collins, S., & DeWitt, J. (2023). Words matter: Presidents Obama and Trump, Twitter, and U.S. soft power. *World Affairs*, 186(3), 530–571.
<https://doi.org/10.1177/00438200231161631>
- Coogler, R. (Director). (2018). *Black Panther* [Film] [Screen capture]. Marvel Studios.
- Couch, A. (2013, 24 January). *J. J. Abrams to direct 'Star wars': The best Twitter reactions*. The Hollywood Reporter. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/jj-abrams-direct-star-wars-415306/>
- Couch, A. (2021, 16 March). *'Justice league' producer Deborah Snyder on assembling A-listers during COVID-19 and the power of fans*. The Hollywood Reporter.
<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/heat-vision/justice-league-producer-deborah-snyder-on-assembling-a-listers-during-covid-19-and-the-power-of-fans>
- Couch, A., & Kit, B. (2023, 18 December). *Marvel drops Jonathan Majors after assault, harassment verdict*. The Hollywood Reporter.
<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/marvel-drops-jonathan-majors-as-kang-1235391129/>
- Couldry, N. (2011). More sociology, more culture, more politics: Or, a modest proposal for 'convergence' studies. *Cultural Studies*, 25(4–5), 487–501.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2011.600528>

- Coveiro. (2023). *Uma comparação entre notas dos críticos e do público dos filmes da Marvel Studios* [A comparison of critic and audience ratings of Marvel Studios films]. Marvel616. <https://www.marvel616.com/2023/04/uma-comparacao-entre-notas-dos-criticos.html>
- Crick, B., & Lockyer, A. (Eds.). (2010). *Active citizenship: What could it achieve and how?* Edinburgh University Press.
- Crow, D. (2023, 14 June). The Flash's *troubled production and Ezra Miller controversy explained*. Den of Geek. <https://www.denofgeek.com/movies/the-flash-production-ezra-miller-controversy-explained/>
- Curtis, B. (2012, 17 January). George Lucas is ready to roll the credits. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/01/22/magazine/george-lucas-red-tails.html>
- D'Alessandro, A. (2023, 29 August). *'Ahsoka' first episode clocks 14M views worldwide on Disney+, per studio—update*. Deadline. <https://deadline.com/2023/08/ahsoka-viewership-streaming-1235530030/>
- D'Alessandro, A., & Hipes, P. (2020, 8 October). *Disney/Pixar's 'Soul' moving to Christmas day release on Disney+*. Deadline. <https://deadline.com/2020/10/soul-release-date-disney-plus-christmas-day-1234594147/>
- Davids, B. (2021, 5 August). *James Gunn on 'The suicide squad', 'Grounded', 'Peacemaker' and the day Kevin Feige came to set*. The Hollywood Reporter. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-features/suicide-squad-james-gunn-peacemaker-guardians-3-1234993608/>
- Davis, A. P. (2017, 5 December). *Daisy Ridley of 'Star wars' on Insta-bullies, Disney execs, and living up to Rey*. Glamour. <https://www.glamour.com/story/daisy-ridley-star-wars-rey-january-2018-cover-story>

- Davis, B. (2022, 28 March). Moon knight *producer on returning after original Spider-Man trilogy*. Comic Book. <https://comicbook.com/marvel/news/moon-knight-producer-spider-man-sam-raimi-kevin-feige/>
- Davis, R. (2021a, 11 May). *Marvel's 'Shang-chi', 'Eternals' may face uphill battle to enter China*. Variety. <https://variety.com/2021/film/news/marvel-shang-chi-eternals-china-release-1234971166/>
- Davis, R. (2021b, 16 September). *'Shang-chi' may be banned from China for perceived 'insults', even as some Chinese viewers praise it*. Variety. <https://variety.com/2021/film/news/shang-chi-china-ban-simu-liu-1235066529/>
- DC (n.d.). *DC FanDome homepage*. Retrieved 17 October 2021 from <https://dcfandome.com>
- Dena, C. (2009). *Transmedia practice: Theorising the practice of expressing a fictional world across distinct media and environments* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. University of Sydney. https://www.christydena.com/research_/phd/
- Dena, C. (2010, 5 April). *PGA's transmedia producer!* <http://www.christydena.com/2010/04/pgas-transmedia-producer/>
- Dena, C. (2011). Do you have a big stick? In S. Groth (Ed.), *Hand made high tech: Essays on the future of books and reading* (pp. 1–5). Institute for the Future of the Book in Australia. <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/77679/12/77679.pdf>
- Dena, C. (2019). Transmedia adaptation: Revisiting the no-adaptation rule. In M. Freeman & R. R. Gambarato (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to transmedia studies* (pp. 195–206). Routledge.
- Dettmann, D. (2017). *Ben Affleck, Henry Cavill, Jason Momoa, Ezra Miller, and Ray Fisher in Justice league (2017)* [Photograph]. IMDb. <https://www.imdb.com/title/tt0974015/mediaviewer/rm693590016>

- Disney Parks. (n.d.). *Star wars: Galaxy's edge*. <https://disneyarks.disney.go.com/star-wars-galaxys-edge/>
- Disney+. (n.d.). 'Because you watched' card [Image attached] [Screenshot]. Disney+. Retrieved 6 March 2021 from <https://disneyplus.com>
- Disney+. (n.d.). *Screenshot of MCU menu* [Image attached] [Screenshot]. Disney+. Retrieved 7 June 2023 from <https://disneyplus.com>
- Donnelly, M. (2021, 9 March). *Marvel chief Kevin Feige on Anthony Mackie's big 'Falcon' moment, fate of Captain America's shield*. Variety. <https://variety.com/2021/film/news/kevin-feige-anthony-mackie-falcon-winter-solider-cap-shield-1234924410/>
- Double Toasted [@Doubletoasted]. (2016, 23 April). *Exclusive! Doctor Strange writer 'C. Robert Cargill'—Double Toasted interview* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=eEpUf8dGq0&t=1074s>
- Dowd, M. (2019, 22 September). The slow-burning success of Disney's Bob Iger. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/22/style/disney-bob-iger-book.html>
- Downey, R., Jr. (2018, 10 February). *Candid* [Image attached] [Post]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=834800743355059&id=154213784747095&set=a.156205521214588>
- Duncombe, S. (2012). Imagining no-place. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 10, <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2012.0350>
- Ehlers, J. T. (2019). *Faith from fiction: Walking the Jedi path* [Unpublished doctoral dissertation]. California State University. ProQuest. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/faith-fiction-walking-jedi-path/docview/2307190733/se-2>

- Evans, C. [@ChrisEvans]. (2017, 15 August). *To the younger generation still choosing a path: Don't be consumed by anger, fear and hate* [Post]. X.
<https://x.com/chrisevans/status/897451120343236609>
- Evans, E. (2011). *Transmedia television: Audiences, new media and daily life*. Routledge.
- Evans, E. (2015). Layering engagement: The temporal dynamics of transmedia television. *Storyworlds: A Journal of Narrative Studies*, 7(2), 111–128.
<https://doi.org/10.5250/storyworlds.7.2.0111>
- Famurewa, J. (2020, 2 September). John Boyega: 'I'm the only cast member whose experience of *Star wars* was based on their race'. *GQ*. <https://www.gq-magazine.co.uk/culture/article/john-boyega-interview-2020>
- Famuyiwa, R. (2019). Chapter 2: The Child (Season 1, Episode 2) [TV series episode] [Screen capture]. In J. Favreau, D. Filoni, K. Kennedy, C. Wilson & R. Famuyiwa (Executive Producers), *The Mandalorian*. Lucasfilm; Fairview Entertainment; Golem Creations.
- Fast, K., & Örnebring, H. (2017). Transmedia world-building: *The shadow* (1931–present) and *Transformers* (1984–present). *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 20(6), 636–652. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877915605887>
- Favreau, J. [@Jon_Favreau]. (2020, 17 January). [Photograph of George Lucas meeting Grogu on the set of *The Mandalorian*] [Post]. X.
https://x.com/Jon_Favreau/status/1217993455487475712
- Filoni, D. (2014, 11 January). *Happy new year!* [Post]. Facebook.
<https://www.facebook.com/DaveFiloni/posts/10152103755565053/>
- Finke, N. (2010, 5 April). *Producers Guild of America agrees on new credit: 'Transmedia producer'*. Deadline. <https://deadline.com/2010/04/producers-guild-of-america-vote-on-creation-of-new-credit-transmedia-producer-30751/>

- Fisher, R. [ray8fisher]. (2020, 2 July). *Joss Whedon's on-set treatment of the cast and crew of Justice League was gross, abusive, unprofessional and completely unacceptable* [Post]. X. <https://x.com/ray8fisher/status/1278362556214755329>
- Fiske, J. (1989). *Understanding popular culture*. Routledge.
- Flanagan, M., McKenny, M., & Livingstone, A. (2016). *The Marvel Studios phenomenon: Inside a transmedia universe*. Bloomsbury Publishing.
- Fleming, M., Jr. (2016, 6 May). *Kevin Feige on 'Captain America: Civil war' and all things Marvel—Deadline Q&A*. Deadline. <https://deadline.com/2016/05/kevin-feige-marvel-studios-captain-america-civil-war-iron-man-doctor-strange-black-panther-1201750467/>
- Fleming, M., Jr. (2019, 25 April). *'Avengers: Endgame' directors Joe & Anthony Russo address inclusion of first openly gay character in Marvel superhero film*. Deadline. <https://deadline.com/2019/04/avengers-endgame-marvel-first-openly-gay-character-directors-joe-russo-anthony-russo-discuss-1202601583/>
- Ford, J. [@JamieFord]. (2015, 12 November). *Avengers set—no Black Widow / Guardians set—no Gamora / Star Wars—no Rey. She's THE MAIN CHARACTER. #WheresRay* [Image attached] [Post]. X. <https://x.com/JamieFord/status/664824284938809345>
- Ford, R., & Siegel, T. (2014, 20 June). *'Star wars: Episode VIII' sets director*. The Hollywood Reporter. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/star-wars-episode-viii-sets-713726/>
- ForSnyderCut. (n.d.). [Photograph of a #ReleaseTheSnyderCut billboard]. <https://www.forsnydercut.com/announcement/the-snyder-cut-the-walking-deads-creator-robert-kirkman-is-a-supporter/>
- Frayling, C. (2014). *The yellow peril: Dr Fu Manchu and the rise of Chinaphobia*. Thames & Hudson.

- Freeman, M. (2014). Up, up and across: Superman, the Second World War and the historical development of transmedia storytelling. *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 35(2), 215–239. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01439685.2014.941564>
- Freeman, M. (2016). *Industrial approaches to media: A methodological gateway to industry studies*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Freeman, M. (2017a). A world of Disney: Building a transmedia storyworld for Mickey and his friends. In M. Boni (Ed.), *World building: Transmedia, fans, industries* (pp. 93–108). Amsterdam University Press.
- Freeman, M. (2017b). From sequel to quasi-novelization: *Splinter of the mind's eye* and the 1970s culture of transmedia contingency. In D. Hassler-Forest & S. Guynes (Eds.), *Star wars and the history of transmedia storytelling* (pp. 61–72). Amsterdam University Press.
- Freeman, M., & Gambarato, R. R. (2019). Introduction: Transmedia studies—where now? In M. Freeman & R. R. Gambarato (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to transmedia studies* (pp. 1–12). Routledge.
- Fuster, J. (2022, 2 January). 'Spider-Man: No way home' passes \$600 million domestic at New Year's box office. TheWrap. <https://www.thewrap.com/spider-man-no-way-home-top-10-box-office-all-time/>
- Gebbia, R. (2021). *Thank you to the #ReleasetheSnyderCut movement for raising \$500k for suicide prevention*. American Foundation for Suicide Prevention. <https://afsp.org/story/thank-you-to-the-releasethesnydercut-movement-for-raising-500k-for-suicide-prevention>
- Gomez, J. (2009, 9 March). *The power of transmedia* [Interview]. PGA NMC Blog. <https://pganmc.blogspot.com/2009/03/power-of-transmedia.html>

Gomez, J. (2012, 19 October). The 10 commandments of 21st century franchise production.

Business Insider.

<https://www.businessinsider.com/s?q=the+10+commandments+of+21st+century+franchise+production>

Gomez, J. (2016, 23 February). *The collective journey: Transmedia and the rise of a new form of story* [Keynote address]. The National Arts Club. New York, NY, USA

Gomez, J. (2017a, 7 February). Why is this happening? A new narrative model explains it.

Medium. <https://blog.collectivejourney.com/why-is-this-happening-d1287d5ee4ee>

Gomez, J. (2017b, 17 February). The collective journey comes to television: *Game of thrones*,

Walking dead, *Orange is the new black* & others are subverting the hero's journey.

Medium. <https://blog.collectivejourney.com/the-collective-journey-story-model-comes-to-television-151bb4011ce2>

Gomez, J. (2017c, 9 March). Regenerative listening: Collective journey narratives require

genuine engagement. *Medium.* <https://blog.collectivejourney.com/the-secret-to-new-storytelling-regenerative-listening-5250c65b6391>

Gomez, J. (2018a, 24 January). The self-disruption of *Star wars*: With 'The last Jedi' Disney

grapples with maintaining an evergreen brand. *Medium.*

<https://blog.collectivejourney.com/the-self-disruption-of-star-wars-ae3311bedc08>

Gomez, J. (2018b, 1 December). Embracing the narrative reversal: A powerful storytelling

strategy dominates the social media age. *Medium.*

<https://blog.collectivejourney.com/embracing-the-narrative-reversal-f56a0129e319>

Gomez, J. (2019). Transmedia developer: Success at multiplatform narrative requires a

journey to the heart of story. In M. Freeman & R. R. Gambarato (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to transmedia studies* (pp. 207–13). Routledge.

- Gray, J. (2010). *Show sold separately: Promos, spoilers, and other media paratexts*. NYU Press.
- Gray, J. (2012). Of Snowspeeders and Imperial Walkers: Fannish play at the Wisconsin protests. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 10.
<https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2012.0353>
- Gray, J. (2021). *Dislike-minded: Media, audiences, and the dynamics of taste*. NYU Press.
- Gray, J., & Johnson, D. (Eds.). (2013). *A companion to media authorship*. Wiley Blackwell.
- Gray, J., Sandvoss, C., & Harrington, C. L. (Eds.). (2007). *Fandom: Identities and communities in a mediated world*. NYU Press.
- Grob, M. (2018). [Photograph of Marvel stars and filmmakers for the 10-year anniversary of Marvel Studios]. *Variety*. <https://variety.com/wp-content/uploads/2018/02/marvel-class-photo-1920x1080.jpg>
- Gunn, J. [@JamesGunn]. (2019, 21 September). *From the kids' #climatemarch in LA* [Image attached] [Post]. X. <https://x.com/JamesGunn/status/1175155428184997895>
- Gunn, J. [@JamesGunn]. (2023, 1 February). *Here are just a few of our plans. Up, up, and away! #DCStudios #DCU @DCComics* [Video attached] [Post]. X.
<https://x.com/JamesGunn/status/1620468379672002565>
- Hamel, J., Dufour, S., & Fortin, D. (1993). *Case study methods*. SAGE Publications.
- Hamill, M. [@MarkHamill]. (2017, 27 December). *I regret voicing my doubts & insecurities in public* [Image attached] [Post]. X.
<https://x.com/MarkHamill/status/945784443964309505>
- Hamill, M. [@MarkHamill]. (2018a, 6 June). *Same here, but over the past 40 years for me* [Repost attached] [Post]. X. <https://x.com/MarkHamill/status/1004142281048244224>
- Hamill, M. [@MarkHamill]. (2018b, 7 June). *What's not to love? #GetALifeNerds* [Image attached] [Post]. X. <https://x.com/MarkHamill/status/1004482255295692802>

- Hamill, M. [@MarkHamill]. (2018c, 29 August). *SHOUT OUT to Aiden Vazquez for his courage & wisdom in the face of adversity*. [Link attached] [Post]. X.
<https://x.com/hamillhimself/status/1034708134751883264>
- Hartley, J., & McWilliam, K. (Eds.). (2009). *Story circle: Digital storytelling around the world*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Harvey, C. B. (2014). A taxonomy of transmedia storytelling. In M.-L. Ryan & J.-N. Thon (Eds.), *Storyworlds across media: Toward a media-conscious narratology* (pp. 219–231). University of Nebraska Press.
- Harvey, W. S. (2011). Strategies for conducting elite interviews. *Qualitative Research*, 11(4), 431–441. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1468794111404329>
- Hassler-Forest, D. (2016). Skimmers, dippers, and divers: Campfire’s Steve Coulson on transmedia marketing and audience participation. *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 13(1), 682–692.
- Hassler-Forest, D., & Brooker, W. (2017). Afterword: ‘You’ll find I’m full of surprises’: The future of *Star wars*. In D. Hassler-Forest & S. Guynes (Eds.), *Star wars and the history of transmedia storytelling* (pp. 289–296). Amsterdam University Press.
- Hassler-Forest, D., & Jenkins, H. (2017). Foreword: ‘I have a bad feeling about this’. In D. Hassler-Forest & S. Guynes (Eds.), *Star wars and the history of transmedia storytelling* (pp. 15–31). Amsterdam University Press.
- Hassoun, D. (2014). Tracing attentions: Toward an analysis of simultaneous media use. *Television & New Media*, 15(4), 271–288. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476412468621>
- Hawley, G. (2018). *Making sense of the alt-right*. Columbia University Press.
- Hayes, G. P. (2011). *How to write a transmedia production bible: A template for multi-platform producers*. Screen Australia.

- <https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/getmedia/33694e05-95c2-4a05-8465-410fb8a224aa/Transmedia-production-bible-template.pdf>
- Heroic Girls @SDCC 2024—#MoreThanCute [@HeroicGirls]. (2015, 27 April). @Marvel @Target You have the entire team—including Hawkeye and Ultron, but no Black Widow? [Image attached] [Post]. X.
- <https://x.com/HeroicGirls/status/592590841845194752>
- Hiatt, B. (2019, 19 November). Lucasfilm's Kathleen Kennedy on 'Rise of Skywalker' and the future of 'Star wars'. *Rolling Stone*.
- <https://www.rollingstone.com/feature/lucasfilm-president-kathleen-kennedy-interview-rise-skywalker-future-star-wars-912393/>
- Hibberd, J. (2023, 30 October). 'South park' mocks Kathleen Kennedy, Disney diversity efforts; Gina Carano reacts. *The Hollywood Reporter*.
- <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/tv/tv-news/south-park-disney-kathleen-kennedy-gina-carano-1235632407/>
- Hills, M. (2002). *Fan cultures*. Routledge.
- Hills, M. (2004). Defining cult TV: Texts, inter-texts and fan audiences. In R. C. Allen & A. Hill (Eds.), *The television studies reader* (pp. 509–523). Routledge.
- Hills, M. (2015a). Afterword: The hope of the Doctor. *Implicit Religion*, 18(4), 575–578.
- <https://doi.org/10.1558/imre.v18i4.29095>
- Hills, M. (2015b). The expertise of digital fandom as a 'community of practice'. *Convergence: The International Journal of Research into New Media Technologies*, 21(3), 360–374. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1354856515579844>
- Hills, M. (2017). 'The one you watched when you were twelve': Regenerations of *Doctor Who* and enduring fandom's 'life-transitional objects'. *Journal of British Cinema and Television*, 14(2), 213–230. <https://doi.org/10.3366/jbctv.2017.0364>

- Hollywood Reporter. (2019, 24 February). *Oscars 2019: Complete winners list*.
<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/lists/oscar-winners-2019-updating-live-1178560/>
- Holt, N. (2017, 22 December). The women who run the ‘Star wars’ universe. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/22/movies/star-wars-last-jedi-women-run-universe.html>
- Hoshi, T. (2009). The fable of the Keiretsu: Urban legends of the Japanese economy. *Social Science Japan Journal*, 12(1), 189–192. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/30209839>
- Hughes, M. (2020, 28 October). ‘Mulan’ small success has big implications for future of VOD at Disney. *Forbes*.
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/markhughes/2020/10/28/mulan-small-success-has-big-implications-for-future-of-vod-at-disney>
- Iger, R. (2019). *The ride of a lifetime: Lessons learned from 15 years as CEO of the Walt Disney Company*. Random House.
- IGN. (n.d.). *Ezra Miller cameos on Arrowverse’s Crisis on infinite earths crossover* [Screen capture]. <https://www.ign.com/slideshows/ezra-miller-cameos-on-arrowverses-crisis-on-infinite-earths-crossover>
- Isidore, C. (2024, 23 February). *Warner Bros. Discovery posts a much narrower loss than a year ago*. CNN. <https://edition.cnn.com/2024/02/23/business/warner-bros-discovery-losses/index.html>
- Ito, M. (2007). Technologies of the childhood imagination: Yugioh, media mixes, and everyday cultural production. In J. Karaganis (Ed.), *Structures of participation in digital culture* (pp. 31–34). Social Science Research Council.
- Ito, M., Okabe, D., & Tsuji, I. (Eds.). (2012). *Fandom unbound: Otaku culture in a connected world*. Yale University Press.

- Ito, M., Soep, E., Kligler-Vilenchik, N., Shresthova, S., Gamber-Thompson, L., & Zimmerman, A. (2015). Learning connected civics: Narratives, practices, infrastructures. *Curriculum Inquiry*, 45(1), 10–29.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/03626784.2014.995063>
- Itzkoff, D. (2021, 14 July). James Gunn nearly blew up his career. Now he’s back with ‘The suicide squad’. *The New York Times*.
<https://www.nytimes.com/2021/07/14/movies/james-gunn-the-suicide-squad.html>
- Jenkins, H. (2003, 15 January). Transmedia storytelling: Moving characters from books to films to video games can make them stronger and more compelling. *MIT Technology Review*. <https://www.technologyreview.com/s/401760/transmedia-storytelling/>
- Jenkins, H. (2006a). *Convergence culture: Where old and new media collide*. NYU Press.
- Jenkins, H. (2006b). *Fans, bloggers, and gamers: Exploring participatory culture*. NYU Press.
- Jenkins, H. (2007, 21 March). Transmedia storytelling 101. *Pop Junctions*.
https://henryjenkins.org/blog/2007/03/transmedia_storytelling_101.html
- Jenkins, H. (2009, 12 December). The revenge of the origami unicorn: Seven principles of transmedia storytelling (well, two actually. Five more on Friday). *Pop Junctions*.
https://henryjenkins.org/2009/12/the_revenge_of_the_origami_uni.html
- Jenkins, H. (2011, 31 July). Transmedia 202: Further reflections. *Pop Junctions*.
https://henryjenkins.org/blog/2011/08/defining_transmedia_further_re.html
- Jenkins, H. (2012). Superpowered fans: The many worlds of San Diego’s Comic-Con. *Boom: A Journal of California*, 2(2), 22–36. <https://doi.org/10.1525/boom.2012.2.2.22>
- Jenkins, H. (2013). The reign of the ‘mothership’: Transmedia’s past, present, and possible futures. In D. Mann (Ed.), *Wired TV: Laboring over an interactive future* (pp. 244–268). Rutgers University Press.

- Jenkins, H. (2014). Rethinking 'rethinking convergence/culture'. *Cultural Studies*, 28(2), 267–297. <https://doi.org/10.1080/09502386.2013.801579>
- Jenkins, H. (2016, 15 November). Transmedia what? *Medium*.
<https://immerse.news/transmedia-what-15edf6b61daa>
- Jenkins, H. (2017a). Adaptation, extension, transmedia. *Literature/Film Quarterly*, 45(2).
https://lfq.salisbury.edu/_issues/first/adaptation_extension_transmedia.html
- Jenkins, H. (2017b, 17 January). Yes, transmedia has a history!: An interview with Matthew Freeman (Part One). *Pop Junctions*. <https://henryjenkins.org/blog/2017/01/yes-transmedia-has-a-history-an-interview-with-matthew-freeman-part-one.html>
- Jenkins, H. (2019a). Foreword. In M. Freeman & R. R. Gambarato (Eds.), *The Routledge companion to transmedia studies* (pp. xxvi–xxx). Routledge.
- Jenkins, H. (2023). *Who the &# is Henry Jenkins?* Pop Junctions.
<https://henryjenkins.org/aboutmehtml>
- Jenkins, H., Ford, S., & Green, J. (2013). *Spreadable media: Creating value and meaning in a networked culture*. NYU Press.
- Jenkins, H., Ito, M., & boyd, d. (2016). *Participatory culture in a networked era: A conversation on youth, learning, commerce and politics*. Polity Press.
- Jenkins, H., Peters-Lazaro, G., & Shresthova, S. (2020). Popular culture and the civic imagination: Foundations. In H. Jenkins, G. Peter-Lazaro & S. Shresthova (Eds.), *Popular culture and the civic imagination* (pp. 1–30). NYU Press.
- Jenkins, H., & Shresthova, S. (2012). Up, up, and away! The power and potential of fan activism. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 10.
<https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2012.0435>
- Johnson, D. (n.d.). *A history of transmedia entertainment*. Spreadable Media.
<http://spreadablemedia.org/essays/johnson/#.VWkt8vmqqko>

- Johnson, D. (2009). *Franchising media worlds: Content networks and the collaborative production of culture* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Wisconsin–Madison]. ProQuest. <https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/franchising-media-worlds-content-networks/docview/305034914/se-2>
- Johnson, D. (2012). Cinematic destiny: Marvel Studios and the trade stories of industrial convergence. *Cinema Journal*, 52(1), 1–24. <https://doi.org/10.1353/cj.2012.0108>
- Johnson, D. (2013). *Media franchising: Creative license and collaboration in the culture industries*. NYU Press.
- Johnson, D. (2017). Battleworlds: The management of multiplicity in the media industries. In M. Boni (Ed.), *World building: Transmedia, fans, industries* (pp. 129–142). Amsterdam University Press.
- Johnson, R. (Director). (2017). *Star wars: The last Jedi* [Film]. Lucasfilm.
- Johnson, R. [rianjohnson]. (2018a, 6 June). *On social media a few unhealthy people can cast a big shadow on the wall* [Post]. X. <https://x.com/rianjohnson/status/1004034384649904128>
- Johnson, R. [@rianjohnson]. (2018b, 6 June). *What we talk about when we talk about manbabies* [Post]. X. <https://x.com/rianjohnson/status/1004034162435678208>
- Johnson, R. [@rianjohnson]. (2019, 22 December). [Crown emoji] [Image attached] [Post]. X. <https://x.com/rianjohnson/status/1208493658334486528>
- Johnston, M., & Forrest, S. (2020). *Working two way: Stories about cross-cultural collaboration from Nyoongar country*. Springer Nature Singapore.
- Jones, B. J. (2016). *George Lucas: A life*. Little, Brown and Company.
- Kelleher, S. R. (2023, 28 May). The high-flying death of Disney’s Star Wars hotel. *Forbes*, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/suzannerowankelleher/2023/05/28/why-disney-closed-star-wars-hotel-galactic-starcruiser>

- Kenny, S., Ife, J., & Westoby, P. (2020). Introductory overview. In S. Kenny, J. Ife, & P. Westoby (Eds.), *Populism, democracy and community development* (pp. 1–18). Policy Press.
- Kenny, S., Taylor, M., Onyx, J., & Mayo, M. (2015). *Challenging the third sector: Global prospects for active citizenship*. Policy Press.
- Kim, V. (2019, 24 December). *Kelly Marie Tran is in even less of The rise of Skywalker than we thought*. Slate. <https://slate.com/culture/2019/12/the-rise-of-skywalker-kelly-marie-tran-rose-tico-time-onscreen.html>
- Kinder, M. (1993). *Playing with power in movies, television, and video games: From Muppet babies to Teenage mutant ninja turtles*. University of California Press.
- Kirkpatrick, E. (2023). *Recovering the radical promise of superheroes: Un/making worlds*. Punctum Books.
- Kit, B. (2019, 15 October). *Kevin Feige upped to chief creative officer of Marvel*. The Hollywood Reporter. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/kevin-feige-upped-chief-creative-officer-marvel-1247801/>
- Kit, B. (2024, 24 March). *Inside the firing of Victoria Alonso: Her Oscar-nominated movie ‘Argentina, 1985’ at center of exit (exclusive)*. The Hollywood Reporter. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/marvels-victoria-alonso-fired-argentina-1985-1235360231/>
- Kit, B., & Couch, A. (2024, 21 February). *How Marvel is quietly retooling amid superhero fatigue*. The Hollywood Reporter. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/marvel-fantastic-four-avengers-movies-1235830951/>
- Kit, B., & Galuppo, M. (2017, 5 September). *Colin Trevorrow out as ‘Star wars: Episode IX’ director*. The Hollywood Reporter.

- <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-features/colin-trevorrow-as-director-star-wars-episode-ix-1035463/>
- Kitwood, D. (2020). *Black Lives Matter movement inspires protest in London* [Photograph]. Getty Images. <https://www.gettyimages.com.au/detail/news-photo/actor-john-boyega-speaks-to-the-crowd-during-a-black-lives-news-photo/1243459406>
- Know Your Meme. (n.d.-a). *Ruined childhood*. <https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/ruined-childhood>
- Know Your Meme. (n.d.-b). *Somehow, Palpatine returned* [Photograph]. <https://knowyourmeme.com/photos/2066154>
- Kohnen, M. E. S., Parker, F., & Woo, B. (2023). From Comic-Con to Amazon: Fan conventions and digital platforms. *New Media & Society*. Advance online publication. <https://doi.org/10.1177/14614448231165289>
- Konzal, A. W. (2011). *Entertainment architecture: Constructing a framework for the creation of an emerging transmedia form* [Doctoral dissertation, Queensland University of Technology]. QUT ePrints. <https://eprints.qut.edu.au/50489/>
- Kroll, J. (2017a, 30 January). *Ben Affleck will not direct 'The Batman' (exclusive)*. Variety. <https://variety.com/2017/film/news/ben-affleck-the-batman-will-not-direct-1201971566/>
- Kroll, J. (2017b, 12 September). *J. J. Abrams to replace Colin Trevorrow as director of 'Star wars: Episode IX'*. Variety. <https://variety.com/2017/film/news/j-j-abrams-star-wars-episode-ix-director-colin-trevorrow-1202548094/>
- Lang, B. (2021, 22 March). *WarnerMedia's Ann Sarnoff on 'Zack Snyder's Justice league' and DC's future*. Variety. <https://variety.com/2021/film/news/zack-snyder-justice-league-suicide-squad-ray-fisher-warnermedia-1234935580/>

- Las Vegas Review-Journal. (2010). [Photograph of *The Avengers* cast with director Joss Whedon at the 2010 San Diego Comic-Con].
<https://www.reviewjournal.com/news/samuel-l-jackson-announces-avengers-cast/>
- Laville, S., & Watts, J. (2019, 21 September). Across the globe, millions join biggest climate protest ever. *The Guardian*.
<https://www.theguardian.com/environment/2019/sep/21/across-the-globe-millions-join-biggest-climate-protest-ever>
- Lawrence, J. S. (2006). Joseph Campbell, George Lucas and the monomyth. In M. W. Kapell & J. S. Lawrence (Eds.), *Finding the force of the Star wars franchise: Fans, merchandise, & critics* (pp. 21–34). Peter Lang Publishing.
- Lee, P. (2012). Grasping for identity: The hands of Shang-Chi, master of kung fu. In M. Pustz (Ed.), *Comic books and American cultural history: An anthology* (pp. 120–135). Continuum.
- Leon, M. (Writer), & Baruh, B. (Director). (2020, 8 May). Legacy (Season 1, Episode 2) [TV series episode]. In J. Favreau, K. Kennedy, D. Filoni, & B. Baruh (Executive Producers), *Disney gallery: Star wars: The Mandalorian*. Fairview Entertainment; Lucasfilm; M3 Creative.
- Lévi-Strauss, C. (1978). *Myth and meaning*. University of Toronto Press.
- Li, Y. (2023). *The Hollywood–China relationship: 2012–2022* [Doctoral dissertation, Washington State University]. ProQuest.
- Library of Congress. (2020). *National Film Registry spotlights diverse filmmakers in new selections*. <https://www.loc.gov/item/prn-20-082/>
- Linebaugh, K., & Knutson, R. (Hosts). (2023, 5 July). With great power, part 1: Origin story [Audio podcast episode]. In *The journal*. Spotify & The Wall Street Journal.

- <https://www.wsj.com/podcasts/the-journal/with-great-power-part-1-origin-story/7a460e36-a426-4f27-a792-e596ae02c6ad>
- Lobato, R. (2018). Rethinking international TV flows research in the age of Netflix. *Television & New Media*, 19(3), 241–256. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1527476417708245>
- Lobato, R., & Lotz, A. (2021). Beyond streaming wars: Rethinking competition in video services. *Media Industries*, 8(1). <https://doi.org/10.3998/mij.1338>
- Lockhart, M. (Ed.). (2019). *President Donald Trump and his political discourse: Ramifications of rhetoric via Twitter*. Routledge.
- Long, G. (2007). *Transmedia storytelling: Business, aesthetics and production at the Jim Henson Company* [Doctoral dissertation, Massachusetts Institute of Technology]. MIT Libraries. <http://dspace.mit.edu/handle/1721.1/39152>
- Lotman, Y. M. (1990). *Universe of the mind: A semiotic theory of culture*. Indiana University Press.
- Lotman, Y. M., Uspensky, B. A., & Mihaychuk, G. (1978). On the semiotic mechanism of culture. *New Literary History*, 9(2), 211–232. <https://doi.org/10.2307/468571>
- Lussier, G. (2019, 20 June). *The gay character in Avengers: Endgame was not supposed to be a big deal*. Gizmodo. <https://gizmodo.com/the-gay-character-in-avengers-endgame-was-not-supposed-1835665347>
- MacArthur Foundation. (2021, 28 April). *Harnessing pop culture to drive social change*. <https://www.macfound.org/press/grantee-stories/harnessing-pop-culture-to-drive-social-change>
- Macauley, S. (2013, 15 July). Chloé Zhao. *Filmmaker Magazine*. https://web.archive.org/web/20201030224312if_/https://filmmakermagazine.com/people/chloe-zhao/#.X5yXEJP7RhE

- Maguire, D. (2023, 15 October). *The Voice to Parliament referendum was defeated. Let's catch you up on the results*. ABC. <https://www.abc.net.au/news/2023-10-15/voice-to-parliament-referendum-result-no-vote-yes-campaign/102977654>
- Martin, D. (2018). The Americanization of the Hong Kong kung fu hero: Orientalism and social class in Marvel Comics' *Iron fist*. *Journal of Popular Culture*, 51(6), 1521–1539. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jpcu.12745>
- Martinson, J. (2015, 14 October). Star Wars new female character 'extremely significant', says producer. *The Guardian*. <https://www.theguardian.com/film/2015/oct/14/star-wars-new-female-character-extremely-significant-says-producer>
- Marvel. (2019, 21 July). *SDCC 2019: All of the Marvel studios news coming out of Hall H at San Diego Comic-Con*. <https://www.marvel.com/articles/movies/sdcc-2019-all-of-the-marvel-studios-news-coming-out-of-hall-h-at-san-diego-comic-con>
- Marvel Cast. [@marvelousactors]. (2019, 3 April). *The reunion we were waiting for* ('[Image attached] [Post]'). Instagram. <https://www.instagram.com/p/BvxO8rglM7n/>
- Masters, K. (2014, 23 July). *How Marvel became the envy (and scourge) of Hollywood*. The Hollywood Reporter. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/how-marvel-became-envy-scourge-720363/>
- Masters, K. (2016, 3 August). *'Suicide squad's' secret drama: Rushed production, competing cuts, high anxiety*. The Hollywood Reporter. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/suicide-squads-secret-drama-rushed-916693/>
- Masters, K., & Belloni, M. (2015, 31 August). *Marvel shake-up: Film chief Kevin Feige breaks free of CEO Ike Perlmutter (exclusive)*. The Hollywood Reporter. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/marvel-shake-up-film-chief-819205/>

- Masters, K., & McClintock, P. (2022, 11 August). *Warner Bros. weighing fate of 'The Flash' as its Ezra Miller problem grows*. The Hollywood Reporter.
<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/the-flash-fate-ezra-miller-problem-worsens-warner-1235196919/>
- Masters, K., & Siegel, T. (2021, 30 September). *Scarlett Johansson, Disney settle explosive 'Black widow' lawsuit*. The Hollywood Reporter.
<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/business/business-news/scarlett-johansson-disney-settle-black-widow-lawsuit-1235022598/>
- Matthew [@frigginhegg]. (2019, 30 December).*somehow palpatine returned* [Image attached] [Post]. X. <https://x.com/frigginhegg/status/1211356585361989632>
- Mayberry, C. (2021, 14 February). Disney+'s 'WandaVision' cast into top viewing spot worldwide. *Forbes*. <https://www.forbes.com/sites/carlymayberry/2021/02/11/disneys-wandavision-cast-into-top-viewing-spot-worldwide/?sh=2eb88aa86133>
- McDermott, M. (2006). The menace of the fans to the franchise. In M. W. Kapell & J. S. Lawrence (Eds.), *Finding the force of the Star wars franchise: Fans, merchandise, & critics* (pp. 243–264). Peter Lang Publishing.
- McMahon, J. (2021). Selling Hollywood to China. *Forum for Social Economics*, 50(4), 414–431. <https://doi.org/10.1080/07360932.2020.1800500>
- Media Informatics and Content Analytics. (2018). *Character network visualization demo*.
https://sail.usc.edu/~mica/project_pages/character_network_visualization.html
- Mendelson, S. (2019, 17 June). Box office: 'Avengers: Endgame' continued Marvel's unparalleled streak of breakout sequels. *Forbes*.
<https://www.forbes.com/sites/scottmendelson/2019/06/17/avengers-endgame-star-wars-avatar-jurassic-spider-man-iron-man-thor-ant-man-box-office/>

- Mengarelli, G. (2022, 29 November). *Every cancelled Star Wars project that was never made*. Dork Side of the Force. <https://dorksideoftheforce.com/2022/11/29/every-cancelled-star-wars-project-never-made/>
- Meow Wolf. (2019). *Who we are*. <https://meowwolf.com/about>
- Mittell, J. (n.d.). *Forensic fandom and the drillable text*. Spreadable Media. <http://spreadablemedia.org/essays/mittell/#.VWQymPmqkko>
- Mittell, J. (2006, 16 June). Lost in an alternate reality. *Flow*. <https://www.flowjournal.org/2006/06/lost-in-an-alternate-reality/>
- Mittell, J. (2014). Strategies of storytelling on transmedia television. In M.-L. Ryan & J.-N. Thon (Eds.), *Storyworlds across media: Toward a media-conscious narratology* (pp. 201–218). University of Nebraska Press.
- Moment Factory. (n.d.). *We do it in public*. <https://momentfactory.com/about>
- Moore, T. (2015). *One controversial piece of Star wars canon that won't be in The force awakens*. Blastr. <http://www.blastr.com>
- Moreau, J. (2023a, 13 September). *Marvel VFX workers unanimously vote to unionize with IATSE*. Variety. <https://variety.com/2023/artisans/news/marvel-union-special-effects-iatse-1235722298/>
- Moreau, J. (2023b, 21 November). *Dave Filoni is chief creative officer at Lucasfilm, will be 'planning the future' of 'Star wars' films and shows*. Variety. <https://variety.com/2023/film/news/dave-filoni-lucasfilm-chief-creative-officer-star-wars-1235804125/>
- Morrison, G. (2011). *Supergods: What masked vigilantes, miraculous mutants, and a sun god from Smallville can teach us about being human*. Random House.
- Mortensen, T. E. (2018). Anger, fear, and games: The long event of #GamerGate. *Games and Culture*, 13(8), 787–806. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1555412016640408>

- Motion Picture Association. (2022). *Theme report 2021: A comprehensive analysis and survey of the theatrical and home/mobile entertainment market environment for 2021*.
<https://www.motionpictures.org/research-docs/2021-theme-report/>
- Moye, C. (2019, 30 December). 'Star wars' screenwriter Chris Terrio on ending the 42-year 'Skywalker' saga. AwardsDaily. <https://www.awardsdaily.com/2019/12/24/star-wars-screenwriter-chris-terrio-on-ending-the-42-year-skywalker-saga/>
- Moye, D. (2017, 27 December). Kelly Marie Tran of 'Last Jedi' facing racist, sexist comments online. HuffPost. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/kelly-marie-tran-racists-last-jedi_n_5a4400fee4b06d1621b6b2bb
- Moyser, G., & Wagstaffe, M. (Eds.). (1987). *Research methods for elite studies*. Allen & Unwin.
- Murdock, M. (1998). *The heroine's journey: Woman's quest for wholeness*. Shambhala.
- Nagle, A. (2017). *Kill all normies: The online culture wars from Tumblr and 4Chan to the alt-right and Trump*. Zero Books.
- Ng, E. (2017). Between text, paratext, and context: Queerbaiting and the contemporary media landscape. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 24.
<https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2017.0917>
- 9 News. (2020, 15 November). *Street battles have broken out between thousands of Donald Trump supporters and counter protesters in the heart of Washington* [Video attached] [Post]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/watch/?v=702965453672584>
- Numbers. (n.d.-a). *Box office history for DC Extended Universe movies*. Retrieved 24 September 2024. <https://www.the-numbers.com/movies/franchise/DC-Extended-Universe>

- Numbers. (n.d.-b). *Box office history for Marvel Cinematic Universe movies*. Retrieved 2 November 2023. https://www.the-numbers.com/movies/franchise/Marvel-Cinematic-Universe#tab=summary&franchise_movies_overview=od5
- Numbers. (n.d.-c). *Box office history for Spider-Man movies*. Retrieved 30 January 2024. <https://www.the-numbers.com/movies/franchise/Spider-Man>
- Numbers. (n.d.-d). *Box office history for Star wars movies*. Retrieved 17 February 2024. <https://www.the-numbers.com/movies/franchise/Star-Wars>
- Numbers. (n.d.-e). *Joker (2019)*. Retrieved 24 September 2024. [https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Joker-\(2019\)](https://www.the-numbers.com/movie/Joker-(2019))
- Numbers. (2024). *Top lifetime grosses*. Retrieved 17 February 2024. https://www.boxofficemojo.com/chart/ww_top_lifetime_gross/?area=XWW
- O’Connell, S. (2021). *Release the Snyder cut: The crazy true story behind the fight that saved Zack Snyder’s Justice league*. Applause Theatre & Cinema Books.
- Ojamaa, M., & Torop, P. (2015). Transmediality of cultural autocommunication. *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 18(1), 61–78. <https://doi.org/10.1177/1367877914528119>
- Oscars [@Oscars]. (2017, 8 June). *Tribute to Richard Donner—How ‘Superman’ influenced today’s biggest superhero movies* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PrNwMXcKxWE>
- Pande, R. (2020). How (not) to talk about race: A critique of methodological practices in fan studies. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 33. <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2020.1737>
- Parker, T. (Writer & Director). (2008, 8 October). The China probrem (Season 12, Episode 8) [TV series episode]. In T. Parker, M. Stone, B. Graden, D. Liebling, F. C. Agnone II,

- B. Howell, & A. Garefino (Executive Producers), *South park*. Parker-Stone Productions; South Park Studios.
- Pearson, R. (2010). Fandom in the digital era. *Popular Communication*, 8(1), 84–95.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15405700903502346>
- Pearson, R. E. (2009). *Reading Lost: Perspectives on a hit television show*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Perez, C. (2018, 28 August). Bullied kid refuses to fight back because ‘it’s not the Jedi way’. *New York Post*. <https://nypost.com/2018/08/28/bullied-kid-refuses-to-fight-back-because-its-not-the-jedi-way/>
- Peter Jackson to write and direct *Star wars episode III* [Online petition]. (2001).
<http://web.archive.org/web/20120111134956/http://www.petitiononline.com/dgkomxpq/petition.html>
- Phillips, A. (2012). *A creator’s guide to transmedia storytelling: How to captivate and engage audiences across multiple platforms*. McGraw-Hill.
- Phillips, A. (2016, 15 November). What’s happened to transmedia? *Medium*.
<https://immerse.news/whats-happened-to-transmedia-855f180980e3>
- Polaris Market Research. (2024). *Immersive entertainment market share, size, trends, industry analysis report, by technology type (virtual reality, augmented reality, mixed reality, others), by application, by region, and segment forecasts, 2024–2032*.
<https://www.polarismarketresearch.com/industry-analysis/immersive-entertainment-market>
- Posobiec, J. [@jackposobiec]. (2016). *Star Wars writers rewrote and reshot Rouge One* [Post]. X. <https://x.com/JackPosobiec/status/806854629459918848>
- Pratten, R. (2011). *Getting started in transmedia storytelling: A practical guide for beginners*. CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform.

- Proctor, W. (2018). ‘I’ve seen a lot of talk about the #blackstormtrooper outrage, but not a single example of anyone complaining’: *The force awakens*, canonical fidelity and non-toxic fan practices. *Participations: Journal of Audience & Reception Studies*, 15(1), 160–179. <https://www.participations.org/15-01-10-proctor.pdf>
- Proctor, W., & Freeman, M. (2017). ‘The first step into a smaller world’: The transmedia economy of *Star wars*. In M. J. P. Wolf (Ed.), *Revisiting imaginary worlds: A subcreation studies anthology* (pp. 223–233). Routledge.
- Producer’s Guild of America. (n.d.). *Producing credits for transmedia*.
<https://producersguild.org/code-of-credits-transmedia/>
- Pryor Cashman. (2022). *Simon Pulman*. <https://www.pryorcashman.com/simon-pulman>
- Punathambekar, A. (2012). On the ordinariness of participatory culture. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 10. <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2012.0378>
- r/moviescirclejerk. (2018). *The Last Jedi: De-Feminized Fanedit (aka The Chauvinist Cut)* [Online forum post]. Reddit.
https://www.reddit.com/r/moviescirclejerk/comments/7qal59/the_last_jedi_defeminized_fanedit_aka_the/
- Ramón, A.-C., Tran, M., & Hunt, D. (2023). *Hollywood diversity report 2023: Exclusivity in progress. Part 1: Film*. UCLA Entertainment & Media Research Initiative.
<https://socialsciences.ucla.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/06/UCLA-Hollywood-Diversity-Report-2023-Film-3-30-2023.pdf>
- Ramos, B. (2023, 30 March). *Diversity takes a step back in theatrical films—but strides forward in streaming*. Newsroom. <https://newsroom.ucla.edu/releases/hollywood-diversity-report-spring-2023-movie-industry>
- RAMZPAUL [@ramzpaul]. (2017, 19 December). *Battlestar Galactica Asian vs. #LastJedi Asian* [Image attached] [Post]. X. <https://x.com/ramzpaul/status/942992274232836096>

- Reed, P. (Director). (2020). Chapter 16: The rescue (Season 2, Episode 8) [TV series episode] [Screen capture]. In J. Favreau, D. Filoni, K. Kennedy, C. Wilson, & R. Famuyiwa (Executive Producers), *The Mandalorian*. Lucasfilm; Fairview Entertainment; Golem Creations.
- Robinson, J. (2016, 5 August). *Did you catch all the ways Hollywood pandered to China this year? They might have snuck one or two by you*. Vanity Fair. <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2016/08/did-you-catch-the-ways-hollywood-pandered-to-china-this-year>
- Robinson, J. (2020, 22 May). *Is releasing the Snyder cut of Justice league a victory for toxic fandoms?* Vanity Fair. <https://www.vanityfair.com/hollywood/2020/05/is-releasing-the-snyder-cut-a-victory-for-toxic-fandoms>
- Robinson, J., Gonzales, D., & Edwards, G. (2023). *MCU: The reign of Marvel Studios*. Liveright.
- Rodriguez, R. (2020). Chapter 14: The tragedy (Season 2, Episode 6) [TV series episode] [Screen capture]. In J. Favreau, D. Filoni, K. Kennedy, C. Wilson, & R. Famuyiwa (Executive Producers), *The Mandalorian*. Lucasfilm; Fairview Entertainment; Golem Creations.
- Romain, L. (2019, 5 December). *A history of Finn/Poe shipping in the Star wars sequels*. Nerdist. <https://nerdist.com/article/history-of-finn-poe-shipping-star-wars/>
- Rose, F. (2011). *The art of immersion: How the digital generation is remaking Hollywood, Madison Avenue, and the way we tell stories*. W.W. Norton & Co.
- Ross, A. S., & Caldwell, D. (2020). ‘Going negative’: An APPRAISAL analysis of the rhetoric of Donald Trump on Twitter. *Language & Communication*, 70, 13–27. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.langcom.2019.09.003>

Rotten Tomatoes. (n.d.). *Star wars saga*.

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/franchise/star_wars_saga

Rotten Tomatoes. (2014). *The amazing Spider-Man 2*.

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_amazing_spider_man_2

Rotten Tomatoes. (2015). *Star wars: The force awakens*.

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/star_wars_episode_vii_the_force_awakens

Rotten Tomatoes. (2017a). *Star wars: The last Jedi*.

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/star_wars_the_last_jedi

Rotten Tomatoes. (2017b). *The mummy*.

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/the_mummy_2017

Rotten Tomatoes. (2017c). *Wonder woman*.

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/wonder_woman_2017

Rotten Tomatoes. (2018a). *Aquaman*. https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/aquaman_2018

Rotten Tomatoes. (2018b). *Black panther*.

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/black_panther_2018

Rotten Tomatoes. (2019a). *Season 1—The Mandalorian*.

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/tv/the_mandalorian/s01

Rotten Tomatoes. (2019b). *Star wars: The rise of Skywalker*.

https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/star_wars_the_rise_of_skywalker

Rotten Tomatoes. (2020). *Birds of prey (and the fantabulous emancipation of one Harley*

Quinn). https://www.rottentomatoes.com/m/birds_of_pre_2020

Rubenstein, K. (2018). Power, control and citizenship: The Uluru Statement from the Heart as active citizenship. *Bond Law Review*, 30(1), 19–30.

<https://doi.org/10.53300/001c.5659>

- Rubin, R. (2021, 26 December). *'Spider-Man: No Way Home' becomes first pandemic-era movie to smash \$1 billion milestone globally*. Variety.
<https://variety.com/2021/film/box-office/spiderman-billion-dollars-box-office-pandemic-1235143308/>
- Ruffalo, M. [@MarkRuffalo]. (2020, 31 August). *This is his power and impact on the next generation*. #ChadwickForever [Images attached] [Post]. X.
<https://x.com/MarkRuffalo/status/1300110581266092033>
- Russo, A., & Russo, J. (Directors). (2016). *Captain America: Civil war* [Film] [Screen capture]. Marvel Studios.
- Russo, A., & Russo, J. (Directors). (2019). *Avengers: Endgame* [Film] [Screen capture] Marvel Studios.
- Ryan, C., & Greenwald, A. (Hosts). (2023, 13 October). The evolution of the Marvel Cinematic Universe with Joanna Robinson [Audio podcast episode]. In *The watch*. The Ringer. <https://podcasts.apple.com/us/podcast/the-watch/id1111739567?i=1000631137925>
- Ryan, M. (2021, 14 May). *Zack Snyder on getting back to basics with 'Army of the dead' after what he calls 'torture'*. Uproxx. <https://uproxx.com/movies/zack-snyder-army-of-the-dead-justice-league/>
- Ryan, M.-L. (1999). Immersion vs. interactivity: Virtual reality and literary theory. *SubStance*, 28(2), 110–137. <https://doi.org/10.1353/sub.1999.0015>
- Ryfe, D. M. (2016). The importance of time in media production research. In C. Paterson, D. Lee, A. Saha, & A. Zoellner (Eds.), *Advancing media production research: Shifting sites, methods, and politics* (pp. 38–50). Palgrave Macmillan.
- Salter, A., & Stanfill, M. (2020). *A portrait of the auteur as fanboy: The construction of authorship in transmedia franchises*. University Press of Mississippi.

- Samuel, E. (2021, 19 May). *Simu Liu wants you to see yourself as a superhero*. Men's Health. <https://www.menshealth.com/entertainment/a36343557/simu-liu-shang-chi-marvel-superhero/>
- Sandvoss, C. (2005a). *Fans: The mirror of consumption*. Polity Press.
- Sandvoss, C. (2005b). One-dimensional fan: Toward an aesthetic of fan texts. *American Behavioral Scientist*, 48(7), 822–839. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0002764204273170>
- Schowalter, D., Stevens, S., & Horvath, D. L. (2021). *The misogynistic backlash against women-strong films*. Routledge.
- Sciretta, P. (2015, 15 August). *Colin Trevorrow confirmed to direct 'Star wars: Episode IX'*. The Hollywood Reporter. <https://www.slashfilm.com/538736/colin-trevorrow-star-wars-director/>
- Scolari, C. (2009). DIGITAL ECO_LOGY: Umberto Eco and a semiotic approach to digital communication. *Information, Communication & Society*, 12(1), 129–148. <https://doi.org/10.1080/13691180802520798>
- Scolari, C., Bertetti, P., & Freeman, M. (2014). *Transmedia archaeology: Storytelling in the borderlines of science fiction, comics and pulp magazines*. Palgrave Macmillan.
- Scott, S. (2011). *Revenge of the fanboy: Convergence culture and the politics of incorporation* [Doctoral dissertation, University of Southern California]. ProQuest.
- Scott, S. (2012). Who's steering the mothership? The role of the fanboy auteur in transmedia storytelling. In A. Delwiche & J. J. Henderson (Eds.), *The participatory cultures handbook* (pp. 43–52). Routledge.
- Scott, S. (2013). Fangirls in refrigerators: The politics of (in)visibility in comic book culture. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 13. <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2013.0460>
- Scott, S. (2017a). Modeling the Marvel everyfan: Agent Coulson and/as transmedia fan culture. *Palabra Clave*, 20(4), 1042–1072. <https://doi.org/10.5294/pacla.2017.20.4.8>

- Scott, S. (2017b). #Wheresrey?: Toys, spoilers, and the gender politics of franchise paratexts. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 34(2), 138–147.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/15295036.2017.1286023>
- Scott, S. (2020). *Battlestar galactica*: Fans and ancillary content. In E. Thompson & J. Mittell (Eds.), *How to watch television* (2nd ed., pp. 319–328). NYU Press.
- Screen Australia. (2023a). *Screen Australia: Drama report 2022–23: Production of feature films, TV and online drama in Australia 2022–23*.
<https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/fact-finders/reports-and-key-issues/reports-and-discussion-papers/drama-report>
- Screen Australia. (2023b). *Seeing ourselves on-screen: Report reveals progress for diversity in Australian TV drama*. <https://www.screenaustralia.gov.au/sa/media-centre/news/2023/04-14-seeing-ourselves-diversity-in-australian-tv>
- Seastrom, L. (2015, 22 October). *Mythic discovery within the inner reaches of outer space: Joseph Campbell meets George Lucas—Part I*. Star Wars.
<https://www.starwars.com/news/mythic-discovery-within-the-inner-reaches-of-outer-space-joseph-campbell-meets-george-lucas-part-i>
- Shefrin, E. (2004). *Lord of the rings, Star wars*, and participatory fandom: Mapping new congruencies between the internet and media entertainment culture. *Critical Studies in Media Communication*, 21(3), 261–281.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/0739318042000212729>
- Silverstone, R. (1994). *Television and everyday life*. Routledge.
- Sivesind, K. H., & Saglie, J. (Eds.). (2017). *Promoting active citizenship: Markets and choice in Scandinavian welfare*. Springer.
- Smith, K. (2022, 21 October). *Special guest: Ed Brubaker!—BMB *live*—10/20/22* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PnB2xCEjMlg>

- Smith, K. E. (2006). Problematizing power relations in ‘elite’ interviews. *Geoforum*, 37(4), 643–653. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.geoforum.2005.11.002>
- Smith, S. L., Pieper, K. M., Granados, A., & Choueiti, M. (2010). Assessing gender-related portrayals in top-grossing G-rated films. *Sex Roles*, 62(11–12), 774–786. <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11199-009-9736-z>
- Snyder, Z. (Director). (2013). *Man of steel* [Film] [Screen capture]. Warner Bros. Pictures; Legendary Pictures; DC Entertainment; Syncopy; Peters Entertainment.
- Snyder, Z. (2019, 4 December). Is it real? Does it exist? Of course it does. *Vero*. <https://vero.co/zacksnyder/7q-RGHf7qKDvh2dS3J8Jn7xz>
- Sony Pictures. (2015). *Sony Pictures Entertainment brings Marvel Studios into the amazing world of Spider-Man*. https://www.sonypictures.com/corp/press_releases/2015/02_15/020915_spiderman.html
- Stanfill, M. (2019). *Exploiting fandom: How the media industry seeks to manipulate fans*. University of Iowa Press.
- Starlight Runner Entertainment. (n.d.-a). *Entertainment projects*. <https://starlightrunner.com/projects/entertainment/>
- Starlight Runner Entertainment. (n.d.-b). *Geopolitical & social good*. <https://starlightrunner.com/projects/sociopolitical/>
- Starlin, J. (2017, 24 January). *Just received a very big check from D.C. Entertainment for my participation in Batman V Superman* [Post]. Facebook. <https://www.facebook.com/jim.starlin.94/posts/1558674220814277?pnref=story>
- Star Wars. (2015, 5 December). *It’s calling to you. #TheForceAwakens* [Video attached] [Post]. X. <https://x.com/starwars/status/672905503270297600>

Star Wars. (2016, 17 September). *Pablo Hidalgo extended interview* [Video]. YouTube.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GvT2F1j-SvA>

StarWars.com. (2012, 30 October). *Passing the baton: Meet Kathleen Kennedy*.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20140404160902/http://starwars.com/news/passing-the-baton-meet-kathleen-kennedy/index.html>

StarWars.com. (2013, 5 February). *New spinoff films set to expand the Star wars galaxy*.

<https://www.starwars.com/news/new-spinoff-films-set-to-expand-the-star-wars-galaxy>

StarWars.com. (2014, 25 April). *The legendary Star wars expanded universe turns a new*

page. <https://www.starwars.com/news/the-legendary-star-wars-expanded-universe-turns-a-new-page>

StarWars.com. (2020a, 4 May). *Academy Award winner Taika Waititi to direct and co-write*

new Star wars feature film for theatrical release; Oscar nominee Krysty Wilson-Cairns to co-write screenplay with Waititi. <https://www.starwars.com/news/taika-waititi-announce>

StarWars.com. (2020b, 10 December). *Future Lucasfilm projects revealed*.

<https://www.starwars.com/news/future-lucasfilm-projects-revealed>

StarWars.com. (2023, 7 April). *SWCE 2023: Three new Star Wars movies announced*.

<https://www.starwars.com/news/swce-2023-new-star-wars-films>

Star Wars star Jake Lloyd: I will never act again (2012, 6 March). *The Sun*.

<https://web.archive.org/web/20120312162603/http://www.thesun.co.uk/sol/homepage/showbiz/film/4170549/Star-Wars-Anakin-Skywalker-star-Jake-Lloyd-I-will-never-act-again.html>

Statista. (2020). *Global box office revenue of DC Comics movies from 2004 to 2020 (in million U.S. dollars)*. Retrieved 1 March 2021 from

<https://www.statista.com/statistics/329199/dc-comics-films-box-office-revenue/>

- Statista. (2022). *Highest-grossing movie franchises and series worldwide as of June 2022 (in billion U.S. dollars)*. Retrieved 15 August 2022 from <https://www.statista.com/statistics/317408/highest-grossing-film-franchises-series/>
- St. Clair, J. (2021, 19 May). *Simu Liu responds to the Chinese criticism he was 'too ugly' to play Shang Chi*. Men's Health. <https://www.menshealth.com/entertainment/a36447247/simu-liu-china-criticism/>
- Steinberg, M. (2012). *Anime's media mix: Franchising toys and characters in Japan*. University of Minnesota Press.
- Stolworthy, J. (2017, 24 December). Mark Hamill 'still hasn't accepted' *Star wars 8: The last Jedi* storyline: 'He's not my Luke Skywalker'. *Independent*. <https://www.independent.co.uk/arts-entertainment/films/news/star-wars-the-last-jedi-mark-hamill-luke-skywalker-he-s-not-my-a8126976.html>
- Sun, R. (2016, 7 December). *Lucasfilm's force: Kathleen Kennedy reveals an executive team more than 50 percent female*. The Hollywood Reporter. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/lucasfilms-force-kathleen-kennedy-reveals-an-executive-team-more-50-percent-female-953156/>
- Sun, R. (2021, 3 March). *The resurrection of Kelly Marie Tran: On surviving 'Star wars' bullying, the pressures of representation, and 'Raya and the last dragon'*. The Hollywood Reporter. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/movies/movie-news/resurrection-of-kelly-marie-tran-on-surviving-star-wars-bullying-the-pressure-of-representation-and-raya-and-the-last-dragon-4142178/>
- Swain, T. (1993). *A place for strangers: Towards a history of Australian Aboriginal being*. Cambridge University Press.

- Swann, E. (2020, 23 August). *DC Films boss confirms how the multiverse will work in the DCEU*. Cinema Blend. <https://www.cinemablend.com/news/2553096/dc-films-boss-confirms-how-the-multiverse-will-work-in-the-dceu>
- Tager, J., & Landreth, J. (2020). *Made in Hollywood, censored by Beijing: The U.S. film industry and Chinese government influence*. PEN America. https://pen.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/08/2020_Made_in_Hollywood_Censored_by_Being_Report_FINAL.pdf
- Tapley, K. (2018, 22 May). *Inside 'Solo': A 'Star wars' story's bumpy ride to the big screen*. Variety. <https://variety.com/2018/film/features/solo-a-star-wars-story-directors-reshoots-ron-howard-1202817841/>
- Tartaglione, N. (2022, 6 January). *Worldwide box office climbed 78% in 2021 to \$21.4 billion amid covid flux as 'Spider-Man' brought the year home: Global studio rankings*. Deadline. <https://deadline.com/2022/01/2021-worldwide-box-office-studio-rankings-hollywood-market-share-covid-spider-man-no-way-home-1234905569/>
- Taylor, C. (2014). *How Star Wars conquered the universe: The past, present, and future of a multibillion dollar franchise*. Basic Books.
- Taylor-Foster, K. (2023, 11 April). *Expect more female-driven 'Star wars' stories, says Lucasfilm's Kathleen Kennedy: 'There's a balance in the force'*. Yahoo! Entertainment. <https://www.yahoo.com/entertainment/star-wars-female-driven-kathleen-kennedy-ahsoka-rey-160236957.html>
- Thomas, E. E., & Stornaiuolo, A. (2019). Race, storytelling, and restorying: What can we learn from black fans? *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 29. <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2019.1562>
- Thomas, J., McCosker, A., Parkinson, S., Hegarty, K., Featherstone, D., Kennedy, J., Holcombe-James, I., Ormond-Parker, L., & Ganley, L. (2023). *Measuring Australia's*

- digital divide: Australian Digital Inclusion Index: 2023*. ARC Centre of Excellence for Automated Decision-Making and Society, RMIT University, Swinburne University of Technology, & Telstra. <https://doi.org/10.25916/528s-ny91>
- Tian, Y., & Yang, J. (2022). Deny or bolster? A comparative study of crisis communication strategies between Trump and Cuomo in COVID-19. *Public Relations Review*, 48(2), Article 102182. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.pubrev.2022.102182>
- Tisch, J. (2010, 27 June). *Active citizenship: A new approach to volunteering*. HuffPost. https://www.huffpost.com/entry/active-citizenship-a-new_b_553417
- Toelken, B. (1996). *The dynamics of folklore*. Utah State University Press.
- Townsend, M., Deerwater, R., Hurwitz, A., & Higbee, M. (2022). *2022 studio responsibility index*. GLAAD Media Institute. <https://assets.glaad.org/m/1cc13086373985a9/original/GLAAD-2022-Studio-Responsibility-Index.pdf>
- Tran, K. M. (2018, 21 August). Kelly Marie Tran: I won't be marginalized by online harassment. *The New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/21/movies/kelly-marie-tran.html>
- Tsene, L. (2016). *Qualitative multi-method research: Media social responsibility*. SAGE Publications.
- Tsui, C. (2013, 25 April). 'Iron man 3' criticized for scaling back Chinese actors' screen time. *The Hollywood Reporter*. <https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/iron-man-3-criticized-scaling-446541/>
- Tussey, E. (2014). Connected viewing on the second screen: The limitations of the living room. In K. Sanson & J. Holt (Eds.), *Connected viewing: Selling, streaming, and sharing media in the digital age* (pp. 202–216). Routledge.

- Tyler, A., Glazebrook, L., & Roark, N. (2024, 23 August). *All 14 unmade & canceled Star wars movies & TV shows (& why they didn't happen)*. Screen Rant.
<https://screenrant.com/unmade-star-wars-movie-reason-canceled/#boba-fett-39-s-solo-star-wars-movie>
- Uluru Statement from the Heart. (n.d.). *What is the Voice?* <https://ulurustatement.org/the-voice/what-is-the-voice/>
- Upright, B. (2021). 美媒：这部美国电影若无法在中国上映，影响会很大！[US media: If this American movie cannot be released in China, the impact will be huge!] Weixin.
<https://mp.weixin.qq.com/s/8FPGvFX2nYZB6M9tVVu-4g>
- Vanity Fair [@VanityFair]. (2023, 6 May). *Elizabeth Olsen rewatches Wandavision, Love & Death, Ingrid Goes West & more* [Video]. YouTube.
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qfK0JmirhHU>
- van Zoonen, L. (2004). Imagining the fan democracy. *European Journal of Communication*, 19(1), 39–52. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0267323104040693>
- Vary, A. B. (2019, 3 December). 'Star wars: The rise of Skywalker': Finn and Poe aren't boyfriends, but J. J. Abrams hints at LGBTQ representation. *Variety*.
<https://variety.com/2019/film/news/star-wars-finn-poe-not-boyfriends-lgbtq-representation-1203423286/>
- Vary, A. B. (2022, 23 July). *Marvel Studios' Phases 5 and 6: Everything we learned at Comic-Con about the multiverse saga*. *Variety*.
<https://variety.com/2022/film/news/marvel-studios-phase-5-phase-6-multiverse-saga-comic-con-1235323893/>
- Victoria K [@VictoriaKM777]. (2014, 6 August). *Hey Marvel, me and my daughter loved your movie, it's a damn shame you seem to have only made merch* [Post]. X.
<https://x.com/VictoriaKM777/status/496889554767319040>

- Vision Research Reports. (2023). *Immersive entertainment market (by technology type: Virtual reality, augmented reality, mixed reality, others; by application)—Global industry analysis, size, share, growth, trends, revenue, regional outlook and forecast 2024–2033*. <https://www.visionresearchreports.com/immersive-entertainment-market/41043>
- Vlad C [@vladtweets]. (2018, 2 March). Black panther *FINALLY* out in Japan [Image attached] [Post]. X. <https://x.com/vladtweets/status/969241225407721473>
- Vogler, C. (1992). *The writer's journey: Mythic structure for writers*. M. Weise Productions.
- Voigts, E., & Nicklas, P. (2013). Introduction: Adaptation, transmedia storytelling and participatory culture. *Adaptation*, 6(2), 139–142.
<https://doi.org/10.1093/adaptation/apt012>
- Wagner, P. M. (Director). (1999). *The mythology of star wars: With George Lucas and Bill Moyers* [VHS]. Films for the Humanities & Sciences.
- Walker, T. D. (2019). Narrative extraction, #BlackPantherSoLit, and signifyin': 'Black Panther' fandom and transformative social practices. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 29. <https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2019.1643>
- Walsh, H. (2017, 15 December). *Have Disney strike Star wars episode VIII from the official canon* [Online petition]. Change.org. <https://www.change.org/p/the-walt-disney-company-have-disney-strike-star-wars-episode-viii-from-the-official-canon>
- Walt Disney Company. (2012, 30 October). *Disney to acquire Lucasfilm Ltd.* [Press release] <https://thewaltdisneycompany.com/disney-to-acquire-lucasfilm-ltd/>
- Walt Disney Company. (2019, 7 November). *The Walt Disney Company reports fourth quarter and full year earnings for fiscal 2019* [Press release].
<https://thewaltdisneycompany.com/the-walt-disney-company-reports-fourth-quarter-and-full-year-earnings-for-fiscal-2019/>

- Walt Disney Company. (2020, 12 November). *The Walt Disney Company reports fourth quarter and full year earnings for fiscal 2020* [Press release].
<https://thewaltdisneycompany.com/app/uploads/2020/11/q4-fy20-earnings.pdf>
- Walt Disney Company. (2020 10 December). *Disney investor day* [Video].
<https://thewaltdisneycompany.com/disney-investor-day-2020/>
- Walt Disney Company. (2022 20 November). *Robert A. Iger appointed CEO by Disney board of directors* [Press release]. <https://thewaltdisneycompany.com/robert-a-iger-appointed-chief-executive-officer-by-the-walt-disney-company-board-of-directors/>
- Wanzo, R. (2015). African American acafandom and other strangers: New genealogies of fan studies. *Transformative Works and Cultures*, 20.
<https://doi.org/10.3983/twc.2015.0699>
- Warner Bros. Discovery. (2020, 3 December). *Warner Bros. Pictures Group announces innovative, hybrid distribution model for its 2021 theatrical slate* [Press release].
<https://pressroom.warnermedia.com/us/media-release/hbo-max/warner-bros-pictures-group-announces-innovative-hybrid-distribution-model-its-2021>
- Watts, J. (Director). (2021). *Spider-Man: No Way Home* [Film] [Screen capture]. Marvel Studios.
- Webb, E. (2022). *The Marvel Cinematic Universe* [Infographic]. Tableau Public.
https://public.tableau.com/app/profile/erik.webb/viz/TheMarvelCinematicUniverse_16236607800290/MCUDashboard
- Webster, L. (2021). Marvel, Star Wars and the risk of being a hero: Social responsibilities for transmedia storytellers in the age of collective journey. *Cultural Science*, 12(1).
<https://doi.org/10.5334/csci.138>

- Webster, L., Leaver, T., & Sandry, E. (2022). Transmedia storytelling during the COVID-19 pandemic: Marvel's *WandaVision* and Zack Snyder's *Justice league*. *First Monday*, 27(7). <https://doi.org/10.5210/fm.v27i7.11784>
- Weerakkody, N. D. (2009). *Research methods for media and communications*. Oxford University Press.
- Weintraub, S. (2022, 5 April). 'Moon knight' director Mohamed Diab on his 200-page pitch, designing the costume, and why he thinks Kevin Feige is a genius. Collider. <https://collider.com/moon-knight-director-mohamed-diab-interview-pitch-costume-kevin-feige/>
- Wetzel, C., & Wetzel, S. (2020). *The Marvel Studios story: How a failing comic book publisher became a Hollywood superhero*. HarperCollins Leadership.
- WikiLeaks. (2014). *Sony female movies*. <https://wikileaks.org/sony/emails/emailid/121981>
- Williams, R. (2015). *Post-object fandom: Television, identity and self-narrative*. Bloomsbury Academic.
- Wills, J. (2017). *Disney culture*. Rutgers University Press.
- Winter, K. (2013). [Photograph of actor Tom Hiddleston appearing as Loki at the 2013 San Diego Comic-Con International]. *Entertainment Weekly*. <https://ew.com/movies/2019/04/29/avengers-endgame-time-travel/>
- Winter, K. (2019). *2019 Comic-Con International—Marvel Studios panel* [Photograph]. Getty Images. <https://www.gettyimages.com.au/photos/kevin-winter-marvel-phase-four>
- Wolf, M. J. P. (2014). *Building imaginary worlds: The theory and history of subcreation*. Taylor & Francis.
- Wolf, M. J. P. (2017). Beyond immersion: Absorption, saturation, and overflow in the building of imaginary worlds. In M. Boni (Ed.), *World building: Transmedia, fans, industries* (pp. 204–214). Amsterdam University Press.

Wookieepedia. (n.d.-a). *Canon*. <https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/Canon>

Wookieepedia. (n.d.-b). *Holocron continuity database*.

https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/Holocron_continuity_database

Wookieepedia. (n.d.-c). *Lucasfilm story group*.

https://starwars.fandom.com/wiki/Lucasfilm_Story_Group

Yuhas, A. (2020, 14 January). Why ‘Star wars’ keeps bombing in China. *The New York*

Times. <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/14/movies/star-wars-china.html>

Yunkaporta, T. (2009). *Aboriginal pedagogies at the cultural interface* [Doctoral dissertation,

James Cook University]. ResearchOnline@JCU.

https://researchonline.jcu.edu.au/10974/9/JCU_10974_Yunkaporta_2009_thesis.pdf

Yunkaporta, T. (2019). *Sand talk: How Indigenous thinking can save the world*. The Text

Publishing Company.

Ziffren, K. (2020, 6 February). *Ken Ziffren: How talent deals are evolving as studios become streamers (guest column)*. The Hollywood Reporter.

<https://www.hollywoodreporter.com/news/general-news/ken-ziffren-how-talent-deals-are-evolving-as-studios-become-streamers-guest-column-1274871/>

Every reasonable effort has been made to acknowledge the owners of copyright material. I would be pleased to hear from any copyright owner who has been omitted or incorrectly acknowledged