

## Transmedia Comics: Seriality, Sequentiality and the Shifting Economies of Franchise Licensing

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In historical terms, the comic book medium emerged out of the relationship between newspaper comic strips and the popular, much lambasted, pulp tradition of the 1920s, both of which introduced numerous trade characters to the popular imagination, including Tarzan, Popeye, Flash Gordon and Buck Rogers. These were, however, preceded by Richard Felton Outcault's 'The Yellow Kid' newspaper strips, often contentiously cited as the first comics in the US, which developed an emergent transmedia presence in the late-nineteenth century with vaudeville plays, a short film, crossover appearances with Outcault's Buster Brown, and a spate of merchandising products, such as gum, postcards, baby clothes and household appliances. In the United Kingdom, the character Ally Sloper debuted in the pages of satirical magazine *Judy* in 1867 almost three decades before *The Yellow Kid*, and grew into 'the first comics superstar' (Sabin, 2003) and the first recurrent comic character – perhaps the earliest example of what would today be described as transmedia franchising, with a flotilla of texts and associated merchandising products, including music hall and street theatre performances, village parades, advertising, film, and anthologies of previously published comic strips. Ally Sloper's popularity was so enormous and widespread that 'it is no exaggeration to say that his visibility in (UK) popular culture would have been comparable to that of any Hollywood blockbuster creation' (ibid).

It wasn't until the early 1930s, however, that comic books began to serve an active role in the extension, elaboration and enlargement of imaginary worlds via emergent licensing practices. As Avi Santos explains, it is through licensing that

IP owners are able to extend a property's reach into almost every area of consumer life without having to invest in manufacturing infrastructure or distribution networks. Licensing agreements typically involve a contract signed between a minimum of two parties, in which licensors give the licensee(s) permission to use the name and/ or image of their intellectual property for a specified purpose, for a limited amount of time, and within agreed-upon geographic and product market boundaries (2015: 7).

From its inception, the comic book medium entered into an intensive dialogic relationship with other new media of the day, including radio, newspapers, television and film, as well as the kinds of merchandising phenomena usually equated with media conglomeration and convergence in the contemporary moment. Over the decades since, comics of this kind have attracted a lion's share of critical scorn. As with other 'tie in' product, transmedia comic 'spin offs' are often pejoratively framed in purely commercial terms, nothing but 'a parasitic industry' leeching off the endeavours of legitimate creative agents and authors (Gaines, quoted in Santo, 2015: 8). For much of the history of licensed comics, with few exceptions, these spin offs 'were crafted exclusively by the comic-book producers with only financial coordination with the intellectual property (IP) holders' (Clarke, 2012: 27). As Kackman puts it, they were certainly 'not the product of smoothly engineered synergy', but 'a profitable secondary market – a way to extract as much as possible from a popular media figure or text'

(2008: 83). Essentially, comics were primarily seen as a valuable ancillary market through elongating the profit potential of popular character brands, such as The Lone Ranger (Santos, 2015), The Shadow (Fast and Örnebring, 2015), or Conan (Bertetti, 2014), to name but a few. According to Henry Jenkins, the licensing system

typically generates works that are redundant (allowing no new character background or plot development), watered down (asking the new media to slavishly duplicate experiences better achieved through the old), or riddled with sloppy contradictions (failing to respect the core consistency audiences expect within a franchise)...In reality, audiences want the new work to offer new insights and new experiences. If media companies reward that demand, viewers will feel greater mastery and investment; deny it, and they stomp off in disgust (2006: 105).

To be sure, tie-in comics have certainly bore economic fruit, and it is true that narrative continuity between various iterations was almost non-existent. But here, Jenkins runs the risk of privileging a limited transmedia framework, 'a monolithic view of 'old' licensing contrasted with 'new' coherent and integrated transmedia' (Hills, 2012: 412). Jenkins' perspective is largely anchored to the notion that fan cultures desire and demand tightly orchestrated continuity systems, a phenomenon that did not yet exist in the early licensing era - and would not for several decades, arguably beginning with the development of the Superman mythology at the hands of DC editor, Mort Weisenger in the 1950s, and the subsequent rise of Marvel in the 1960s. In so doing, Jenkins constructs a homogenously ideal and imaginary fan audience, who will only 'stomp off in disgust' if they don't get what they want, disregarding the way in which the relationship between license parties has operated trans-historically. Specifically, it is mainly through licensing partnerships that character brands have been able to develop an accumulation of iterations by soaking up the fluids of transmedial exchange while sustaining its shelf life through multiplication.

That said, there have been a series of shifts and modifications in recent years undergirded by greater co-ordination, integration and collaboration between license partners, with an emphasis on connecting primary and ancillary units according to principles of transmedia storytelling. Although this model has yet to become institutionally mandated as standard practice - indeed, there are still as many transmedia comics operating according to traditional licensing practices that have been on going for the better part of a century as there are experiments with transmedia storytelling, perhaps even more so - we are beginning to see significant manoeuvres in this direction.

For the rest of this chapter, I want to look at the shifting transmedia economies of franchised licensing as it relates to comic books, specifically the way in which film and television properties have been extended and franchised. To achieve this, the following sections include small case studies centred on licensed comics - mainly, Disney, Star Trek and Star Wars - and should in no way be viewed as providing a complete account of the history of licensing across almost a century of such practices. Clearly, there is much work to be done by scholars in order to (more) fully historicise the licensing phenomenon which, as with transmedia storytelling (Freeman, 2016), did not emerge *ex nihilo* from the wellspring of convergence and conglomeration in the contemporary moment.

## Transmedia Disney

Beginning two years after his debut in animated short, 'Plane Crazy' (1928), Disney's famous brand-mascot, Mickey Mouse, travelled across media to become the star of syndicated newspaper comic strips and played a key role in the economic fortunes of the burgeoning studio (Davis, 2017: 56). Walt Disney himself had been keen on creating merchandise based on the anthropomorphic rodent as early as 1929 in order to stimulate 'very good publicity' for further adventures on the silver screen – in turn, stimulating the cash nexus (Barrier, 2007: 83). As money was especially tight for the studio during the period, Disney orchestrated several licensing deals for the purposes of merchandising products and novelties, but the first contract was borne out of his firm belief that 'the character's regular presence in newspapers [would be] a key promotional strategy for his cinematic efforts' (Davies, 56; see also Santos, 2015: 37). So it was that on January 24<sup>th</sup> 1930, Disney entered into a licensing agreement with King Features Syndicate to begin producing newspaper strips and, soon enough, the zany Mouse was featured in numerous daily publications as much as six times a week. Unlike later licensing partnerships, however, the relationship between Disney and King Features was based on production and distribution – the strips themselves were created 'in house' and not farmed out to freelance writers and artists by the licensor. In essence, Disney remained responsible for creating narrative content.

The first story was a loose adaptation of animated short, *Plane Crazy*, but it was with the follow-up, 'Mickey in Death Valley', that the newspaper strips, at the behest of Kings Features, became more than just 'cute animal antics and playful punch-lines' (Davies, 2017: 56) and offered continuity strips that could last for several months. From January to March 1930, the strips were written by Disney himself and drawn by Ub Iwerks until April of the same year when he began sending plot ideas to animator, Floyd Gottfredson, who took over completely the following month. Gottfredson was 'given a broad license to freely adapt and expand concepts as he liked' (Booker, 2014: 407), and would feature an irreverent brand of comedy, including one story that had Mickey repeatedly try to take his own life – and failing catastrophically each time – because he wrongly believed that he has seen Minnie kiss another mouse ('Without Minnie I might as well end it all!'). It is these kinds of zany escapades that saw Gottfredson's stories tampered with in later collected volumes (although this has since been redressed with Fantagraphics series of lavish hardback compendiums). Astonishingly, Gottfredson continued to work on Disney comic strips and books for forty-five years until 1975, but as with legendary Donald Duck artist, Carl Barks, Gottfredson wouldn't be recognised for his creative efforts during his own lifetime as artists contributions went uncredited during the period with only Walt Disney's authorship serving as sole imprimatur. In recent years, however, Gottfredson has grown to be revered as 'the young and unrecognised genius of graphic narrative' and 'the definitive creative force' behind the evolution of Mickey Mouse, and other Disney staple characters (Booker, 2014: 407). Even in the early days of licensed comics, then, the question of authorship was freighted with paradox, despite Disney's signatory dominance. Both Gottfredson and Barks were able to invent new characters, some of which would become fully integrated members of the Disney catalogue (the most famous of which being Barks' Scrooge McDuck); and both Gottfredson and Barks are recognised contemporaneously as creating the 'definitive' versions of the Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck characters, respectively.

The partnership between Kings Features and Disney would also produce popular adaptations of Disney's feature films, beginning with the syndication of *Snow*

*White and the Seven Dwarfs* on December 12th 1937. Illustrated by Hank Porter and written by Merrill de Marris, the Snow White comic further tested traditional adaptation processes through the extension of key scenes – greatly expanding the role of Prince Charming, for example – and adding story elements not included in the source text (although these additive elements were not produced for the comic strip per se, but were scenes left on the cutting room floor (see Booker, 2014: 409). It is worth noting that the strip preceded the theatrical release of the film by six weeks and by the time audiences queued up for tickets, they may have already become quite familiar with the story and characters.

King Features Syndicate had the option of licensing the Disney comic strips to other partners (which would effectively make them ‘sub-sub-licensees’) and in doing so, ‘the acquisition of licenses with newspaper syndicates led to the production of comic books filled with reprinted material’ (Duncan and Smith, 2013: 198). In 1938, Dell Comics, an offshoot of Dell Publishing that had its genesis in pulp magazines, formed a partnership with Western Printing, who had obtained the license to publish Disney material. In this case, however, rather than reprinting daily newspaper strips in compilation formats, as was *de rigueur* at the time, Dell Comics started producing original Disney stories in the pages of anthology comic, *Four Colour* (1938 - 1968) – which incidentally remains the current record-holder for most ‘floppies’ published in a comic series with 1,354 issues. With *Four Colour*, Dell would effectively use the publication as a litmus test for Disney characters, much in the same way that DC would in the 1950s with the *Showcase* anthology. For example, the fourth issue featured Donald Duck, the success of which evinced that the character could be exploited more fully elsewhere – and so it was that eight months later, Dell published the first issue of *Walt Disney’s Comics and Stories* (1940 - 1962), a title that eventually achieved the highest overall circulation of any comic book series in history (Benton, 1993: 158). Disney’s expanding catalogue of trade characters were not only transmedia figures, but also ‘transtextual’, in that they often crossed over from one title to another within the same medium (Scolari, Bertetti & Freeman, 2014: 4).

Dell’s success with the so-called ‘funny animal genre’ led to other licensing coups with rival studios, such as Warner Bros. (Bugs Bunny, Porky Pig, etc.), and by the early 1950s, the publisher had steadily grown into ‘the largest publisher of comic books in the world’ (Benton, 1993: 109), well in advance of DC and Marvel’s industrial domination. At its peak, *Walt Disney’s Comics and Stories* sold in excess of 4 million copies per issue, a feat even Superman could not manage during his salad days, and, as comic historian, Mark Carlson, emphasised, Dell’s market-share may only have amounted to 15% of titles published, it controlled almost a third of the total market and had ‘more million-plus sellers than any other company before or since’ (2005). Clearly, then, the early Disney strips and comic books were essential elements of the studio’s early transmedia presence – hardly redundant or solely economically driven, no matter what Walt Disney himself had originally envisioned. As Keith M. Booker explains,

Studios were among the earliest to successfully exploit the creative and commercial potential of comic art, constructing wonderful worlds of comedy, fantasy, melodrama and adventure that would eventually produce a legacy of immense popularity, incredible financial success, and seemingly limitless imagination’ (2014: 406).

As Fredric Wertham’s crusade against comic books gathered steam in the early 1950s, leading to the establishment of institutional watchdog, the Comics Code Authority

(CCA), as well as increasing competition from television, sales of comic books began to suffer accordingly. In order to face up to the challenge, comic publishers continued to accumulate licensed holdings to extend and augment film and TV properties. As the domestication of TV accelerated in the 1950s and '60s, the comic book industry responded to the changing cultural landscape, quite ironically, with a spate of licensed material based on popular television series and often associated with, but not limited to, the rising tide of 'tele-fantasy' genres (Chapman, 2011: 104). Perhaps the most interesting example during this period were comic strips and books based on the science fiction series, *Star Trek*, to which I now turn.

### TV: The Final Frontier

In the US, so-called 'TV Comics' - basically, comics based on television properties - had multiplied exponentially by the 1960s. Prime-time series, some of which have since become seminal, such as *I Love Lucy*, *Sergeant Bilko* and *Jackie Gleason and the Honeymooners*, extended televisual worlds into comics, keeping the brand alive in the interstices between episodes and during the off-season. In 1962, the partnership between Dell Comics and Western Printing had come to an end, with the latter forming the Gold Key Comic imprint with which it continued to produce licensed material (although not as successfully as Dell). In 1967, one year after its debut on NBC, the *Star Trek* license was awarded to Gold Key and eventually became a largely faithful interpretation of its parent series. However, the first issues were marred by a lack of collaboration or dialogue between licensor and licensee(s), leading to the production of a comic curiosity.

Indeed, the first issues were drawn by Italy-based artist Alberto Giolotti without him actually 'ever having seen a single frame of the on-air television program' (Clarke, 2012: 27), using publicity shots as his chief guide. In the first issue, titled 'The Planet of No Return', the *Enterprise* crew battle cannibal plants and giant trees, but this voracious vegetation's true threat is in the spores that they produce to infect hosts. 'Giant trees are trying to germinate is!' exclaims Kirk dramatically. Now while this may be rather silly, it is in the stories' final moments that perhaps the most unfaithful interpretation of the programme's political bent in the property's history occurs. To combat the threat, Spock recommends that the *Enterprise*'s weapons be used to eradicate all life on 'that hideous little globe', an action far removed from the liberal humanistic agenda of Roddenberry's famous 'vision'.

And that's just what the *Enterprise* does. It burns *the entire planet from orbit*, flying around it and around it, killing and killing until it's exterminated all life. In the Captain's log that closes out the story, Kirk characterizes the mission as one of "*total destruction*". And we're treated to the image of the *Enterprise*, firing phasers onto the burning surface, where the sentient trees are on fire, helplessly fleeing the eradication of their entire planet (Darius, 2014: 31, italics in original).

Over in the UK, comic books were usually published weekly, as opposed to the US monthly system, and were most often anthology titles wherein multiple stories featured a range of characters and storyworlds, a tradition which continues to this day in titles such as the long-running *The Beano* or influential science fiction publication, *2000AD*. In the 1950s, the first television-themed anthology comics appeared, such as *TV Comic*

(1951 - 84) and *TV Fun* (1953-9), but it was in the following decade that the genre boomed with the likes of *TV Express* (1960 - 62), *TV Toyland* (1966 - 68), *TV Tornado* (1967 - 8) and, most pointedly, *TV Century 21* (1965 - 71) (Chapman, 2011: 104). The latter title, which was soon abbreviated to *TV 21*, was created as a promotional tie-in vehicle for Gerry Anderson's various 'Supermarionation' series (*Thunderbirds*, *Stingray*, *Captain Scarlet and the Mysterons*, and *Joe 90* etc.). Esteemed comic book artist, Frank Bellamy, who had previously worked on Dan Dare for boy's comic, *The Eagle*, was recruited to draw the Thunderbirds and Lady Penelope strips before the series had even aired on British television (105). Within its first year, *TV21* was selling 600,000 copies per week and also received two further spin offs in *Lady Penelope* (1966 - 68) and *Joe 90 Top Secret* (1969), the latter of which was merged with *TV 21* after only 34 issues. Eventually, *TV21* opened up its pages to other (Non-Andersen) US and UK television properties, including *The Saint*, *Land of the Giants* and, perhaps the title's most historically fascinating attribute, the inclusion of a strip based on *Star Trek* which would have been British readers first introduction to the crew of the Starship Enterprise given that the series did not air in the UK until 1969.

As with the Gold Key versions, the UK *Star Trek* comic strips are quite singular, thus again indicating the creative gulf between licensor and licensee during the period, yet the strip 'proved to be one of the most vibrant and long-lived strips during a turbulent time for British comics titles' (Porter, 2014: 36). The UK strips preceded the series' airing by six months and resulted in yet another oddity - as with Gold Key, writers and artists tried to adapt and extend *Star Trek* without even seeing the show. In the British context, Spock was a 'central identification character' and was more representative of the British 'stiff upper lip' stereotype than the dispassionate Vulcan of the TV programme; Scotty was the strip's action hero; while the most egregious portrayal was Captain Kirk who was framed as inadequate, confused and often a plain idiot, 'the least effective command officer in Starfleet' (Porter, 2014: 41).

Over the decades since, the Star Trek license has been passed from pillar-to-post: Gold Key (who folded in 1984 having lost their most valuable licenses), Marvel, DC, Malibu Comics, WildStorm, Tokyopop and, most recently, IDW, have all held the license to publish Star Trek comics across half a century and over 1000 comic books (not to mention Manga variations and graphic novels). Yet despite these comics far outweighing TV episodes by a considerable margin in quantitative terms, none of these stories are considered to be (official) canonical extensions. In other words, the Star Trek primary text - the canon - is comprised of live-action material only, which, at the time of writing, consists of six TV series, and thirteen feature films. They are all of a piece. Hence, Star Trek's armada of transmedia expressions, such as tie-in comics, novels and even *The Animated Series* - which included the vocal performances of Shatner, Nimoy and so forth, excluding Walter Koenig's Chekov, and featured the return of 'classic' series alumni, D.C Fontana and David Gerrod - are *non-canonical augmentations*, counter-factual narratives that do not represent the 'true' continuity. The 'real' Captain Kirk did not ever decimate an entire planet of cannibal plants.

This may not have mattered so much in the 1960s given that *Star Trek* was famously cancelled by its third season, but the rise of Trek fandom in the early 1970s, leading to the series' resurrection as a blockbuster film franchise with *The Motion Picture* (1979), meant that continuity would become an important feature of imaginary worlds beyond the domain of superhero comics. Indeed, as many scholars have pointed out, serial continuity is one of the most pleasurable aspects associated with worldbuilding for fan audiences (for example, see Reynolds, 1992; Kaveney, 2008), but, as with Jenkins' idealized fan community discussed earlier, this should in no way be

embraced as a homogenous component of ‘geek’ fan cultures. Put another way, whether or not Star Trek comics are viewed as ‘redundant’ by fans or if ‘they storm off in disgust’ at the disavowal of continuity conventions is another question entirely and beyond the scope of this chapter. It is worth noting, however, that it cannot be the case that all fans feel this way – for if the comics were not economically viable, it stands to reason that they would surely have been discontinued (which is eventually what would happen with comic strips). By the time *The Motion Picture* re-ignited Star Trek’s fortunes in 1979, another science fiction property had already emerged that would have a tremendous impact on the cultural landscape, echoing across the decades since. That was a little independent film written and produced by George Lucas.

### Star Wars Comics: From Seriality to Sequentiality

In the summer of 1975, the release of Steven Spielberg’s *Jaws* sent shockwaves through Hollywood, accumulating over 100 million dollars at the box office, and forging the template for the ‘event film’ phenomenon. But it would be George Lucas’ *Star Wars* that would become harbinger of the blockbuster franchise tradition, with all its attendant toys, action figures, spaceships and merchandise, which have squeezed maximum profits out of the brand over the past forty years – indeed, so much more than the films themselves. It would only be a matter of time before transmedia tie-in media would follow suit.

In 1977, Marvel obtained the license to publish *Star Wars* comics for a song, primarily because both Lucas and the head honchos at Twentieth Century Fox strongly believed that the film would tank at the box office, and if their predictions proved to be correct, then associated tie-in products would be the least of it all, especially considering that movie tie-in comics, especially those of a science fiction bent, were no longer the sellers they once were. It was certainly a risk for Marvel – they had gone from industry saviours in the 1960s to a struggling publication house defending against the forces of economic recession and stagnation in the early ‘70s (as was main competitor, DC Comics). Indeed, (then) editor Jim Shooter claims that the acquisition of the *Star Wars* license actually saved the publisher from bankruptcy (Proctor and Freeman, 2016; Booker, 2014: 447).

On April 12<sup>th</sup> 1977, the first issue of Marvel’s *Star Wars* was published, and rapidly ascended the comic book charts almost six weeks prior to the film’s release in theatres. This meant that readers would have already been introduced to a cast of characters, such as Darth Vader, R2-D2, C3P0 and Luke Skywalker (much in the same way that the Snow White daily strip would be the threshold into Disney’s imaginary world for millions of readers, as discussed above). Written by Roy Thomas and drawn by Howard Chaykin, the first six issues of the series adapted Lucas’ *Star Wars*, although reading it now may be rather discombobulating for those familiar with the film; like the *Star Trek* comics, Marvel did not have the luxury of seeing the finished product before starting work on the comic, and it certainly shows. The first issue of the comic sold over a million copies and, once the adaptation was completed, Marvel created new stories, new characters and new mythological elements. Those working on the title, however, were creatively constrained by Lucas, who mandated that they ‘could use the main characters, but not infringe on the movies’ developments’ (Booker, 2014: 447). At this point, of course, *Star Wars* had become perhaps the largest ‘sleeper hit’ in Hollywood history and work had already started on what would become *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980).

The licensing arrangement between Lucasfilm and Marvel lasted for 107 issues, but following release of the final instalment, *Return of the Jedi* (1983), and with no new film in the pipeline, the Star Wars brand entered its interregnum period – also known as ‘the dark age’ in fan communities. In 1989, however, the force would be awakened once again as a new publisher, Dark Horse Comics, acquired the vacant license and the age of the Star Wars Expanded Universe (EU) began in earnest.

Founded in 1986, Dark Horse Comics would go on to become the third largest comic book publisher – behind Marvel and DC, of course, both of which have jockeyed for industrial dominance for the best part of six decades – mainly through the acquisition of blockbuster franchise licenses and associated characters, as well as television and video-game properties, which include the likes of: *Aliens*, *Transformers*, *The Terminator*, *Indiana Jones*, *Game of Thrones*, *Buffy the Vampire Slayer*, *The Legend of Zelda*, *Tomb Raider* and, of course, *Star Wars*. In 1991, Dark Horse published the first issue in the *Star Wars: Dark Empire* series that, along with Timothy Zahn’s sequence of sequel novels, catapulted the brand into popular consciousness once again. Between 1991 and 2014, Dark Horse published an armada of expanded universe comics, but, as with *Star Trek*’s tie-in media, these tales are not considered legitimate entries in Star Wars canon, a sore point for many a fan reader, with some turning to the cyberspace chat-rooms of Web 1.0 to argue, debate and deliberate – often quite vehemently – the finer points of canonical law (for more on the so-called ‘canon wars’, see Brooker, 2002: 101 - 114).

As we have seen throughout this chapter, the licensing system had not yet addressed the lack of continuity between various transmedia iterations and may not have mattered so much until later. As with many franchise licenses (if not all), it would be the film series – the primary text – that maintained its canonical hegemony and, should Lucas decide to create new Star Wars films that contradicted expanded universe elements, then they would take precedence and effectively erase them from inclusion altogether. To address queries about canonicity, Lucasfilm created a hierarchical taxonomy with G-Canon (the ‘G’ standing in for ‘George’) being the apotheosis of official continuity (although the Ewok films, *Caravan of Courage* and *Battle for Endor* were not granted this status). The Star Wars comics, be they from Marvel or Dark Horse, occupied not even the second tier, which only contained *The Clone Wars* animated TV series (T-Canon), but the third rung (C-Canon).

In 2014, the new corporate owners of the Star Wars brand, Disney, committed hyperdiegetic genocide by declaring that the old licensing system was dead and buried, and that, from here on out, all transmedia Star Wars elements, including comics and novels, would be considered canonical, official components of a vast transmedia continuity system. As Matthew Freeman and I have theorised elsewhere, this institutional decree represents a fundamental shift in *the transmedia economy* of Star Wars. Hence, the concept of ‘seriality’ – most often used to detail the spreadability of imaginary worlds, whether or not such elements fit into a cohesive continuity system – gives way to ‘sequentiality’ – that is, a transmedia economy developed according to the principle of continuity between and across media.

From April 2014, Star Wars’ new rulers mandated that the old system be replaced by a flattening of hierarchies and that new comic books (and novels etc.) would henceforth be legitimately canonical. From a business perspective, this makes a lot of sense, especially considering that the comic license was taken from Dark Horse and awarded again to Marvel, a company that was already within the aegis of Disney. Some fans, however, were less than thrilled at being told that the comics (and novels etc.) that they had spent a long time reading and collecting were officially banished to a



netherworld of falsehood and speculation. But it was not simply that these fans were bothered by the exclusion from official canon *per se*, but that the old EU would be re-branded beneath the 'Legends' banner and, more importantly, that there were no plans to continue telling stories in what now effectively amounts to an alternative universe. In 2015, the so-called EU Movement raised funds via Kickstarter to advertise both their displeasure at Lucasfilm and to ask that the 'Legends' series be continued (see image). *Contra* Jenkins, the 'old' licensing system matters more to these fans than a newly co-ordinated transmedia experience whereby everything matters and everything counts.

There have, however, been significant manoeuvres and modifications in recent years toward a more closely integrated system of interlocking narrative regardless of media-specificity, a transmedia storytelling of the kind that Jenkins proposed in *Convergence Culture*. This in no way suggests that this shift has been adopted by all and sundry, nor that the old system has now been completely overhauled and replaced by the new. The shifts discussed here are continuing at the time of writing and it would perhaps be better to view the contemporary system as a conflict between old and new, not as a binary, but as a *spectrum of multiplicity* wherein alternative worlds, parallel universes and counter-factual stories, co-exist with canonical continuity; that is to say, vast franchised narratives possess a range of continuities and several different canonical systems, largely dependant on the choices and positions of each individual reader, and fans are experts in navigating alternative worlds such as these. That said, it largely remains that the primary text, whatever that may be, maintains its power over the array of transmedia satellites orbiting the mothership.

In *Transmedia Television*, MJ Clarke demonstrates these shifts by examining the production contexts relating to the television series, *Heroes* and *24*, and their respective comic book extensions. What is valuable here is the understanding that the contexts within which transmedia comics are produced might radically differ between license holders. The relationship between Fox and IDW regarding the *24* comics is quite different to that between NBC and Aspen's *Heroes*' extensions, but the principal shifts towards an inclusive dialogue between showrunners and subcontractors shares similarities:

What these two ventures have in common is that they both operate via a combination of freelance creative labour and permanent supervision either closely or loosely affiliated with program producers. In the case of *Heroes*, scripts are drafted by either series writers, staff writing assistants, or freelance writers hired from outside the program staff. Yet, in all these cases, *it is the series writers who oversee and determine the content of each issue* (2013: 32, my italics).

The connective relationship between licensor and licensee - between showrunner and staff writers, on the one hand, and freelance creative, on the other, serves an important authenticating role and a discursive production of cultural distinction, of 'value'. The involvement of production personnel, no matter how closely aligned or not, operates to ratify transmedia 'micro-narratives' as legitimate instalments of a piece with an overarching 'macro-structure' (Ryan, 1992: 373). This kind of thinking is illustrated by several transmedia comics that extend television series in canonical directions, usually branded as officially sanctioned continuations, such as *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* (subtitled Season Eight though Ten), all of which were either written, co-written, or overseen by Joss Whedon, the ultimate creative authority on all things Buffy-related.

The attachment and transposition of TV language into comics (the use of ‘seasons’ is telling), as well as the attribution of Whedon’s authorship is indicative of the shift in the transmedia economy of licensed comics. For all intents and purposes, the Buffy the Vampire Slayer ‘season’ comics are ‘the definitive version of what happens after the TV series ends’ and are ‘absolutely canonical in the views of many fans’ (Ford and Jenkins, 2009: 305). The appending of authorship works to enhance the comic books’ ‘aura’ as authenticate rather than illegitimate.

However, as we have seen earlier, fans may not simply and wholeheartedly embrace such extensions as legitimately canonical, especially given that the comic series introduces new generic elements into the mythos, such as Buffy being able to fly (!). Indeed, as Emma Beddows illustrates, fans may follow the adventures of the Scooby Gang across media, but it is less narrative continuity that concerns them than consistency of character, genre and tone. Yet despite this flattening of hierarchies (theoretically) dissolving the borders between primary/ secondary texts, and the evocation of authorship as a method of authentication and branding, the transmedia hierarchy is often re-ascribed and reaffirmed at the institutional level. In other words, the primary text, be it in film or TV, retains its status as the imaginary ‘centre’, dislodging the poststructuralist decree that the centre does not exist.

Consider IDW’s *The X-Files: Season Ten* comic series, which was deemed as a canonical extension of the TV series after over a decade in the cultural wilderness following the program’s cancellation in 2002. The comics were branded as authenticate continuations with showrunner Chris Carter’s involvement appending an authorial aura to the project. But when Fox announced that the X-Files was to return to TV screens in 2016 with what was described as an ‘event series’, consisting of six episodes as opposed to a full-length season of twenty-plus episodes, the comic books’ status as the canonical ‘Season Ten’ was cancelled out and abolished; that is, what was once canon can just as easily be revised and re-positioned should the television text call for it, thus demonstrating that the textual, and media, hierarchy retains its primary status (see Proctor, 2017).

## Conclusion

These marked shifts in the transmedia economy of franchise licensing, from seriality to sequentiality, are not yet firmly embedded as institutional practice across the board. As an ancillary market, comic books continue to be valuable assets for extending not only narrative, but also the profit margins of franchise IP holders. For some fans, what counts as canonical – or not – matters a great deal, and it is by appealing to the fannish desire for continuity that the transmedia economy of licensed comic books has been undergirded by a series of modifications in the twenty-first century. As the relationship between producers and licensed sub-contractors grows ever closer and more collaborative, the continuities between primary texts and secondary comics will also benefit from closely monitored orchestration in narrative terms (with the proviso that not all fan audiences care that deeply about canonicity, as demonstrated by the Star Wars EU movement, and the enormous success of Dark Horse many franchised transmedia comics). Whether or not transmedia storytelling grows into an industry standard by directly appealing to continuity mavens as the pre-eminent factor governing consumption habits and voyages into imaginary worlds, however, remains to be seen.

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