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Chapter 22

A New Hate? The War for Disney's *Star Wars*

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“It is a battle that has been raging for more than four decades. No, not Team Luke vs Team Vader but the ongoing war for the soul of Star Wars”

—Ben Child, *The Guardian*

“Boycotting Star Wars is like boycotting the *sun*. It will do nothing. The sun will keep on shining. Its heat will remain *radiant* and *globally present*. It will remain at the center of this space and we will continue to orbit it in an

elliptical manner. Your efforts will have no meaningful result except to reveal yourself as a cruddy dingleberry dangling from fandom's ass-hairs"

—Chuck Wendig

"The internet is...the largest experiment in anarchy that we've ever had"

—Eric Schmidt, former CEO of Google

Since the theatrical release of *The Force Awakens* in December 2015, Disney has continued to expand and extend the *Star Wars* imaginary world across various media platforms, sparking a frenetic groundswell of franchise activity that has since been criticised in entertainment journalism for "oversaturating" the cinema market (Cotter 2018; Rubin 2018; Sims 2018). By the time the final episode of the Skywalker Saga is released in December 2019, Disney will have produced five new live-action *Star Wars* films in four years, with perhaps a sixth to follow hot on the heels in 2020 should Rian Johnson's trilogy continue as planned (Bui 2018). With another trilogy announced, spearheaded by *Game of Thrones* showrunners David Benioff and D.B Weiss, as well as the return of cancelled animated show, *The Clone Wars*, the anime-styled *Star Wars: Resistance* series and Jon Favreau's live-action television series, there certainly seems to be an unusual amount of *Star Wars* media planned for the immediate future, at least in comparison with the history of the franchise under George Lucas' reign. Taking into account the fact that Lucas produced six films across almost three decades, albeit with an eighteen-year inter-regnum period between the original and prequel trilogies, it has since become a matter of debate whether or not Disney's annual release strategy in cinematic terms has backfired. Since the

enormously divisive *The Last Jedi* hit theatres in December 2017, and the disappointing box office performance of *Solo: A Star Wars Story* in May 2018, entertainment critics have been hard at work hypothesizing whether the cultural and economic health of the brand is lately underpinned by so-called “franchise fatigue,” or “toxic” fan boycotts.

Since at least the debut of *The Force Awakens* teaser trailer in December 2014, a substantial amount of entertainment journalism and fan blogs have focused on what has been viewed as a salient proliferation of “toxicity” within *Star Wars* fandom, a criticism that more often than not has over-amplified and exaggerated the quantity of racist and misogynist rhetoric by excluding other voices that have been pushing back vigorously against a (very loud) vocal minority taking place across various online territories (which is in no way an attempt to claim that they do not exist). In this final chapter of *Disney’s Star Wars: Forces of Production, Promotion and Reception*, I want to address the way in which the franchise has become ensnared in the “new culture wars,” considering the way in which a certain “regime of truth” has been constructed in entertainment press discourse. As Michel Foucault (1980, 131) explains:

Truth is a thing of this world: it is produced only by virtue of multiple forms of constraint. And it induces regular effects of power. Each society has its regime of truth, its ‘general politics’ of truth: that is, the types of discourse which it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances which enable one to distinguish true and false statements, the means by which each is sanctioned; the techniques and procedures accorded value in

the acquisition of truth; the status of those who are charged with saying what counts as true.

The Flame Wars Saga

It is hardly surprising that Disney's acquisition of Lucasfilm would spark new infarctions, rifts and quarrels over the *Star Wars* franchise as "a 'transitional object,' with a new phase or new hope being offered to audiences, [which] then seems to very much become a moment of heightened fan feeling, and anxiety" (Hills quoted in Proctor 2013, 206). The major difference between past and present, however, would be provided by the inception and impact of domesticated internet technologies, especially the more recent emergence of social media platforms and portals that afford media audiences the means with which to participate in cultural dialogue in more significant ways than ever before in human history. The internet and the participatory affordances of Web 2.0 would inaugurate radical shifts in contemporary communication in all sorts of ways, including the way in which fan "communities" migrated from marginal ghettos and into mainstream awareness and heightened visibility. This so-called "mainstreaming" of fan cultures has also served to demonstrate quite convincingly that the idea of fan "community" or "culture" as a homogenous, singular and coherent body is less be-fitting an understanding of "fandom" as "a network of networks, or a loose affiliation of sub-subcultures, all specializing in different modes of fan activity" (Hills 2017, 860). In this light, the projection of *Star Wars* fandom (or any fandom for that matter) as a coherent "community" can no longer withstand scrutiny—if perhaps it ever could considering

what almost three decades of fan studies has revealed—despite its commonality across academic disciplines.

As the war for *Star Wars* moved into cyberspace and onto forums and message boards two decades ago, this notion of “community” was radically punctured as fans reacted to Lucas’ first *Star Wars* film in eighteen years, *The Phantom Menace*. As discussed in chapter one of this volume, Will Brooker captured a snapshot of fan debate and discord during this period by showing the way in which hostility and aggression between first generation *Star Wars* fans and younger fans of *The Phantom Menace* became heated. Thus, “to talk of the fan reaction or the fan viewpoint is to impose an imagined consensus on a community that thrives on debate” (Brooker 2002, 113). Although Brooker’s use of the term “community” here, and in the title of the monograph from which this comes, is surely problematic given the lack of consensus he describes, it is assuredly early evidence of spirited and often heated fannish quarrel occurring in online quarters. However, this is not an intrinsic symptom of fandom per se. “Flame Wars”, that is, “vitriolic online exchanges,” have been a characteristic of cyberculture since the internet’s earliest days, as examined by authors in Mark Dery’s edited collection, *Flame Wars: The Discourse of Cyberculture*, twenty-five years ago (1994, 1).

This does not necessarily mean that impassioned fans enact “toxic” behaviours exactly, however: “as an innate part of fan experiences, ‘thriving on debate’ is not necessarily a signifier of toxicity...unless it falls into the realm of bullying, racism, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, or other types of ad hominem attacks,” such as rape or death threats (Proctor and Kies 2018, 137). For instance, African-American actor, Ahmed Best, has recently opened up about the fan reaction to his role as CG-character Jar Jar Binks in *The Phantom Menace*, stating that the fan backlash was so

fierce that he considered taking his own life (Raftery 2017). Fans complained in droves and even started a website, Jar Jar Must Die (jarjarmustdie.com) and an internet discussion group on deja.com included 13,000 commenters angrily railing against the character, as reported by Eric Harris of *The Los Angeles Times* (1999). Moreover, entertainment critics added to the storm by accusing Lucas—and by extension, Best—of racial stereotyping, with *The Wall Street Journal* describing the world's first digital character as “a Rastafarian Stepin Fetchit on platform hoofs, crossed annoyingly with Butterfly McQueen” (Harris 1999). At the time, Best claimed that he didn't “pay attention to that stuff” and recognized its “stupidity” (Smith 1999), but it has since become clear that the backlash affected his psychological wellbeing more seriously:

I think the people who are saying those things are very much in touch with the racism inside themselves. They sense African-American descent, and all they can think of is Stepin Fetchit. They can't compare it to Jerry Lewis or Buster Keaton or even Jackie Chan (Smith 1999).

What is noteworthy here is that the majority of fans were calling out *The Phantom Menace* for perceived racism, for stereotyping and “othering” ethnic minorities, which also included the Neimodian race caricaturizing Asian people, or the money-grubbing Toydarian, Watto, as an offensive Jewish stereotype (Brooker 2001). Sending death threats to Best tagged with anti-racist sentiment means that “toxicity” does not always come from reactionary quarters, but from more politically progressive avenues, complicating the notion that “toxic fan practices” are invariably right-wing in nature. That said, Best says that he “was shocked with the racial

implications, but always knew they had little to no merit” (Raftery 2017). From this perspective, whether Binks is racist or not becomes a matter of debate and interpretation, indicating that the war for *Star Wars* shouldn’t be oversimplified by a neat semiotic split into binary camps of “good” versus “evil.”

I now want to move onto the way in which *Star Wars* under Disney’s aegis has been paralleled by the emergence of the so-called “alt-right,” a period that is being described in discourse as “the new culture wars,” and a battleground where popular culture has become a site of ideological conflict and negotiation.

Gamergate, the New Culture Wars and the “Alt-Right”

Although often criticised for romanticizing the power of fan audiences, Henry Jenkins has on numerous occasions attempted to clarify his argument. In his afterword for the 2008 paperback edition of the seminal *Convergence Culture*, Jenkins emphasised that:

Those of us who care about the future of participatory culture as a mechanism for promoting diversity and enabling democracy do the world no favor if we ignore the ways that our current culture falls short of these goals. Too often, there is a tendency to read all grassroots media as somehow ‘resistant’ to dominant institutions rather than acknowledging that citizens sometimes deploy bottom-up means to keep others down. Too often, we have fallen into the trap of seeing democracy as an ‘inevitable’ outcome of technology change rather than as something which we need to fight to achieve with every tool at our disposal. Too often, we have sought to deflect criticisms of grassroots culture rather than trying to identify and resolve

conflicts and contradictions which might prevent it from achieving its full potential. Too often, we have celebrated those alternative voices which are being brought into the marketplace of ideas without considering which voices remain trapped outside (Jenkins 2008, 293-294).

Likewise, in “Rethinking ‘Rethinking Convergence/Culture,’” Jenkins explains that the long history of participation “should be sobering, as we encounter such a record of bold predictions, promises delayed and deferred, partial successes and unintended consequences [that] should make us slow to construct triumphant narratives of technological inevitability” (2014, 270). What is “inevitable” in this context is the belief that progressive grassroots movements would eventually metastasize into a political powerhouse capable of toppling “Governments of the Industrial World,” as pronounced confidently by John Perry Barlow in 1996. In this article, Jenkins clearly articulates a “growing concern that networked communications would not necessarily result in a more progressive, inclusive, or democratic culture” (2014, 270). Indeed, both the elections of Barack Obama (Sandvoss 2013) and Donald Trump were energized, at least in part, by waves of support from online territories, evincing a dialectic struggle for political hegemony.

In many ways, Jenkins could be read here as prophesizing the emergence of the so-called “alt-right,” an umbrella term for “an amorphous, ideologically diffuse, and largely online movement” (Heikkilä, 2017: 2) that became visible in mainstream media and political discourse in the run up to the US Presidential Election in 2016. Naturally, the “alt-right” did not suddenly spring up from out of nowhere: “White nationalism had been lurking on the fringes of the American political right for a couple of decades before the alt-right came along to give it fresh new life, rewired for

the twenty-first century” (Neiwert 2017, 220). A series of forces and factors contributed to this very loose-knit dispersion of neo-Nazis, white supremacists, Men’s rights activists (MRAs), white tribalists and “other ideological groups” (Heikkilä, 2017: 2), achieving that which they desired most of all, that is, mainstream recognition and validation.

One of the ways that so-called “alt-right” agents attempt to infiltrate the mainstream with ideology is through “metapolitics,” a strategy “that would gradually transform the political and intellectual culture as a precursor to transforming institutions and systems” (Lyons 2017, 10; see also Proctor 2019). In other words, attacking artefacts of pop culture that are viewed as “politically correct” becomes one of the ways that the “alt-right” can spread ideological “messages,” and the mainstream news media’s “constant churn of outrage and spectacle” (Beckett 2017) has been enormously beneficial to this metapolitical strategy, as claimed by neo-Nazi and anti-Semite Andrew Anglin:

This is why I love the media so much—they cover my site with outrage, in turn I get more traffic and more on board with my agenda, in turn the media produces more spectacle...The coverage only has one effect, which is the normalization of our ideas. And it doesn’t take a political scientist to figure that out (ibid).

As Matthew Lyons (2017) emphasizes, by turning to (what they see as) PC-inflected pop culture facilitates a proliferation of reactionary ideological currents, and the mainstream news media has become complicit in making this so by willingly

providing a platform for otherwise marginal voices to be heard in public, mainstream spaces —marginal no longer as a result.

The most widely publicized outcome of this strategy is what became known as #Gamergate in 2014, which has been viewed as the touchstone of both the rise of the “alt-right” and the new culture wars. Emerging out of the “toxic technocultures” (Massanari 2015) of 4Chan, 8Chan and Reddit, this was a flame war unlike any other. Ostensibly centred on ethics in video-game journalism, #Gamergate mushroomed into a pugnacious cyber-war between feminist and conservative video-game fans, the majority of them male (although not entirely).

On one side were feminists and other liberals who believe the gaming world is dominated by males, both as game developers and as members of the target audience. This group...argued for greater inclusion of games appealing to female audiences. On the other side were males who found such talk not merely threatening but a declaration of a “culture war” against white males by a nefarious leftist conspiracy (Neiwert 2017, 214).

Computer game developer, Brianna Wu, received a series of tweets from the pseudonymous ‘Death to Brianna,’ with death, rape and other violent threats becoming commonplace: “I’ve got a K-Bar and I’m coming to your house so I can shove it up your cunt”; or “your mutilated corpse will be on the front of page of Jezebel and there isn’t jack shit you can do about it” (Mantilla, 2015 87). Anita Sarkessian fled her home after one commenter released her address on Twitter—a strategy known as “doxxing”—along with the message that he would “come to her apartment and rape her to death [and] after I’m done, I’ll ram a tire iron up your cunt”

(Frank 2014). Other scholars have written extensively about #Gamergate and I don't want to rehearse the entire sordid affair here (see Salter and Blodgett 2017, 91-94; Massanari 2015; Todd 2015). But what I will say is that #Gamergate should not be viewed as somehow separate from other reactionary discourses that have since been awarded the "alt-right" designator. What is certain is that the controversy was in many ways the spark that lit the fuse, with fascist villains such as Milo Yiannopoulos, Roosh V, and Vox Day achieving a level of fame and infamy as key mouthpieces of #Gamergate and, later, the "alt-right." In this way, the #Gamergate controversy "heralded the rise of the alt-right and provided an early sketch of its primary features" (Briewert 2017, 215).

It is not only video games that have been attacked for "political correctness" and progressive biases. #Gamergate may have been an early firing shot across the bow of pop culture, but as an instrumental characteristic of rightist metapolitical warfare, other cultural artefacts have been at the centre of such conflicts, much of them without any success whatsoever (which is often sadly missing from many journalistic accounts). The controversy surrounding the science fiction genre's Hugo Awards was centred on the same type of metapolitical warfare, with reactionary fans hijacking the nomination for so-called "message fiction" that is, sci-fi literature with a left-wing bent. Commonly referred to as "the sad puppies," and led by Theodore Beale (a.k.a Vox Day), the campaign involved attempting to ensure that such "message fiction" did not receive any award nominations, a strategy that largely failed (Sandifer 2017; Stevens and Watson 2018).

As the "alt-right" started to gain mainstream recognition, the metapolitical lens has been turned onto other aspects of pop culture, often signified by what we might describe as "boycott culture," many of which also failed (often spectacularly

so). For example, novelist Stephen King used Twitter to heavily criticize US President Donald Trump, leading to cries from “Redditors” to boycott Andy Muschetti’s adaptation of King’s 1986 novel, *IT* (2017):

Okay, Everyone. Please DO NOT go see Stephen King's new 'IT' movie this weekend when it opens. If you have to see it, wait till after opening weekend so he has a lousy showing this week. Trump stands up for us, so we should stand up for him!" (Sellinger 2017; Shapiro 2017).

However, as the film quickly smashed box office records for horror cinema (in unadjusted dollars), it became evident that the boycott wasn’t an efficacious strategy.

The same can be said of calls to boycott the hit Broadway musical, *Hamilton*. In November 2016, Vice President-Elect Mike Pence was confronted with catcalls and jeers from an energetic crowd during a performance of *Hamilton*, which was followed by a direct address at the end of the show from cast-member Brandon Victor Dixon, who stated:

We are the diverse America who are alarmed and anxious that your new administration will not protect us, our planet, our children, our parents, or defend us and uphold our inalienable rights. But we hope this show has inspired you to uphold our American values, and work on behalf of all of us (Kelley 2016; Walters 2016).

Following a series of angry tweets from Donald Trump demanding apologies for Pence, conservative supporters started the hashtag #boycotthamilton which, as with

IT, achieved little impact as tickets sold out (and continue to do so). That said, it is noteworthy that a boycott campaign such as these, and many others, do not necessarily include identification with so-called “alt-right” membership, which indicates that anti-PC discourses of this nature are automatically awarded “alt-right” status, thus discursively overamplifying and overtly validating the “alt-right” as a coherent ideological collective, when in reality it is nothing of the sort.

What is difficult to quantify in these cases, especially for academic study, is whether or not these boycott campaigns—if we can even describe them as orchestrated “campaigns” at all—were comprised of fans, neo-Nazis and other reactionary agents, general right-wing sympathizers, or nasty trolls out to provoke and terrorise “for the lulz” (Phillips 2015). This is something that academia has not yet quite got to grips with in methodological and epistemological terms. That is not to say that #Gamergate, the “sad puppies” and other campaigns and boycotts are but a storm in a teacup—clearly, the war waged against feminism and SJWs (a pejorative term for “Social Justice Warriors”) and what gamergaters described as “cultural Marxism” (whatever that means) was virulent and vicious, with some women living in fear that threats would be carried out. But how many people were involved in sending horrific threats of this sort? How can this be quantified through research? I have asked these questions on a number of occasions, including in this book (on #blackstormtrooper in chapter 17), but I should clearly articulate that I am not attempting to defend fans nor argue that there has not been an resurgence of radical right-wing rhetoric in cyberspace. Ultimately, what I am saying is that mainstream journalism has been complicit in tipping the discursive scales enormously by focusing primarily on the spectacle and sensation enacted by “toxic” agents, while being less interested in users that pushback against discourses of this type, so much so that the

“regime of truth” built up around these “new culture wars” has skewed the portraiture in favour of reactionary ends, be it inadvertently or not. Mainstream entertainment media and journalism in general (including fan blogs and websites) have tended to offer much more space to right-wing ideologies, if only to express outrage and virtue as a way to demonstrate progressive ideologies and political world-views.

But one of the severe consequences of this imbalance is that it appears that, in its many guises, “the new culture wars” are a lost cause for progressive politics with the radical right seemingly standing triumphant. The situation, however, is more concretely the antithesis of what is being reported in mainstream journalism; the most hateful, violent rhetoric—the rape and death threats, the doxxing, the racism, sexism, homophobia, etcetera—emanates from a minority; a very loud minority, to be sure, but a minority nonetheless. As video-game fan Jennifer Reed put it:

‘We’ including countless women are not harassing Anita and Zoe. A SELECT MINORITY within the gaming community are harassing her, and that is extremely offensive to people such as myself who love the gaming community and have never been harassed for being female. Those people do not represent gamers. We do not hate women. This hasn't even been about Anita or Quinn for the past several days. If you want to see some positivity, check out the #GamerGate tag (Frank 2014).

It is within this context that Disney’s *Star Wars* became a lightning rod for “the new culture wars” and the metapolitics of the “alt-right,” largely anchored onto

representations of equality and diversity in Disney's *Star Wars* films, to which I now turn.

The Boycott Wars Saga

As with the various boycott “campaigns” mentioned above, there has been a continuation of the “regime of truth” about “toxic fan practices” (Proctor and Kies 2018), an overamplification of right-wing rhetoric in mainstream news discourse operating in parallel to a kind of progressive neutering (or, at the very least, a palpable quietening). I have already examined the #blackstormtrooper “controversy” in this book, and I don't want to regurgitate that argument here except a reminder that the hashtag in question was overwhelmingly replete with attacks on an imagined and imaginary population of “toxic” racist fan-boys, with many progressive messages performing a brand of what can be viewed as “toxicity” of a more progressive nature.

The Force Awakens was criticised by a vocal minority for political correctness and liberal identity politics, with several amorphous boycott campaigns achieving widespread media attention, and resulting in further amplification and fermentation of the “regime of truth.” However, what is strikingly absent across press discourse is a quantitative examination of boycotts enacted through social media hashtags, most of which explicitly contain a minority of reactionary agents compared with a critical majority that were pushing back, as with #blackstormtrooper.

Consider #BoycottStarWarsVII, a hashtag which was activated on Sunday October 11th 2016 and swiftly became the number one trending topic on Twitter the following day. Introductory comments included complaints like “the Star Wars movie...barely has any whites in it,” “J.J Abrams' political correctness is a code word

for anti-white,” and “white children deserve wholesome movies, not PC anti-white diversity crap.” Another anonymous commenter tweeted, “Let’s get #BoycottStarWarsVII trending.” However, as reported by Josh Dickey for entertainment website *Mashable*,

Of everyone who tweeted the hashtag #BoycottStarWarsVII on Monday, 94% were merely expressing outrage over its existence, according to a statistically relevant sample examined by social media and analytics firm Fizziology for Mashable. The other 6% were ‘racist trolls trying to get people mad,’ the firm told Mashable, adding that many of them also used their rants to campaign for Donald Trump (Dickey 2015).

Over on 4Chan’s “politically incorrect/ pol/ thread,” as recounted by Dickey, the several trolls were relishing in the impact of the hashtag, with one user instructing “EVERYONE GET ON TWITTER THE ALT-RIGHT IS TRIGGERING SJWS” (ibid). Numerous mainstream news outlets accepted the trolling operation at face value, with *The Hollywood Reporter’s* Graeme Macmillan describing the hashtag as a “social media *movement*” (2015, my emphasis) or “a bunch of white supremacists,” in Anna Silman’s account for *Salon*, both of which was commonly hyperlinked on social media. The trolls rejoiced. On 4Chan: “WE DID IT AGAIN.” On Twitter: “We made a racial issue out of thin air!” (O’Neil 2015).

In fairness, Silman later mentioned that “the hashtag seems to have been mostly co-opted by reasonable people at this point,” but leading with emotive headlines is freighted with sensation and bias, such as *Wired’s* Matt Kamen (2015)

announcing that “Racists want to #BoycottStarWarsVII because it’s ‘anti-white,’” while explaining later in the article that “[t]he vocal minority sincerely using BoycottStarWarsVII is just that—a minority.” However, Kamen’s claim that the hashtag is “equally being used to deride those actually calling for a boycott” is problematic given that the contents were not “equal” at all, but in favour of anti-racist commenters by a wide margin.

Writing for *Esquire*, Luke O’Neil (2016) expressed concern about the hyperbole and sensation underpinning a lot of news reports indignantly focused on the hashtag at the expense of “real” news, which is worth quoting at length:

For almost the entirety of the hashtag’s run, it was dominated by people commenting on how terrible it was, with very little noise coming from actual racists...That’s because there weren’t that many of them involved...No reporter would file a story based solely on the deranged ramblings of an anonymous, obviously deranged person screaming on the street, so why do so many of us continue to do this when it comes to isolated pockets of Twitter users? Group of Assholes Says Something Stupid just isn’t a newsworthy story. But, when you can affix that angle to a mention of Star Wars, then it makes more sense. People are hungry for any sort of news about the film, and when you add in the element of outrage, it’s an orgy of clicks for everyone, including the inevitable dénouement when we get to write shaming anti-reaction-reaction pieces like this one.

In many ways, then, the “regime of truth” constructed around boycott campaigns of this nature by not only professional entertainment channels, but also fan

websites and blogs, are validating these kinds of viewpoints by airing them publically and thus being complicit in the metapolitics of the “alt-right,” whether trollers involved in campaigns of this kind identify as such or not. That said, my argument here is not that *Star Wars* fandom is a homogenous, progressive “community,” and that trollers are inherently “non-fans” by default. What I am saying is that the widespread focus on toxic fan practices, if indeed such boycotters are fans (which isn’t to claim that they’re not either) augments the “regime of truth” in favour of reactionary ends. This has, unfortunately, become a common feature of entertainment criticism in professional and fan spheres across online territories.

The boycott discourse gathered steam again prior to the release of *Rogue One* in 2016, which was enmeshed with the US Presidential election. The hashtag #dumpstarwars protested the multi-racial cast and the second female protagonist in *Star Wars* history with Felicity Jones’ Jyn Erso, less a year after Daisy Ridley’s Rey received a similar backlash from a minority of complainers—which didn’t prevent the film from raking in \$2 billion-plus in box office receipts and becoming the second-largest grossing film in history in unadjusted dollars (Carissimo 2016). *Rogue One* was, however, accused of anti-white propaganda well in advance of the film hitting theatres in December 2016, but as the race for the White House heated up, a series of tweets by the film’s screenwriter Chris Weitz ended up drawing fire from “alt-right” mouthpieces, such as Jack Posobiec and Mike Cernovich. Weitz tweeted his support for Hillary Clinton, with the words “more female heroes” branded upon an image of the rebel insignia, followed by another tweet comprising a photograph of Jyn Erso above the message: “Are you with her?”

As reality TV star and real estate mogul Donald Trump declared victory in November 2016, Weitz again incensed right-wing ideologues on Twitter by equating

Trump and his supporters not with the rebels, as they preferred to see it, but with the villains. “Please note,” tweeted Weitz, “the Empire is a white supremacist organization.” This was followed up with an addendum from Gary Whitta: “Opposed by a multicultural group led by brave women” (Ellis 2016; Siegel 2016).

In the days that followed, these tweets were taken down and replaced with an image of the rebel insignia with a safety pin attached—the pin being a symbol of solidarity amongst diverse and disenfranchised publics in the UK after the Brexit referendum, and co-opted for anti-Trump sympathizers in the US—and an incendiary message guaranteed to raise the hackles of “alt-right” sympathizers: “Star Wars against hate. Spread it” (McMillan 2016). It is within this context that right-wing troller *par excellence* Jack Posobiec launched hashtag #DumpStarWars.

Whether or not it was Lucasfilm executives that requested Weitz and Whitta take down these political tweets is difficult to ascertain, Disney CEO Robert Iger tried to neuter the conflict in interview by insisting that *Rogue One*

is not a film that is, in any way, a political film. There are no political statements in it, at all. [Rogue One] has one of the greatest and most diverse casts of any film we have ever made and we are very proud of that, and that is not a political statement, at all (Galuppo, 2016).

It is more than likely that Iger was anxious that the politicization of *Rogue One* could negatively impact the film’s box office, as pointed out by Tatiana Siegel for *The Hollywood Reporter* (2016):

[w]hat Disney and Lucasfilm might not be thrilled about is that a Trump ‘Empire’ versus Hilary Clinton ‘resistance’ narrative might alienate the 61million-plus voters who backed the real estate mogul, a group too large to ignore when a company is in the tent-pole business...In the Trump age, if the right-leaning media can help tip a presidential election, it’s reasonable to assume it can impact grosses.

As with the boycotts discussed earlier, *Rogue One*’s theatrical release demonstrated that #DumpStarWars hardly mattered. Although the film’s box office paled in comparison with the record-breaking haul of its predecessor, *The Force Awakens*, *Rogue One* managed to capture over \$1 billion dollars in box office receipts. Given that *The Force Awakens* was the first *Star Wars* film in a decade, the first since the Disney acquisition of Lucasfilm, and the first Skywalker saga instalment since Lucas had dictated that the series was complete (see chapter one in this book), as well as *Rogue One* being a litmus test for the “anthology” series, it is highly probable that the film was unlikely to achieve a similar level of box office traffic. Yet as liberal news media rejoiced that the boycott #DumpStarWars had failed (Friedman 2016; Hathaway 2016; Peyser 2016), “alt-right” identifiers claimed that the campaign was successful. Jack Posobiec, for instance, argued that *Rogue One*’s “opening weekend was roughly 40%, or \$100 million less than [*The Force Awakens*],” while Mike Cernovich celebrated that the film was “not a huge hit, lost money compared to last *Star Wars*.” However, some fans responded to these claims on social media and the hashtag #DumpStarWars, such as “Star Wars Junk Man,” who tweeted that “only 2

movies has every (sic) made over 85 million opening weekend in December. Both are #StarWars films” (<https://twitter.com/StarWarsJunk/status/810991987155496960>).

It is more illuminating perhaps that the contents of #DumpStarWars contain over 50% more tweets mocking the very few boycotters within, with a significant uptick in traffic following news of *Rogue One*'s box office (which was used often as a way to bait the complainers). Indeed, *the vast majority of comments were from anti-boycotters*, regardless of what Posobiec and Cernovich claim about the campaign's success. Like #blackstormtrooper, scraping the contents of hashtags and conducting a discourse and/ or content analysis is certainly one of the ways that academic study can challenge the overamplification and hyperbole that has become part and parcel of mainstream media discourse.

It is during this period that the radical right were given a brand makeover as the “alt-right,” and this usage has accelerated in the aftermath of the US 2016 Presidential Election when Donald Trump proved to be

a particularly unifying force for the Ku Klux Klan, splinter white nationalist groups, and the cacophony of reactionists, antagonists, and neo-supremacists that have come to be known as the alt-right, all of whom have declared, publically and enthusiastically, their support for a candidate who ‘gets it’ (Phillips and Milner 2017, 180).

It should hopefully be clear at this juncture that the “alt-right” and “toxic fandom” is intrinsically and nebulously intertwined in a discursive Gordian knot of excessive proportions of which *Star Wars* is but one element. To complicate matters further,

“toxic” *Star Wars* fans do not all identify as “alt-right” ideologues, and many complaints can be framed as fidelity criticisms, conservative though they may be. It is not a new phenomenon that fan audiences tend to cry foul when beloved franchises and storyworlds adapt and shift in accordance with social and cultural mores, such as accommodating a marked uptick in multicultural and female representations in pop culture. Naturally, this is not to argue that manifestations of reactionary viewpoints should be condoned, but to ask that more meaningful exegeses take place as opposed to descriptions of “toxic fandom” being framed as legitimately emanating from the “alt-right.”

Consider the brouhaha surrounding *The Last Jedi*, a film that was not only critically heralded as “transporting entertainment” (Dargis 2017), “an emotional wallop” (Freer 2017), “a tidal wave of energy and emotion” (Bradshaw 2017) and “a blockbuster movie packed with invention, wit, and action galore” (Gompertz 2017), but one that also received a ferocious backlash not seen since *The Phantom Menace*. I have written about the critical discourse surrounding *The Last Jedi* at length elsewhere (see Proctor 2018a; 2018b; 2018c), but it would be helpful to summarize the way in which news media seemed to want to illustrate that an “alt-right” conspiracy was afoot, primarily because of the lack of consensus regarding the film’s quality. Ultimately, the notion of fan “community” becomes continuously invoked as having been “broken” by *The Last Jedi* and thus a firm indication that journalists—and fans as well—projected a utopian portrait of *Star Wars* fandom as a homogenous collective.

The Last Jedi

Prior to the global release of *The Last Jedi* in cinemas on 17th December 2017, the film was premiered to select audiences and critics on 9th December in Los Angeles and on 12th December in Europe. With a review embargo in place until the film's official release, some fans took to social media to champion the film and, once the embargo was lifted, critics joined in the chorus of celebrations as well, although not invariably (for example see Brody 2017; Gleiberman 2017; Taylor 2017). However, in the days following the film's general release, a different critical outlook began to surface, with many entertainment critics, journalists and fans eagerly querying the legitimacy of the meta-scoring site Rotten Tomatoes, which indicated a gulf between professional reviews and audience reception. Since then, this gulf has only increased: at the time of writing (September 2018), the critical score stands 91% against an audience score of 46%.

This rapidly became a cause for concern as journalists and bloggers could not accept that *The Last Jedi* could be both critically praised and vilified simultaneously. "It became clear for the world to see that something was seriously amiss when a huge discrepancy opened between the critical and audience scores for the movie on Rotten Tomatoes," explained Jordan Zakarin for *SyFy.com* (2018).

Critics largely showered it with praise, while registered moviegoers gave it a failing grade; right now, it stands at 91 percent 'fresh' from professional film critics, but has just a 50 percent audience score. The gulf is an anomaly, which we know both because moviegoers gave largely positive assessments of the film to the polling firm ComScore and because a member of an alt-right fan group proudly told HuffPost that dissatisfied fans sent bots to deliberately lower the Tomatometer.

In Zakarin’s account here, polling by ComScore is constructed as an efficacious and accurate reflection of audience tastes, while Rotten Tomatoes is not. Naturally, I do not intend to argue the obverse—Rotten Tomatoes is not an accurate barometer of popular opinion either—but the fact that “moviegoers gave largely positive assessments to ComScore” tells us little about the wider parameters of audience reception. (And I am certain I do not need to go into statistical flaws about polling in general, especially regarding the results of the Brexit referendum, the US Presidential election or the UK “snap election” of May 2017.) But what is noteworthy in Zakarin’s article is the final sentence which claims that Rotten Tomatoes had been infiltrated by “a member of an alt-right fan group [who] proudly told HuffPost that dissatisfied fans sent bots to deliberately lower the Tomatometer.”

On 20 December 2017, *The Huffington Post*’s Bill Bradley headlined: “Surprise Surprise: The Alt Right Claims Credit for ‘Last Jedi’ Backlash.” In this article, Bradley writes that a Facebook group “Down with Disney’s Treatment of Franchise’s and its Fanboys” was responsible for sending “bots” through the internet to torpedo the Rotten Tomatoes score, the evidence of which was discussed with “Down with Disney” through Facebook messenger (which Bradley provides screenshots of). When asked by Bradley to provide evidence of the way that bot attacks were orchestrated, Down With Disney replies, “that’s confidential,” then later explained that a tech-savvy friend assisted with the “review bombing” (note the semantics of terrorism used here and in the headline, “takes credit for”). *At no point does the poster identify with, or use the term, “alt-right.”*

The story did not begin with Bradley, however, but the “alt-right” angle certainly did. The first news story to mention Down with Disney was on *Deadbeat*,

but with no description of “alt-right” membership (D’Alessandro 2017). This was then picked up by Julie Alexander of Polygon (2017), who wrote that Down with Disney is “a Pro-DCEU [DC Expanded Universe] community,” but later added an update following Bradley’s “alt-right” article: “After reports of the attack being organized by a right-wing group began to circulate, a Rotten Tomatoes representative told Polygon that its security team and database experts ‘haven’t determined there to be any problems.’”

As the story began to be reproduced across cyberspace, the discourse gathered apace and mushroomed into a regime of truth whereby Down with Disney is discursively awarded “alt-right” status, clear indicating that *The Last Jedi*’s Rotten Tomatoes score was the result of “alt-right” orchestration as emphasised by Zakarin’s article above, but also reproduced in publications, as varied as (but not limited to): the *Chicago Tribune* (Page 2017); *NME* (Trendell 2017), *Indiewire* (Sharf 2017), *Newsweek* (Amhed 2017), *Slash Film* (Bui 2017), *The Wrap* (Verhoeven 2017) *GQ* (Darby 2017), *Nylon* (Manders 2017), *Complex* (Pimentel 2017), *AV Club* (Rife 2017), *Vice* (Schwartz 2017), *Pajiba* (Preston 2017), and many more besides. (One might wonder why other news outlets such as, say, *The Guardian*, *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* etc., chose not to run this story).

On Down with Disney’s official Facebook page, a different narrative emerges. First, over 98% of commenters were pillorying the poster for espousing misogyny and racism, which is entirely missing from Bradley’s account. Second, the anonymous Down with Disney is not representative of “the alt-right” at all, but an anonymous male individual who is widely known as a Facebook troller. Thirdly, and perhaps most pointedly, is that other *Star Wars* fan groups challenged Down with Disney by

claiming that they impacted the Rotten Tomatoes score, such as the “Star Wars Anti-Disney Pro-Canon” Facebook group, who wrote:

WE DID THIS! Not the fake page Down with Disney. We brought the Rotten Tomatoes score down. And we didn't have to use bots either. You claim to do something you never did...You sit on a throne of lies! We had our supporters do down vote the movie without seeing it. We are the ones should be getting praise not you.

Whether or not either of these groups orchestrated a “review bombing” campaign matters less in this context as much as “the regime of truth” that developed around the “alt-right” being responsible. It is entirely possible—even plausible—that a certain number of fans attempted to downgrade the audience scores on Rotten Tomatoes as a protest against Disney's *Star Wars* and what may be viewed as a political correct shift in equality and diversity. It is not only that the press “has erred on the side of overexposure” regarding stories about “the alt-right,” as emphasized by *Wired's* Issie Lapowski (2017), or that this ends up shining “too bright a light on them and risk[s] amplifying their message—or worse, attracting new acolytes to the cause” (ibid). More pointedly, it appears that mainstream media have been complicit in constructing Down with Disney as a legitimate chapter of the “alt-right” when, in reality, the Facebook “community”—a community of one—is a notorious troller without much in the way of support at all.

More recently, both the “Star Wars Anti-Disney Pro-Canon” and Down with Disney Facebook pages have been taken down. In place of the former, a new page has surfaced called the “Star Wars Anti-Disney Pro-Canon Parody” group, which contains

commenters teasing the person in no uncertain terms who launched the original page (whose real name is revealed), as well as several attacks on Down with Disney's misogynist and racist rhetoric, as well as his lack of fan cultural capital. But Down with Disney's infamy would live on and proliferate once again in February 2018, this time around Marvel's *Black Panther*, and again led by Bill Bradley (2018) of *The Huffington Post*, headlining: "'Alt-Right' Group Takes Aim At 'Black Panther.' Ryan Coogler Responds." On this occasion, more reputable news outlets *did* run the story, including *The Guardian* (Virtue 2018); *International Business Times* (Gander 2018), *Variety* (Fernandez 2018); and *The Washington Post* (Cavna 2018), to name a select few. All of this kerfuffle because of a Facebook post comprised of the following words: "Give Black Panther a Rotten Audience Score on Rotten Tomatoes" (one should wonder what has happened to Down with Disney's bots on this occasion or query the Rotten Tomatoes score, which is split 97% for critics and 79% for audiences).

And it didn't stop there either. In June 2018, *The Guardian's* Catherine Shoard ran an article about Down with Disney, who had been kicked off Facebook in February but had returned after a ban to claim responsibility for the online abuse leveled at *The Last Jedi* actor Kelly Marie Tran, who left social media as a result and to which she has since responded in *The New York Times* (Tran 2018). Unlike Bradley, Shoard doesn't evoke the "alt-right" political noun, preferring "Pro-'straight-white-male group'"—a description that was reproduced by Mel Evans (2018) in *Metro*—while in *The Washington Post*, Michael Cavna reverts to type with "the now removed 'alt-right' Facebook page" (2018).

At this point, there have been over sixty articles written about Down with Disney as an "alt-right" group. That one anonymous and infamous social media troller

should be able to attract such a massive amount of publicity is astonishing and worrying, not least because it works to publicize “alt-right” philosophies even when

Kelly Marie Tran has certainly been the recipient of racist and sexist ideologies on websites such as Instagram and Wookieepedia, so I am in no way attempting to argue that *Star Wars* is somehow immune from “new culture war” skirmishes. But how would we know if these attacks were orchestrated by the “alt-right,” whose metapolitical strategy is not to mask political affiliation and identity but, rather, to openly evoke “alt-right” branding to infiltrate mainstream discourse and spread ideological currents.

As for *The Last Jedi*, I would argue that it has become academically urgent to explore and examine discourses of this nature with rigorous research protocols to test and measure more effectively “the regime of truth.” Perhaps the best way of checking the veracity of Rotten Tomatoes scores and whether or not audience reviews are aligned with right-wing ideologies, political correctness and “the new culture wars” is to fully examine the entire contents therein (which of course would be time-consuming). It is possible that reviewers may mask their political viewpoints, but it is better than relying on supposition, conjecture and imputation. As the current “regime of truth” is heavily weighted in favor of reactionary ends and agents, it is becoming an essential scholarly endeavor, I would argue, to better examine these “new culture wars” with as much accuracy as possible rather than embrace press discourse unequivocally. Unfortunately, academic literature has also started to marshal parochial and partisan viewpoints, adding to the culture of fear produced by mainstream news and entertainment discourses. The “regime of truth” may well illustrate that the left is losing “the new culture wars” but, as I have hopefully started to show in this chapter, once we begin tapping into hashtags, forums, comments

section and other online user-generated portals, the picture becomes evidently more complex and less reactionary than we might think. Put differently, all of the energy spent on Down with Disney is considerably less than news articles centred on positive aspects of *Star Wars* fandom, such as the #ForceOutHate campaign or the Expanded Universe Movement's Twin Suns charity initiative, both of which have received little mainstream media attention. From this perspective, entertainment journalism enacts a kind of *cultural rubbernecking*, attracted to drama, sensation and the “car crashes” of pop culture. This is much more than about *Star Wars*—it is about media bias and “information disorder” (Wardle 2017) in the twenty-first century.

Conclusion: Fracture, Fallout or Fatigue?

The “regime of truth” that has since emerged regarding the impact of *The Last Jedi*'s divisiveness has had many news and fan sites announcing that the *Star Wars* fandom is “notoriously toxic, and you don't have to look very far for evidence,” as stated by Joshua Rivera (2018). “It's embarrassing to share a passion with...a small yet splenetic subsection of so-called ‘fans,’” writes Luke Holland in *The Guardian*, (2018). For Brandon Katz (2018) writing for Observer.com: “Something is deeply broken among the Star Wars faithful. Respectable discourse has deteriorated completely as a small but determined minority of ‘fans’ turn to the Dark Side—hate-spewing assholes looking to ruin the party for everyone.”

Wired's Adam Rogers (2018) offered the “three tenets of Nerd,” illustrating that this notion of “fan-as-community” is a common discourse amongst journalists and fans themselves (or “journalist-fans”):

1. A nerd must not harm another nerd, or through inaction allow a nerd to come to harm.
2. Nerds must cooperate with other nerds, except where such cooperation would violate the previous tenet.
3. Nerds must protect the existence of nerddom, except where such protection violates the first two tenets.

While these tenets are certainly aspirational, it is worth remembering that fandom is most often a site of savage argument than a utopian “community” built on the principles of solidarity. Naturally, harming another “nerd” is as morally despicable as harming anyone, whether fan or not; but this notion of cooperation and protection is not usually how fandom functions in general. Again, it is certainly a honourable philosophy, however unlikely. *Star Wars* fandom isn’t “broken” or “fractured” (Reinhard 2018)—as an abstract concept that cannot be quantified substantively or entirely, *fandom has never been in a state of unity from which it might be broken and in need of repair*. *The Last Jedi* certainly became a hot spot for these kinds of arguments, primarily because the film *was* so divisive among fans (although division again implies a rupturing of “community”). As mentioned earlier, what seems to be surprising to many critics and fans is that *The Last Jedi* might be loved and hated simultaneously, but *by different kinds of fans*. The lack of fannish consensus became a gateway to all sorts of theories, and suppositions, resulting in the construction of a reductive and oversimplified binary, a “moral dualism” (Hills 2002), between “good” progressive fans of *The Last Jedi* that loved the film, and “bad” reactionary fans that hated it. As *The Hollywood Reporter’s* Marc Bernadin (2018) put it:

Some loved the bold liberties of writer-director Rian Johnson...But others hated it. Hated everything it stood for. Hated what they saw as a social justice warrior remix of the Star Wars they grew up with. And they hated [Kelly Marie] Tran's most of all because they decided that she was the avatar for what was wrong with the franchise. Those fans—a minority but a loud one—found their “them” in the very thing they used to love.

For all the talk about toxic fans being a minority faction of a wider fan “community,” it is puzzling to read vaunted claims that this minority might well have impacted the box office for *Solo: A Star Wars Story*, the first *Star Wars* film following *The Last Jedi*, which “officially became the first *Star Wars* movie to flop” (Stefansky 2018). But *Solo* was nothing if not a turbulent production almost from the off.

Firstly, directors Phil Lord and Chris Miller were fired due to creative differences with Ron Howard stepping in as director. Secondly, numerous reports claimed that young Han Solo actor Alden Ehrenreich required lessons from an acting coach (hardly an indicator of confidence in the film). Thirdly, replacing Harrison Ford was always going to be a risky proposition and *Star Wars* prequels don't have a positive history. And finally, marketing for the film was exceptionally belated, the first teaser trailer premiering only a few months before *Solo's* theatrical release (compared with *The Force Awakens* teaser trailer coming a full year before it was distributed). If *The Force Awakens'* “Comic-Con Reel” operated to paratextually rehabilitate the franchise and steer negative criticisms away from prequel territory, then it stands to reason that unpoliced negative reports may achieve the opposite by functioning as a paratextual “red flag” (see Hassler-Forest's chapter in this book).

Numerous articles also suggested that *Solo*'s box office failings indicated that audiences were "fatigued" with *Star Wars* (Cotter 2018; Coyle 2018; Rubin 2018; Sims 2018), but if compared with Marvel, one of Disney's other twenty-first century acquisitions, this makes little sense. Since 2008, the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) has rapidly grown into a franchise powerhouse, spreading transmedially across film, television and streaming platforms. In cinematic terms, Marvel Studios have released twenty MCU films theatrically in ten years, with a schedule that has not slowed down over time, but accelerated. In 2018, the films *Black Panther*, *Avengers: Infinity War* and *Ant-Man and the Wasp* have all performed well, both in critical and commercial spheres—with *Black Panther* and *Avengers: Infinity War* crossing the \$2 billion line. Between 2015 and 2018, Disney's Lucasfilm produced four *Star Wars* films—*The Force Awakens*, *Rogue One*, *The Last Jedi* and *Solo*—while during the same period Disney's Marvel released eight MCU films—*Captain America: Civil War* (2016), *Doctor Strange* (2016), *Guardians of the Galaxy Vol. 2* (2017), *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017), *Thor: Ragnarok* (2017), and the aforementioned triumvirate of films in 2018. Rather than indicating signs of exhaustion and fatigue, or the law of diminishing returns, the MCU certainly seems to be in rude health, with *Avengers: Infinity War* now standing as the most successful film in the franchise at the time of this writing (August 2018). With no new *Star Wars* films on the release roster until J.J. Abrams' *Episode IX* in December 2019, Marvel Studios in the meantime will have added yet another three films to the MCU before then, with *Captain Marvel*, the second-part of *Avengers: Infinity War*, and *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (all 2019). By the time the conclusion of the Skywalker Saga is distributed theatrically—if indeed *Episode IX* will conclude the story or lead into another trilogy at a later date—the ratio between Lucasfilm and Marvel Studios

cinematic outputs will be 5 films to 11. Put differently, Marvel's cinematic output will quantitatively exceed fifty per cent more compared with *Star Wars* films produced within the same four-year period.

Of course, *Star Wars* and Marvel are very different beasts and I do not mean to claim that the former simply cannot fatigue audiences because the latter continues to attract significant critical praise and box office receipts; although I will say that it seems to be clear that Marvel is healthier than *Star Wars* at this juncture, both commercially and critically. It is entirely possible, however speculative, that one of the reasons that *Star Wars* has been a crown jewel of franchise cinema is precisely because there has been less content produced, at least in filmic terms, and thus marked it out as somehow "unique." The case of *Solo* is particularly interesting given that it has been viewed as the first theatrical "failure" in the franchise's history, which is made all the more remarkable considering the venomous fan backlash against the prequels. I contend that there is so much more going on here than mere "franchise fatigue," although we will need to wait and see how the "final" instalment of the Skywalker Saga is received in December 2019 to explore whether or not the *Star Wars* brand remains a vibrant franchise property.

The key argument in this chapter is that news media's preeminent focus on the most virulent and toxic elements of *Star Wars* fandom has undoubtedly constructed a biased narrative, a concretized "regime of truth" whereby a minority of digital users, be they fans, trolls or "alt-right" identifiers, are made to look as if they represent a majority. In producing—and indeed re-producing—this "regime of truth," I would argue that it is also news media that is "toxic," or at the very least, dedicated to unduly dramatizing toxic narratives at the expense of a fan majority. There is much work to be done in this area and the digital environment will continue to be an

enormous challenge for scholars to examine rigorously and robustly as the war for Disney's *Star Wars* continues.