

TRANSMEDIA AND FRANCHISE SCIENCE FICTION

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To misquote Fredric Jameson's famous quip about capitalism, it is easier to imagine the end of the world than the end of *STAR WARS*. We live in an age where media franchises appear to have established a presence that feels frighteningly permanent. In the twenty-first century, transmedia franchising has indeed become so ubiquitous that it sometimes seems to occupy the entire horizon of our cultural landscape. From *STAR WARS* and the *MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE* to *HARRY POTTER'S WIZARDING WORLD* and the *Godzilla MONSTERVERSE*, high-profile sf franchises are much more than extended film series: they stretch across media into a multitude of licensed storytelling extensions, merchandising commodities, and experiential spaces like theme parks.

But this global proliferation of corporate-owned Intellectual Property (IP) is not just a case of particular properties growing popular to the point of cultural saturation. The explosive growth of media franchising has been the result of political and economic shifts that dramatically increased corporations' power within the media landscape. From the late 1970s onward, the implementation of neoliberal policies ushered in an age of corporate deregulation and conglomeration. At the same time, these interlocking transformations were sped up by the rapid growth of digital technology from the 1980s onwards. This process radically reshaped media production and distribution, while digital media convergence eroded longstanding barriers between media platforms.

This chapter reflects on both aspects of this historic shift in sf history: it describes on the one hand how transmedia sf franchises are organised as complex networks of media texts, while on the other contextualising this shift from the perspective of changes at the level of political economy. The phenomenal success of *Star Wars* (Lucas 1977) developed over the years not only into a basic template for sf franchising across media, but it also stood at the dawn of a new era in which a wide variety of transmedia expansions has come to revolve around every major form of IP. Since it has been so central to the development of media franchising over the past 50 years, *STAR WARS* will inevitably loom large in this discussion – especially since its absorption by the Walt Disney Company illustrates the simultaneous processes of media diversification and corporate monopolisation. But this overview will also draw on a wide range of other examples, from *The Matrix* (Wachowski sisters 1999) to *The LEGO™ Movie* (Lord and Miller 2014), to flesh out this brief history of transmedia and franchise sf.

The *Star Wars* event: Transmedia storytelling takes flight

‘A long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away...’ The fairy-tale phrase that precedes a deafening blast of horns is by now a ritualistic entry point into a deeply familiar sf universe. When it first appeared on cinema screens in 1977, the words paved the way for a semi-mythical space opera that nostalgically revived the serialised sf of the 1930s and 1940s. Two generations after its momentous premiere, this nostalgia has turned in on itself: aging fans are reminded of the wonder they felt watching *Star Wars* as a child, eagerly introducing their offspring to what has by now become a prime example of transgenerational entertainment.

As *Star Wars* swiftly developed into the pop-cultural phenomenon of its era, the film’s cultural impact was marked above all by its merchandising footprint. The astonishing success of the film’s action figures, T-shirts, lunch boxes and bedspreads taught Hollywood studio executives a valuable lesson: whereas licensed merchandising had previously provided ancillary profits, the wildly popular commodities showed that these derivative products, if properly handled, could be developed into a long-term source of profits (Booth 188). And while the growing variety of licensed toys kept a youthful audience engaged with the film’s storyworld, a multitude of other media extended the storyworld in different directions.

Writer-director George Lucas proved himself shrewdly aware of how sf fans were already skilled at navigating media networks, obsessively exploring connections between different platforms and formats. Anticipating that a high-risk endeavour like *Star Wars* would depend heavily on the interest and support of organised sf fandom, the film’s novelisation (ghost-written by Alan Dean Foster) was published a good six months ahead of the film’s release. Quickly selling out its first printing, the book sold over 3.5 million copies in the first few months after its appearance (Van Parys 75). Without deviating substantially from the screenplay it was adapted from, Foster’s novelisation deftly illustrated how strongly *Star Wars* depended on the productive connections between media from the very start.

This interrelation took a further turn even before the film’s unprecedented success. Nervous about his troubled production’s financial prospects, Lucas commissioned Foster to write a sequel that could be used as the basis for a more low-budget sequel in case the film failed financially. The resulting book *Splinter of the Mind’s Eye* (1978) followed the further adventures of the characters who had already been contracted for possible sequels. To facilitate a lower production budget, its story was set on a fog-shrouded planet and featured far fewer action set pieces. This sequel was the first original plot to follow the movie’s storyline – but its narrative was abandoned in favour of a much more ambitious sequel once the first film’s record-breaking success became clear (Freeman 66).

While Foster’s sequel novel offers a compelling imaginary detour from the developing franchise’s overall plotting, it also opened the door to a rapidly proliferating industry of novels, games, comics and cartoons that would become known as the Expanded Universe (EU). The EU would give fans regular doses of officially licensed STAR WARS content, thereby both expanding the mythology surrounding the films and maintaining a stable presence within fandom in the gaps between new film releases. So even though there were certainly periods in which the STAR WARS franchise had only a limited presence in popular culture, Lucasfilm was still able to maintain an ongoing fanbase through the continued production of EU expansions in other media.

The combination of these developments made the STAR WARS franchise one of the most striking examples of *transmedia storytelling*, a term popularised by Henry Jenkins to indicate the structural integration of multiple media platforms to develop a single, more or less coherent storyworld (97–8). In its ‘ideal’ form, transmedia storytelling distributes narrative elements across

media in ways that play to each individual medium's strength, 'so that a story might be introduced in a film, expanded through TV, novels and comics; its world might be explored through game play or experienced as an amusement park attraction' (97–8).

As the STAR WARS franchise developed, this kind of transmedia cross-fertilisation did indeed start to emerge. But it is important to note that this happened incrementally and provisionally rather than as a coordinated effort to integrate multiple media into a single storyworld. As the *Splinter of the Mind's Eye* example attests, transmedia storytelling forms are shaped first and foremost by the specific limitations and opportunities posed by specific media-industrial conditions. The STAR WARS novels that followed Foster's non-canonical sequel, for instance, initially had very little oversight in terms of narrative consistency, just as the proliferating STAR WARS comic books freely experimented with the franchise's main characters without much eye for planning or consistency (Guynes 145).

It is also important therefore to distinguish between transmedia storytelling as an ideal on the one hand, and the forms it tends to take in cultural and industrial practice on the other. For while Jenkins's oft-cited definition gave media scholars a provocative starting point, it also clearly exaggerated the degree of organised and consistent cross-platform development of fictional storyworlds. In order to employ the term 'transmedia' meaningfully, we must first attend to the hierarchical structures that we inevitably encounter both within existing transmedia multitexts, and in the industries and audiences that engage with them. We might therefore more accurately typify Jenkins's original description as *integrated* transmedia, dispersing a storyworld evenly across a variety of media platforms that offer different entrance points to the narrative (Eder 75).

But as the STAR WARS example shows, a far more common variation is the *supplementation* model, in which one primary media text (often referred to as the 'mothership') is expanded via a range of 'satellite texts' (Eder 76). Most commonly, the mothership is a costly, labour intensive and high-profile mass media production, such as a feature film, television series or AAA video game, while the satellites are less expensive secondary texts that function simultaneously as world-building expansions and as possible entrance points. For most of its long history, the STAR WARS franchise has also followed this logic, with the saga films operating as the mothership, and the many spin-offs and expansions supplementing its story in a variety of ways. Historicising these distinctions allows us to foreground the inherent connections between transmedia as a narrative form – *transmedia storytelling* – and the political economy in which it circulates – *transmedia franchising*.

The political economy of transmedia franchising

To understand how transmedia sf franchises came to dominate the culture industry, we first need to consider how the political economy of media production changed in the neoliberal era. In response to the global economic crisis of the 1970s, Western governments in the 1980s embraced an aggressive programme of corporate deregulation, facilitating businesses to access labour and resources much more freely in wave after wave of 'flexible accumulation' (Harvey 147). Firmly embracing a radical conception of free market ideology, the Reagan administration unleashed forces that would irrevocably alter the global media landscape. The transformation that occurred in this period can be summed up by three key terms: *globalisation*, *deregulation* and *market concentration* (Holt 10).

These policies led to a series of mergers made possible by the abandonment of most forms of effective antitrust legislation within the US media industry: a first wave around the year 1985, a second in 1989–90 and a third in 1994–5, 'as the last remaining regulations separating film studios

and broadcast networks fell away, cross-ownership rules were dismantled, and the door was open for the deregulated telecommunications industry to join the global media conglomerates' (Holt 18). Effectively reversing most of the policies designed to limit media monopolies, this onslaught of mergers and acquisitions yielded a political economy that was ideal for the transmedia franchising of sf properties.

The historic second-wave merger of publishing giant Time Inc. and the already-diversified entertainment conglomerate Warner Communications, Inc. was paradigm-shifting in this regard. The newly formed media corporation united a tremendous variety of production and distribution infrastructure with an enormous stable of IP and contracted talent. Mere weeks after the historic merger was announced, its unprecedented power was vividly illustrated by the cultural phenomenon of *Batman* (Burton 1989). As a blockbuster production designed to capitalise on Time-Warner's synergistic potential, the film popularised a character and storyworld that were part of the corporation's existing holdings, recruited the Warner-contracted pop icon Prince for the soundtrack, surrounded the film with transmedia satellites and spin-offs, and made strategic use of every available media platform and distribution channel to amplify the film's impact (Pearson and Uricchio 183).

The Time-Warner conglomerate instantly became the new example that other businesses quickly learned to emulate, as the already blockbuster-focused 'New Hollywood' further increased its focus on big-budget sf spectacles that lent themselves to STAR WARS-type transmedia licensing (Holt 122). The resulting wave of *Batman* franchising in the 1990s typified this emergent corporate strategy, as 'the balance of franchise discourse shifted toward describing the ongoing production of content across a range of genres and industrial contexts' (Johnson 55). In this period, the word 'franchising' soon took on a distinct cultural significance as 'a new way of thinking about networks of collaborative content production constituted across multiple industrial sites' (6). Transmedia franchising is therefore in most cases a more appropriate term than transmedia storytelling, as it relates directly to the many decentralised, episodic and non-narrative modes of production that tend to typify media franchises in the IP age (31).

The structural tension between storytelling and franchising is best illustrated by *The Matrix* – one of the most frequently cited examples of transmedia storytelling. Arriving after all three major waves of corporate consolidation had been completed, the film played to Time-Warner's key strengths: saturation marketing was pushed through all available media channels, a bestselling soundtrack CD featured a collection of contracted metal and alt-rock bands, a ground-breaking website capitalised on Time-Warner's recent merger with internet service provider AOL, and the film's high-concept sf plot and innovative digital effects perfectly matched the reigning focus on spectacular entertainment that translated easily to other media platforms.

Following the film's financial success, Time-Warner developed more ambitious plans for the budding franchise. Not one, but two film sequels went into production simultaneously, while the Wachowski sisters also involved themselves creatively with the development of elaborate transmedia expansions. The videogame *Enter the Matrix* (2003), for instance, included a full hour of live-action footage featuring actors from the films, while the promotional texts tirelessly emphasised that the game constituted an integral part of the story presented in the films. By the same token, the DVD *The Animatrix* (2003) collected an anthology of animated shorts, which also had been overseen by the Wachowskis to fill important narrative gaps in the films. For media theorists eager to identify blossoming forms of transmedia storytelling, *The Matrix* therefore became a gratifying case study (Jenkins 98–102).

But even this rare kind of 'entertainment super system' remains most illuminating for what it tells us about the emergent media-industrial logic of the franchising age (Johnson 31). For while

these transmedia extensions involved an unusually high degree of narrative coordination, they could not have been produced outside a very specific industrial organisation of horizontally and vertically integrated media conglomerates. In other words, franchises like *The Matrix* ‘do not dictate, but rather are *dictated by* the contexts of the contemporary creative industries’ (Archer 22).

Transmedia franchising comes of age: Marvel superheroes in the age of Disney

After the interlocking forces of globalisation, deregulation and market concentration reshaped the media industries in the 1980s and 1990s, the twenty-first century has seen a further consolidation of these developments. The rise of social media websites like Facebook, YouTube and Instagram pushed the generalised presence of media monopolies to unprecedented new heights. As the internet’s early potential as a global commons was rapidly eclipsed by privately owned and commercially oriented corporations, a *convergence culture industry* emerged that skilfully integrated audience participation within its hegemonic power structure (Scott 12).

While sf fans had previously been seen as a pesky niche group, the convergence culture industry has fostered a much more dynamic relationship with them. Two key elements contributed to this more participatory engagement: first, the tremendous growth in cultural status and visibility that sf accrued post-*Star Wars* as a mass cultural genre (Rieder 54–7); and second, the cultural mainstreaming of fandom, which has led participatory culture to foster new forms of audience exploitation described as ‘Consumption 2.0’ (Stanfill 84). This new dynamic between media industries and sf fan cultures caters on the one hand to fandom’s taste formations, while on the other demanding that fans constantly play the long game of anticipating, consuming, praising and promoting the franchises they worship in seemingly endless iterations.

Having added both *STAR WARS* and Marvel Studios to its growing collection of media franchises, the Walt Disney Company has by now long eclipsed every other company as the epitome of deregulated media conglomeratisation – including Time-Warner, which would become WarnerMedia before being rebranded once more as Warner Bros. Discovery following another big wave of mergers and acquisitions. As a company that has consistently sought to integrate its multiple forms of IP into a single unified brand experience, Disney was uniquely positioned to become the dominant media conglomerate in a media landscape ruled by branded transmedia worldbuilding (Wasko 156–7). Following the operative logic of its own theme parks, Disney now marks its various primary media franchises as individually branded domains that still fit comfortably under a unifying corporate umbrella.

The *MARVEL CINEMATIC UNIVERSE* (MCU) is a case in point. This Disney-owned media franchise currently stands as the most financially successful film series in entertainment history. But it paradoxically also expresses how the convergence culture industry has changed from ‘a state in which the film itself functioned as the primary revenue-generating product in the industry to it being just one part of an extensive multi-media tapestry’ (McSweeney 4). For no matter how much money the many MCU films might make at the box office, those numbers are negligible compared to the enduring value the Marvel brand represents for an IP-driven conglomerate. In this sense, the ongoing production of films is mainly necessary to sustain the relevance and longevity of branded characters that can be licensed, reproduced and consumed in seemingly limitless ways.

As a media franchise, the MCU began with the release of *Iron Man* (Favreau 2008). Having spent the previous decade strategically reinvigorating public interest in superheroes by licensing some of its characters to movie studios, Marvel founded its own studio to develop ‘a cohesive narrative in which the characters and events portrayed reside within the same diegetic world’

(McSweeney 14). Where previous sf film franchises had followed the dominant industrial logic of following a hit film with a number of sequels until public interest waned, Marvel Studios hoped to develop a complexly tiered narrative universe that mimicked their interlinked comic book universe (Wright 218). Thus, *Iron Man* was not followed directly by *Iron Man 2* (Favreau 2010) but first by *The Incredible Hulk* (Letierrier 2009), with post-credits ‘stings’ in both films that established connections between the individual films.

As the franchise gained momentum and popularity, connections between individual films became more elaborate, while occasional cross-over ‘event films’ like *The Avengers* (Whedon 2012) brought together major characters who also had their own ongoing film series. Shortly after Marvel Studios’ 2009 acquisition by The Walt Disney Company, the MCU’s ongoing film series was expanded as a franchise in other media as well: television series such as *Agents of S.H.I.E.L.D.* (2013–20) and *Agent Carter* (2015–6) were broadcast on the Disney-owned ABC network, while a collaboration with streaming platform Netflix yielded an additional set of superhero-driven limited series from 2015 to 2018.

This partnership introduced new audiences to the MCU franchise, in part by the combination of adult-oriented themes, explicit violence, and a stronger focus on race and gender (McSweeney 224–6), but it was abandoned once Disney unveiled its competing streaming service Disney+. Besides offering access to its archive of animated films alongside its other properties and brands, the new service promised to expand them further with exclusive serialised expansions. Unlike the earlier TV series, which were peripheral in most ways to the ‘mothership’ constituted by the feature films, the Disney+ series were designed from the start to be a much more integral part of the ongoing MCU narrative.

This higher degree of narrative integration across media platforms indicates a stronger commitment to transmedia storytelling. But as with *Star Wars*, *Batman* and *The Matrix* before it, the MCU’s newfound commitment to integrated transmedia storytelling is again best understood in political-economic terms. Placing a greater emphasis on the importance of franchise expansions that are exclusively available on Disney’s streaming channel drives Marvel fans to become paying subscribers, thereby strengthening the corporation’s hold over the convergence culture industry. While this certainly allows for new storytelling opportunities, Disney’s ongoing expansion surely owes more to media power than it does to narrative complexity or innovation (Archer 41).

While shows such as *WandaVision* (2020), *Falcon and the Winter Soldier* (2021) and *Loki* (2021) do take the MCU in some new directions, their ongoing development of Marvel’s fictional universe remains fatally constrained by what Gerry Canavan has described as *franchise time*: since every new iteration in the franchise must be set in a recognisable ‘now’, every new development, no matter how impactful, will fade into the background as every new instalment resets itself, ‘just in time for the start of the next show, forever’ (n.p.). As successful as the MCU has been as a transmedia franchise, its internal organisation therefore continues to be determined primarily by the Disney media conglomerate’s commercial imperatives.

Disney’s competition: DC, *Star Trek* and the Lego-verse

As Disney’s Thanos-like acquisition of studios and franchises cemented its twenty-first century media dominance, competing conglomerates played variations of Disney’s franchising game. From the post-*Star Wars* series of SUPERMAN films (1978–87) to the DARK KNIGHT trilogy (2005–12), DC characters had largely dominated the superhero genre. But while Time-Warner has ownership of many of the most enduringly popular superhero icons, the studio was still developing them according to an older franchising logic: twenty-first-century reboots were produced by default as

standalone films, like *Batman Begins* (Nolan 2005) and *Superman Returns* (Singer 2006), ideally to be followed by one or more sequels.

But as Disney's many acquisitions established a new paradigm for transmedia franchising, competing studios like Time-Warner, Paramount and Universal scrambled to develop their own narrative universes, or *transmedia worldbuilding*. While similar in some ways to the film series of the early blockbuster era, transmedia *worldbuilding* emphasises a different logic that has come to typify the convergence culture industry:

1. Transmedia worldbuilding takes place *across* media.
2. Transmedia worldbuilding involves *audience participation*.
3. Transmedia worldbuilding is a process that *defers narrative closure*. (Hassler-Forest 5)

Popular entertainment franchises in the 2010s mostly adopted this logic, focusing their film production output increasingly on 'worlds' and 'universes' that translate easily to other media, that foster participatory engagement with fan cultures, and that perpetually hold out the promise of further expansion.

But for Time-Warner, the road to a robust and commercially viable transmedia superhero franchise turned out to be more challenging than expected. Initial attempts to jump-start a DC EXTENDED UNIVERSE (DCEU) floundered, as the first two films *Man of Steel* (Snyder 2013) and *Batman v Superman: Dawn of Justice* (Snyder 2016) failed to meet expectations, and the rushed crossover team-up *Justice League* (Snyder 2017) sank at the box office. Largely abandoning the use of a single 'house style' that has defined the most successful transmedia franchises, subsequent DCEU films explored a variety of styles and registers, all of which existed in a cultural realm that remained separate from DC's ARROWVERSE: the collection of interlinked superhero series broadcast on young-adult-oriented television channel The CW, and further supplemented by web series on Time-Warner's digital platform CW Seed.

Along similar lines, the STAR TREK franchise has been revived in the twenty-first century, again in ways that foreground changing industrial practices. In 2009, the perennial fan favourite and sf classic was rebooted as a STAR WARS-like space opera that cast young actors as the original crew of the starship *Enterprise*. The action-oriented blockbuster followed the logic of the *legacy film*, as it introduced a new generation to a beloved franchise by creating a sense of continuity with what came before (Golding 70) – in this case, by having original series icon Leonard Nimoy appear alongside the newer incarnation of his beloved character. This provides both a sense of continuity with the franchise's history and a renewed sense of relevance, as the new team takes the familiar mythology in new directions. The 2009 franchise reboot deviated in such substantial ways from the series' existing chronology that the film and its ongoing sequels are now commonly referred to by fans as the 'Kelvin timeline', thereby indicating a separate continuity within the franchise's governing logic.

While the films gave Paramount a foothold within the increasingly competitive and franchise-oriented media landscape, the industry's transition to streaming would yield another series of franchise reboots in the following decade. As part of Paramount's plan to launch its proprietary subscription-based streaming channel CBS All Access (later re-named Paramount+), *Star Trek: Discovery* (2017–24) was developed as the new service's flagship property – with distribution outside the US handled by production partner Netflix. While this series mapped out yet another origin story for the early days of the Federation, a second series titled *Star Trek: Picard* (2020–3) was developed simultaneously to focus on one of the franchise's most beloved characters in his older years. While *Discovery* constituted an attempt to rejuvenate the narrative formula of

the STAR TREK television with fresh faces and situations, *Picard* was largely defined by the nostalgic return of a multitude of familiar actors.

These proliferating styles and storytelling logics illustrate an expansive multiplicity that resides at the core of these projects: the simultaneous co-existence of multiple variations that makes up ‘the generational engine at the heart of any successful transmedia franchise’ (Rehak 64). As these franchises accumulate meanings over the years in sometimes wildly different incarnations, the dominant logic of the convergence culture industry has increasingly embraced these differences rather than attempt to iron them out into a single canonical storyworld or house style. This sensibility expresses an attitude that acknowledges the audience as a participatory presence, while simultaneously limiting this participation to a position that remains ‘inherently consumptive’ (Stanfill 96).

The best example of this proliferation of difference is surely *The LEGO™ Movie* and the transmedia franchise it spawned. Since the 1990s, the LEGO toy brand has licensed a variety of prominent media franchises, such as STAR WARS and HARRY POTTER, to sell a tremendous range of branded sets that reproduce characters, locations and props from transmedia storyworlds (Geraghty 24). The popularity of these sets led LEGO to produce a variety of licensed spin-off productions, including a line of bestselling video games, an ongoing series of parodic recreations of famous movie scenes for the LEGO website, and television series featuring LEGO versions of franchised characters. Through this strong association with some of the biggest transmedia franchises, LEGO thereby became a meta-franchise that incorporated licensed IP in a playful and participatory manner.

Franchise entry *The LEGO™ Batman Movie* (McKay 2017) perfectly illustrates both the inherent multiplicity of transmedia franchises and their basic dependence on corporate interests grounded in licensable IP. Rather than embracing a singular conception of the main character and his storyworld, the film constantly reminds the viewer of his many competing incarnations amassed over the years, including clear references to the 1960s television series, the critically pummeled Joel Schumacher films and the more recent DARK KNIGHT trilogy. The film’s own Batman, voiced by Will Arnett, is not so much a new version of the caped crusader as a self-conscious composite character, playing off the audience’s familiarity with the brand’s history while adding new elements to the shared cultural archive.

Ultimately, the film and its overarching franchise represent the cultural and industrial logic of the convergence culture industry in the age of corporate IP: participatory and playful in the way they erode boundaries between media, while engaging viewers through an explicit acknowledgment of their cultural knowledge as media fans. But at the same time, their primary task is to keep reproducing only those kinds of content that can be profitably licensed across a variety of media platforms. As creative as these franchises therefore might be in incorporating fan culture’s unruly energies, this creativity also remains fatally limited by the industrial constraints imposed by franchise time.

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