Jessica Tatum

Professor Carlson

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Star Wars: A Force to be Reckoned With

There is perhaps no more universally recognized film franchise than Star Wars. It revolutionized the science fiction/fantasy genre in cinema with groundbreaking special effects and a timeless story of adventure. Since the first Movie, *Star Wars: A New Hope,* was released, fans have amassed to celebrate the imaginative Universe it created a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away. These legions of fans form the Star Wars fandom, and in many ways are the driving forces behind all the Star Wars stories told since this original film. To examine the fandom is to explore the multifaceted and ever-evolving perspectives and conversations of those who escape to this fictional universe; it is the8 examination of why Star Wars is still popular today after nearly forty years of existence and growth.

The Basics

The first three Star Wars Movies were *A New Hope*, *The Empire Strikes Back*, and *Return of the Jedi*, as premiered in 1977, 1980, and 1983 respectively. Another three movies, *The Phantom Menace*, *Attack of the Clones*, and *Revenge of the Sith*, were released 16 years later in 1999, 2002, and 2005 as a prequel trilogy. These films define the core storyline, or Canon, of the Star Wars Universe. They are joined so far by the animated television shows *Rebels* and *The Clone Wars* plus its movie pilot episode, and twelve novels. Sitting opposite the Canon is the Extended Universe (EU), or a collection of materials that further define the world of the movies. Also referred to as “Legends,” the EU includes about 140 novels and reference books (including several encyclopedias), dozens of videogames, and near countless comic books among almost all other storytelling mediums (“List of Star Wars Books”). At the center of this vast Universe is its creator: George Lucas. The story artist of the first six movies, or Episodes, Lucas is perceived as both a hero and villain to those who idolize Star Wars. He is the visionary young director and writer who conquered unfavorable circumstances to bring the original trilogy (Episodes IV, V, and VI) of movies to the big screen, but is also the man who created the far less masterful prequel trilogy, (Episodes I, II, and III) and seemed to develop an over-fondness for Computer Generated Effects, or CGI, therein . His recent retirement led to his production studio’s acquisition by Disney and the announcement of the final three movies in the Saga: Episodes VII, VIII, and IX. It was also the Disney acquisition which organized Star Wars Materials into either Canon or EU.

Emerging from this wealth of material is a fan base unlike any other, foremost in its diversity. It stretches from young children who play with the action figures or watch the television shows to parents who grew up with the movies, and to every age in between. However, even more distinct than the age range are the different commitment levels in fans. In other words, while almost everyone who has been exposed *Star Wars* in some degree says they enjoyed it (“What do you know about Star Wars?”), merely appreciating a small part of the franchise does not make someone a fan. Rather, there are distinct factions which help to separate the broad group into more manageable clusters of casual fans and more involved fans such as YouTubers, bloggers, and Cosplayers to name a few.

Casual Viewers

Casual fans of Star Wars are by far the most numerous of all Star Wars enthusiasts as they comprise what can only be described as the corona of the fandom: they form a thin and dispersed fringe group that everyone currently devoted to Star Wars has passed through at some point. They are basically people who have seen the movies and displayed anything more than a passing interest in the story told. The uniqueness of casual fans lies in their relative isolation from the rest of the fandom as they rarely seek interaction with other fans outside of brief references within everyday conversation. According to one such fan, “I'm Solitary. I Like it, [Star Wars] but don't necessarily want to be part of a group.” (“What do you think about Star Wars?”)

In this line of thinking lies the distinguishing factor between the majority of Americans who would consider themselves casual fans of Star Wars and the true members of the fandom: true fans want nothing more to discuss and nitpick all aspects of the universe, while their laid back counterparts are content to just enjoy the movies. To quote an excellent essay detailing this phenomenon, “If you run into somebody who tells you they thought the franchise was quite enjoyable, and even own everything on DVD, and a few of the books, these imposters *are not Star Wars Fans.* Star Wars Fans Hate Star Wars.” (Summers) The core of the Star Wars Fandom is built upon the heated discourse of its members as they attempt to assemble a more perfect version of the galaxy that sparked their imaginations when they first saw it. “To be a Star Wars fan, one must possess the ability to see a million different failures and downfalls, and then somehow assemble them into a greater picture of perfection.” (Summers) To lack this passion for what Star Wars *should* be is to be a casual, and therefore uninvolved, member of this discourse community.

YouTube

One of the main places this all-important search for perfection occurs is within the videos of knowledgeable fans. YouTube can give about 7,240,000 results for the search word “Star

Wars,” (“Search Results”) and since anyone can post a video on YouTube, or comment on that video in direct digital conversation, there are limitless opportunities for the fandom to expand online in this way. Some of the most popular videos come from the official Star Wars channel, which has 540,141 subscribers and 505 videos. Among these is the most recent trailer for next movie, Episode VII, which reached over 88 million views in just 24 hours of its posting to the internet. With this in mind, it’s not surprising that YouTube Videos and their associated comment sections are the main source of discourse for around 35 percent of fans, the most common source by far. (“What do you think of Star Wars?”) Within this vast well of fan-based material are movie and trailer review videos, fan reactions, and homemade recreations and spoofs of the Star Wars Universe and fandom; although it can be argued that the reviews are especially influential in contributing to the views of the fandom itself.

Important to note when discussing this aspect of Star Wars fan community is the role that nostalgia plays for the majority of participants. Most peoples’ first exposure to Star Wars is the Prequel trilogy, (“What do you think of Star Wars?”) and in part because of this, is considered the best Star Wars content available. Even besides the prequel trilogy, almost all other canonized editions to the universe are controversial because they cannot live up to everyone’s unique memories of the originals. This effect is only compounded since many fans active within the discourse community saw the original movies as children or teenagers; it inspired the dreams of many of these young people. The phenomenon is often apparent in YouTube movie reviews, as the originals are hailed as “Awesometacular” (JeremyJahns) and the prequel trilogy as merely “a good time if you’re drunk.” (Simon Stock) What is most interesting about these reviews, however, is the depth and breadth of the content they communicate. That is to say, not only are there thousands of reviews, but many of them develop and discuss profound insights into the nature of the films. Take, for example, one of the most comprehensive negative reviews of Episode III: Revenge of the Sith by Red Letter Media, Which is an hour and forty-five minute breakdown of everything that the movie did wrong. It examines nearly every conceivable aspect of the story, including character development (or lack thereof) pacing, dialogue, plot (specifically plot *holes*) and editing to name a few. Beyond just saying what he did and did not like, the narrator, Mr. Plinkett, discusses *why* certain scenes were uninteresting or unsuccessful, saying,

There seems to be a very basic language to cinema that’s been totally ignored… Film is essentially a visual medium that can make you feel a certain way… What really irks me is how basic and static things were filmed; they [George Lucas and the film production team] just had people talk in front of a green screen and said they were going to make the background interesting later. (RedLetterMedia)

This deep and intelligent level of conversation and analysis also carries over, at least in some degree, to the comment section, where fans debate how they think Anakin Skywalker/ Darth Vader should have fallen to the dark side of the force, or how certain continuity issues between the original and prequel trilogies could have been rectified. Granted that not all conversation is so well-meaning, a portion is just someone insulting all viewpoints contrary to their own, but such a dichotomy seems inevitable within such a large and diverse group as the Star Wars fandom.

A more personal use of YouTube is in so-called reaction, or theory videos. Though typically garnering fewer viewers than the videos featuring well-known critics, theory clips are a key source of the idealism many fans possess when it comes to the Star Wars Universe. One video that *does* have a large audience is “WHAT IF ‘STAR WARS: EPISODE II’ WAS GOOD?” (belated media) Here, the speaker in the video develops an alternate storyline for the movie that many fans consider the weakest in the series. More importantly though, is that this format, and in fact the same exact premise, is repeated dozens if not hundreds of times as individual fans try to share what they think would be the best way to continue the mythos and story of the Star Wars saga.

Social Media, Forums and Blogs

Stepping back from the intense debates over storyline, it is also important to notice more superficial discourse of Star Wars fans on social media and in chat rooms/forums, specifically on Facebook. Instead of arguing minutia, Facebook users tend to use the site as a platform to express their enjoyment of the franchise. There are several Facebook pages devoted to such interactions, including an official page for the first movie (Episode 4) and general pages like “Star Wars Fan Fix” and “Star Wars: anything and Everything.”

By far the most active page is one devoted to discussing and producing hype for the upcoming movie Star Wars Episode VII: The Force Awakens. Here, fans post updates on the film and celebrate the community that the fandom had created through the use of inside jokes and memes that only fans who have seen a large amount of Star Wars material can understand. In some ways, it makes this fandom seem closed off to non-fans, but the beauty of the Star Wars fandom is that anyone can join by watching the Canon and/or EU materials and participating in discussion. The group is closed only to those who don’t choose to pursue membership.

Bogs and articles posted to the official Star Wars website are a common way for members of the fandom to learn about the day-to-day updates in the franchise. There, hundreds of informative articles are stratified into seventeen separate categories including collecting, events, behind the scenes, books/comics, and interviews; because of the internet’s large role in the fandom, access to information about and within the fandom is overwhelming (“Star Wars News”).

Such a plethora of information, however – especially when considered together with the Canon and EU – contributes to a sort of fatal flaw in the Star Wars Fandom. It is large and cumbersome, like a many-headed monster whose appendages continue to grow independently and unceasingly. There is probably no one alive who can say that they have read every comic book and novel, watched every behind the scenes featurette on the movies, owned all the action figures, listened to all the podcasts about Star Wars, or played through every video game. It’s humanly impossible, and the fans know it, one saying,

“The best thing about Star Wars is also the worst: there's so goddamn much to its universe. This means that you can spend a great deal of time learning about another world which has [been] developed with such a great amount of detail that it could feasibly exist… on the other hand, this creates a massive entry gap, and is arguably an immense waste of time” (Tatum, “What do you think about Star Wars?”).

So while it is technically simple to join the fandom, there is another dimension to the process that is not immediately obvious, and in some ways harkens back to the difference between casual fans and devotees of the Universe: it takes a long time to become truly acquainted with Star Wars in its entirety. This is perhaps why, while the entire world will recognize Star Wars as a brand, not everyone is an active participant in the discussions of the fandom.

Perhaps to try and organize all this information, dozens of blogs and forums have cropped up, each reporting on and discussing a different aspect of the fandom. To name but a few: thedentedhelmet.com is a digital forum where costume enthusiasts can exchange information and advice, clubjade.net caters to a mostly female demographic and posts fan fiction (i.e. stories created by fans themselves to expand the Universe further), and The Star Wars Prequels Appreciation Society represents fans who enjoyed (rather than despised) the Prequel trilogy (“Star Wars Community”). These diverse outlets for fan expression and debate allow for great variety in the kinds of fans that Star Wars attracts. In other words, there is something for everyone, and the interactive nature of these blogs allows for discourse between fans with both similar and opposing interests and perspectives.

Cosplay and Conventions

By far the most devoted fans of Star Wars lie among the Cosplayers. To the uninitiated, Cosplay, or dressing up as a fictional character, seems rather immature. And perhaps in some instances it is. Dressing up as a Clone Trooper and hanging out at a movie premiere for no other reason than to show your appreciation for that character doesn’t seem to be the most productive or mature pastime. In the realm of Star Wars Cosplay however, such scenarios are rarely so on-dimensional. There are seven major international Star Wars Cosplay fan organizations as recognized by the official fan club/site. Three align specifically with the dark side of the force: the 501st legion, the Dark Alliance, and the Dark Empire. The Jedi Assembly and the Rebel legion comprise the counterpart organizations aligned with the light side of the force. (“Star Wars Community”) The Saber Guild, for its part, consists of volunteer light and dark side Cosplayers who stage Lightsaber battles at charity events and to benefit the Make a Wish Foundation. (“Saber guild”) In fact, Charity work is a part of almost all these major Cosplay clubs.

As might be expected, another major characteristic of this community is the visual communication present when the members of a group meet at Star Wars conventions and events. The color of a character’s light saber can identify them as either a light-sider, (a Jedi with a green, blue, or purple blade) or a dark-sider (a Sith with a red blade). Certain styles of armor can also identify what section of the fandom a Cosplayer belongs to; be it Mandalorian, as often sported by bounty hunters within the Canon Universe, or Imperial, as worn by the Empire’s Stormtrooper foot soldiers. (“Star Wars Community”) Additionally, when a group of Cosplayers meet, there is an instant connection and alignment of interests which creates further connections outside of Star Wars discussion. In other words, it’s much easier to start a conversation when both parties have a large area of common ground that they are passionate about: Star Wars.

Large conventions, like the annual Star Wars Celebration, allow opportunities for the entire fandom to converge (whether in person or online) on a single location to refocus and further expand the fandom and Universe. Often, Cast members from the movies will appear to sign autographs and give interviews, or panels, about past or upcoming Star Wars material. Teaser trailers for upcoming movies, television shows, or videogames are often premiered as well, sparking even more conversation over almost every discourse method open to fans. The bottom line is that conventions rope in the outskirts of the fandom and remind everyone that the core and origin of their passion lies in a single movie that basically changed the world of film.

The Power of Discussion

The influence of the Star Wars franchise on modern pop-culture cannot be overstated. There is a reason that everyone knows that Darth Vader is Luke’s father, the sound a Lightsaber makes when it moves, or the weird and endearing shape of Princess Leia’s Hair buns – and that reason is the dedication of the Star Wars fandom. How the fans perceived and reacted to the Movies, and then to the entire Universe, had shaped its character and existence today. Without the fans, Star Wars would have simply been a science-fiction fantasy with some great effects, not the iconic source of inspiration for generations of viewers.

All this begs the question: Why *are* Star Wars fans so dedicated? Why spend hours picking apart the construction and motivation of fictional characters and sequences? Why defend the honor and characterization of a villain in a random movie? The most obvious answer to these questions is that the visual effects in Star Wars were groundbreaking, and they were, but the story conveyed by those effects was so much more than a tired action-adventure plot. No, Star Wars is a Space Opera, meant to evoke romantic notions of what it means to be human; images and emotions that were intended to inspire the audience to dream bigger than a mundane existence. And that epic story, unsurprisingly, resonated with audiences the world over.

May the Force be with you.

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