

“Hokey Religions: *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* in the Age of Reboots”

Gerry Canavan

In the last few years debates over stewardship, fidelity, and corporate ownership have arisen in both STAR WARS and STAR TREK¹ fandom, as long-standing synchronicity between corporate interest and fan investment in these franchises has suddenly and very sharply diverged. After several decades nurturing hyperbolic “expanded universes” in tie-in media properties, through which devoted fans might more fully inhabit the narrative worlds depicted in the more central film and television properties, the corporate owners of both properties have determined that their commercial interests now lie in reboots that eliminate those decades of excess continuity and allow the properties to “start fresh” with clean entry points for a new generation of fans. In the case of STAR WARS, the ongoing narrative has been streamlined by prioritizing only the six films and certain television programs as “canonical” and relegating the rest to the degraded status of apocryphal “Star Wars Legends,” in hopes of drawing in rather than alienating potential viewers of the forthcoming Episodes 7-9 (2015-2019). In the case of STAR TREK, the transformation is even more radical; utilizing a diegetic time-travel plotline originating within the fictional universe itself, the franchise has been “reset” to an altered version of its original 1960s incarnation, seemingly relegating every STAR TREK property filmed or published before 2009 to the dustbin of future history—in effect obsolescing *its entire fifty-year history*, “canon” and “non-canon” alike, in the name of attracting a new audience for the rebooted franchise.

These moves raise familiar questions about the relationship among the corporate owners of an intellectual property; the mainstream, casual audience to whom the blockbuster films are addressed; and the much-smaller hardcore fan base that sustains a franchise during its lean years through its consumption of tie-in novels, comics, cartoons, radio plays, and games and their production of fan fiction and fan commentary. To which population does an imaginary universe properly “belong,” and how do fandoms navigate opposed loyalties to differing “canons” in a contemporary moment in which the pace of “reboots” seems only to increase? Considering fandom investment in the processes of world-building and continuity across the landscape of SF media forms, this article will focus specifically on STAR WARS and STAR TREK. Perhaps along with superhero comics and the British television series *Doctor Who* (1963-), both of which I discuss briefly in my conclusion, these franchises are the two key vehicles for the explosive popularity of science fictional media over the last fifty years as well as two key loci for the development of fandoms and fan practices across the SF genre. A key irony in both cases is that these now-denigrated expanded universes and “fan canons” have exhibited some of the most complex and imaginative world-building in their respective franchises, elevating both STAR WARS and STAR TREK from what Darko Suvin negatively characterized as mere “science fantasy” to the level of genuine “science fiction” through fan attempts to rationalize and regularize the events depicted on screen;² this expansive

¹ For the purposes of this piece, as with the other essays in this special issue, I have adopted the convention of using a small-caps STAR WARS and STAR TREK to refer to the franchises in their respective totalities, as opposed to the individual films and series titled *Star Wars* and *Star Trek* within that larger framework.

² See, of course, the distinctions Suvin makes that place SF above other related speculative genres like fantasy, fairy tale, and horror in his well-known *Metamorphoses of Science Fiction* (1979).

transmedia world-building, though now viewed as a potential economic liability, has long been among both franchises' greatest *assets* in terms of renewing fan investment and generating new intellectual property, thereby ensuring ongoing profits on the part of their corporate owners.

STAR WARS

The STAR WARS films would undoubtedly suggest themselves as a “merely generic”³ media formation to many SF scholars, frequently dismissed as the bad Other against which the quality of good, worthy SF is thrown into sharp relief. The three original films—*Star Wars* (1977), *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980), *Return of the Jedi* (1983)—wear the trappings of space-operatic SF, but actually operate narratively within the logic of the fairy tale or even the religious parable, most notably through their depiction of maximally good protagonists versus maximally evil antagonists that is famously concretized in the totemic notion of a mystical “Force” governed by “Light” and “Dark” “sides.” The primary antagonists seemingly have no personal or political goals whatsoever, save for the acquisition of power that they can use to harm and oppress others; the ultimate enemy of the series, the Emperor, is revealed in *Return of the Jedi* as the cackling cartoon of an old, wicked wizard, who in dialogue is shockingly blithe about the outcomes of any of his schemes so long as “evil” in the abstract prevails, even (at least nominally) with regard to his own survival: “I can feel your anger. I am defenseless. Take your weapon. Strike me down with all of your hatred and your journey towards the dark side will be complete!”

The radically Manichean nature of this worldview is strictly enforced by the narrative arc of both the three individual films taken in isolation and the original STAR WARS trilogy as a whole, even as the interior narrative strains against these constraints. As an ethical proposition, the entire notion of “Light” and “Dark” sides of the Force is stunningly incoherent in its depiction, working to provide effective catharsis for the audience for the purposes of film but holding up to almost no serious scrutiny whatsoever. One need only think here again of the climax of *Return of the Jedi*, which sees Vader, a mass murderer of almost incomprehensible proportions, being completely and instantaneously redeemed through his rage-filled commission of yet another murder, that of the Emperor, just moments after Luke has announced that the Jedi code compels them to *forsake* violence, especially violence done in anger—an especially stunning instance, I would suggest, of “that most striking and persistent of all classical Hollywood phenomenon, the happy ending [as] ‘emergency exit’ [...] the barely plausible pretense that the problems the film has raised are now resolved” (Wood 80).

Insert Image 1 around here.

The film’s politics, such as they are, fare little better. Both the original *Star Wars* (rechristened *Episode IV: A New Hope* not long after the first film’s blockbuster release to better suggest a long and presumably equally profitable sequence of films) and the original STAR WARS trilogy as a whole rely on a figuration of a heroic “Rebel Alliance” fighting an “Evil Empire” that is fabulist even outside the terms of Force-based pseudo-

³ For a full elaboration of this term, please see the introduction to this special issue.

religion. The Empire is bad, and the Rebellion is good, and that is more or less all we need to know; the Rebellion wins at the climaxes of both *Star Wars* and *Jedi* because they destroy the Empire's "Death Star" battle station through access to the design flaw that constitutes its single point of failure (retained in the design of the second Death Star, apparently, even after the first catastrophic failure of the first years earlier). When the second Death Star is destroyed at Endor, the Emperor is aboard, which is taken in *Jedi* as an event equivalent to the defeat of the entire Empire as such; indeed, the revised print of the expanded film released in 1997 (expanded again in a 2004 DVD release) seemingly confirms this view by showing ecstatic scenes of celebration not simply at the local site of the battle but now galaxy-wide. Moreover, this collapse is utterly instantaneous, at least as far as the visuals of the victory montage is concerned. The total, immediate collapse of the evil side of the war following the death of its evil leader is, like the Force and the wizard-like Jedi, a trope more at home in fantasy than in SF proper; it is at its core a magical solution to the problem of empire, rather than a "realistic" one.

As we begin to nitpick the series to death on the level of its internal logic, we might pause to recognize that we actually know almost nothing about the history or economic organization of galactic society; or about the history of the Empire, or the Rebellion; or about the origins, limits, and physical mechanics of the various Jedi powers; or even about what drives our characters emotionally beyond a stock, one-dimensional commitment to being protagonists. As a film narrative, the trilogy is obviously incredibly successful, one of the most financially lucrative and beloved media franchises of all time; analyzed as either a science fiction or a space fantasy, however, it provides almost nothing in the way of specific or coherent world-building beyond evocative background detail. The original STAR WARS trilogy, taken purely in its own terms, is a fairy tale about how the good wizards beat the bad wizards and then everyone lived happily ever after; the extent to which it is popularly understood to be a more complex artistic statement is in large part a testament to the creative achievement of its actors, directors, set-designers, and special-effects technicians, who collectively created a milieu of such stunning visual and tactical vividness that audiences felt they knew it intimately, despite the highly superficial construction of its associated narrative.

The STAR WARS Expanded Universe

However, the STAR WARS films never *really* stood entirely on their own, even in the earliest days of the STAR WARS phenomenon. They were always infused by a vast, quasi-authoritative (and only quasi-reliable) network of information sources that would augment, complicate, and at times rewrite the terms of the world presented by the films: interviews; promotional materials; fan publications; prose, radio, and comic book adaptations; book-only sequels; even the flavor text from the hugely popular Kenner toy line (1978-1985), which gave names and hints of the backstory of incredibly minor characters who appear in crowd scenes like the famous Mos Eisley Cantina (released in a "Cantina Adventure Set" in 1978).⁴ As Jonathan Gray has argued in *Show Sold*

⁴ The immense and polymorphous nature of the STAR WARS universe makes specific citation difficult, as my reconstruction of major events in its development has been gleaned from multiple and varied sources over many years, much of it online photography and even eBay auction descriptions. The best resource, and the one I relied on the most, is the fan-run STAR WARS encyclopedia Wookieepedia, discussed in the course of the article; the traditional, general-interest Wikipedia also contains surprisingly detailed histories of

Seapratelately: Promos, Spoilers, and Other Media Paratexts, media texts “cannot be adequately analyzed without taking into account the film or program’s many proliferations” in entertainment media, movie trailers, spin-off texts, toys, games, logo-bearing merchandise, parodies, paraphrase, amusement park rides, and on and on; in many cases these proliferations serve not as “extensions” of some privileged or primary text but as the originary “filters through which we must pass on our way to the film or program, our first and formative encounters with the text” (2). This is especially true, I think, of a text like the STAR WARS franchise, which is now largely consumed by a generation who first encountered the film franchise not as adults systematically watching the release of each film in order but through a kind of uncontrolled osmosis, in the murk of childhood.

The toy line in particular would be quite influential on fan reception of the STAR WARS films; as Henry Jenkins and others have suggested, the overwhelming and outsized popularity of the character of Boba Fett (who is not named in *Empire*) is likely due to the fact that the character was the first *Empire* toy released by Kenner in a special 1979 mail-in promotion, a year before the film was released.⁵ (The character had also briefly appeared in cartoon form in the benighted, and emphatically de-canonized, *Star Wars Holiday Special* on CBS in 1978—riding a dinosaur.) Such supplementary materials would help flesh out the world of the STAR WARS galaxy significantly for fans—as well as allow fans to construct their personal supplements and additions to the STAR WARS narrative world. The scenes between Luke and his childhood friend Biggs Darklighter—almost entirely cut from the 1977 print of the film and partially restored in the 1997 special edition—became nonetheless well-known to devoted STAR WARS fans through their inclusion in the *Star Wars* novelization ghostwritten by Alan Dean Foster (actually published six months before the film itself was released), the Marvel Comics adaptation (1977), and the NPR radio play (1981). The novelization would also introduce fans to the concept of Darth Vader as a “Sith Lord” (Lucas/Foster 8 and throughout)—the ethical inversion of the noble Jedi—as well as name the Emperor as “Palpatine” (Lucas/Foster 1), words that would not be uttered on screen until 1999’s *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*. Such tantalizing and under-defined world-building elements would become spaces for imaginative fan creation, as Jenkins notes in his brief description of the Boba Fett phenomenon: Fett’s masked appearance encouraged audiences to project their own visions of who or what might be underneath (Jenkins 115).

Foster’s next entry into the STAR WARS franchise would be the first licensed sequel to *Star Wars*, *Splinter of the Mind’s Eye*, contracted in 1976 as the possible seed for a low-budget sequel to the movie if it was not a box office success. (Of course, by the time *Splinter* was actually published in 1978, *Star Wars* was already a record-breaking blockbuster.) *Splinter* would establish a paradigm common in Star Wars supplemental fiction to come: it would both provide plot and setting elements that would become core propositions of the franchise’s world-building while at the same time almost immediately

events and paratexts of the Star Wars canon, perhaps suggestive of the extracurricular interests of its primary editor base. Uncited historical facts about the STAR WARS franchise in the forthcoming pages should be presumed to be locatable and confirmable at one or both of those sites. For more direct attempts to synthesize the STAR WARS extended universe into a unified, chronological whole, one might also consider fan primers, like the one written by Sonia Saraiya at the Onion A.V. Club.

⁵ For a much more detailed reading of the crucial influence of the licensed toy line and other immersive experiences on the STAR WARS franchise, see in particular Gray, chapter six.

contradicting other elements of the franchise established in other, more authoritative works. Perhaps most famously, the fact that Luke and Leia are brother and sister had not yet been established, even privately by Lucas; Foster consequently took the implication of *Star Wars* that Luke and Leia were the primary romantic pairing of the series and ran with it, resulting in sexual tension dominating the interactions between the two characters across the book that is deeply uncomfortable to read post-*Jedi*. Similarly—due to Harrison Ford being uncontracted for the sequel at the time of its writing—the character of Han Solo is both absent and dismissed as unimportant, merely an acquaintance of the heroes, rather than the integral part of the Rebellion he would be in *Empire*.

Splinter of the Mind's Eye, despite these and other disjunctures with the film sequel to *Star Wars* that would follow in just the next year, has become understood as the first entry in what is commonly called the “STAR WARS Expanded Universe,” the totality of spin-off material (including books, comics, video games, toys, and more) officially licensed by Lucasfilm. Lucasfilm took an unusually formalized approach to its licensing, as opposed to (for instance) the STAR TREK spinoff material discussed in the next section. The ambition of the STAR WARS Expanded Universe from a very early stage in its development was to depict a singular, totalized history of the “galaxy far, far away” from many thousands of years before the events depicted in *Star Wars* (the *Knights of the Old Republic* video games and related works) to the adventures of one of Luke Skywalker’s descendants approximately 125 years after *Return of the Jedi* (the *Star Wars: Legacy* comics series). Naturally this process was nowhere near 100% successful; the films are themselves not mutually consistent, much less the hundreds of Expanded Universe texts produced. But the efforts of Lucas Licensing nonetheless created significantly more internal consistency in the STAR WARS Expanded Universe than one would find in the expanded universes of similar officially licensed, multi-author spinoff series like those that have built up around STAR TREK, *Doctor Who*, or *Dungeons and Dragons*.

Adherents of the Expanded Universe use a hierarchy of canonization that is derived from Lucas Licensing’s own internal reference system, a database nicknamed the “Holocron” after an information-storage technology from the STAR WARS universe (the concept, in fact, was first introduced in Expanded Universe comics from Dark Horse). According to a blog post from Lucas Licensing archivist Leland Y. Chee—dubbed by fans “The Keeper of the Holocron”—in 2011 there were nearly 46,000 entries in the database, including 1,683 textual “sources,” 13,000 images, 15,795 characters, and 4,277 planets. This immense archive was subdivided into several ranked tiers of authority, ranging from G-canon (“George Canon,” anything sourced to the original six *Star Wars* films as well as related production notes) to T-canon (“Television canon”), C-canon (nearly all other officially licensed works), S-canon (specially deprecated C-canon works like *The Star Wars Holiday Special*), and N-canon (“not canon,” like Luke Skywalker’s appearances on *The Muppet Show*). Authority accrued to a particular detail from the STAR WARS universe on the basis of its highest appearance: a detail from “C-canon” (like the name of the Imperial capital city, Coruscant, or the notion of the “holocron” itself as a Jedi storage technology) became “G-canon” once it appeared in one of the six official films (as both of those appeared in the prequels). Contradictions between tiers of canon were similarly resolved on the basis of this hierarchy: anything G-canon outranked anything T-canon, which both in turn outranked anything C-canon, and so on.

The Holocron reflects George Lucas’s “three-pillared” vision for STAR WARS universe canon: the original films, the Expanded Universe, and fan-generated material. It is worth noting in that regard that the Holocron makes no effort to include fan-generated material within the hierarchy of canon at all; such “F-canon,” were that designation used, would either fall under the umbrella of “N-canon” or perhaps rank even below it. Fan-generated material becomes included in the Holocron only when references are made to it in actually canonical material; examples include the fan charity “The 501st Legion” and the astromech droid R2-KT (a pink version of R2-D2 first built to honor a young female STAR WARS fan, Katie Johnson, who was dying of brain cancer⁶), both of which subsequently made on-screen appearances in the *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* cartoon.

Consequentially an obvious tension can be seen in the relationship between the Lucas Licensing system and the fandom that consumes these materials. On the one hand, the Expanded Universe has created a huge supplemental archive of materials from fans to delight in and inhabit—but it has accomplished this task precisely by elevating its own system of monetization to the level of epistemology. The system of trademark, copyright, licensing, and work-for-hire contracts that govern Lucas Licensing’s management of its intellectual property becomes oddly indistinguishable from knowledge itself. While exceptions exist, by and large the textual “authority” of the G-, T-, C-, S-, and N- tiers maps closely to the profitability for Lucasfilm for the works in those tiers, with the films much more lucrative than television productions and so on—as well as replicating precisely the corporate organizational structure that sees LucasArts (video games), Lucas Books, Lucas Animation, and even Lucas Licensing itself as wholly owned subsidiaries of Lucasfilm.

A second paradox exists in the system as well. Despite nominally being directed towards fan experience, the efforts to make the Expanded Universe consistent paradoxically *devalued* fan investment in the series by ranking the material consumed by super-fans beneath the material directed at casual fans (the six movies) and (primarily) at child fans (the *Clone Wars* cartoons, which admittedly did have a large share of adult fans as well). That is: the more invested fans became in STAR WARS fandom, the more secondary and spinoff material they consumed, the less certain they could be that the knowledge they had about the series was actually true. Indeed, the most devoted fans, consuming the most obscure and hard-to-find material, would necessarily encounter less and less authoritative material the deeper into fandom they went. The fantasy of totalizing mastery of STAR WARS implied by Expanded Universe fandom was thus very much a double-edged sword.

George Lucas was himself somewhat skeptical of *any* non-G-canon material, refusing to commit to being bound by it in any subsequent works he might produce. Indeed, Lucas’s position was that the entire STAR WARS Expanded Universe, as such, was noncanonical as far as he was concerned (“New Hopes” 47-48). Here we see the canon hierarchy taken to its maximum level, the level of the auteur, or even something like the sovereign exception; G-canon does not even need to recognize the existence of lower levels of canon at all.

Despite Lucas’s public statements throwing the very legitimacy of sub-G-canon into question, however, the fan attitude towards the licensed works has generally tracked with the official “Holocron” approach. At “Wookieepedia”—a fan-run and fan-edited

⁶ See Liptak.

version of Wikipedia devoted entirely to STAR WARS and related properties, and an absolutely invaluable resource for the writing of this article—entries replicate the top-down logic of the Lucas Licensing system, marking when information is sourced to material “released outside of the Lucas Licensing process [whose] licensing status was never confirmed by Lucasfilm Ltd.” Similarly, fans (including those at Wookieepedia) have tended not only to accept the hierarchy of G-, T-, C-, S-, and N-canon but also insist upon the coequality of C-canon materials, preferring to find ways in which two apparently conflicting sources from the same level of canon might both be true. At the same time, Wookieepedia is much more likely to include fan-generated materials and to suggest they may have some authority commensurate with officially licensed works.

All these tensions can be felt in the popular name for Chee’s job, “Keeper of the Holocron”: that Chee is only the current holder of a job that exists in a larger context than his own work, that he is “keeping” this knowledge as a trustee for other parties rather than owning it. The question would then become who is the proper owner of the Holocron: does it belong to Lucasfilm, or to the fans themselves?

The Heat Death of the Expanded Universe

This question would be answered on April 25, 2014, when Disney announced that going forward *none* of the existing Expanded Universe material would be considered canonical (“Legendary”). The interlocking network of texts and intense fandom devotion which had sustained STAR WARS as a viable media franchise in the fifteen-year dry spell between 1983 and 1999 (the years of release of *Return of the Jedi* and *The Phantom Menace*) and in the ten years between the release of the last prequel and the announcement of Episode 7 was now deemed a threat to the larger system’s viability and profitability. There was now too much Expanded Universe, too much continuity to sift through to make any sense of the stories. J.J. Abrams—who was put in charge of the relaunch—was like Lucas himself unwilling to commit himself to the Expanded Universe as a creative constraint. Instead of the vast and contentious Expanded Universe, a new STAR WARS canon would be introduced that would include the three new trilogy films set after *Jedi* (Episode 7, Episode 8, and Episode 9), a huge number of spinoff films focusing on events undepicted in the existing films (such as Han Solo’s youth, or the story of the theft of the plans for the Death Star immediately before *Star Wars: A New Hope*) as well as on underexplored characters like Yoda and Boba Fett. Licensed works such as comics, books, and video games would henceforth be developed in tight internal consistency with each other, obviating any need for internal divisions privileging the auteur-genius and other works.

The existing Expanded Universe material would still be sold, but under the new branding “Star Wars Legends,” denoting their lack of textual authority in the new order. The fan community has, perhaps unexpectedly, generally accepted this directive without serious complaint or significant revolt, reorganizing Wookieepedia into “Canon” and “Legends” sections in accordance with the new corporate directives about canonicity. An invaluable piece at FiveThirtyEight gives some sense of the sheer scope of this change: over two years after the de-canonization of the Expanded Universe, “Legends” articles at Wookieepedia outnumber the Disney canon ten to one, with nearly 105,000 articles devoted to the now-defunct continuity.⁷

⁷ See Walt Hickey’s “Star Wars Killed a Universe to Save the Galaxy.”

What was lost, then, when the Expanded Universe was ended? There is, undoubtedly, a sense in which these works were a strongly illustrative example of the “merely generic”: produced with varying levels of internal and mutual consistency under work-for-hire conditions by multiple authors, aligned primarily towards maximizing profitability across every conceivable media arena rather than making any traditional sort of artistic or creative statement.⁸ As with many such licensed or spinoff works, many elements of the Expanded Universe are derivative of the original trilogy almost to the point of absurdity, as in the invention of more and more superweapons to be destroyed by the heroes at the last minute (yet another Death Star, as well as Death Star substitutes like the Sun Crusher, the Planet Killer, the World Devastators, etc.—the Wookieepedia entry on “superweapons” lists *sixty-six* such examples). Emperor Palpatine is likewise revealed to have cloned himself dozens of times, with the bodies secreted across the galaxy, allowing him to return as a villain to be defeated again and again. (The franchise’s overreliance on clones as a plot device was parodied by Timothy Zahn, one of the worst offenders, in a 2012 April Fool’s Day “apology” that saw Luuke Skywalker [an actual Expanded Universe character, an evil clone of the hero Luke Skywalker] replaced in turn by Luuuke Skywalker.) In a sort of franchise-wide running joke—reflecting one of the central points of disagreement between Lucas’s personal vision of the Star Wars universe and the Expanded Universe, the ultimate fate of the fan-favorite bounty hunter Boba Fett (who, needless to say, is eventually revealed in the prequels to *also* be a clone)—Fett repeatedly escapes from apparent death to bedevil the protagonists again and again, including escaping and becoming re-entrapped in the Sarlacc Pit, into which he plummeted during *Jedi*, as many as three separate times.

However, despite these sorts of silly elements, the Expanded Universe also takes STAR WARS much more seriously as a science fictional narrative than the films. I am far from the first to remark that STAR WARS becomes properly science fiction, as opposed to space fantasy or fairy tale, *only* in the Expanded Universe material, which attempts to turn the films’ evocative imagery into a self-consistent and comprehensible world system governed by physical and social-historical principles. It fell to the partisans of the Expanded Universe, for instance, to explain why the fiery destruction of the second Death Star at the end of *Jedi* in orbit around Endor would not result in the mass extinction of the adorable Ewoks on its forest moon (as our real-world physics would suggest)—a disturbing proposition the emergency-exit happy ending of *Jedi* obviously never even considers.

In many cases this world-building results in the creation of narrative situations that are more sophisticated than the stock characters and good-vs.-evil fairy-tale logic of the films. We see the roguish Han Solo mature over the films, but this is nothing compared to the character development he underwent under two decades of Expanded Universe books, becoming a husband, father, and enduring multiple personal tragedies (including the loss of two children and his best friend, Chewbacca). Leia is never allowed to become the Jedi that *Return of the Jedi* hints she might have been—but the books explore her character in much more detail than the films can muster, showing how she chooses not to develop that part of her talent because her passions lie in other areas, including her political leadership of the New Republic. Instead the Expanded Universe

⁸ For a recounting list of such nonsensical elements that is emblematic of the fondly nostalgic mode of fan response, see (for instance) “The 12 Worst Things in the Star Wars Expanded Universe” at io9.com.

lets other women take up the role of female Jedi left invisible in the films, like Leia's daughter, Jaina Solo, and the reformed villain Mara Jade.

In what is still one of the most beloved and most influential Expanded Universe stories, Zahn's *Heir to the Empire* (1991) and its sequels—often credited with the systemization of the Expanded Universe and revitalizing STAR WARS as a franchise after the decade-long post-*Jedi* narrative drought⁹—the entire narrative catharsis of *Jedi* is undone altogether. Zahn recognizes that a militarized system of social control as wide-ranging and robust as the Empire would not fall in a single battle. Instead, the Empire limps on as a defeated but still dangerous rump force in the outskirts of galactic society for several years, until it is revitalized by one of its greatest generals (Grand Admiral Thrawn, a character of Zahn's creation) to become a renewed threat to the burgeoning New Republic. Thrawn, while a villain, is depicted with a complexity never afforded either Vader or Palpatine in the films: someone from an oppressed minority who has overcome severe anti-alien prejudice through his immense talent, as well as someone possessing a code and a sort of personal decency, even nobility.¹⁰

This kind of complex character investigation is a hallmark of the Expanded Universe, which sees Luke Skywalker marrying and having children with a reformed Dark Jedi (the aforementioned Mara Jade), and sees as well one of Han and Leia's children—Jacen Solo, a character readers had seen raised from childhood over the decades of Expanded Universe material—fall to the Dark Side of the Force and ultimately need to be killed (after, among other crimes, murdering Jade). Jacen's fall is depicted as tragic in the franchise, in the classical sense of being the fall of a great man, as well as fundamentally *understandable*—he falls to the Dark Side out of a misplaced desire to inaugurate an era of Galactic peace he believes only he can create and sustain. (The years-long arc of Jacen's tragedy can be negatively contrasted with the cartoonishly rapid fall of Anakin Solo/Darth Vader in the prequel trilogy, who accepts Palpatine's claims about the evil of the Jedi and becomes immediately willing to commit any heinous crime, including the merciless slaughter of children, moments later.) In the Expanded Universe even Emperor Palpatine, that prototypically evil wizard, comes in for an unexpected re-evaluation: it is revealed in the Bush-era Expanded Universe novels that part of Palpatine's ultimate reason for crashing the Republic and creating the Empire may have been to create a military force capable of resisting extragalactic invasion from a Force-resistant species called the Yuuzhan Vong; the suspension of the rule of law and the brutality of Imperial tactics becomes (as in the case of Jacen Solo) at least arguably recast as a "necessary evil" chosen in the name of larger galactic security.¹¹

Indeed, as the Expanded Universe developed, the narrative model for the series began to look less like the happy ending of *Jedi* and more and more like the tragic arc of a history that repeats itself over and over again. From the backwards-looking perspective of the *Star Wars: Legacy* period, set 125 years after the first STAR WARS movie, the

⁹ A 2017 profile of Zahn in the *Chicago Tribune* outright names him "the man who saved Star Wars."

¹⁰ Indeed, Thrawn's ejection from canon proved so regrettable that since the original writing of this piece his descent into mere apocrypha has already been reversed; a version of the character has been introduced in to the *Clone Wars/Rebels* cartoon television series, making him the first major case of a "C-canon" EU/*Legends* character to be taken up in the new post-Disney continuity. A new Zahn Thrawn novel, *Thrawn*, set in the post-EU continuity, appeared in 2017.

¹¹ This popular and now widespread fan theory originated in a Reddit post from u/ProfessorLaser entitled "The Real Reason Emperor Palpatine created the Empire, Death Stars, Sun Crusher, etc."

heroic era of the STAR WARS films looks like a tiny blip of hope amidst a sea of despair: the galaxy has endured a bottomless series of crises from the Yuuzhan Vong to repeated collapses of New Republic(s) and repeated returns of a resurgent Empire, with no moment of victory ever proving permanent or enduring.

Image 2 and 3 go around here.

As we cast our view back to the Knights of the Old Republic area of the franchise, set thousands of years in *Star Wars*'s past, we see this same cycle of endless war reflected across millennia. A film and toy franchise that, if not intended for children exactly, was certainly marketed to them, becomes in its Expanded Universe formation a mature and at times brutally bleak rumination on the tragic arc of history and the inability of social forms to *ever* progress past violence and collective misery. Perhaps on some level this explains the willingness of so many STAR WARS fans to simply let the Expanded Universe go, despite their decades-long investment in these stories and their fondness for particular characters (such as Jacen, Jaina, and Jade) who will likely never be taken up in the new Disney corporate canon; the Disney reset allowed the possibility of a utopian suspension of the anti-utopian nightmare of galactic history as they had come to know it, a chance for the story to finally go some other way.

Or perhaps not. *The Force Awakens* seems in fact to track the Jacen Solo story quite closely in the character of Kylo Ren, only in compressed time and with streamlined narration—we see again in *The Force Awakens* Leia and Han's child fall to darkness, as well as a New Republic that is never quite able to defeat the Empire, much less ever able to establish or sustain itself as a functioning political unit. *The Force Awakens* has likewise borrowed from the Expanded Universe a more diverse cast both on the level of gender (with Rey as the new central character) but also on the question of moral complexity and redeemability (with Finn as a reformed stormtrooper and very reluctant hero). Disney has made clear, with its plan to release a STAR WARS movie every year, that soon the prototypical STAR WARS will be not a "saga" film like Episodes 1-9 but rather *Tales-from-the-Mos-Eisley-Cantina*-style spinoffs like *Rogue One* (2016) and *Han Solo* (in preproduction). What seems to have ultimately been problematic about the Expanded Universe was *not* its political ideology, or its exhaustive replication, recombination, and re-re-re-presentation of the original films, so much as the limited profitability and negative branding of its oversaturated marketplace.¹²

As material from the New Expanded Universe began to trickle out in late 2015 as a means of promoting the December release of *The Force Awakens*, the existence of Expanded Universe loyalists and their refusal to submit to the new order became increasingly visible online. In September 2015, Chuck Wendig's *Aftermath*, the first post-*Return-of-the-Jedi* novel in the new canon to be released, was beset by one-star reviews at Amazon,¹³ seemingly orchestrated by groups like Facebook's "Alliance to Save the

¹² See Benjamin J. Robertson's review essay on *The Force Awakens* in *Science Fiction Film and Television* 9.3 for more on the way *The Force Awakens* seeks to rejuvenate *Star Wars* through radical streamlining of the franchise.

¹³ See Jim C. Hines, "One-Star Wars," (September 6, 2015). Hines notes that the pro-EU one-star movement seems to have overlapped with an orthogonal effort to vote down the book due to its inclusion of several gay characters among its cast.

Star Wars Legends Expanded Universe.”¹⁴ Many reviews of the book at sites like Bleeding Cool (Ellsworth) and Grantland (Lindbergh)¹⁵ touched on the controversy, almost always comparing the book negatively to Zahn’s *Heir to the Empire*. “It’s an awkward time to be a *Star Wars* fan,” announced Phil Owen with a widely felt mix of sadness, excitement, and trepidation in his own review of *Aftermath* at the Gawker Media site kotaku.com, two months before the release of Episode 7. While the Expanded Universe has been affirmatively and seemingly definitively killed, in the main if not in literally every particular, not all fans have accepted that Disney’s profitability outweighs the decades they spent invested in those stories that have now been deemed a problem.

The Strange Case of STAR TREK

If Abrams has killed one universe, he’s killed two; he was also instrumental in the 2009 reboot of the STAR TREK universe, directing both *Star Trek* (2009) and *Star Trek Into Darkness* (2013) and remaining a producer on the third film in the updated series, the recent *Star Trek Beyond* (2016). These films undertake a project of rebooting that is simultaneously far more ambitious and far more timid than the one undertaken by Disney following its acquisition of Lucasfilm—suggesting the extent to which the runners of the STAR TREK franchise both fear and revile the core *Star Trek* fandom.

Superficially, STAR TREK canon matches the system established by Lucas Licensing in which the film and televisual productions (designated “alpha canon” by some fans, in accordance with the pseudo-astronomical naming conventions on the series that sees the galaxy divided into alpha, beta, gamma, and delta quadrants) “outrank” all licensed tie-in and spin-off material (“beta canon”) and all fan-created or -proposed material (“fanon”).¹⁶ However, a number of important differences are obscured by this formal similarity. Perhaps most crucially, STAR TREK was, over a much longer time horizon, created under significantly different production conditions than the two STAR WARS trilogies. Instead of just six movies and two animated series, there have been hundreds of hours of STAR TREK film and television produced in divergent media environments across the last fifty years. The sheer scope of this material makes the problem of STAR TREK canonicity a much more significant problem than it is for STAR WARS: there is simply too much material produced across too many decades by too many different production teams in too many divergent media environments for it to truly cohere in a single, unitary “whole.” Clear adjudication between competing canonical claims is likewise impossible. Instead, despite a nominal adherence to the notion that all elements of alpha canon are coequal with one another, in practice both STAR TREK’s producers and its fans have had to institute secondary heuristics to adjudicate between

¹⁴ This fan movement did not arise spontaneously around the book launch but existed for at least a year prior, as documented by Eric Gellar in October 2014 at fan site theforce.net.

¹⁵ Lindbergh, a fan of the EU trilogy, as Wendig was, sees its destruction as necessary for the greater good of STAR WARS: “Difficult as it is to accept, the old EU had to be struck down so that Star Wars could become more powerful (and profitable) than anyone can possibly imagine.”

¹⁶ The division between “alpha canon” and “beta canon” is enforced in the creation of two fan-run wikis for creative works related to STAR TREK: Memory Alpha and Memory Beta. As with Wookieepedia in the previous section, these two sites are invaluable to research working on TREK, and any unmarked historical information about STAR TREK should be presumed to be traceable to its original sources from either one of those two sites or via the mainstream Wikipedia.

conflicting televisual narratives. Prior to *Star Trek* (2009), both sides had come to a general agreement that the TNG-era productions had canonical primacy. *The Original Series* (1966-1969) and its films (1979-1991) were canonical insofar as they were compatible with *The Next Generation* and its spinoffs (1987-2005), while non-TNG elements (like the “parallel Earths” the TOS crew would frequently encounter) were quietly dropped¹⁷; *The Animated Series* (1973-1975) was largely considered not canonical at all, with the exception of the episode “Yesteryear” that fleshed out elements of Spock’s backstory and Vulcan culture; *Star Trek V: The Final Frontier* (1989) was only marginally canonical, at best, even with regard to elements (like the Scotty-Uhura romance and Spock’s half-brother Sybok) that *weren’t* contradicted elsewhere; and so on.

In contrast to the attitude Lucasfilm took towards their Expanded Universe, comparatively little effort was made to ensure that these books would be mutually compatible in some overarching pseudohistorical framework. The novels frequently and severely contradict each other, especially when their date of original publication is separated by more than a few years; additionally, relatively little from the “beta canon” novels has made it into “alpha canon,” in contrast to Lucas’s very visible poaching from the Expanded Universe for his prequels and expanded editions. The one major exception to this general rule are the technical manuals like *Star Trek Blueprints* (1973) and *The Star Fleet Technical Manual* (1975 and frequently reprinted)¹⁸ and similar companions like *The Klingon Dictionary* (1985) or *The Star Trek Encyclopedia* (1994, 2016) written by Michael and Denise Okuda. These more technical tie-ins were typically produced by, or in consultation with, people who had worked in writing or production design on the series, lending them a special textual authority not typically seen in spinoff material—although even these books have frequently and freely been overridden by writers on the series when they chose. For his part, Roddenberry’s perspective on the licensed material more or less matched Lucas’s: *none* of it was canonical.

In keeping with the episodic nature of the original series—and, in some cases, befitting their origins as unproduced scripts for the fourth season of *Star Trek*—the early STAR TREK tie-in novels typically described self-contained missions to particular planets that the crew would visit and then leave. Major changes to the characters or general setting would not happen (just as they would not happen in the episodic television typical of the period); events depicted in the original novels would have few or no long-term, consequences. Despite the cheeky title of *Spock Must Die!* (1970), one would not pick up a Bantam adaptation to discover that Kirk or Spock had been killed off and some new character has taken up his role going forward. Even here, of course, one finds exceptions: in *Spock Must Die!*, for instance, we do see the Klingons become confined to their homeworld without spaceflight for a thousand years by powerful aliens as punishment for their imperial transgressions—a development obviously not respected in later works. But, in the main, the overall tendency holds; these novels were produced so as to avoid significantly altering the terms of the larger series, characteristically resetting back to the status quo at the conclusion of each story as the Enterprise flew off towards its next adventure.

¹⁷ For more, see Kotsko. Kotsko’s argument in fact parallels the development of TREK canon directly with the development of church canon in early Christianity, literalizing the familiar fan homology implied by the widespread use of the word “canon.”

¹⁸ On these sorts of pseudoscientific “technical” texts in particular, see Rehak.

This ethos began to shift a bit when the Pocket Books, especially in the late 1980s and 1990s, began to emergently develop a loose internal continuity independently of reference to the series. By this point STAR TREK had been revived as a televisual property, first in the film series starring the original crew (1979-1991) and second in the television series *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (1987-1994); the presence of ongoing alpha canon stories set in the universe required more attention to brand management. In the 2000s, the Pocket Books line would ultimately become the centerpiece of new Star Trek production as it became clear, following the commercial failure of *Nemesis* in 2002 and the cancellation of *Enterprise* in 2005, that the production apparatus developed in TNG and its sequels had run its course and would not be returning to television. Only then did permanent changes to canon (in the manner of the old STAR WARS Expanded Universe) become possible. Characters could be promoted, transferred to new jobs, or killed off permanently; major changes to canon were also possible (as when the Borg were permanently eliminated as a threat to the galaxy in the “Destiny” trilogy written by David Mack in 2008, or when characters like Captain Janeway were promoted, killed off, and eventually resurrected in the book universe). The retroactive building of a Pocket Books “canon”—or perhaps it would be better to describe this as a rebranding—has given the appearance of a unified STAR TREK line in its more recent publications, though contradictions still frequently appear.

Regardless of this new move towards intertextual coherence, however, the dominant attitude in STAR TREK fandom is that spinoff material does not truly “count” as canon at all; the film and television series are always primary. The primacy of film becomes an even more serious problem for STAR TREK fandom than for STAR WARS because of events in the relaunch of the original series crew in the J.J. Abrams-directed *Star Trek* (2009). *Star Trek* is a “hard reboot” of the Star Trek canon, in the sense that it seems to risk overwriting the events of the original film and television series—and by implication all STAR TREK ever produced—through a narrative that sees post-TNG version of Spock traveling back in time with a new villain (the imperial Romulan subject Nero) and altering the course of history. From a commercial perspective, this is a fairly by-the-numbers reboot, allowing Paramount to recast the actors and start the narrative over. But from the perspective of internal Trek continuity it is a catastrophe. Given the logic of other time-travel events presented in the series, Spock’s traveling back in time and changing history (and then not restoring it to its original course) logically entails the obliteration of the entire original STAR TREK universe. In previous entries in the STAR TREK canon—like *First Contact* (1996) or beloved episode “The City on the Edge of Forever” (1967) or “Yesterday’s Enterprise” (1990)—the plot would have been devoted to the restoration of the original, “proper” timeline. But *Star Trek* (2009) and *Star Trek Into Darkness* (2013) do not even identify this situation as a problem, much less offer any solution; they simply continue the story in the new metanarrative context, without any further consideration of the old.

Original Spock’s dialogue in the film—as might be expected of a “passing the torch” film like *Star Trek* (2009)—tends to affirm that things are happening *as they were always meant to*, with the crew automatically re-assembling into its original configuration as if by law of nature; likewise, Kirk and Spock once again become incredibly close friends. That this is happening in the context of a universe that cannot possibly “reset” to its old form does not seem to bother Original Spock, nor do the facts that Vulcan has

been destroyed and millions, perhaps billions of his people killed, nor that literally every person he knew for his entire life post-TOS potentially no longer exists. Spock appears utterly sanguine about the terrifying existential consequences implied by his time-travel adventures, and perfectly content to let events in the new universe simply play out according to their own internal logic.

It has fallen to the “beta canon” to find ways to rescue this situation. The crucial intervention has been to find ways to assert that, contrary to the usual laws of time travel in *Star Trek*, the original universe was not destroyed as a result of Old Spock’s time travel and *definitely* still exists. In the paratexts for the game *Star Trek Online* (set in the old continuity) this is accomplished in a chart that asserts that the Star Trek Online timeline is “the standard timeline” and the Abramsverse timeline is an “alternate timeline.”

Image 4 goes about here.

In the first issue of the “Q Gambit” arc of the ostensibly canonical comic series (2014-2015), the story opens with characters in the old universe (Captain Picard, now an admiral, and Q) talking about Spock’s disappearance, establishing that they still exist despite the time travel. Q then uses his powers to travel to the Abramsverse version of *Star Trek* and interacts with it, spawning the creation of a third alternate universe (and thereby further establishing the co-existence of multiple independent realities). The “Department of Temporal Investigations” series of novels (set in the post-TNG book canon) similarly establishes new rules for time travel to demonstrate that the Abramsverse and the TNG-verse are not mutually exclusive, but can in fact co-exist. The DTI books, published post-reboot, even work to explain away Spock’s bizarre behavior in the Abramsverse: they describe previously unstated laws of quantum entanglement that would *compel* a time traveler like Spock to remain in the past and do nothing to restore the old timeline, lest it be destroyed in the process. The old timeline will always exist, *DTI* quietly assures its readers, so long as Spock just stays put (and so one finds that the movie, despite all appearances, actually makes perfect sense after all...) (*Watching the Clock* 79-81).

Still, the overall mood at fan sites like Reddit’s R/DaystromInstitute has been one of deflation and dejection, as the site’s canon-scientists continually re-confront the end of the TNG-era continuity and its replacement with something they feel violates both the letter and the spirit of their old, beloved canon, which at this point may never return to either film or television. A survey of the site reveals repeated and ongoing debates about the nature of time travel and parallel timelines, whose true content frequently becomes revealed only in the comments: the fandom is looking for a reason to believe that the old STAR TREK universe they loved is not permanently and forever gone. When a new STAR TREK TV series was announced (with very few details) in November 2015, that subsumed desire quickly rose to the surface, as Daystrom’s fans immediately began to debate which canon—the old TNG canon, or the new Abramsverse canon—the series ought to follow.¹⁹ It seems this time the “old” fans may have won; while *Star Trek: Discovery* had

¹⁹ See the 420-comment “megathread” on the site discussing the news, https://www.reddit.com/r/DaystromInstitute/comments/3r8dm4/megathread_cbs_announces_new_star_trek_television.

still not yet premiered as this article went to press, all indications are that the story will be set in the original, not reboot, continuity, with the reboot universe now slated to be abandoned instead.²⁰

Nostalgia for Nostalgia

That a close relationship exists between science fiction and nostalgia is no surprise: it was Fredric Jameson who remarked in 1985 that *Star Wars* is a “nostalgia film” insofar as “it does not reinvent a picture of the past in its lived totality; rather, by reinventing the feel and shape of characteristic art objects of an older period and to live its strange old aesthetic artifacts through once again” (Jameson 659). If anything, the relationship between such texts as *STAR WARS* and *STAR TREK* and an overriding social atmosphere of postmodern nostalgia has only intensified since Jameson’s remarks; while both of these texts certainly exhibit this impulse towards the repeated re-performance of an increasingly antiquated “original”—which itself is in some sense a copy of even earlier SF forms—he was writing before the move towards prequelization had come to so overwhelmingly define science fictional cultural production (nowhere more so than in *STAR WARS* and *STAR TREK* franchises themselves).

I would suggest that the nostalgia for an earlier cultural moment can be hard to separate from the nostalgia for an earlier moment in a fan’s own life; as David Hartwell once famously and acerbically remarked, “the golden age of science fiction is twelve,” precisely because it is in the late childhood and early teen years that one forms affective investments in these kinds of media properties through constant and repeated exposure. Hartwell, with his tongue in his cheek, even pretends to pathologize adult science fiction fandom as a kind of pseudo-Freudian attachment complex, a failure to pass through teen investment science fiction (as one should) to a properly adult contemplation of the world as it truly is. (Science fiction may be a “drug” to which it is “impossible to avoid exposure,” but nonetheless “most of us do end up well-adjusted, more or less” [273].)

But Hartwell suggests that for the person who does *not* lose their attachment to science fiction, these properties exist in a sort of “co-equal” (288) reality to the actual present, a secret world that exists “under cover” in ours (272). In his own work on this subject, Michael Saler has called such secret worlds “as if” narratives that challenge the reductionism of science and materialization through “the self-conscious practice of dwelling in these worlds through the ironic imagination and public spheres of the imagination” (21). The secret world of the “as if,” and the fan’s totalizing encyclopedic mastery of it, is what comes ultimately under threat in the logic of the reboot; the story goes on, but deliberately without “us.” The sense of betrayal felt by fans of these properties when the secret world comes under attack seems, in this context, to be quite understandable, and perhaps inevitable. Even—to, finally, admit it—speaking personally as someone who read, voraciously, both the Pocket Book *TREK* novels and the early *STAR WARS* Expanded Universe before putting them away in my later teens, I can feel in myself the sense of betrayal many fans do when told that these stories no longer “count.” It seems *tawdry*, somehow, to just start the story over, in some sterile, sanitized mode,

²⁰ I discuss this odd reverse of fortunes for the reboot universe in a bit more detail and speculate about what it may mean for *Star Trek: Discovery* in my July 2016 review of *Star Trek Beyond* at the *Los Angeles Review of Books*.

with none of the complexity and messiness and weird loops of the old stories left intact. Who will mourn Chewbacca now? He isn't even dead anymore.

The suspension, or refusal, of death—which is to say, the refusal to allow narratives to progress and reach their conclusions—seems to me to be the key creative move in both the impulse to create expanded universes and the impulse to obliterate them. Umberto Eco noted this decades ago with regard to Superman comics—a topic also taken up by Hartwell—which as a serialized (and, we might say, merely generic) media form operates on the illusion of plot rather than actual plot. That is: Superman comics stories operate by introducing plot complications that they then eliminate, returning the reader continually to the original status quo with the false feeling that this represents forward momentum. Thus, Superman might lose his powers, then get them back again; then get new powers, which he soon loses; he might reveal his true identity to Lois Lane, or to the public at large, only for everyone to be hit with an Amnesia Ray at the end of the issue allowing things to go back again to the way they'd always been; all the while repeatedly defeating and locking up the villains in his rogues' gallery, only to see them escape justice and run amuck again for the next month's stories. The continual wrinkling of time in these stories, their anti-narrative tendencies, contributes to what Eco calls the anti-erotic “parsifalism” of Superman: his insulation from the passing of time, in any sense, that would ultimately make him subject to death (Eco 18). As Eco notes, the sort of continuity that fans insist on in their stories—that they be able to be put in chronological order, that they be mutually consistent, etc.—runs counter to the way that stories in comics were frequently told, “in a kind of oneiric climate [...] where what has happened before and what has happened after appears extremely hazy” (Eco 17). The very idea of continuity itself, in other words, is a threat to what makes franchises “work” as endlessly renewable, endlessly consumable media properties.

The D.C. Comics Universe (of which Superman is a part) has actually made this dialectical tension a diegetic part of their universe: every ten years or so (*Crisis on Infinite Earths*, 1985; *Zero Hour*, 1995; *Infinite Crisis*, 2005; *Flashpoint*, in 2011, and *Rebirth*, in 2016, suggest the lifecycle may be accelerating) the heroes encounter a universe-threatening cosmic crisis that causes history to reset, beginning the entire universe over and thereby allowing each of the characters to start fresh, without any of the baggage of continuity and “canon” that might weigh down their adventures (and/or act as a barrier to entry for potential new consumers of the property).²¹ These events turn the stasis logic Eco identifies on its head, as well as invert the fantasy element of safety that would seem, superficially, to be at the core of the superhero narrative: in a hyperbolic version of the return of the repressed these stories are now revealed to be *only* about death, as the only stories that truly stick are the ones where entropy wins and the heroes fail and everyone in the existing continuity dies. Needless to say such “Crises” inevitably infuriate the fans who had been invested in the previous decades of comic

²¹ Marvel's solution to this problem for its superhero comics is beyond the scope of this article, but interesting: they have tended to use a quiet “sliding timescale” in which the earlier events of the universe, the founding of the Fantastic Four, happened roughly ten (in recent years, more like 14-15) years ago. The constant telescoping of decades of comics history into the same amount of compressed temporal space has the atmospheric effect sometimes seen late in situation comedies: the sense that what was once a fun romp becomes more and more a hell from which there is no escape, as major cities are, retrospectively, now understood to have been totally ravaged by supervillains and alien invasions over and over again, roughly on the order of every few weeks.

history, just as STAR WARS and STAR TREK fans have been infuriated by their own franchises' reboots; their knowledge—and in the case of comics fans their collectable, mylar-bound issues, ostensibly “worth something” someday—is overnight rendered trivial, a curiosity, a mere footnote. A reboot seems like its own kind of death, both a highly personal and a universal death, even as (as is typical) it nominally resurrects both dead characters and used-up plotlines, and allows them all to live and breathe again.

Of all the many major mass media SF franchises at work today, it may be only the long-running British series *Doctor Who* that has managed to integrate this interplay between death and renewal safely within the logic of the series itself. *Doctor Who* is, as perhaps goes without saying, a time travel series concerning the adventures of a “Time Lord” who traverses both history and the wider universe in a device called the TARDIS that allows him to appear anywhere and anywhen, as the plot demands. A certain amount of continuity flexibility is thus built into the premise; if something seems not to make sense or to contradict other established facts, perhaps the apparent contradiction is simply the result of the Doctor's time travels.

But following the end of William Hartnell's tenure as the Doctor in 1966 something else happened; rather than recast, or end the series, the showrunners of *Doctor Who* announced that Time Lords had the heretofore unknown ability to regenerate upon their death. Thus the Doctor could now be played by a new actor (and then another, and then another, through the end of Peter Capaldi's turn as the Twelfth Doctor and the start of Jodie Whittaker's glass-ceiling-smashing tenure as the Thirteenth), each of whom could experience a full narrative arc with a beginning, middle, and end in heroic death, which then immediately flows into the start of the next Doctor's story. Nothing is ever decanonized—all those previous stories “really happened”—but each new Doctor is her own woman, and few of them directly carry on the narratives associated with previous incarnations for very long.

Image 5 goes here.

A second, similar ebb and flow can be seen in the Doctor's Companions, who cycle on and off the series at a different frequency; you might love the previous companion and despise the current one, but simply wait a series or two and there'll be another.

For the superfan, DOCTOR WHO (as franchise) offers an archive of spinoff media that rivals STAR WARS or STAR TREK, continuing the adventures of the adventures of obsolesced Doctors and Companions off-screen in books, comics, and audio-only adventures (often using the original actors) produced by Big Finish productions. But, in the main, *Doctor Who* simply periodically resets itself and then moves on in a totally new direction. *Doctor Who*, in this sense, inadvertently solved the problem of modulating fan investment and detachment from a series, decades before it would become a problem for properties like STAR WARS and STAR TREK; its fans have been trained to accept that nothing in the series is permanent (even what appear to be permanent changes), and that all Doctors eventually die even as the originary status quo (a Time Lord in a TARDIS) is always eventually returned to. *Doctor Who* has run nearly continuously since its premiere in 1963—barring a brief cancellation between 1989 and 2005—precisely because it has stumbled into an SF formula that allows major series changes to be justified diegetically without fan outcry or rage.

What *Doctor Who*'s regeneration plot mechanic both centers and decenters is the narratological problem of death, which paradoxically becomes both more important and less important in *Who* than in any other mass media SF franchise one might name. All of these long-running franchises (STAR WARS, STAR TREK, Superman, and so on) eventually become in one way or another metafictional ruminations on their own longevity, typically through the device of the reboot (which in turn becomes a device for replicating the original story over again)—but *Who* alone seems to have solved the interrelated problems of longevity, narrative sclerosis, nostalgia, and reboot in a way that its most-devoted fans do not experience as betrayal or come to resent. The unique plot mechanic of a regenerating Doctor achieves, for *Doctor Who*, what the “legends” and “alternate universe” and “rebooted universe” decanonization mechanics of the other narrative universes desire but seem to have been unable to successfully achieve: providing its fans with a visual and narratological language to honor their investment in what came before, a chance to collectively grieve it and then move on.

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