To *Disney Infinity* and Beyond - *Star Wars* Videogames Before and After the Lucasarts Acquisition

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Introduction

Disney's purchase of Lucasfilm in 2012 heralded a new direction for *Star Wars*, firmly aimed towards Disney's new character-led diversification strategy which CEO Bob Iger had begun with its purchase of Pixar in 2006[1]. It also had some unexpected fallout for the world of videogames both within and beyond the franchise. The absorption of *Star Wars* into Disney entailed a new approach towards transmedial content creation. This involved the integration of its characters into the macro-transmedial world of the broader Disney 'meta-franchise', already expanded beyond the company's own works by the addition of Marvel Studios. This new approach became apparent, as is explored throughout this volume, through the integration of *Star Wars* intellectual property (IP) into Disney branded content from movies and TV shows to theme parks, advertisements and merchandising. For video games in particular, the Disney buyout was greater than the *Star Wars* franchise only. The Lucasfilm portfolio also includes Indiana Jones, the special effects house, Industrial Light and Magic (ILM) and – most importantly for the purposes of this chapter – Lucasarts, a well-respected game development and publishing company with a string of classic videogame IPs attached. Trepidation from gamers over how Disney would deploy and monetise the new IP came tempered with hope that classic game series both within the franchise's universe and outside of it, including long-dormant IP such as classic adventure games *Maniac Mansion*[2] and *Day of The Tentacle*[3] could perhaps be revived or rebooted. Lucasarts was a company which had been quite free-wheeling with the *Star Wars* IP in comparison with how guarded or conservative movie rights-holders tend generally to behave when it comes to videogame adaptations[4], by creating or licensing videogames which are widely considered classics or genre innovators such as *Star Wars: Knights of The Old Republic*[5] and *Star Wars: Republic Commando*[6]. More recently *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed*[7] was considered a flawed but brave game set on the darker side of the

[1] Daniel Miller, "How Robert Iger's 'fearless' deal-making transformed Disney" *Los Angeles Times,* June 6, 2015, accessed November 29, 2016, http://www.latimes.com/entertainment/envelope/cotown/la-et-ct-disney-iger-20150607-story.html

[2] *Maniac Mansion*. Lucasarts, PC, 1987. Videogame.

[3] *Day of The Tentacle.* Lucasarts, PC, 1993. Videogame.

[4] Douglas Brown and Tanya Krzywinska. "Movie-Games and Game-Movies : towards an aesthetics of transmediality" in *Film Theory and Contemporary Hollywood Movies,* ed. Warren Buckland (New York, Routledge, 2007).

[5] *Star Wars: Knights of The Old Republic*. Bioware, PC, 2003. Videogame

[6] *Star Wars: Republic Commando.* Lucasarts, PC, 2005. Videogame

[7] *Star Wars: The Force Unleashed.* Lucasarts, Playstation 3, 2008. Videogame

franchise's universe despite its flagrant revision of canonicity[8]. Prior to the buyout, studios were working on a range of games with the IP, but all projects were cancelled when the acquisition occurred, except for the long-running Massively Multiplayer Online Game (MMOG), *Star Wars: The Old Republic*[9] alongside TV series, The Clone Wars (see Hills in this volume). One of these casualties was the game *1313*, which was cancelled quite late on in its development cycle, and set to take the franchise into some quite dark places, allegedly featuring Boba Fett as the lead character.

Since the acquisition, a new transmedial strategy emerged as Disney redistributed the IP rights to *Star Wars* videogames both to its own interactive division and external publishers. To reduce the financial risk of developing games in-house, Disney's strategy was to allow the publishing company EA Games exclusive use of the *Star Wars* IP in the non-mobile game development space, with a single exception granted for the continuation of LEGO's series of *Star Wars* games[10] (see Geraghty in this volume). Less expensive mobile app development was handled internally and licensed out by Disney. This led to high profile new games being developed for distinct audience segments. Published on multiple platforms, these new games aimed to build hype around both the re-invigorated franchise more generally, and *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*[11] (hereafter *TFA*) in particular. Trends towards homogenisation of the franchise, and the dangers that could bring in the form of eventual brand fatigue were uncertain at first, but now that there has been quite a significant shake-down in the transmedial games market evidenced since the movie's release (discussed in detail further on in this chapter), it is clear that, for Disney, the franchise marked the litmus test for one of their key approaches to both transmediality and franchise games. The new movie releases and Disney's selection of licensing partners held the potential for a step forwards from the models of adaptation investigated in Brown and Krzywinska[12], with opportunity to enhance and build the worlds of the franchise as part of a converged approach centred around characters, rather than 'spin offery'[13]. However, while the property was ripe in transmedial opportunity, in the wake of the release of *TFA* little of this potential has yet been realised. This chapter compares classic *Star Wars* games with the three new releases developed since the buyout. The distinct markets targeted by the three games will be investigated alongside the ways the franchise has evolved since the acquisition, and its new place within the now heavily character-focused Disney 'meta-franchise'. Is this wholesale approach to transmediality strengthening the franchise, or is it simply homogenising it?

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[8] Seth Sommerfeld "Gaming in a Galaxy Far, Far Away" in *Myth, Media and Culture in Star Wars : An Anthology* ed. Douglas Brode and Leah Deyneka, (New York, Scarecrow Press, 2012)

[9] *Star Wars: The Old Republic*. EA Games, PC, 2011. Videogame.

[10] As is argued elsewhere in this volume (Part 1, Chapter 3) and below, the LEGO dimension of the franchise is an important aspect of how Disney have reformed *Star Wars* brand synergy since the acquisition.

[11] *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, directed by JJ Abrams, Disney, 2015. Film.

[12] Brown and Krzywinska "Movie-Games and Game-Movies."

[13] Jason Mittel, *Complex TV* (New York, NYU Press, 2015) p.284

Two major videogame releases carried the *Star Wars* brand in the interim period after the Lucasfilm buyout but prior to *TFA*'s release. *Star Wars: Battlefront*[14] (hereafter '*Battlefront*'), a special edition of a mainstream first-person shooter franchise was announced in 2013, and *Disney Infinity 3.0*[15], a bold, expensive experiment in the transmedial 'toys-to-life' genre containing a sandbox platform game was relaunched with *Star Wars* as its prime focus in early 2015 (the earlier iterations in versions 1.0 and 2.0 centred around the Disney and Marvel universes respectively).

Battlefront's eventual release in November 2015 began a controlled build-up of game releases on social, mobile and online platforms, as well as expansions and downloadable content for both major titles. While the approach was not unusual for a blockbuster movie release, the scale was far larger and the channels games released on more diverse than is usual for game releases associated with film properties nowadays. In the 1990's and early 20th century big-budget, high production value game releases for mainstream consoles (generally known as 'AAA' or 'triple-A' games) were commonplace projects released alongside movie properties when the two shared a similar target audience, the market for games was much less diverse than it is now. Gamers were a specific demographic and tie-in audiences were clear-cut. However, since the development of smartphones, so-called 'casual' games have become ubiquitous[16] and the market has dramatically expanded to the point where now many films for all manner of audiences have tie-in mobile promotional games. Meanwhile the amount of big-budget, AAA console releases has not slowed down as such, but is smaller by comparison. Thus, *TFA's* full-spectrum approach was unusual and made it stand out. This build-up escalated right up to the day of *TFA's* release, and consisted of numerous games bearing the *Star Wars* brand and generally available for free on mobile devices or online, including a companion app for *Battlefront,* culminating in the experimental Google Chrome browser-game *Star Wars Lightsaber Escape*[17]. This game made players' phones simulate lightsaber hilts synchronised with a whooshing blade on-screen, and was released two days before the movie's global release at the same time as Facebook profile photos were being edited *en-masse* to feature lightsabers while hype was at fever pitch, cannily connecting the aged, establishment brand of *Star Wars* with broader sci-fi themes of enduring innovation. The movie's global release coincided with *TFA* toys and a gameplay campaign for *Disney Infinity 3.0* becoming available to buy and download. Post-release, games continued to come out while these major titles were expanded, including *Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens*[18], timed to align with the movie's DVD/ Blu-ray release.

The sheer diversity of these releases is impressive, some aimed at casual gamers, others at those who make gaming a primary hobby; some at nostalgic grown-up fans and others squarely at children. This variety of titles was also widely released on platforms which run the whole gamut

[14] *Star Wars: Battlefront*. EA Games, PC, 2015. Videogame.

[15] *Disney Infinity 3.0.* Avalanche Software, Playstation 4, 2015. Videogame.

[16] Newzoo, *Casual Games Sector Report* 2016. accessed November 29, 2016, https://s3.amazonaws.com/CGA_Report/CCNewzooSpringReport-pages.pdf

[17] *Star Wars Lightsaber Escape*. Unit 9, PC, 2015. Videogame.

[18] *Lego Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, TT Games, Playstation 4, 2016. Videogame.

from established, mainstream consoles to experimental web browser games. Comparing the different major and minor releases can help show the objectives which Disney was attempting to fulfil through the careful selection of licensing for the many adaptations and spin-offs which bear the *Star Wars* brand, and provide context for a game release strategy which was a key front in the franchise's re-establishment.

Star Wars: Battlefront

Figure 1 – one of many of Star Wars Battlefront's *loading screen shows a clean, stark aesthetic, confident golden logo and an exceptionally hi-resolution model of R2D2.*

In the case of *Star Wars: Battlefront*, the company granted the license is one of the biggest and oldest mainstream videogame publishers, Electronic Arts (EA). Their studios had previously produced many *Star Wars* games alongside Lucasarts, including a well-received set of earlier titles in the 'Battlefront' series. Signifying the re-birth common to much of the content produced around *TFA*, even though it was developed as the next in the series after *Star Wars Battlefront 2* [19], this game reset the battlefront nomenclature back to zero. Playing off the franchise's wide reach and reputation for special effects, *Battlefront* was trailed 2 years in advance of its release, almost immediately after the buyout, and traded initially off of its high resolution graphics, which looked almost unbelievably 'next-gen' when they were first revealed. These expensive production values and high budget development markers persisted into the game's eventual release, where it has all the hallmarks of a blue-chip modern 'AAA' videogame. In fact it extends these elements, playing off them and uniting them with other signifiers of luxury, quality and social cachet. This can be seen as part of a greater, overarching 'authenticity' strategy paving the way for the revival of star wars more generally.   No fan

[19] *Star Wars Battlefront 2*. Lucasarts, PC, 2005. Videogame.

would be embarrassed to be either a gamer or a *Star Wars* fan when presented with *Battlefront*, which holds its own as purely as a team-based first person shooter game as well as a game set in the *Star Wars* Universe. In fact, *Battlefront's* clear, easily navigable user interface within its clean and opulent aesthetic is designed to pull in fans that may well be unfamiliar with games of this kind, and ease their transition into playing first-person-shooters through *Star Wars*. Loading screens present extreme high-resolution models of ships and droids from the show, suspended in space or walking across stark white backgrounds. The quality and detail of these non-playable models is such that they appear more perfect than the 'real thing', particularly the graphic renditions of droids, R2D2 and C3PO. The menu screens which present themselves after the loading screens are a myriad of gilt-edged icons and wedding-invitation fonts, again all set against the confident white background. These items are being showcased. Authenticity is of great importance to *Battlefront*, an example of what Proctor defines as a 'totem of authenticity' . This game is a museum of *Star Wars*, and the player is both attendee and curator. Such confident interface design states clearly that here in *Battlefront, Star Wars* is a treasured exhibit - canonical, worthy, for the ages.

There are very few weapons in this game in comparison to other first person shooters, but each one when unlocked is displayed via another high-quality model which can be rotated, zoomed and examined, handled with reverential attention. Fittingly Han Solo's blaster is the most powerful sidearm in the game, and the first thing most players will unlock through playing is Princess Leia's pistol. The genre of multiplayer first person shooter and complete lack of single-player content marries the title with the other enormous franchises of modern console gaming, while the production values align with flagship game series from first-party console developers such as *Halo* and *Uncharted*. The genre has a proven track-record and the format of the game refined through decades of iteration. This multiplayer shooter does not break the mould in any way. However, what it does present is scenes from the original trilogy of *Star Wars* films, rendered in the same painstaking detail as the models and weapons. While no linear story is present, players take part in varied set-piece battles in levels are made up of film sets: from the Yeti Cave on Hoth through to the Millennium Falcon's launch pad on Tatooine and the Ewok tree village on Endor. Encountering these locations suddenly in the heat of battle enhances their nostalgic impact, making spaces both familiar in *mise-en-scene* but unfamiliar as urgently navigable contested locations, thus more likely to surprise a player, particularly when the whole game is accompanied by an adaptive, context sensitive version of John Williams' score, a rich source of *Star Wars* authenticity. *Battlefront* even co-opts action from the films, its most popular game mode being 'Walker Assault', which replays the AT-AT assault sequence from *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back*[20] on all the different worlds. This is the reason that the game's marketing para-texts are dominated by the Hoth sequences rather than focusing on the other locales, and also has the dual effect of emphasising stark white backdrops which also characterise the game and are unusual for the genre. Most of the time, players are either storm troopers or rebel soldiers, but they can, on occasion, pilot ships or vehicles, or switch to playing characters from the movies. Movie character 'heroes'

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[20] *Star Wars Episode V: The Empire Strikes Back* directed by George Lucas, Lucasfilm, 1980. Film.

are extremely powerful and take large numbers of players to stop, so inhabiting one is the pinnacle of the power-fantasy this game offers. Domination is assured when playing as Darth Vader or piloting the Millennium Falcon. Completing tasks and 'achievements' in-game gradually reveals portions of what the game describes in one loading screen as its toughest challenge, a diorama of *Star Wars* icons and figures engaged in a battle. The ultimate museum exhibit, or the original trilogy preserved in aspic.
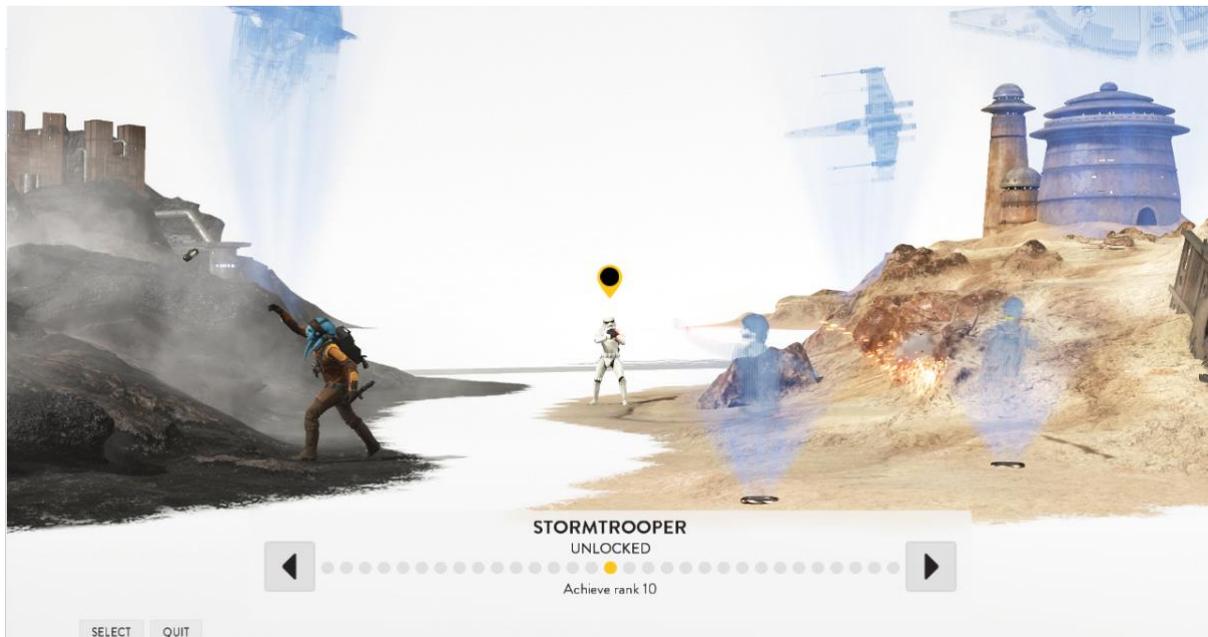

Figure 2. The Diorama in Star Wars Battlefront (extending far beyond this screenshot) is how players are rewarded for achieving in-game challenges. The holographic figures solidify and then play sounds and animations with a click. The game describes completing the diorama as its toughest challenge.

With hindsight, *Battlefront* proved an ideal primer for *TFA*, despite originally containing none of the content of the actual film (although the Battle of Jakku was added as free downloadble content in the weeks prior to *TFA*'s release thus providing at least some context). Seeing how *Battlefront* lionises the original *Star Wars* trilogy with no mention whatsoever of the prequel trilogy chimes with how *TFA* would go on to re-imagine and pay homage to *Star Wars Episode IV:A New Hope* [21](see Gray, and Hassler-Forest, both in this volume). While other games of this genre share its production values, fetishisation of weaponry and lavish detail on the historical and mechanical accuracy of their armouries[22], *Battlefront* turns that intense gaze on recreating movie scenes, to the point where being cut down by another player's Luke Skywalker when you're playing a storm trooper can still be an enjoyable experience even when there was no chance of a fair fight. *Battlefront* was a huge hit for EA and Disney, becoming the most commercially successful *Star Wars* game ever, selling over 14 million copies by

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[21] *Star Wars Episode IV:A New Hope* directed by George Lucas, Lucasfilm, 1977. Film.
[22] Matthew Payne 'Marketing Military Realism in Call of Duty 4' *Games and Culture* 7, no 4 (2012), http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/1555412012454220 (accessed November 29, 2016)

March 2016[23] and recouping far in excess of its assumed development and advertising budget of around $100 million. Aimed squarely at the old guard of *Star Wars* fans nostalgic for the original trilogy of films, *Battlefront* did the heavy lifting of re-immersing these players in a 'gamespace' which affirmed their fandom, rewarded intense investment both in terms of expensive graphical processing power and dedication of time, and played up the enduring visual and action themes of the franchise.

Disney Infinity

If *Battlefront* was a giant *Star Wars* museum, then a similar approach was taken in the creation of a massive toybox, designed primarily for a group of fans whose first encounter with the franchise in movie-form would be *TFA*, but in a format which could also prove enticing to older *Star Wars* fans, who could even be their parents. This was delivered both through software content and novel hardware components, in a format which has become known as 'toys-to-life'. Disney's 'Infinity' product line is a hybrid toy and videogame system developed by a wholly owned subsidiary of Disney Interactive, Avalanche Software, which had been iterating on the idea of RFID-chip integrated model figures in games since 2013. Not the only player in this marketplace, Infinity's competitors included Nintendo's Amiibo (2014) and Activision's Skylanders (2011) systems, featuring the characters from these videogame publishers' titles. LEGO's Dimensions line (2015) came at the market from the opposite direction as a toy manufacturer rather than a game creator, and licensed a wide array of Warner Brothers IP. The idea is that the figures are used in conjunction with the software, and the toy characters come 'to life' within the game. In all these systems, the main game is sold with a peripheral scanner and some character figures. When the figures are scanned they appear as controllable characters in the game, and all the different characters are capable of different actions, or can access unique content. A large array of characters and game content are sold separately as physical objects in stores to supplement the system. This system means bitesize chunks of content are available for small, regular purchases. Ideally, the system aims towards added-value to toy purchases for children and a desire for completionism or other game elements encourages spending on content. The increasing competition in the marketplace indicated that the sector was also financially successful, and Nintendo's Amiibo figures in particular have been a major financial success, selling over 20 million units[24]. Audiences both of long-term franchise fans, who might buy memorabilia or collectables combine with the target kids audiences to make this genre viable.

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[23] Electronic Arts inc. *2016 Proxy Statement and Annual Report,* May 27, 2016, accessed November 29, 2016 http://investor.ea.com/financials.cfm p.8

[24] Nintendo Co., Ltd. *Consolidated Financial Highlights, February 2, 2016*, accessed November 29, 2016, https://www.nintendo.co.jp/ir/pdf/2016/160202e.pdf p.3

Figure 3. A Disney Infinity *figure. The toy features a Radio Frequency Identification (RFID) Chip in its base, which communicates with the peripherals sold with the game, and detects different figures when they come into contact. Many figures are available from all sorts of different Disney properties.*

Toys-to-life are an example of media convergence both from the perspective of hardware and the worlds which they create. Early harbingers of the 'internet of things'i, their evolution presented major game design opportunities[25]. The high development budget and steady content release schedule encourages a modular design where the different pieces, which can be bought in any order, can be combined or even overlaid on top of one another. Different characters can traverse the same worlds which came with the base game, or come packaged with new landscapes or content which the other characters can then engage with (see McCulloch in the companion volume to this collection). Ideally, Princess Elsa from *Frozen*[26] can end up fighting alongside Rey on Takodana, and both will be able to acknowledge the situation. These radically different worlds overlapping provided opportunities for characters to talk to one another and explore their different contexts in a freeform 'toy-box' mode, where players could build or import levels and content for all their characters. The Lucasfilm buyout was triumphantly embraced in the release trailer for *Disney Infinity 3.0* (henceforth *'Infinity'*), which showed the Millennium Falcon landing amongst a range of Disney characters from Rapunzel (*Tangled*) to Jack Skellington (*The Nightmare Before Christmas*). "Looks like we have visitors" says Buzz Lightyear (*Toy Story*), "let's hope they come in peace…" as Olaf (*Frozen*) tries to hug an AT-AT walker. The merging of these diverse IPs into the Disney meta-franchise was clearly aimed

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[25] Paul Coulton et al, 'Game Design in an Internet of Things' *Transactions of The Digital Games Research Association* 1 no.3 (2014) http://todigra.org/index.php/todigra/article/view/19/30 (accessed November 29, 2016)

[26] *Frozen* directed by Jennifer Lee, Disney, 2013. Film.

to empower the IPs making up the whole Disney brand. The videogame series *Kingdom Hearts* also unites Disney characters from multiple franchises together with, popular gaming franchise *Final Fantasy*, but was the result of a chance encounter between corporate executives[27]. *Infinity* was much more strategically planned, as evidenced by Disney attempting a similar strategy in the successful meta-franchise ABC television show *Once Upon a Time*[28], which collides characters from all over Disney's fantasy stable as well as the public domain in a modern-day setting and focuses on the relationships which result. *Infinity*, with its focus so squarely on a pantheon of characters as both tactile and agentic objects, crossing between software and hardware is in many ways emblematic of this same renewed approach to franchises taken up more widely by its parent company. It's no accident that the main menu screen, an addition to *Infinity* in its 3.0 incarnation, looks like 'Main Street USA', the opening 'zone' of the Disney theme parks. *Infinity* is itself a virtual theme park, much in the manner of DVD intratext 'digital theme parks' which Brown[29] aligned with the 'cinema of attractions'[30]and its embracing of social and configurative play builds upon this concept to create a unique selling point for the product.

In early 2016 Disney announced that its intention was to cut its losses on *Infinity*, stop development of the game and shutter Avalanche Software, writing down a $147 million loss[31]. The final *Infinity* toys were released in August of 2016 and the game's servers are set to go offline during 2017. Not even the *Star Wars* IP was enough to keep *Infinity* viable in the competitive toys-to-life marketplace. Disappointed developer sources reported anonymously to videogame journalists[32] that to some extent it was awkward licensing restrictions between the various IPs which put a brake on the levels of integration which *Infinity* was able to contain, despite all IP being owned by the overarching Disney company, as the Marvel and Lucasfilm arms jostled with the Interactive division to achieve different goals. Ironically, the close control Marvel demanded over the use of their properties in *Infinity,* dictating development direction in ways similar to the old 'spun-off' transmedia content may well have stemmed from their own difficult relationship with transmedial gaming as discussed further on in this paper. The ideal situation of characters sharing worlds, the emphasis on identity core to the transmedia

[27] William Huber and Stephen Mandiberg 'Kingdom Hearts, Territoriality and Flow' in *Proceedings of DiGRA 2009,* 2009. accessed November 29, 2016,http://www.digra.org/wp-content/uploads/digital-library/09287.47134.pdf

[28] *Once Upon a Time* directed by Edward Kitsis and Adam Horowitz, ABC, 2011-ongoing.

[29] Tom Brown. "The DVD of Attractions'? – *The Lion King* and the Digital Theme Park" *Convergence* 13 no.2 (2009) http://journals.sagepub.com/doi/pdf/10.1177/1354856507075243 (accessed November 29, 2016)

[30] Tom Gunning, 'The Cinema of Attractions: Early Film, its Spectator and the Avant-garde' in *Early Cinema: Space, Frame, Narrative*, ed. T. Althusser, London, BFI, 1990, p.56–62.

[31] The Walt Disney Company. *Second Quarter and six months earnings for fiscal 2016*. accessed November 29, 2016 https://ditm-twdc-us.storage.googleapis.com/q2_fy16_earnings.pdf p.1

[32] Patrick Klepek. "Sources: The Ambitious (Now Cancelled) Plans For Disney Infinity's Future Included Rogue One, Bigger Figures" *Kotaku*, May 12, 2016. Accessed November 29, 2016.http://kotaku.com/sources-the-ambitious-now-cancelled-plans-for-disney-1776370484

strategy, proved hard for Disney to manage from a corporate perspective. Outside of the toy-box mode, there was not much storyline content which could be accessed by figures from different 'playsets', and developers' attempts to create such were made more complex by corporate rules and different agendas functioning within the Disney machine. This reality made a mockery of the game's advertised ambitions, where the promise of the trailers was rarely realised in the actual games, with characters fenced in to 'their' IP and territory. Disney has since clarified that it will no longer make videogames at all and instead franchise game development out to third-party companies, once again citing risk and the volatility of the games industry as the primary causes. While *Infinity* had seen Disney Interactive make a small profit during 2016, as cited above the division had lost the company over $1.41 billion dollars between 2008 and 2013. While this makes sense as a business decision, it is unfortunate to see such a setback for what could have been an exceptional route to enabling transmedial content ripe for use in a future defined by the internet of things. Even within the corporate umbrella, it would seem IP remains jealously guarded and controlled.

LEGO Star Wars

Infinity's TFA content was the only game which actively attempted to retell the plot of *TFA* until the release of *LEGO Star Wars: The Force Awakens*, a full seven months after the movie's release. Many of the actors reprise their roles vocally and the content is polished, faithfully following the movie's plot through a sequence of hub levels set of the different worlds and locations of *TFA*, significantly deepened through flavour text and side-missions. There is no new narrative material in *Infinity's* content, but it does a good job of following along with the plot and allowing for improvisation and unlockable characters. The *LEGO* title does much the same, although its opening is a whistle-stop tour through the original trilogy's main dramatic moments. Several extra pieces of storyline information are included in the plot of the *LEGO* game, including why Han Solo was transporting Rath'tars and how the Rebels acquired the plans for Starkiller Base. Other content in the film specifically earmarked for transmedia connection is also explored here in the resolution of C3PO's mysterious red arm. All the movie content is presented in a tongue-in cheek, often overblown style typical of the series, which has become an institution, bridging the gap between old and young fans, as Cook[33] attests:

> [I]mportantly to the continuity in the appeal of the franchise to different generations, these SW games are not limited only to the more adult players; some of the best selling games bearing the star wars [sic] name are part of the Star Wars Lego series.

The LEGO game represents a third toybox more suited to playing together than alone. On offer is both chaos and craziness created through the huge roster of characters (far more than *Infinity* allows, as the production of physical models was not a limiting issue) and comic tone supported by LEGO's other game and TV series, while nostalgia is also indulged in this light hearted

[33] Brendan.Cook 'Star Wars Generations – A Saga for the ages, for all ages' in *Fan Phenomena – Star Wars* ed. Mika Elovarra (Bristol, Intellect Books 2013)p.85

send-up of the franchise. This 3D platformer title takes its place as the latest iteration in a tried and tested series of LEGO games going back more than a decade. While they appear much more accessible, the LEGO games are no less venerable an institution than *Battlefront*, and just as safe a bet. This game, too, has become an assured financial success.

Figure 4. There are 150 unlockable characters in LEGO Star Wars:TFA, *including the movie's director, J.J. Abrams and producer Kathleen Kennedy. George Lucas, however, is absent.*

In its construction of these three toyboxes, Disney eschewed the game form as a mechanism for telling stories, instead putting additional story material only into the LEGO game, safe behind strongly non-canonical and 'playful' signifiers. The company did this at the same time as giving fans proven game content with the highly limited amount of innovation typical of AAA game production. The lack of content which directly reflects the narrative may in fact be a strategy born out of transmedia game content failing in other brands, as Flanagan et al describe with reference to the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), an approach also taken in one post-buyout, pre-*TFA* mobile game, *Star Wars: Insurrection*[34] :

> With the largely negative critical reception that the *Iron Man* game earned, Marvel revisited Strategy on MCU-based videogames, adopting a preference to create narratives that occur around the fringes of a film's plot, but avoid recreating the action itself. Thus, the games were meant to come further in line with a truer contribution to transmedia story operating.[35]

[34] *Star Wars: Insurrection*, Kabam, Iphone, 2015. Videogame.

[35] Martin Flanagan et al, *The Marvel Studios Phenomenon : Inside a Transmedia Universe* (London, Bloomsbury, 2016) ch.8

Disney's approach regarding *Star Wars* in the main has been to heed the first part of this lesson but ignore the second, placing their games in an awkward position relative to story where the major games take place in the world but do not move it forward or drive the narrative, setting the focus squarely on recycling and emphasising brand signifiers: character motivations, blaster and lightsabre action sequences and franchise core themes. Their decision not to produce future games in-house at all solidifies this approach. The same issues which befell the MCU games now also threaten *Star Wars*:

> Having travelled successfully through many portals to different media, videogames are where the MCU expansion has become unstuck by the failure to negotiate medium specificity.36

Narrative content is not the only place *Star Wars* games rested on their laurels. Since Disney and *Star Wars* are the biggest franchise around, they have been able to rely on distribution methods and an approach to content which is retrograde in comparison with the rest of the games market. Boxed products sold in stores rather than distributed digitally, premium prices and add-ons which cost extra help recoup the high production costs of these games. All of the games focus upon collectability in different ways, particularly the mobile titles which align it with micro-transaction customer payments. *Star Wars: Galaxy of Heroes*37 sees players in Cantina arcades playing the holo-games featured in the films, and buying pieces or upgrades. *Star Wars Force Collection*38is a straight up baseball-card style collection game. The three AAA titles analysed above also involve constant collecting and rely heavily on 'achievements', which combined with their approach to narrative material cements the videogame elements of the post-acquisition *Star Wars* clearly as merchandise and brand extension as opposed to full-fledged transmedial content. We can play around in the new *Star Wars* universe, but adapting or changing it, grappling with its themes in any way other than swinging a lightsaber is out of bounds for now.

This approach stands in stark contrast to how videogames were treated prior to the buyout. There were over 120 *Star Wars* videogames published by Lucasarts prior to the acquisition, and indeed many of them did follow a similar formula to Disney's much safer post-buyout productions. Some are famously terrible movie tie-ins including an indecipherable Japanese take on *Star Wars*39where Darth Vader turns into a scorpion for no discernible reason. Other movie-tie ins were critically successful; the pod racing games connected to *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace*40 produced their own mini-series of well-made racing games. The franchise games had hits as well, with games like *Knights of The Old Republic (*henceforth, *KOTOR)* taking real risks with the IP and seeing it pay off, while adventurous projects like *Kinect Star Wars*41, an attempt to use very new console technology to simulate lightsabre fighting fell foul of technology not quite matching up to expectations. Grand experiments like

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36 ibid

37 *Star Wars: Galaxy of Heroes* EA Games, Iphone, 2015. Videogame.

38 *Star Wars Force Collection* Konami, Iphone, 2015. Videogame.

39 *Star Wars* Namco, Famicom, 1987. Videogame

40 *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* directed by George Lucas, 1999. Film.

41 *Kinect Star Wars* Terminal Reality, Xbox 360, 2012

Star Wars Galaxies[42], an ambitious early MMOG where initially only the luckiest gamers' characters were 'born' with the midi-chlorians to become Jedis, generated headlines. As is the case with almost all movie franchises which grappled with games, there were a lot fewer critical hits than there were embarrassing misfires. However, risk, both to legacy and finances, was clearly less of a concern for Lucasarts then than it is for Disney now, and that gave a certain vibrancy to *Star Wars* branded game content. While not necessarily working towards Jenkins'[43] ideal that "In the ideal form of transmedia storytelling, each medium does what it does best" by the sort of specific, anticipatory design which was the guiding light for *Infinity*, and which Disney now demands of all its franchises. When the old games did chance to hit upon these synergies, Lucasarts produced moments which resonated in a way the new approach forbids. This was an inevitably messy situation, with a whole subsection of 'canon' rules needing to be established in the fan-bible 'wookiepedia' to control the canonical and continuity implications of pre-buyout videogames where player choices could lead to wildly divergent characters and outcomes.[44]

The games are at their best when virtuous circles are established between theme, systems and content, as occurs in both *KOTOR* and *Republic Commando*, which are given the freedom to make the most of the IP thematically, rather than just showcase it mechanically. KOTOR effectively built upon the concept of The Force, which everyone who had seen the movies understood, to segue into a nuanced morality and alignment system where player choices and behaviour moulded both a character and an eventual antagonist. This complex game system was made accessible, as well as tolerable from the perspective of risk to the game, through the lens of the IP. Veale[45] describes a playthrough of KOTOR to define how the game form can drain away affective mediation, citing a journal of an intense 'dark-side' playthrough which led to such introspective guilt and discomfort that it was almost cause to stop playing the game. This proving ground allowed for developer Bioware's eventual *Mass Effect* game series, exploring similar themes of light and dark morality set against an intergalactic backdrop. In a similar vein, *Republic Commando* manages to make a virtue out of an aspect of squad based third-person-action games which is rarely believable and often feels forced: team communication and control. The characters all being Clone Troopers, with all that this entails already known by the audience, legitimises the kinds of behaviour which often make squad-mates in other games appear robotic. It makes a theme out of this, allowing for this behaviour to be actively explored as a narrative strand in the game, leading to memorable characterisation which also reflects upon the *Star Wars* world from the unusual direction of a disposable grunt. These kinds of distinctive angles on the franchise were valued by fans, who mourned the cancellation of *1313* primarily because it was aiming to show a grittier, darker take on *Star Wars*. In both examples above theme, gameplay and content work in tandem, and the results

[42] *Star Wars Galaxies* Daybreak Studios, PC, 2003. Videogame.
[43] Henry Jenkins *Convergence Culture* (New York, NYU Press, 2008) p.98
[44] http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Canon
[45] Kevin Veale 'Affect, Responsibility and how Modes of Engagement shape the experience of videogames' *Transactions of The Digital Games Research Association* 2 no.1 (2015)
http://todigra.org/index.php/todigra/article/view/44/83 (accessed November 29, 2016)

galvanise franchise themes. This is how the 'medium specificity' referred to by Flanagan et al above is successfully negotiated. Within the Expanded Universe, there was even scope for transmedial connections to bear fruit, as evidenced through KOTOR's character Bastila Shan, who both provides bridges between these games and *The Old Republic* MMO-RPG game which persists today, but also broke out of the games and appears in *Star Wars* comics and other expanded universe material. Perhaps in the new paradigm more risks will be taken with content associated with the 'Star Wars Story' sequence of films, which also looks to be taking a different angle on franchise presentation.

In *The LEGO Movie46*, the big twist at the end of the animated LEGO extravaganza is that there are two unnamed fans competing for control of a gigantic LEGO set. One, an adult (Will Ferrell), wants to preserve the toy and values it as a collectable. He wants to glue all the models in place and admire the resulting diorama, not so far from the final achievement of *Battlefront*, the museum centrepiece. The other fan is his young son, Finn (Jadon Sand), who sees the toy as a staging ground for all kinds of tales and chaos, where characters from different contexts collide, the *Infinity* toybox. The film certainly wants viewers to empathise with the child as they struggle, but also to acknowledge, as Will Ferrell's character gradually relents on his ambitions, that there is a beauty in both father and son playing with the same toy, even though the son's creativity might break canon or drive imperfections into the painstakingly constructed backdrop. The message is clear – the timeless allure of the toy the father values is preserved through the creativity and play his son exerts upon it, and this is truly what the father is nostalgic for, rather than the other signifiers. This is the central thrust of the entire LEGO brand, and the reason why its spin on toys-to-life will most likely prove the place where that kind of transmedial content now goes for the *Star Wars* franchise. The wider story of the buyout and rebooting of *Star Wars* is one of how nostalgia can be leveraged to allow both nostalgic re-visiting and enthusiastic new uptake of this source material, and presently the games represent a point where the former is being emphasised to the detriment of the latter. Disney could learn a lesson from LEGO, and will hopefully loosen some of its risk-averse grip on the franchise's game aspects. This is necessary to prevent the nostalgia and brand signifier enhancement evident in *Star Wars* videogames since the buyout from transitioning into brand fatigue. Perhaps by asserting this I am myself guilty of the same stifling nostalgia, but I believe that new *Star Wars* fans, raised on the infinitely configurable sandbox worlds of *Minecraft47* and similar games, aren't always going to be content to just play around in the world or a pastiche of it, they will want to play *with* it as well, and explore its themes themselves to realise why they deserve such preservation.

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46 *The LEGO Movie* directed by Phil Lord, 2014. Film.
47 *Minecraft* Mojang, PC, 2011. Videogame.

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[i] The internet of things is defined in the Oxford English Dictionary as "The interconnection via the Internet of computing devices embedded in everyday objects, enabling them to send and receive data". It has become shorthand for the emerging technological situation where many small devices in and around the home and person have become networked. Examples include not just toys-to-life figures, but also things like smart home thermostats and voice-operated personal assistants such as the Amazon Echo.