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DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

Fictional Universes in the Digital Age: Multiplicity, Canonicity, and Participatory Culture in *Star Wars* and the Marvel Franchise

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Abstract

According to the popular definition by Henry Jenkins, a transmedia story "unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" (Jenkins 2006a, 95-96). Ever since the release of Jenkins's book, *Convergence Culture*, transmedia storytelling has been a popular framework for scholars exploring the ways in which media producers disseminate fictional worlds across multiple media platforms.

In recent years, the multiverse has become a popular plot element in various movies and franchises. I argue that this mode of storytelling, which has a long tradition in the comic book medium, can be viewed as a new form of transmediality. Currently, there are debates among scholars over the exact definition of multiverse narratives. On the one hand, these stories feature a multiplicity of universes in the fictional diegesis of the narrative. On the other hand, the existence of many different adaptations and fanfictions in a vast narrative like *Star Wars*, is also often understood as a form of multiverse.

In my doctoral dissertation, I analyze and compare two different multiverses from a variety of perspectives. The Marvel Cinematic Universe uses the concept consciously in its movies, which creates a unique transmedia interplay between various adaptations. Meanwhile, *Star Wars* has traditionally placed a greater emphasis on continuity and creating a well-defined canon. However, it has also spawned a myriad of different universes, adaptations, and reinterpretations. Overall, I aim to explore how storytelling, world-building, and fandom change in the digital environment of the 2020s, and how the concept of the multiverse influences this process.

Keywords: transmedia, multiverse, diegesis, adaptation, fandom

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Chapter 1. Fictional Universes Across Media: An Introduction

Ever since the release of L. Frank Baum's novel *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900), building fictional worlds across multiple forms of media has been an important aspect of mass media and entertainment franchises. From author-created universes like J.R.R. Tolkien's Middle-Earth Legendarium and Frank Herbert's *Dune* series, to massive transmedia franchises like *Star Wars*, *Doctor Who*, and *Star Trek*, as well as comic book franchises like Marvel and DC Comics, detailed storyworlds have become central in modern popular fiction. Fans worldwide engage not only in the collection and consumption of these series, but also in their interpretation, creation, and curation.

The idea of multiple universes coexisting in the same reality has fascinated authors of fantasy and science fiction for centuries. Even before the advent of these genres, mythological stories and folk tales often featured characters shifting between different realms. Examples such as the Nine Realms in Norse mythology, the distinction between perceived and true realities in Plato's allegory of the cave, and the three realms of the afterlife in Dante's *Divine Comedy* all demonstrate the persistence of this concept in human culture. Beyond the realms of literature and entertainment, scientists like Stephen Hawking and Hugh Everett have written and spoken about the possible existence of multiple realities.

In recent decades, fictional universes have expanded significantly. Transmedia extensions and alternate versions, such as adaptations, reboots, and LEGO movies and games, have created enormous webs of intertextuality and multiplicity (Jenkins 2009). Coupled with the active participation of fans in the form of fanfiction, artwork, wiki sites, and cosplay, these transmedia universes (2006a, 95-96) have become multiverses with multiple coexisting versions and interpretations. This phenomenon is not completely new, as folktales and mythological stories, many of which were passed down through oral tradition, also have a myriad of different versions (Domsch 2012, 106). The reasons behind the creation of these alternate versions can be corporate and studio factors, artistic choices, and the disappointment of audiences (Goodman 2015, 662). The most important innovation explored in this dissertation is how these different, narratively isolated adaptations interact with each other. Nowadays, there is an increasing number of films, series, novels, and video games that use the multiverse as the main driving factor behind the plot.

With the rise of digital culture and new media at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries, audiences have gained new tools to reinterpret and rewrite popular texts according to their own ideas. The internet gave them a platform to share their creations, with the most successful ones gaining a widespread following. Online video-sharing platforms, such as YouTube, have enabled fan videos to would reach millions of fans worldwide. Forums and social media platforms amplified audience voices, making them crucial players not just in the criticism and evaluation of media texts, but also in the production process. However, these platforms have also led to further fragmentation and alienation among fans. This results in the proliferation of alternate versions and interpretations of these texts by fans, although the influence of such contributions varies across fan communities.

This doctoral dissertation aims to explore how the concept of the multiverse functions simultaneously as a narrative device and a transmedia framework in contemporary popular culture. It aims to investigate how this dual function challenges traditional distinctions between canon and non-canon, creator and fan, and diegetic and extra-diegetic storytelling. Transmedia franchises produce perceived and competing multiverses through industrial strategy and fandom practices, resulting in layered, contested, and coexisting narrative realities that are curated by producers and negotiated by interpretive communities[1]. The dissertation does not intend to provide a clear definition of what the multiverse is. Instead, it aims to contribute a new perspective to this rapidly growing and changing field. Throughout the dissertation I argue that multiverse narratives not only expand storytelling and world-building possibilities but also create space for self-reflexivity and critique across various forms of media.

World-building, as a theoretical concept, has been highly influential among scholars of transmediality. As Mark J. P. Wolf argues, "there is no doubt that franchised entertainment, and entertainment in general, is moving more and more in the direction of subcreational world-building" (Wolf 2012, 16). There have been many approaches toward defining the term. In the context of superhero comics, Jenkins explains how "from day one, one of the superhero's powers was to be able to leap across different media channels in a single bound" (Ford and Jenkins 2009, 304). Certain narrative elements, such as characters, themes, locations, conflicts (Booth 2016, 89) are placed within the storyworld, which is then accessed through various forms of media in a transmedia environment (Jenkins 2006a). However, multiverses are characterized by a multiplicity (Jenkins 2009) of storyworlds that are different from each other,

[1] I thank the second reader of the dissertation, Dávid L. Palatinus, for his valuable suggestion and help in clarifying the main argument.

yet contain similar but non-identical narrative elements. In certain cases, there is a possibility of moving between universes, while in others, they are completely isolated. This dissertation will explore cases studies from both versions.

1.1. The Overview of the Dissertation

I chose two media franchises for this analysis: Marvel and *Star Wars*. Both are among the most popular and most influential transmedia empires. Regarding the multiverse, Marvel has fully embraced the idea, with their movies and comics using it regularly as a narrative device. In *Star Wars*, while its creators often put emphasis on canonicity and narrative continuity, this dissertation argues that the existence of multiple canons has led to the creation of a multiverse. The multiverse has been described both as a narrative device that involves the crossing of alternate universes in the fictional ontology of the story (D'Amato and Diani 2024, 595); and as a more metaphorical understanding of the phenomenon where the multiplicity of transmedia and fan-made content creates various alternate universes and canons which may or may not cross over (Jenkins 2009). In other words, as Matt Hills points out, there are diegetic and extra-diegetic understandings of the multiverse (Hills 2024, 70-71). In this dissertation, I argue that the two are highly interconnected and it is difficult to discuss them separately.

There are other franchises, such as *Star Trek* or *Doctor Who*, that could qualify as subjects of analysis in this dissertation. DC Comics' *Elseworlds* line, in which they explore stories with DC characters in various settings, such as a Victorian-era Batman in *Gotham by Gaslight* (1989), would also merit critical attention in this discussion. However, I chose *Star Wars* and Marvel for multiple reasons. Firstly, I wanted to choose narratives that have radically different approaches to world-building and multiverses. The contrast between Marvel's comparatively permissive and playful approach and Lucasfilm's more centralized canon-management practices provides a productive framework for analyzing different modes of transmedia world-building. At the same time, it also highlights that some of these differences are often superficial, and that it is difficult for any studio to set a canon in stone in the age of the internet. Furthermore, this comparison can also demonstrate the corporate side of the phenomenon. Multiverses are inseparable from studio politics, and outside factors greatly influence the development of these narratives. While the two franchises had very different beginnings, with Marvel releasing comics since the 1940s and *Star Wars* being a film franchise that started in the 1970s, I argue that nowadays their mode of distribution is very similar, mainly due to the fact that they are both under the umbrella of Walt Disney Company. Throughout the dissertation, I will also

discuss the legal situation of these franchises in order to gain a better understanding of the way in which they have developed into their current form.

In addition to the first, introductory chapter, and the final, concluding chapter, the dissertation is separated into five main sections, all of which are further separated into sub-chapters. In the second section, I will discuss the theoretical background of the dissertation. Firstly, I will explore how multiple realities appeared in traditional speculative fiction. I argue that classical fantasy elements, such as portals and doppelgängers, play an important role in multiverse narratives. In the third section, I will discuss the media background of these narratives and how the phenomenon is connected to transmedia storytelling (Jenkins 2006a) and transfictionality (Ryan 2013). I do not intend to argue that the approaches of *Star Wars* and Marvel to storytelling and multiverses are one and the same. On the contrary, I am interested in what these two franchises with lots of common points but many radical differences at the same time can teach us about storytelling and fictional universes in the digital age. The multiverse as a framework will serve as the primary framework for understanding the transgressive nature of storytelling in the digital age. In each analysis, I will identify dichotomies that are challenged by this new form of storytelling. In the fourth section, I aim to identify the socio-cultural background of multiverse narratives and argue that the current information crisis and the rising challenges regarding artificial intelligence, fake news, and misinformation have contributed to the popularity of this form of storytelling. In this chapter, I will analyze the marketing campaign of *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021), one of the first and most successful instances of the multiverse being a driving factor in the plot of a high-budget blockbuster movie. I will argue that Marvel Studios used this new media environment consciously and built up a marketing campaign that utilizes the concept of spreadability and works similarly to conspiracy theories.

The fifth main section is fully devoted to *Star Wars*. In its first sub-chapter, I will explore the history of how it expanded from a movie into a vast transmedia narrative with several levels of canon. To contextualize this transition, I will start by comparing two databases, Disney+ and Wookieepedia. While Disney+ is a corporate-curated archive that provides direct access to movies and series in the *Star Wars* franchise to subscribers, Wookieepedia is a fan-edited encyclopedia that aims to organize all information about the franchise into one database. This comparison sheds light on the difference between fan- and corporate-interpretations of what is canonical to the narrative. In general, owners of the franchise aim for one consistent storyworld where every story element is approved specifically by a Story Group hired by the company. In contrast, fans usually create their own interpretations, often called “head-canons”, which

dismiss certain official elements while including unofficial and fan-created ones. There is no unified “fan canon”, of course, but it is rare in any franchise that the fans accept everything universally. I argue that in multiverse narratives, the binary distinction between canon and non-canon is blurred, with *Star Wars* being one of the prime examples of this phenomenon. In the sub-chapter about databases, my main subject for analysis is the series *Star Wars: The Acolyte* (2024). This series has received significant negative feedback from many fans, leading to new debates around narrative authority and canonicity (Tassi 2024b). In this sub-chapter, I utilize Roy T. Cook’s definition of canon (Cook 2013, 272) and Lesley Goodman’s observations regarding “fannish disappointment” (Goodman 2015, 664) to understand these tensions. The question of canonicity leads to the next sub-chapter of the dissertation, where I discuss the unofficial Hungarian comic book adaptations of the original *Star Wars*-trilogy. I argue that this case highlights a pre-digital case where a non-canonical, unofficial adaptation is accepted as canon by fandom. I will discuss how this adaptation differs from the official comic adaptation of *Star Wars* in terms of visual and textual content, and I will also analyze its further implications regarding fandom and alternate universes. The reason why the subject of this subchapter is particularly interesting is that it is a localized, culturally, geographically, and linguistically isolated reinterpretation of the *Star Wars* saga.

The sixth main section of the dissertation discusses Marvel. Unlike *Star Wars*, which is a franchise with constant tension between producers and fans regarding what constitutes the official part of the narrative, Marvel embraced the idea of the multiverse in movies and comic books. In most of the literature produced on this topic, authors tend to focus either on the film adaptations (Marvel Cinematic Universe/MCU) or the comics universe. However, this dissertation argues that with the current trends of media convergence, these two are not isolated from each other. Furthermore, other media forms, such as LEGO and animation, are also gaining importance. In order to demonstrate this, I am going to discuss the animated movie *Across the Spider-Verse* (2023). The LEGO scene in this movie blurs the boundary between diegetic and paratextual elements. LEGO toys have long served as ancillary products for transmedia storytelling. Their popularity inspired the creation of many video games and movies, where the main characters are replaced with LEGO figures. Furthermore, there is a vast segment of LEGO fandom, in which people create fan art and fan videos with their toys. In *Across the Spider-Verse*, the LEGO universe is shown as another realm in the multiverse. The scene featuring this universe was designed by a fourteen-year-old boy, who got noticed by the directors after uploading his own homemade animations to YouTube. In this case, LEGO, which

had been considered as a paratextual element of the movies, became integrated into the narrative. Thus, it can no longer be discussed as a separate entity from the diegesis of the movie. As such, binary distinctions, such as fan/creator and diegesis/paratext become increasingly unstable. Playing with action figures is a space where fans can transform the narrative to their own liking (Jenkins 2009). As this chapter will demonstrate, the modular nature of LEGO takes this customizable aspect even further.

In the final sub-chapter, I discuss the latest movie in the Deadpool series, *Deadpool & Wolverine* (2024). This movie features the multiverse as the central element of the plot, and I argue that it serves as a meta-commentary directed at audiences about the recent crisis of superhero movies, as well as Marvel's self-legitimation in regard to its growing monopoly in the superhero movie genre. The movie brings back various characters from older Marvel franchises from before the Marvel Cinematic Universe became the powerhouse that unifies the various franchises only to kill them off. It is accompanied by Deadpool's constant breaking of the fourth wall through his meta-monologues. The dichotomy of the diegetic world of the movie and the extra-diegetic world of the audience is blurred, and the studio uses this to justify certain recent problems regarding the franchise.

Finally, in the concluding chapter, I will assess the findings of the dissertation and discuss its further implications. Considering the vast nature of the subject discussed here, I believe there are many more examples that would merit further research. The examples in this dissertation were chosen based on their relevance to the broader subject, but the phenomena discussed here are not limited to them.

Overall, this dissertation aims to provide a new understanding of fictional universes and multiverses in the ever-changing digital/popular culture of the 21st century. By analyzing the various phenomena listed in this introduction, I attempt to identify the dichotomies in popular culture and storytelling that have been changed by this environment. The novelty of the dissertation lies in the observation that the two different understandings of the multiverse, namely the diegetic existence of alternate realities and extra-diegetic web of various adaptations, transmedia extensions, fan creations, and reinterpretations are interconnected and cannot be treated as different entities. The examples discussed in the following chapters will highlight cases where the two interact with each other. In the following sub-chapter, I will provide an overview of the two transmedia worlds or multiverses that serve as a basis to my research.

1.2. Situating the Case Studies

The *Star Wars* franchise started with the 1977 movie titled *Star Wars*, which was renamed retroactively to *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* when creator George Lucas received the green light to continue the series. Afterward, two more episodes, titled *The Empire Strikes Back* (1980) and *Return of the Jedi* (1983), were created, both of which received episode numbering in later official editions. These three movies together constitute the so-called 'original trilogy', which tells the story of Luke Skywalker, Princess Leia, and Han Solo, as they lead the rebellion against the Galactic Empire, the evil tyrant Emperor Palpatine, and his apprentice, Darth Vader, revealed to be Luke's father in *The Empire Strikes Back*. One of the biggest innovations of the trilogy was the conscious use of merchandise and ancillary materials. Lucas focused heavily on merchandising strategies through partnerships with toy companies like Kenner, which generated enormous profit and at the same time further increased the movie's popularity and engagement with audiences (Levasseur 2017).

During the release of the original trilogy, other stories were published across various forms of media. The first original *Star Wars* novel (aside from the novelization of the first movie), titled *Splinter of the Mind's Eye* (1978), written by Alan Dean Foster, was published in 1978, and served as a sequel to the original movie. In the meantime, Marvel Comics published a comic series titled *Star Wars* (1977-1986), which told the story of the main characters between the events of *Star Wars* and *The Empire Strikes Back*. These were followed by Brian Daley's *Han Solo Adventures* (1979-1980) novels and L. Neil Smith's *Adventures of Lando Calrissian* (1983) book trilogy (Proctor and Freeman 2016, 223).

The time between 1985 and 1991, which marked an era of pause in *Star Wars* publishing, is known among fans as the "dark age" (Proctor and Freeman 2016, 223). However, in 1991, Bantam Spectra, the science fiction imprint of Bantam Books, published *Heir to the Empire*, a *Star Wars* novel by Timothy Zahn. The story of this novel was set in the years after the events of the original trilogy, and continued the story of Luke, Leia, and Han. It introduced several major characters, including the imperial warlord Grand Admiral Thrawn, who became one of the most popular non-filmic *Star Wars* characters. *Heir to the Empire* was a resounding success and was followed by two sequels: *Dark Force Rising* (1992) and *The Last Command* (1993). These books, collectively known among fans as the *Thrawn Trilogy*, reinvigorated public interest in the *Star Wars* universe, and their success led to the publishing of a wide variety of *Star Wars* novels by Bantam. These books, alongside the *Star Wars* comics published by Dark Horse Comics, started the vast universe that would become known as the Expanded Universe

(EU) (Proctor 2018, 58). In the following two decades, many novels, comics, animated movies, and video games were released that became part of the EU. However, as the chapter about narrative authority will demonstrate, this Expanded Universe was not a unified entity and there had been many debates over the canonicity of its items. In 2014, Lucasfilm announced that it would render the entire EU non-canon in order to create space for the then-upcoming movies and their ancillary materials. The chapter about *Star Wars: The Acolyte* (2014) is included specifically to present a case study where the Expanded Universe and the official canon clash. This case can help us understand whether these new adaptations and expansion can be regarded as separate alternate universes in the *Star Wars* transfiction (Ryan 2013), or they are just byproducts of corporate politics. The chapter about the Hungarian *Star Wars* comics by Attila Fazekas is also related to this issue. It presents an alternate interpretation of the original trilogy, one which is confined linguistically and geographically to one specific segment of *Star Wars* fandom. It also serves as a counterpoint to the main concept of the dissertation, showing that the phenomena discussed here are not tied intrinsically to the digital age. All these examples highlight the fluidity of what we understand as canon. In Cook's definition, canon in transmedia fiction the set of stories that are privileged within the narrative in comparison to other, non-canonical ones (Cook 2013, 272). These are often determined by the owner or producer of the transmedia franchise. However, Jenkins argues that while some transmedia texts make the author the arbiter of canonicity, others celebrate the multiplicity of stories, which creates space for fan-created content (Jenkins 2011). The examples in my dissertation also challenge the authoritative canon in various ways, and highlight canon as a fluid entity influenced by various different factors.

While Marvel's inception was very different from that of *Star Wars*, both franchises have evolved into two similar shared film universes under the umbrella of Walt Disney Company. The first ever comic released by the company, known as Timely Comics at the time, was published in 1939. It was titled *Marvel Comics*, and it featured the first appearance of some important Marvel characters, such as Namor and the original Human Torch (not to be confused with the *Fantastic Four* character of the same name). Two years later, in 1941, the first issue of *Captain America Comics* was published, featuring the first appearance of Captain America. More than 80 years later, Captain America is still one of the cornerstones of Marvel Comics. However, true success came in the early 1960s, known as the "Silver Age" of comics (Genter 2007, 953), when Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and Steve Ditko created iconic characters like *Spider-Man*, the *Fantastic Four*, the *Hulk*, and *Iron Man*. They were created during one of the lowest

points of American comics sales, mainly due to the Comics Code Authority, which greatly restricted the content allowed on the pages of comics. They reinvented superheroes by making them more grounded, focusing more on their everyday lives and problems (Genter 2007, 954). These comics were created for teenagers and young adults, unlike the more mature horror and pulp comics against which the Comics Code Authority was created.

Over time, superhero stories have also matured, especially as the CCA became more relaxed. By the 1970s, these comics were portraying issues such as death, illness, drug abuse, and depression. Despite these changes, the comics continued the same narrative continuity that started in the 1960s. As of the writing of this dissertation, the ongoing major titles at Marvel Comics continue the same story started in the early comics, making the overarching Marvel narrative arguably the longest continuous work of fiction ever created (Wolk 2021, 1). However, many alternate versions of its characters have been released, such as *Spider-Man 2099* (1992-), a futuristic version of *Spider-Man* and *Marvel 1602* (2003), which puts Marvel heroes into the Elizabethan era. Furthermore, Marvel started the Ultimate Marvel imprint in the 2000s with series such as *Ultimate Spider-Man* (2000) and *Ultimate X-Men* (2001), which rebooted the stories of these characters in a modern environment. Therefore, while the original mainline Marvel is still ongoing continuously, there are multiple versions of its characters running parallel in various comic series. As major crossover events like *Spider-Verse* (2014) and *Secret Wars* (2015) have shown, these alternate universes are all parts of the same ecosystem and are traversable by characters instead of being fully isolated entities.

Adaptations across various media, like films, series, and video games add another layer of complexity to this ecosystem. For example, the movie *Spider-Man* (2002) is not a direct adaptation of any comic storyline. Instead, it presents its own take on the character's origin story, with certain characters and elements borrowed from the source material. In the original comics, Peter Parker uses a self-made web-shooter device to shoot spiderwebs. However, in the movie, he receives the ability to shoot webs from his wrist after the spider bite. In superhero media, these adaptations are treated as alternate universes. This aligns with Jenkins's theory of multiplicity, where he argues that the logic of multiplicity replaces strict continuity in superhero franchises (Jenkins 2009).

It was not until the launch of the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) with *Iron Man* (2008) that a shared movie universe was created in which characters like Iron Man, Thor, and Captain America could star in their own movies and then team up in crossovers. However, narrative decisions have often been overwritten by outside factors like franchise acquisitions, celebrity

scandals, and studio decisions. For example, Spider-Man could only join the Marvel Cinematic Universe in 2016, eight years after the inception of the universe, due to Sony Pictures owning the filmic rights of the character. The Spider-Man of the MCU, played by Tom Holland, is a completely rebooted version of the character, different from other iterations played by Tobey Maguire and Andrew Garfield in previous movies. After the introduction of the multiverse in Marvel movies, such as in the animated movie *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018) and in the live-action movie *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021), Jenkins's distinction between multiplicity and continuity became blurred. The multiverse is an in-universe narrative tool, while, at the same time, also draws on the intertextuality of these different adaptations to establish the impact of the appearance of returning characters. In the LEGO scene of *Across the Spider-Verse* (2023), the aesthetic and stylistic aspects of LEGO are used consciously. The multiverse is used to elevate LEGO from a parodistic satellite product to an alternate universe of the same value as movies or comics. The fact that it is fan-made also reframes the relationship between creators and fans, which is an important point in Jenkins's concept of multiplicity (Jenkins 2009). Afterward, the chapter about *Deadpool & Wolverine* (2024) provides an example in which creators actively reflect on the chaos of the multiverse and use it as a meta-commentary of studio politics.

Although the dissertation is going to explore both the narrative, in-universe side of the multiverse, and the transmedia, intertextual side of it, I argue that these two are inseparable in franchises like *Star Wars* and Marvel. As the dissertation will argue, the two factors are intertwined, and have a complementary relationship with each other. The examples chosen for the analyses also reflect on this.

Chapter 2. Multiple Realities

Although multiverse narratives are generally viewed as products of the modern entertainment industry, I argue that many of their storytelling elements are deeply rooted in traditional fantasy fiction. An interplay between these fantasy elements and new media provides creators with new tools for storytelling. If we look back at ancient times, even mythological heroes and gods had multiple different versions, often influenced by how the stories were transmitted. Oral tradition had a significant impact on mythological stories. With the appearance of writing, "texts become fixed, the idea of integrity of fictional worlds gains strength. Individual versions of a story gain authoritative status, becoming canonical" (Domsch 2012, 106). In this sense, it can be argued that storytelling in the digital world represents, in some aspects, a return to this ancient tradition. While digital platforms do not produce multiverses, they enable them by providing audiences an efficient outlet to create, archive, and negotiate content in transmedia franchises. As a result, I argue that canon in popular media franchises is a fluid entity shaped by a wide variety of factors.

In my view, multiverse narratives have two important pillars. The first pillar is the existence of alternate realities in the fictional ontology of the narrative. The second one is the extensive use of transmediality and the existence of various adaptations that shape our engagement with the fictional world(s). This notion is also reinforced by Matt Hills, who points out that there is both a text-oriented and an audience-oriented understanding of the multiverse (Hills 2024, 70). In this dissertation, I will devote a theoretical section to each of the two as I aim to approach the subject from two different perspectives. Firstly, I will discuss the role and characteristics of alternate universes in speculative fiction. Secondly, I will map the multimedia and transmedia aspects of multiverse narratives. Ultimately, I aim to develop a theoretical framework which I can use to further investigate multiverse narratives in the following chapters.

2.1. The Secondary World: Mythopoesis, and Sub-Creation

If one is to embark on the perilous journey of defining fictional universes, it is important to start by reaching back to one of the earliest and most influential scholarly accounts of fantastic storytelling: J. R. R. Tolkien's essay, "On Fairy-Stories". Initially delivered as a university lecture in 1939, it was first published in print in 1947 and has been re-released multiple times. In this essay, Tolkien discusses world-creation and mythopoesis. As the creator behind the vast and detailed storyworld of Middle-Earth, he outlines the basic principles of fantasy fiction and sub-creation. He argues that "in such "fantasy", as it is called, new form is made; Faerie begins;

Man becomes a sub-creator" (Tolkien 1997, 122). Sub-creation happens when humans imitate the power of God by creating a secondary world through language as the primary tool.

Tolkien identifies four main criteria for modern mythologies: fantasy, recovery, escape, and consolation (Tolkien 1997, 138). Fantasy refers to the construction of alternate worlds using the author's imagination. This Secondary World should come with an "inner consistency of reality" (140). This means that even if it contains fantastic elements, this world should be constructed in a way that makes the existence of these elements believable. He gives the example of the "green sun" for this phenomenon: "To make a Secondary World inside which the green sun will be credible, commanding Secondary Belief, will probably require labour and thought, and will certainly demand a special skill, a kind of elvish craft" (140). Verlyn Flieger argues that the grounded approach of Tolkien's works played a huge part in their popularity. She claims that "Tolkien's "fantasy" is both attractive and powerful not because of its fantasy but because of its reality, because his world shows us that things are "so" in our own world" (Flieger 1999, 7).

This realistic approach sets Tolkien apart from the great romantic poets, such as Samuel Taylor Coleridge, who advocated for the "willing suspension of disbelief" (Sammons 2009, 119-120). Tolkien calls for a type of storytelling where the details and rules make readers believe in the existence of this world without a suspension of disbelief. His works in the Middle-Earth Legendarium contain detailed accounts of the history, geography, cultures, and languages of his world. While most of these are included in his novels and their appendices, other details were revealed by him in other forms of media: poems, drawings, maps, and even private correspondence. His attention to detail is a cornerstone of Tolkien fandom. This is why there have been a lot of negative responses to newer releases, such as Amazon's *Rings of Power* (2022-) series, that attempted to expand on the storyworld in some form.

However, it is important to acknowledge that even in his life, Tolkien created various versions of his stories and was often indecisive regarding the final canonical version. For example, the compilation *Beren and Lúthien* (2017) contains multiple editions of the eponymous story. The "definitive" version of Tolkien's canon can be greatly attributed to the editing of his son, Christopher Tolkien. Therefore, even in the case of a prolific author like Tolkien, who put huge emphasis on the diegetic details of his storyworld, we can raise the question whether we can consider him the sole author of the Middle-Earth Legendarium.

In this context, defining what world-building and diegesis mean is also important. For this, While Denis Mellier's work focuses on comic book universes, his definition remains useful to this thesis' understanding of the concept:

> The time and space – but also topography, architecture, climate, history, the list of inhabitants according to various degrees of coherence, consistence or completeness, and, in some cases, even languages – compose what theory and poetics call *diegesis*. But when watching movies like *The Matrix*, *The Truman Show*, or *TRON*, or when reading comics like *Wormwood*, *The Authority*, *Fables*, *Academy Umbrella* (sic!), or *The League of Extraordinary Gentlemen*, readers quite pragmatically call the diegetical content of fiction a world. We particularly need to name it so when the fictional world represents in itself the co-existence of several different worlds. (Mellier 2017, 307-308)

Through the act of world-building, the author constructs the diegesis of the story. In Tolkien's case, characters like Gollum and Aragorn, locations like the Shire and Mordor, and languages such as Sindarin and Quenya all constitute part of the Middle-Earth Legendarium's diegesis. Therefore, when he describes historical events, characters, or settings in Middle-Earth, he performs world-building. However, even in his case, diegesis and the outside world are not fully separated. In later parts of my dissertation, I will discuss how multiverse narratives put this "coherence" and "consistence" of fantasy universes mentioned in Mellier's definition (Mellier 2017, 307) into question. Yet, even in the case of a classic example like Tolkien, it cannot be considered as fully coherent narrative setting. As Gergely Nagy observes, "it is evident that Tolkien more and more emphatically thought of his works as *texts within the fictional world*, and that he regarded this "duplication of texts" as centrally important to the effect he wished to achieve" (Nagy 2014, 112). This gives *The Hobbit*, *The Lord of the Rings*, and *The Silmarillion* a frame story in which these works constitute parts of the imaginary *Red Book of Westmarch*. Thus, making Tolkien, who positions himself as the translator of the texts written by Frodo and Bilbo, an unreliable narrator. Therefore, in the case of Tolkien's world, there is no clear boundary between the diegesis of the narrative and the real world.

The second principle of fantastic storytelling in Tolkien's view is recovery (Tolkien 1997, 145). Our experience with the Secondary World helps us see the real world through a fresh new perspective, gaining newfound appreciation for everyday objects (146). For Tolkien, this contained a moral dimension, something that is not necessarily present in the case of modern corporate-produced transmedia franchises.

The third criterion of fantastic storytelling is "escape" (Tolkien 1997, 148). Escapism is often used as a negative term. It usually refers to people who immerse themselves in video games or fantasy universes to escape from real life. However, Tolkien regarded escaping as a noble act, which involves escaping from the mundane reality of everyday life. He argues that critics of escapism confuse "the Escape of the Prisoner with the Flight of the Deserter" (Tolkien 1997, 148). In the case of modern transmedia franchises, such as *Star Wars* and the Marvel Cinematic Universe, we can observe that they provide an inexhaustible source for escapism. The amount of content released facilitates maintaining constant engagement with the storyworld. For example, one can spend years studying the history of various planets in the *Star Wars* universe, or one can also indulge in various encyclopedia books that explain the inner workings of spaceships.

Tolkien's final criterion for fantastic storytelling is eucatastrophe, described as the "consolation of fairy-stories, the joy of the happy ending: or more correctly of the good catastrophe, the sudden joyous turn" (Tolkien 1997, 153). Eucatastrophe is present in his works, most notably in *The Lord of the Rings*, when the eagles arrive to save Frodo and Sam from the Mount Doom after they destroy the One Ring. Although this concept can also be present in individual installations of vast transmedia narratives, like the ending of *The Return of Jedi* (1983) in *Star Wars* or *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the serialized nature of these narratives prevents them from having one final cathartic turn. To maintain audience engagement, it is often expected that new installations be more grandiose than the previous ones. For example, in the case of *Return of the Jedi*, Darth Vader's turn against Emperor Palpatine to save his son could be regarded as a moment of eucatastrophe. However, can we truly view it as eucatastrophe, if the first installment of the sequel trilogy, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015) features the rise of an even more potent imperial force and the sudden creation a Starkiller Base, a weapon far larger than even the Second Death Star?

Overall, we can observe that while some of Tolkien's ideas regarding world-building still stand, the entertainment industry has moved on from others. His meticulous attention to detail is one of the main factors in which he influenced modern storytelling. However, even in the case of his works, we can ask the question whether he can be considered the sole creator of Middle-Earth. For example, Björn Sundmark argues that "transmedia storytelling is all about piecing together, adding to, embellishing, editing, transforming, and translating" (Sundmark 2020, 117). He analyzes the Tove Jansson's Swedish picture book adaptations of *The Hobbit* and argues that these works can also be viewed as part of the transmediation process of Tolkien's

universe. Peter Jackson's cinematic visualization of Middle-Earth in the movie trilogy is often cited as the "one vision to rule us all" (130), but exploring other visual representations can counter this notion. Especially since, as Sundmark argues, "Tolkien wanted illustrations of fantasy to be stylized and symbolic: they should evoke ideas and emotions and point to something beyond themselves" (Sundmark 2020, 128). This notion is also echoed by Sammons, who claims that "Tolkien advocates allowing readers to "see" a scene and then provide their own interpretation" (Sammons 2009, 134). Both Sundmark and Sammons agree that Tolkien did not want one "definite" illustration for his works, he wanted audiences to have their own interpretations. In Sundmark's case study, Tove Jansson's illustrations provided Swedish audiences with a stylized and abstract representation of Middle-Earth that also "stresses the horror aspect" (Sundmark 2020, 128). Therefore, we can argue that representations, and as a result, interpretations of transmedia universes can be different across various communities, even countries in certain cases.

2.2. The Portal: Crossing Through Boundaries

Tolkien's concepts of the Secondary World and sub-creation have become important cornerstones of our understanding of fantasy storytelling and world-building. His terms are still used to this day, and there is a lot of research building on his ideas. Tolkien also had a crucial role in the acceptance of fantasy as a legitimate literary genre instead of something that is aimed at children. However, as he first delivered "On Fairy-Stories" in 1939, more than eighty years before the writing of this dissertation, it is understandable that it is no longer the primary tool for academic discussions about fantasy universes. Especially as fantasy and science-fiction narratives have also changed a lot during these decades, and the development of digital media has left its mark on them. In this section, I will discuss some of the newer approaches towards fictional universes. I will start with an important element that has remained central to all kinds of fantastic stories: the portal. As I mentioned earlier, alternate universes are one of the main foci of my dissertation. Portals allow the characters to travel between these universes, leading to various new situations. Later parts of my dissertation will demonstrate that they also get a new role in multiverse narratives: they help characters cross boundaries between forms of media; between the diegetic world of the movies and paratexts; and even between the diegesis and the audience.

Farah Mendlesohn outlines four types of fantasy: portal-quest, immersive, intrusion, liminal (Mendlesohn 2008, xix-xxiii). These four categories were chosen based on the

relationship between the real world and the fantastic realm. The first type is the portal-quest fantasy, in which "a character leaves her familiar surroundings and passes through a portal into an unknown place" (1). There are many classic examples of portal-quest fantasy in literature, such as *The Chronicles of Narnia* (1950-1956) by C. S. Lewis and *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland* (1865) by Lewis Carroll. The portal through which the characters enter another world can be a literal portal or some other magical object. For example, in Marvel movies, portals opened by the sorcerer Dr. Strange often serve as gateways to alternate universes. Meanwhile, in the aforementioned two literary works, the portals are replaced by different objects. In *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe* (1950) by Lewis, the wardrobe functions as the portal through which characters from the real world enter the mystical realm of Narnia. In *Alice's Adventures in Wonderland*, Alice is taken to Wonderland after she follows the White Rabbit down a rabbit hole. We can name a myriad of other examples, like the 9¾ Platform in J. K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series (1997-2007) or the Bifröst bridge in Norse mythology, the point remains the same. On the one hand, there is the realm of mortals, which is usually identical or at least very similar to our real world. On the other hand, there is the mystical, "perilous" realm (Tolkien 1997, 122), which is inhabited by supernatural creatures, and is governed by the forces of magic. In portal-quest fantasy, travel between these two is facilitated by the portal.

Mendlesohn's second category is the immersive fantasy, which is "a fantasy set in a world built so that it functions on all levels as a complete world" (Mendlesohn 2008, 59). Tolkien's Middle-Earth Legendarium is a classic example of immersive fantasy. In immersive fantasy, world-building with close attention to detail becomes an essential element. As I explained earlier through Tolkien's example of the green sun (Tolkien 1997, 140), while this fantasy does not have to be realistic at all, there must be inner rules that make this world feel real. As such, Mendlesohn views modern immersive fantasy as a "rediscovery of the reality of the fantastic, and with it a set of ways to express that belief" (Mendlesohn 2008, 61). Taking all of this into account, *Star Wars* can also be viewed as a prime example of immersive fantasy. Through its various transmedia (Jenkins 2006a, 95-96) extensions, *Star Wars* has built up a highly detailed storyworld. Spaceships, like X-wing starfighters or TIE-fighters have detailed technical descriptions in various encyclopedias. Minor background characters, such as the aliens in the Mos Eisley cantina or Imperial officers have their complete backstories shaped out in novels. This meticulous development of the storyworld, which indeed makes it highly immersive, has contributed greatly to its persistent popularity.

Immersive world-building also enables political reading. Well-constructed fantasy universes can provide metaphorical commentary on real-life political systems. In Mark Bould's and Sherryl Vint's view, imagination in fantasy literature can serve as a tool for social change (Bould and Vint 2012, 107).

> Within Mendlesohn's scheme, the immersive is perhaps the type of fantasy most amenable to political readings. If done skillfully, the construction of an entire other world in which to set the narrative – often working out detailed maps, charts, languages, lineages and bestiaries – focuses the reader's attention on the necessary interdependence, and radical contingency, of its elements. (Bould and Vint 2012, 107)

The third category of fantasy outlined by Mendlesohn is the intrusion fantasy, in which "the world is ruptured by the intrusion, which disrupts normality and has to be negotiated with or defeated, sent back whence it came, or controlled" (Mendlesohn 2008, 115). We can see that multiverse narratives can fit into multiple categories. *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022) can be considered a portal-quest fantasy (Mendlesohn 2008, 1), as the main characters travel to various universes through portals. Meanwhile, in *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021), the universe of the main characters is visited by villains from other universes who must be sent back. In its more traditional sense, intrusion fantasies feature otherworldly beings who enter our reality.

The fourth and final type of fantasy in Mendlesohn's categorization is the liminal fantasy, which "estranges the reader from the fantastic as seen and described by the protagonist" (Mendlesohn 2008, 182). Sándor Klapcsik argues that authors of liminal fantasy, such as Terry Pratchett and Neil Gaiman, can potentially threaten Tolkien's position in the center of contemporary fantasy canon (Klapcsik 2008, 317). Liminal fantasy has no clear boundaries (Mendlesohn 2008, 183). Neil Gaiman often endows various everyday objects with mystical properties in his works. For example, in *The Ocean at the End of the Lane* (2013), he turns a small pond in a backyard into an "ocean" that serves as a gateway between the real world and the fairy realm. This can be interpreted literally, or simply as the product of the main character's imagination. Gaiman often places his characters into oneiric environments, his main characters are often children, and his narrators are unreliable. This gives his works an open-endedness, giving the readers the opportunity to interpret them as dreams or figments of imagination. As Irina Rata argues, "he bends space and time for the purpose of his plots" (Rata 2016, 112), creating an alternate world where social issues are discussed within the context of these

"impossible topologies" (Rata 2016, 112). I argue that this postmodern blurring of clear-cut boundaries in dichotomies like reality/imagination and reality/dream is a significant shift from the detailed Tolkienesque planning of fictional universes. In later case studies, I will argue that this liminality is not only ontological but also performative: characters like Deadpool use it to create humor and provide critical commentary about the franchise.

As I will explain later in my dissertation, blurring boundaries is a recurring trend in multiverse narratives. As such, there is a certain irony in attempting to categorize them. Mendlesohn herself acknowledges at the beginning of her book that she does not aim to define fantasy, she simply aims to provide critical tools (Mendlesohn 2008, xiii). Multiverse narratives have aspects that make them eligible for all of these categories in one way or another. They are liminal in the sense that dual boundaries, such as reality and imagination or reality and dream become fluid. At the same time, they also have the potential to transgress other categories, such as diegetic/nondiegetic, author/audience, or the various forms of media. The analyses in this dissertation all aim to highlight some of these transgressions in order to demonstrate how multiverse narratives differ from what we traditionally regard as transmedia world-building and storytelling.

2.3. Other Worlds

Alain Boillat identifies seven types of "other worlds" in film (Boillat 2022, 130). It is important to point out that in his typology, the term "multiverse" is applied to all kinds of narratives that involve the crossing between multiple realities. He ranks these worlds "in an ascending order according to the impact the collective imagination linked to digital technology has on the process of world-building" (131). The first two categories he identifies are "Distant Worlds" (132) and "Artificial Worlds" (135). Out of the seven worlds outlined in his categorization, he does not consider these two multiverses. Yet, as he argues, they share important characteristics, therefore they merit attention in this discussion. In the first category, the characters travel to a distant place. This can be an alien planet or a lost world like Atlantis. Meanwhile, the second category places the plot in an artificial place, such as a film setting, prison, or maze. As we can see, neither of these involve the crossing of dimensions or alternate realities. They take the characters and place them in a setting that is found in their own reality but is different from their usual environment.

We can find numerous examples for both categories in both *Star Wars* and the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Interstellar travel is one of the major plot elements in *Star Wars*. Although

Earth does not exist (or at least is never referenced) in *Star Wars*, there is a wide variety of different biomes, such as desert planets (Tatooine, Geonosis), swamps (Naboo, Dagobah), or ice planets (Hoth). In most cases, the plot is influenced by environmental factors, and the protagonists and antagonists are forced to accommodate themselves to these factors. Meanwhile, Marvel's *Guardians of the Galaxy* trilogy (2014, 2017, 2023) is set in a universe where Earth exists, but the characters travel to alien planets. In both instances (*Star Wars* and Marvel), alien planets have their own distinct people, cultures, and general characteristics. These are usually threatened by an intergalactic empire (the Galactic Empire in *Star Wars* and Thanos in *Guardians of the Galaxy*) that aims to enslave and assimilate them. The peoples of these planets usually strike an alliance with the main protagonists and use their own characteristic methods of fighting the uniformized villains.

The second type of world is also present in both franchises. *Star Wars* often includes stories where the main characters must infiltrate artificial environments, such as spaceships and space stations. The most notable example is the original *Star Wars* (1977), where a huge part of the movie features the protagonists trying to rescue Princess Leia from the Death Star. In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the series *WandaVision* (2021) is the most interesting example. In this story, the characters are trapped in an idyllic American small town full of references to 80s and 90s television series. This "fake" world is created by the superhero/sorceress Scarlet Witch as an unconscious response to the traumatic events in her life, including the death of her love, the android Vision. The sitcom references serve as a nostalgic retreat to her childhood memories, and the inhabitants of the town are forced to act as supporting characters. This creates a *Truman Show*-like world, where no one knows what is happening. However, unlike the technology-based settings of *Star Wars*, the small town in *WandaVision* is driven by magic and illusion, making it a crossover between Boillat's second and fourth categories.

The third type of world in Boillat's system, "The Supernatural World" (Boillat 2022, 140) is the first one that involves the crossing of boundaries of multiple realities. It is most prevalent in horror, specifically in ghost stories, and usually features the dichotomic existence of the real world and an underworld/beyond. The concept exists in *Star Wars*, with the Force Ghosts of Jedi, who come back from the dead to guide the living. In Marvel, the Ancestral Plane is visited by the titular character in *Black Panther* (2018), where he gains his powers from his dead ancestors.

The fourth type is the "Mental World" (Boillat 2022, 141). It refers to narratives where the story takes place in the subjective mind of a character, in the form of visions, dreams, or

hallucinations. In *The Empire Strikes Back*, when Luke Skywalker enters the Dark Side Cave on Dagobah, he fights an illusion of Darth Vader, with his own face revealed after damaging Vader's mask with his lightsaber. In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the *WandaVision* series features a town where all inhabitants live in an illusion. So, while this town is a physical place created by a character in the diegetic world of the series, the characters inside live under the effect of a magical illusion. Therefore, it can fit into both the second and fourth categories.

The fifth category outlined by Boillat is the "Alternate (Story)Worlds" (Boillat 2022, 148). He highlights that this category consciously uses the concept of the multiverse. However, instead of world-building like science fiction and fantasy universes, it is used as a narrative tool. It serves as an artistic device for the exploration of character development or certain narrative concepts. Despite the presence of the multiverse, these stories are relatively self-contained. I identify this category as the point where the two franchises diverge. Marvel uses this concept as a major driving force in its stories. For example, the 2021 animated series *What If...?* explores a variety of alternate scenarios, such as Peggy Carter getting the super-soldier serum and becoming Captain Britain instead of Steve Rogers becoming Captain America. Although these scenarios intersect in the final episode of the first season, where the main characters from each alternate universe team up against a villain, the series itself remains self-contained. *Star Wars* also has similar retellings, such as the *Star Wars Infinities* (2002-2004) comic series, which presents alternate scenarios from the original trilogy like Luke Skywalker missing the mark on the reactor shaft of the Death Star, and *Star Wars: Rebuild the Galaxy* (2024-2025) a LEGO animated series, where the removal of a Jedi relic creates an alternate timeline. As I will demonstrate later in my analysis of *Across the Spider-Verse* (2023), this is not the only case where the modularity and variability of LEGO bricks is used as a metaphor for the infinite possibilities of the multiverse. Despite these examples, *Star Wars* has mainly avoided elements like time travel and alternate realities in its narrative. Both in George Lucas's era and in the period after he sold Lucasfilm to Disney, the studios have held a firm grip over canonicity in the franchise. There is little space for experimentation and alternate scenarios in the *Star Wars* universe. For example, at the time of its release, the *Star Wars Infinities* series was included in the non-canon category (Proctor and Freeman 2016, 233). Despite this, while the multiverse is never mentioned explicitly or used as a plot point, I argue that the various incarnations of the narrative through adaptations, fanfiction, and reboots have created a multiverse.

The sixth category in Boillat's list is "Parallel Worlds" (Boillat 2022, 154). These stories usually present worlds that "exist simultaneously, while being mutually accessible and

ontologically distinct" (Boillat 2022, 155). There is a way to pass into the other world, usually in the form of a portal. In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the realm of Asgard, a futuristic version of the famous setting of Scandinavian mythology, can be accessed through the Bifrost Bridge. Although *Star Wars* usually avoids concepts like portals and teleportation, we can still find some examples in the saga. In one of the episodes of the animated series *Star Wars: Rebels* (2014-2018), titled "A World Between Worlds", the characters unearth an ancient portal which leads to a mystical plane.

The final category in Boillat's categorization is "Virtual Worlds" (Boillat 2022, 155). Stories with virtual worlds usually feature some kind of augmented or virtual reality, with the most notable example being the *Matrix* franchise. While in some cases it can be achieved through technology, it can also be created by magic or some form of enchantment in others. For example, in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, in *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (2019), Spider-Man's villain Mysterio uses augmented reality technology to create illusions to fight Spider-Man. Meanwhile, in *Star Wars*, characters use the Force to deceive their enemies. In *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017), Luke Skywalker creates a projection of himself through the Force to fight the villain Kylo Ren and win time for the main protagonists. In the episode titled "Overlords" of the animated series *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* (2008-2014), the main characters arrive on a mysterious plane where the Force manifests itself through three characters: the Father, the Son, and the Daughter.

These seven categories and their examples show us that multiverses can manifest themselves in various forms, even within the context of *Star Wars* or the Marvel Cinematic Universe. However, as I mentioned earlier, multiverse narratives often overlap traditional categorizations. Combining Boillat's categories with other systems, such as the one proposed by Mendlesohn, can give us a more accurate tool for their analysis.

2.4. The Doppelgänger

Portals are popular elements in multiverse narratives that serve as tools for characters (and writers) to navigate between various alternate universes. However, they are not the only elements borrowed from classical fantasy. The doppelgänger or the double, which is another cornerstone of multiverse narratives, is a common character type in popular fiction. It usually represents a dark, twisted version of the main character. However, the doppelgänger is not necessarily a direct mirror of the main character.

> In reading prose fiction it is not uncommon to discover that the double is a literary, and specifically a fictional, device for articulating the experience of self-division. Its variations in prose fiction most often include the phantasmal duplication of the individual, through likeness of affinity; and the division of a personality, by fantastic or rationally inexplicable means, or through the opposition or complementarity of separate characters who can be looked upon as different aspects of a sundered whole. (Živković 2000, 122)

In many cases, the doppelgänger amplifies one of the negative traits of the main protagonist. In *The Lord of the Rings*, Gollum represents the evil side of Frodo Baggins. During his quest to destroy the One Ring in the fires of the Mount Doom, Frodo gets increasingly under the evil influence of the Ring. He starts developing a psychological obsession with it, refuses to hand it over to Samwise Gamgee, and even starts hesitating when the moment comes to toss it into the fire. During their quest to the Mountain of Doom, the hobbits are led by Gollum, one of the previous owners of the Ring. The Ring had spent centuries in possession of Gollum, turning him into a twisted, obsessive shell of what he originally had been. Although the hobbits are suspicious regarding the hidden motivations of Gollum, Frodo spares his life multiple times and lets him join them in their journey. Nicoleta Popa Blanariu and Dan Popa interpret this relationship between Frodo and Gollum in a Jungian sense, arguing that "the trickster (the opponent) is only the reflection of the shadow being – the dark but hidden side of the hero himself" (Popa Blanariu and Popa 2018, 448).

While we usually associate doppelgängers with evilness, there are also doubles that are not antagonists. Živković, who argues that the double "is defined as evil precisely because of its difference and a possible disturbance to the familiar and the known" (Živković 2000, 124). I have already discussed the liminal and intrusive nature of multiverse narratives. This possible disturbance mentioned by Živković is indeed and important feature in them. The arrival of a person or a creature from an alternate universe disturbs the order of nature. In *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021), villains from other *Spider-Man* series, such as Willem Dafoe's Green Goblin and Jamie Foxx's Electro, enter the Marvel Cinematic Universe through the multiverse, causing significant disruption. Following the death of his aunt May, alternate versions of Spider-Man arrive to console Peter Parker. At the end of the movie, the main character, Tom Holland's Spider-Man attempts to kill the Green Goblin as an act of revenge. However, he is stopped by another universe's Spider-Man, portrayed by Tobey Maguire. This movie is a classic example of benevolent doppelgängers that contribute to the character development of the protagonist.

In other cases, the villain is an identical, but evil version of the main character. This is a particularly common trope in Marvel movies. Even in the first Marvel Cinematic Universe movie, *Iron Man* (2008), the Iron Monger uses the titular character's own armor to stop him. Interestingly, as Ezra Claverie argues, the recurring "melodrama" of stories involving the copying of the hero's superpower "not only reflects the comics duopoly's dependence on the expropriation and control of intellectual property but also reflects the imperatives of Hollywood studios to sacralize IP, demonize illicit copying, and revise the law in favor of their business models" (Claverie 2024, 33). In other words, in Claverie's reading, these doppelgänger characters represent the studio's fears regarding the copying of their intellectual property. Although I argue that there are also other factors at play, some of which I will mention in later parts of this dissertation, Claverie makes some really important observations. The story of these movies is often influenced by industry factors. Multiverse narratives, especially in big-budget franchises like Marvel, can use the multiverse as a narrative device to transfer characters from one intellectual property to another. In *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021), the alternate versions of Spider-Man, played by Tobey Maguire and Andrew Garfield, whose filmic characters belong to Sony Pictures legally and not the Walt Disney Company or Marvel, become part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe through the multiverse. Deadpool and Wolverine had previously been owned by 20th Century Fox and thus had been part of the 20th Century Fox *X-Men* universe. However, after Marvel's acquisition of the company and all its related IPs in 2019, *Deadpool & Wolverine* (2024) moved these characters into the MCU while also presenting a satirical and symbolic showdown with other non-MCU Marvel characters. The point that I am trying to make with these examples is that the presence of doppelgängers in multiverse is often influenced heavily by industry factors.

Dennis Kogel and Iris Schäfer identify five categories of doppelgängers in science fiction: clones, artificial intelligence, time travel, parallel universes, and virtual identities (Kogel and Schäfer 2011). The first category, clones, which they define as "an exact genetic replica of a living creature that exists independently of the original and usually with an agency of its own" (Kogel and Schäfer 2011, 127) is one of the most common types of the double in science fiction. They explain that a single clone, usually found in Gothic stories, can represent a dark mirror to the original character. When there is a multitude of clones, like in *Star Wars*, they are used as soldiers. As Kogel and Schäfer put it, "they are not encouraged to develop an identity of their own, and their identical bodies reflect their identical functions and absence of a self" (Kogel and Schäfer 2011, 127). However, a search for identity can be one of the central elements of

stories featuring clones. For example, in the animated series *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* (2008-2014), one of the main points of the series is the clones' attempts to forge their own identities. They were originally created in laboratories from the DNA of the headhunter Jango Fett to serve as soldiers to the Galactic Republic. Although they are originally given serial numbers, the series feature numerous characters, such as Captain Rex, Fives, Wolffe, and Echo, who develop their own identities through nicknames, tattoos, hairstyles, armor paints, and other forms of self-identification. Some of these characters became so popular that they appeared in further transmedia *Star Wars* entries. For example, in *Star Wars: Rebels* (2014-2018) older versions of Rex, Wolffe, and Gregor appear to help the main characters. The animated series *Star Wars: The Bad Batch* (2021-2024) features Clone Force 99, a group of rogue clones who have various irregular attributes, hence the nickname Bad Batch.

We can observe a similar phenomenon in the case of Marvel's *Clone Saga* (1994-1996), an extended crossover storyline across multiple *Spider-Man* titles, which features the appearance of Peter Parker's clones. Over time, these clones develop their own personalities, distinct from that of Parker. Similarly to the case of the clones in *Star Wars*, some of them, such as Ben Reilly (The Scarlet Spider) and Kaine Parker have either received their own series or had extensive guest appearances in others.

The type of doppelgänger in Kogel's and Schäfer's categorization which has the most relevance to this dissertation is the doppelgänger from parallel universes, which "shows us the potential for personal development that lies within us" (Kogel and Schäfer 2011, 133). They compare it to another type, the dystopian future self. They argue that the version from parallel universes, unlike dystopian future doppelgängers, has not been altered by events happening between its present state and the present of the other version it visits. Instead, it "has diverged from the "original" from birth onwards by being brought up in a different society and under different circumstances" (133). This is the type of doppelgänger is an important narrative device in many Marvel movies nowadays. As Rob McLaughlin argues, "the inclusion of an alternative or variant as a narrative catalyst is evident in the MCM's Phases 3 and 4, with two characters acting as a fulcrum to widen the MCU" (McLaughlin 2024, 129). His two examples for this phenomenon are Sylvie, a female variant of Loki, and an alternate version of Doctor Strange from *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022). The murder of He Who Remains, a benevolent variant of Kang the Conqueror, at the hands of Sylvie in the first season of *Loki* (2021-2023) is the event that opens up the multiverse storyline of the Marvel Cinematic

Universe. This then gives an opportunity to other doppelgängers from alternate universes to appear in Marvel movies.

While doppelgängers can be traced back to classic fantasy fiction and even mythology, they gain a new role in multiverse narratives. They often become the driving force behind the plot, whether they are benevolent or malevolent characters.

2.5. Multiverse and Fantasy Fiction: A Summary

In this chapter, I created a theoretical background for my dissertation from the perspective of fantasy fiction. While the current form of transmedia multiverses that we see in cinemas and on streaming platforms is a relatively new phenomenon, it has its roots in the earliest traditions of fantasy literature. While this chapter dealt with the diegetic elements of multiverse narratives, I will delve deeper into their transmedia and multimedia aspects in the following one. I argue that it is impossible to carry out an adequate analysis of multiverse narratives without discussing both pillars, as there is a strong interconnection between the two.

Chapter 3. Multiple Media

Multiverse storytelling is not just about fictional worlds within the story. It is also about how those worlds exist across multiple forms of media and audience interpretation. In the previous chapter, I discussed the diegetic, in-universe aspects of the multiverse. I explored the various kinds of alternate universes that exist in fiction and discussed the connection between them. Fantasy elements, such as portals and doppelgängers provide creators with tools to traverse these various universes, while also connecting them to wider fantasy tradition. In this section, I will explore the other pillar of multiverse narratives: their multimedia and collaborative aspects. I aim to map the various academic approaches toward multimedia world-building and adaptation and locate the multiverse in this context.

Fictional universes have always been constructed through multiple forms of media. In Ancient Greek mythology, the stories of heroes and gods were conveyed through oral storytelling, theatre plays, paintings, and sculptures. Tolkien, regarded as one of the most influential figures of modern world-building and mythopoesis, crafted the mythology of Middle-Earth through novels, short stories, poems, drawings, and even private correspondence. After his death, his works were adapted to film, comic books, and video games. The universe he created was expanded by other authors through TV series and animated films, and by fans through fanfiction and fan art. This highlights two important aspects of fictional worlds: the multiplicity of media and the multiplicity of authors. One of the biggest driving factors behind the changes in our understanding of fictional universes is the rapid development of digital media. Multiverse narratives exhibit a strong interplay between various forms of media, even more so than traditional transmedia storytelling. The multiplicity of media containers is an essential element of multiverse narratives.

3.1. Defining the Multiverse

In the past two decades, transmedia storytelling (Jenkins 2006a, 95) has been the most popular approach among scholars to describe novel tendencies of media convergence in the mass media industry. According to Henry Jenkins, a transmedia story "unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" (95-96). His classic example for transmedia storytelling is the narrative of *The Matrix* franchise, which is told through four (at the time of the writing of Jenkins' book, three) movies, video games, animated films, comics, and more. These media products all provide multiple "windows" (Wolf 2018, 142) on a Secondary World. What was regarded as a new and

innovative way of storytelling back in the day is now a common practice among media producers. Furthermore, while storytelling is an important aspect of transmediality, it is not the only one. As the chapter discussing Tolkien and mythopoesis highlights, transmedia elements influence characterization, lore expansion, and spatial/temporal world building. In *Star Wars*, novels like L. Neil Smith's *Adventures of Lando Calrissian* (1983) trilogy might not move the overarching storyline of the saga forward much, but they enhance the characterization of a key supporting character from the original trilogy while also adding new alien species and planets to the *Star Wars* universe.

Although this is still a valid approach, it fails to reflect certain popular phenomena in transmedia franchises. In recent adaptations, the boundaries between various layers of adaptation have become less clear. For example, the 2021 movie, *Spider-Man: No Way Home*, which became an instant mainstream success, saw the MCU (Marvel Cinematic Universe) version of the titular character (played by Tom Holland) team up with his counterparts (played by Andrew Garfield and Tobey Maguire) from two previously discontinued *Spider-Man* series. The versatile, multiversal nature of Spider-Man is further highlighted in Sony Pictures' animated films, *Spider-Man: Into the Spider-Verse* (2018) and *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* (2023) where the lines between the different forms of media are blurred, and iterations of the character from many different platforms of the *Spider-Man* transfiction (films, comics, cartoons, anime, video games even LEGO) are brought together in an animated story. Moreover, in a digital environment, fans play a much more significant role in the negotiation and interpretation of these media products than before. Modes of storytelling, that were exclusive to subcultures and fandoms are slowly becoming the norm in mainstream media. Jenkins also reflects on this issue in his blog, where he explains the seven principles of transmedia storytelling (Jenkins 2009). He establishes "continuity" and "multiplicity" as two opposing concepts. He uses the example of alternate retellings of superhero stories (such as DC's *Elseworlds* line) to show that transmedia storytelling is not a unified experience. Multiplicity enables alternate versions, retellings, and even fan-created content within the media franchise. Fanfiction and other fan works produce meanings and interpretations that compete with the studio-curated official version of the narrative. He admits that the strict continuity described in his earlier definitions of transmediality is inapplicable in many instances. However, in cases like *No Way Home*, multiplicity becomes continuity, an explicit connection is established between previously isolated storyworlds, and the various alternate versions get intertwined in one narrative.

Another key term introduced by Jenkins is "spreadability" (Jenkins et al, 2013). The amount of content and information shared on the internet makes it impossible to pinpoint one media product that can describe an entire phenomenon (Manovich et al 2011, 2-3). Millions of videos, tweets, Instagram posts, and TikTok reels are produced daily, yet only a few of them become popular enough to set trends on social media. As Jenkins argues, if media does not spread, it is dead (Jenkins et al 2013, 188). This means that in the digital age, content is disseminated by users. Jenkins and his peers use the term to provide an alternative to the terms "viral" and "viral marketing". Viral implies "infection" or "contamination", and frames audiences as a passive entity with minimal agency (21). In contrast, in the framework of "spreadability", audiences play an active role, and their choices determine the value of media products.

The abundance of content produced by fans further complicates the issue of multiplicity. Due to the unorthodox release order of the *Star Wars* movies, with episodes four, five, and six being the first trilogy, followed by episodes one, two, and three, there has been much debate around the "proper" viewing order. Some fans believe that the chronological order of episode numbers should be followed, as this is how George Lucas intended to present the movie anyways. Meanwhile, others prefer the release order as watching the prequels first spoils the big reveal in *The Empire Strikes Back* with Darth Vader being Luke Skywalker's father. *Star Wars* fans came up with a third viewing order, one which preserves the twist at the end of *The Empire Strikes Back*, while still keeping *The Return of the Jedi* as the grand conclusion to the series: The Machete Order (Hilton 2011). Fans who watch the movies in this order start with the original *Star Wars* (1977), followed by its sequel, the *Empire Strikes Back*. At the end of *Empire*, we learn the truth about Luke and Vader, after which we jump onto the prequel trilogy as a sort of a flashback. While some people start with *Episode I: The Phanom Menace* (1999), others jump straight to *Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (2002), claiming that the first episode is irrelevant to the overarching narrative. Afterward, they watch *Episode III: The Revenge of the Sith* (2005) and finally conclude the series with *Return of the Jedi* (1983). This viewing order is not endorsed by the studio or the creators of the series, it was created by fans based on their own preferences. Another similar well-known example is *Star Wars: Episode III.5: The Editor Strikes Back*, an 85-minute cut of the prequel trilogy, created by actor Topher Grace, which removes most criticized parts of the movies, and tells the backstory of Anakin Skywalker in a more condensed format. This version was never uploaded publicly and was only shown to Grace's friends and colleagues at a public screening, turning it into a "Hollywood quasi-urban legend" (Sciretta 2012).

These examples show us that it is difficult to define the multiverse in this new digital environment. There have been many attempts at creating definitions in the context of multimedia and seriality. According to William Proctor, "the Marvel multiverse functions as a transmedia firmament that encapsulates an entire catalogue within its narrative rubric, a strategy that is analogous with the quantum paradigm" (Proctor 2017, 319). This definition can be complemented by Mark J. P. Wolf's more practical approach, who defines the multiverse as "the overall structure resulting from two or more universes that, though connected, still remain distinct and separate" (Wolf 2012, 216). He differentiates between crossovers, where there is a pre-planned linkage between the crossing over of multiple universes, and retroactive linkages, where universes that were conceived separately cross over. For example, the way in which Tobey Maguire's and Andrew Garfield's Spider-Man incarnations were integrated into the Marvel Cinematic Universe in *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021) is a retroactive linkage, as they were originally created for two completely separate *Spider-Man* franchises. Marvel has had the tendency to create these retroactive links between its franchises, both in comics and movies. The original *Spider-Verse* (2014-2015) comic was originally published as a crossover event across multiple *Spider-Man* comic titles. It appeared on the pages of main ongoing *The Amazing Spider-Man* (1963-), but at the same time included the titular characters from series like *Spider-Man 2099* (1992-) and *Peter Porker, the Spectacular Spider-Ham* (1985-1987). These series were originally not created with a crossover in mind, the link between them was established retroactively with the multiverse as a narrative device.

Roberta Pearson calls for scholars to use Marie-Laure Ryan's term "transfiction" (Pearson 2018, 148) in the context of transmedia storytelling, which describes the phenomenon as "the migration of fictional entities across different texts" (Ryan 2013, 365). This term can serve as an appropriate starting point in our quest to describe the new mode of storytelling discussed in this dissertation. Pearson treats all properties released under a particular franchise as parts of a single transfiction (e.g. all comics, films, games, and other media entries released under the Marvel banner as part of the Marvel transfiction).

Ryan cites Richard Saint-Gelais's definition of transfictionality: when "two (or more) texts … share elements such as characters, imaginary locations, or fictional worlds" (Saint-Gelais 2005, 612). This shows us that transmedia storytelling is a form of transfictionality. A character introduced in a movie might have their backstory expanded in a novel. As a result, the movie and the novel share their narrative elements. However, we can also look at adaptation as transfictionality, as the film adaptation and its source material usually share the vast majority

of their narrative elements. Ryan argues that while transmedia storytelling is often regarded as a new form of storytelling, it has historical roots (Ryan 2013, 362). She uses Greek mythology as an example where the narrative was expanded through sculpture, architecture, drama, and epic poetry.

Ryan utilizes a threefold categorizing system when outlining the various forms of transfictionality (Ryan 2013, 365). Her first category is the *one-text/one-worlds* relation. In this case, the storyworld is contained in one text, which is "the only mode of access to this world" (365). However, she acknowledges the fact that complete containment of a narrative is impossible in a literal sense, as personal interpretations can be different. Even the simplest narratives can evoke a wide variety of emotions and feelings in audience members. This makes it difficult to claim that a certain text is the one and only definitive container of a narrative. Ryan arrives at the same conclusion. She clarifies that this category pertains to the "immediate meaning" (Bunia 2010, 713). Standalone movies that have no sequels or transmedia extensions can fit into this category. It is clear that this is currently not the preferred approach of major studios, as they constantly attempt to create brand new shared cinematic universes. Even a movie like *E.T. the Extra-Terrestrial* (1982, dir. Steven Spielberg), which has no official theatrical sequel, shows us the difficulty of containing a narrative within a single text. The film received other additions, such as theme parks and video games, that expand audience engagement beyond the original story. Furthermore, some aliens from the same species as E.T. appeared in the Galactic Senate in *Star Wars Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999) as an easter egg. These examples highlight how multifaceted our engagement with these narratives is, and how difficult it is to contain them in strictly just one text.

Ryan's second category is the *one-text/many-worlds* relation. This occurs when "the text is so indeterminate that it can be related to many different stories" (Ryan 2013, 365). The most obvious example of this category is video games. Video games, while often constrained to one text, can have infinite outcomes. The same is true for board games, and role-playing games like *Dungeons & Dragons*. In each case, the outcome is determined by the players. The many variable elements give an almost infinite number of possible narratives. However, similarly to the previous category, there are no clear boundaries in this one either. For example, *Dungeons & Dragons* has a vast catalogue of tie-in literature and other transmedia releases in various fictional settings, such as *Dragonlance* and *Forgotten Realms*. Both settings have more than 100 novels, and have spawned some highly popular recurring characters, like the wizard Raistlin Majere in *Dragonlance* and the drow (dark elf) Drizzt Do'Urden in *Forgotten Realms*.

These settings operate with the logic of shared universes. There have even been cases where characters traversed from one another, such as Lord Soth, originally a Dragonlance character, who ended up in the *Ravenloft* universe in *Knight of the Black Rose* (1991). Therefore, while the game *Dungeons & Dragons* can exemplify this category, its tie-in novels create a multiverse that transcends far beyond its boundaries.

The third category in Ryan's system is the one world, many texts relation. This is generally applied to transmedia storytelling in franchises like *Star Wars* or *The Matrix* (Jenkins 2006a, 95-96). In these franchises, we engage with one storyworld through multiple media entries. The *Star Wars* universe is constructed through movies, series, video games, novels, comic books, theme parks, and other media products. However, anomalies, such as the distinction between the Legends and Canon continuities and the existence of alternate universes like *LEGO Star Wars: Rebuild the Galaxy* or *Star Wars: Infinities* make the inclusion of Star Wars in this category questionable. Ryan also questions whether we can really regard the various transmedia iterations of *Star Wars* and other shared universes as representations of the "same" world (Ryan 2013, 365).

This question essentially serves as the basis for understanding multiverse narratives from a multimedia perspective. The *Star Wars* universe has strict continuity constructed through various forms of media. However, it also has a tremendous amount of content that does not fit this discourse. For example, *LEGO Star Wars* magazines and movies are not parts of the canonical narrative, yet they are sold as official products under the franchise banner.

Therefore, I propose adding a fourth approach to this classification system: many-texts/many-worlds. Vast narratives, such as *Star Wars* and Marvel, are constructed through many media texts. At the same time, not all media texts construct the same storyworld. Multiverse narratives contain the play element of the "many-worlds" category, as they allow for multiple outcomes and versions. I argue that multiverses build extensively on the idea of play in storytelling, which is in line with Katriina Heljakka's views about comics and toys. She argues that these two forms of media make storytelling more playful and customizable (Heljakka 2022, 1157). In transmedia multiverse narratives, this is true regarding the entirety of the narrative and is not limited to just comics or toys. As Ryan explains, "the many-worlds interpretation denies any contrast between the actual and the nonactual, since it regards all probabilities as simultaneously realized in some world" (Ryan 2022, 129). Infinite realities provide us with infinite possibilities and outcomes. At the same time, the parallel universes in these narratives are unfolded through various texts. For example, the version of Luke Skywalker

we read about in Timothy Zahn's *Heir to the Empire* (1991) is different from the one seen in the sequel movie *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017). These Luke Skywalkers "live" in different continuities, with the first being in the "Legends" universe, and the latter one being in the Canon universe. The stories of Luke in Legends can be further followed in comics like *Star Wars: Dark Empire* (1991-1992) and video games like *Star Wars Jedi Knight: Jedi Academy* (2003). These different "windows" (Wolf 2018, 142) present the audience a world where Luke reconstructed the Jedi Order and started a family. Meanwhile, the canon version of Luke can also be followed through multiple media, such as Adam Christopher's novel *Shadow of the Sith* (2022) and *The Rise of Kylo Ren* (2019-2020) comic series. This continuity shows us a version of Luke whose life unfolded differently after the events of *Return of the Jedi* (1983) from what fans had previously read or seen in older transmedia entries. This example highlights the need for the fourth approach that I propose. While all these stories were published under the umbrella of the *Star Wars* transfiction, they present a different version of the universe through different media. Indeed, this category can apply to other transfictions as well. For example, multiple versions of the *Sherlock Holmes* narrative also open windows to many worlds through various transmedia texts. The action-packed, Hollywood version of the character portrayed by Robert Downey Jr. in *Sherlock Holmes* (2009) does not show us the same universe as the more laid-back and deductive version of Benedict Cumberbatch in the BBC *Sherlock* (2010) adaptation.

Pearson argues that we should utilize the term addition instead of expansion when referring to new elements in a transfiction (Pearson 2018, 149). In the case of *Star Wars*, a new novel detailing the backstory of a character or a new comic telling a story between two movie episodes can be considered expansions to the *Star Wars* universe. However, a more abstract, non-canonical, but officially licensed product, like a LEGO adaptation or an iPhone game, that does not add any details to the storyworld itself, still counts as an addition to the *Star Wars* transfiction. This is also reflected in Lee's view, who claims that toy and LEGO versions deemphasize a character's personality and position it in an archetypal, playable subject position (Lee 2020, 160). As he argues, this is a "radical inversion of the narrative logic of most traditional storytelling media, which typically narrate a single, fixed progression of events" (160). Pearson argues that different, seemingly unrelated additions to an existing transfiction leave an imprint even on those elements that are diegetically unrelated (Pearson 2018, 150). Toys add a degree of playability to this transfictional system. As a result, the contrast between Jenkins' ideas of multiplicity and canonicity (Jenkins 2009) might not be as stark after all. Various incarnations and interpretations still have significant influence on each other.

There are two shortcomings in Pearson's framework that prevent me from relying on it as the sole theoretical basis for my research. One of them is that it draws a clear line between publicly owned (e. g. mythologies, folktales) and proprietary (e. g. *Star Wars*, *Dune*, Marvel) transfictions (Pearson 2018, 150-151) and fails to consider works in the grey area of unofficial and fan-created content. Moreover, how do we classify a postmodern reimagining of a media franchise? For example, Alexander James Pollard's *WoW Paintings :P* exhibition (Pollard 2016) features images of weapons from the video game *World of Warcraft* (2004) inserted into his paintings. While this oeuvre has had real-life exhibitions in London and printed publications as well, it is not officially associated with *World of Warcraft* or Blizzard Entertainment. How do we put it into Pearson's classification system in this case?

The other problem is that it is insufficient for describing this novel phenomenon of different adaptations and iterations of characters and storyworlds blending in one multiverse of storyworlds. She focuses more on the institutional and authorial side of transfictions instead of their narratology. At the same time, the term is useful, because it does not restrict itself to one specific storyworld.

Thus, I propose a new theoretical framework, one in which every single piece of work ever created (whether it is officially licensed or fan produced) under a banner (in the case of this essay, *Star Wars* and Marvel) is part of a multiversal transfiction. I argue that this is the most appropriate approach if we want to understand the direction in which world-building and storytelling are going in mass media. However, this immediately puts an enormous obstacle in front of us. In the case of Marvel Comics, we must take more than 27,000 comic issues (with more and more being released on a weekly basis) into consideration. Pop-culture critic Douglas Wolk, who undertook the task of reading all issues of all Marvel comics series up until 2021, claims that "the twenty-seven thousand or so superhero comic books that Marvel Comics has published since 1961 are the longest continuous, self-contained work of fiction ever created: over half a million pages to date, and growing" (Wolk 2021, 1). And we have not even mentioned the huge number of films, video games, animated series, live action series, novelizations, and webcomics. These add together a corpus of examinable material that is impossible to be thoroughly analyzed within the boundaries of any academic essay. Thus, picking the appropriate corpus for this analysis requires meticulous planning both in the case of *Star Wars* and Marvel.

Gabriele D'Amato and Luca Diani view the 2013 animated series *Rick and Morty* as one of the prime examples of multiverse fiction. They discuss how the series purposefully integrates

a wide variety of science-fiction tropes, with the multiverse being one of them. As they argue, "the multiverse, as one of the most important strategies of the show, allows the actualization of intertextual references on a diegetic level, by providing infinite parallel universes in which the allusions actually exist" (D'Amato and Diani 2024, 602). In *Rick and Morty*, the multiverse provides an opportunity for the insertion of various references to other works of science-fiction. The example provided by D'Amato and Diani highlight the intertextual and self-reflexive nature of multiverse fiction.

Currently, there is a conflict among the definitions of the multiverse. For example, the definition by D'Amato and Diani says that "the characters of these narratives explicitly refer to the ontological structure of the worlds they live in as a "multiverse"; moreover, within the plot, it is usually provided a theoretical explanation of the concept" (D'Amato and Diani 2024, 595). Arguably, if we relied solely on this definition, *Star Wars* would not fit the scope of this research. However, there are many other definitions that have a different focus. D'Amato and Diani's definition contradicts what Carmelo Esterrich says about *Star Wars*, who argues that "cinema and television, comics and fiction, even cosplay, interact with each other, complementing, supplementing, and creating fascinating and complex layers of what we might start calling the *Star Wars* multiverse" (Esterrich 2021, 3). While he acknowledges the fact that this structure is different from the Marvel multiverse, I argue that we can indeed draw parallels between the two. Mark J. P. Wolf also highlights the extradiegetic aspect of the multiverse, who claims that the "two most common ways to link words together are transnarrative characters (or objects) and geographical (or spatiotemporal) linkages" (Wolf 2012, 216). D'Amato and Diani also acknowledge Wolf's definition, but they position themselves in contrast to it (D'Amato and Diani 2024, 595). Overall, in this dissertation, I am actually interested in the contrast between a multiverse that integrates the concept consciously into its narrative (Marvel) and a multiverse that generally tries to avoid the term (*Star Wars*). From this perspective, the direct counterpart of *Star Wars* would be the movie *Everything Everywhere All at Once* (2022). While *Star Wars* does not include the multiverse in the fictional ontology of the narrative, it is rendered a multiverse by its extradiegetic multiplicity of various levels of canon, transmediality, and different adaptations. Meanwhile, *Everything Everywhere All at Once* does not attempt to create a transmedia empire, it simply aims to tell a one-off story with the multiverse as the central narrative device. Matt Hills problematizes this duality of the use of multiverse in scholarly discourse and argues that there is a difference between the text-oriented and audience-oriented understandings of the it (Hills 2024, 70). He uses Will Brooker's analysis of *Blade Runner: The*

Final Cut (2007) as an example for this phenomenon. Brooker argues that "in contrast to Lucasfilm's approach, the *Final Cut* box set effectively offers a collection of alternatives and variants and allows them all a valid position in the canonical hierarchy" (Brooker 2009, 86). In other words, while George Lucas has always viewed the latest Special Editions of the *Star Wars* saga as the definitive versions, Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner* (1982) offers a multiverse of various final narrative outcomes. However, as Hills claims, "there is no diegetic multiverse here: the term is utilized to characterize the extra-diegetic collections of different edits and versions of *Blade Runner*, as well as acknowledging its transmedia extensions" (Hills 2024, 75).

Esterrich's argumentation regarding *Star Wars* as a multiverse can be supported by other scholars' theories as well. Anne Kustritz refers to the multiplicity of fanfiction in a transmedia environment as a multiverse (Kustritz 2014). She argues that "the incorporation of transmedia elements within an overall story world requires essential reassessment of how seriality has changed in contemporary digital culture, especially when professional and fan-produced transmedia each contribute to the overall narrative whole" (Kustritz 2014, 225). This further reinforces the idea that digital media has led to drastic changes in seriality and transmediality. Fan works are also included in Jenkins's discussion of multiplicity, in which he argues that "where we embrace the logic of multiplicity, they simply become one version among many which may offer us interesting insights into who these characters are and what motivates their behavior" (Jenkins 2009). Audience engagement with movies and TV series in this environment is different from what it used to be before the internet became widespread. Lesley Goodman takes a step forward and argues that "fan interpretation privileges the coherence of the fictional universe while downplaying the authority of the text and insisting that the author is not dead, but a failure and a disappointment" (Goodman 2015, 663). In other words, Goodman views fanfiction as an example of "fannish disappointment" (664), which aims to "fix" elements in the official canon of the storyworld fans are disappointed with.

The definition of "canon" is subject to constant debate within the context of transmedia storytelling. Certain audience members only engage with material that is approved by the owner of the franchise. Meanwhile, others create 'headcanons', their own personal interpretations of a story, which are often different from what is enabled or acknowledged by its authors. Headcanons can include fanfiction, deleted scenes, and non-canonical works, while also excluding some of the official material. In his analysis of massive serialized collaborative fiction (MSCF), Roy T. Cook attempts to define what canonicity is in fiction:

> Canonicity is a set of practices serving to divide MSCFs into those installments that are canonical and those that are noncanonical. In short, canonicity practices identify a privileged subfiction that constitutes the "real" story regarding what is fictionally true in the MSCF, whereas noncanonical stories are "imaginary" or are de-legitimized in some other sense. (Cook 2013, 272)

In other words, there is a hierarchy between the entries in a fictional universe. This delineates what really happens in the official version of the narrative according to the creator, and what does not. Certain narrative elements are deemed 'canon' by the studio, while others are deemed 'non-canon'. In Paul Booth's definition, narrative elements are "those elements within a narrative that can be readily identified. For example, a character is a narrative element, as are locations, events, conflicts, motifs, themes, props, or any number of things within the narrative world" (Booth 2016, 89). In *Star Wars*, characters like Luke Skywalker or Obi-Wan Kenobi; planets like Tatooine or Naboo; objects like lightsabers and X-wing starfighters; and events like the Battle of Yavin and the Battle of Hoth are all examples of narrative elements. In the Internet age, storytelling happens when these narrative elements are connected through hyperlinks, which leads to Booth's definition of narrative: "a community's sum total of knowledge, about, on and/or of a world" (Booth 2016, 88). Studios often assert control over which narrative elements are canon, but fans frequently engage with content beyond corporate-defined boundaries. I use the term narrative authority to define the power and control that creators (or institutions) hold over the development, continuity, and interpretation of a transmedia narrative distributed across multiple platforms. This is particularly true in the case of vast fictional universes like Star Wars, where competing claims of authorship arise both from corporate studios and fan communities. Studios establish the hierarchy of content, and curate it as an attempt to determine what constitutes the definitive, canonical narrative of the *Star Wars* saga. However, as this dissertation will demonstrate in sub-chapters like the one about the Hungarian *Star Wars* comics or the one about *The Acolyte* (2024), this hierarchy is not as concrete as one might expect.

Beyond the dual distinction between canon and non-canon narrative elements, there are also characters that are depicted differently in canon and non-canon stories. In the old continuity of *Star Wars*, which was in effect before Disney took over the franchise, Luke Skywalker became a powerful Jedi Master, had a wife and a son, and succeeded in rebuilding the Jedi Order. His adventures could be followed by fans in various novels and comic books that are

now branded under the non-canon "Legends" continuity. Meanwhile, the movies produced by Disney after it took over the franchise featured a different version of Luke, one which never had children, failed to rebuild the Jedi Order, and lived alone on an island on a distant planet. This was one of the reasons behind the strong backlash against *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017), as Luke's portrayal was significantly different from the version that fans had been reading about in books for more than 25 years.

Sissel Undheim argues that the multiverse is the "perfect setting to explore the metamodern as a contemporary cultural term" (Undheim 2023, 198). It is characterized by a strong degree of intertextuality and self-reflexivity. As we can see in the case of the *Spider-Verse* movies or *No Way Home*, it also requires audiences to be at least somewhat familiar with other, seemingly unrelated adaptations. As Jen Cardenas describes it, the various animation styles representing the alternate Spider-heroes in Into the *Spider-Verse* create a "postmodern chaos" (Cardenas 2021). This notion of "chaos" is also echoed by Anne Besson, who argues that the multiverse is presented as "a figure of chaos, a vector of an imbalance, a disturbance, which cannot last" (Besson 2023, 10, my translation) in *Into the Spider-Verse*. This chaos also challenges our notion of canon, transforming it into a fluid, rapidly changing entity instead of a rigid construction. As Jenkins's idea of multiplicity (Jenkins 2009) and Goodman's examples of fannish disappointment (Goodman 2015) exemplify, this process is facilitated by the active participation of audiences.

3.2. Comics and the Multiverse

Jenkins discusses comics as a medium in which new storytelling methods and storylines are tried before they are implemented into films or TV series (Ford and Jenkins 2009, 303-304). Comic books have long experimented with different transmedia strategies. They have also experimented with new approaches towards renegotiating the dichotomy of the fan and the author. Whether we talk about the letter pages in which they publish fan letters or about the myriads of writers and pencilers who originally started out as fans themselves, the comic book has always had a tendency of establishing a collaborative relationship with its fandom. According to Ford, the defining characteristics of comic book universes are: "seriality, multiple creators, long-term continuity, a character backlog, contemporary ties to deep history, and a sense of permanence" (Ford and Jenkins 2009, 304). The transfictional multiverses of the 21st century rely heavily on these attributes. It was the comic medium that gave readers the ability and "literacy" to engage with these narratives this way. As William Proctor argues:

> From its inception, the comic book medium entered into an intensive dialogic relationship with other new media of the day, including radio, newspapers, television, and film, as well as the kinds of merchandising phenomena usually equated with media conglomeration and convergence in the contemporary moment. (Proctor 2018, 52)

The comic book medium has always had a pivotal role in the development of transmedia storytelling and participatory culture. However, this is not the only way in which comics have influenced storytelling. Comics popularized the multiverse in popular fiction. What was originally viewed as an interesting, yet niche storytelling device for comics fans is now a cornerstone in mass cinema. In the aforementioned discussion with Sam Ford, Jenkins explains the following:

> Television and film producers often express the need to maintain absolute fidelity to one definitive version of a media franchise, fearing audience confusion. Comics, on the other hand, are discovering that readers take great pleasure in encountering and comparing multiple versions of the same characters. There are multiple versions of, say, the Spider-Man character in publication at once: in some, Peter Parker is still a teen, while in others he is an adult; in some, he is married to Mary Jane and living at the Avengers Mansion, while in others he is still courting her. Some emphasize action elements, others stress romantic entanglements. (Ford and Jenkins 2009, 307)

What Jenkins could not foresee in 2009 was that this phenomenon would eventually make its way into cinema as well. At the time of the discussion, Christopher Nolan's *The Dark Knight Trilogy* was still an active franchise, the Marvel Cinematic Universe had just kicked off with the release of the *Iron Man* and *The Incredible Hulk* movies, and *Star Wars* was still owned by George Lucas. Social media was not even nearly as widespread as today, and fans had very little influence over the development of these movie series. Multiverse storylines, such as DC Comics' *Crisis on Infinite Earths* (1985-1986) and Marvel's Secret Wars (1984-1985) had already been popular in comics but were not explored in movies. Nowadays, in the 2020s, after more than two decades of Marvel Cinematic Universe content, mass entertainment audiences are much more willing to engage with more complex forms of storytelling involving multiple incarnations of characters. The commercial and critical success of Sony's *Into the Spider-Verse* (2018) and *Across the Spider-Verse* (2023) is a clear example of this.

In the 2000s and 2010s, franchises were sold and bought, cancelled and revived, rebooted and expanded. Sometimes, the sole reason behind these was simply studio politics: after the cancellation of Sam Raimi's *Spider-Man* series, Marc Webb's *The Amazing Spider-Man* series was launched in 2012. Then, only four years later, after Disney and Sony had reached an agreement, a third iteration of the character was developed to fit into the overarching narrative of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. In other cases, directors wanted to explore different aspects of these characters. For example, in the case of the Joker, as Amira Rihab Saidi argues in her paper, the three post-millennial filmic iterations of the character represent three different "faces" of evil: Heath Ledger's portrayal in *The Dark Knight* (2008) is a pure embodiment of evil; Jared Leto's version in *The Suicide Squad* (2016) has his love for Harley Quinn as an underlying motivation behind his evil acts, and Joaquin Phoenix's variant in *The Joker* (2019) is a mentally ill character who turns evil as a result of a classist society mistreating him (Saidi 2022, 8-9).

The problems of database-structured storytelling also started appearing in comics much earlier than in any other medium. More than eighty years of storytelling for Marvel Comics and more than forty years of storytelling for *Star Wars* have created an immense amount of both officially licensed and fan-created content. It is no longer accessible for a single consumer to track down every single piece of content and to fully grasp these transmedia multiverses. Thus, the narrative became a "database", as it was foreseen by Lev Manovich in his highly influential 2001 book, *The Language of the New Media*. In the book, Manovich argues that in the computer age, the database took over the narrative as the "key form of cultural expression" (Manovich 2001, 194). Furthermore, he goes on to argue that "database and narrative are natural enemies" (Manovich 2001, 199). He explains that new media objects have no hierarchical relationship, and that they can be organized into any sequence. This aligns with the definition of transmedia storytelling laid down by Jenkins (Jenkins 2006a, 96), where each addition provides a valuable contribution to the whole. However, as evidenced by the existence of fan-edited Wikia databases and other hyperlink-driven websites, the database is not necessarily the natural enemy of the narrative after all. This critique of Manovich's statement is also reinforced by Paul Booth (Booth 2016, 89), who utilizes Pierry Lévy's theory of "collective intelligence" (Lévy 2001, 253) to describe the way fandom integrates information. If the multiverse is a valid approach toward storytelling in the 21st century, then it can be argued that the database and collective intelligence are both almost synonymous, or at least are in a close semantic relationship with it. In this case, what makes the comic book medium particularly relevant in this discussion?

Even in the case of an outstandingly long-running television series like *Doctor Who*, it was always possible to go back and watch the episodes in order (well, except for the ones that got deleted from the BBC archives and only got restored in audio drama or photo novella format). However, fans of Marvel Comics have always had to pick their own stories with which they would create their own personal canons. The complete narrative of the entire Marvel Universe had been a near-impossible task to fully grasp even before its expansion into other media. This could sound like underestimating the devotion of fan communities, but taking all the comic strips, limited comics, and other rare formats into consideration, the point becomes understandable. Furthermore, Stan Lee and Jack Kirby always created comics in a way that they could be understood even by first-time readers. Therefore, many comics published by Marvel contain hyperlinks, in the form of textboxes that refer to events that happen in other comics. This storytelling method once again highlights the vertical nature of the database and shows that there is no clear-cut linear order in which these comics must be read. In the following sub-section, I will discuss what happens to temporality in long-running comic series when the narrative turns into an archive.

3.3. Time and Memory

An important and highly influential characteristic of long-running comic franchises that has not been discussed yet in my dissertation is their unique representation of time. It is heavily driven by outside factors, real-life events, and publisher decisions. In this sub-section, I will discuss various approaches toward time and memory in comic series and identify their influence on storytelling in popular culture. The reason why I find it important to discuss this in my dissertation is that memory serves as a tool to navigate multiple canons in multiverse storytelling. The multiverse becomes an archive, from which creators of stories can pull elements to create further stories.

To understand the interplay between the comic book medium and memory, I will start with Marianne Hirsch's analysis of Art Spiegelman's *Maus*. In *The Generation of Postmemory*, Hirsch discusses the concept of "postmemory". It is the relationship that the new generation bears with the memories of previous ones (Hirsch 2012, 31). *Maus* is a graphic novel about Spiegelman's father, a Polish Holocaust survivor, who tells the story of his escape from Auschwitz to his son. The narrative is told in the form of flashbacks and is absorbed within the framework of a bedtime story. Different nations are portrayed by different animals in the story: Jewish people are portrayed as mice, Germans are portrayed as cats, and Americans are

portrayed as dogs. Spiegelman, as Hirsch argues, transforms familial visual archives and narrative traditions in a radical way (Hirsch 2012, 29). This makes it possible for the new generation to interact with the memories of those who came before.

Maaheen Ahmed and Benoît Crucifix acknowledge that Hirsch's analyses on *Maus* have been essential to the development of a critical vocabulary in memory studies but suggest that researchers move beyond looking at trauma as the central point of this discourse (Ahmed and Crucifix 2018, 3). They argue that comics and memory are closely related and propose styles and archives as the two trajectories of examining this field. In this subsection, I will mainly focus on the archival aspect of comic book universes. However, in certain instances, like the *Spider-Verse* animated series, styles are also relevant, as the change of styles marks a change of the location of the narrative as well (e.g. when we move to the LEGO universe or the noir universe).

The storytelling strategy of Marvel comics has many unique elements that make it an excellent subject for research on memory. Retelling classic stories from different perspectives is a narrative tool that has been utilized quite often by comics authors. Since the main series (for example *The Amazing Spider-Man*, *Fantastic Four*, *The Avengers*) have been running for more than 60 years, there have been many contradictions in their narratives. Geoff Klock argues that the serial nature of comics gives them an open-endedness that prevents them from ever being completed (Klock 2002, 27). This leads to a paradoxical situation where long-running superhero characters have participated in World War II, the Civil Rights Movements, witnessed the Vietnam war, the 9/11 bombings, met Ronald Reagan and Barack Obama, while still being the same, continuous character, and not showing age (28). This creates a unique, oneiric perception of time, where historical memory is constantly shifting. Roz Kaveney calls this form of continuity "sliding timescale" (Kaveney 2008, 22).

Marcello Serra compares Marvel's and DC's approaches to temporality. While DC works with a "mythological" temporality without strict continuity, Marvel works with "historical" temporality, that is organized into a timeline (Serra 2016, 647). Citing Russian semiotician Boris Uspenskij, Serra argues that Marvel's approach organizes events into a causative series that have long lasting effects on characters and settings (647-648). Over many decades of publishing, Marvel has accumulated an archive of memories in its timeline (651-652). Every event that happens in the comics has its place in this continuity, and they can be withdrawn and further developed at any time.

Jean-Matthieu Méon investigates the complex relationship of comics and memory and discusses it in the context of Marvel comics. Like Serra, he also views the serialized nature of comic books as the main reason for the central role of memory in comic book narratives (Méon 2018, 189). However, he puts greater emphasis on the role of publishers and commercial production (190-191). Marvel's storytelling involves a localized, narrative-centered memory, that "focuses on stories, on the events they tell and on their intertextual narrative coherence rather than on style, manners, or creators" (Méon 2018, 190). He considers Marvel's approach towards memory as "the dominant regime in mainstream comics" (191).

As a practical example to demonstrate the temporality of Marvel comics, I will discuss the representation of the September 11 terrorist attacks in *The Amazing Spider-Man*. The origin story of Spider-Man, while not explicitly related to any historical event, is still deeply rooted within the socio-cultural environment of the 1960s. The character first appeared in the 15th and final issue of *Amazing Fantasy*; an anthology series written by Stan Lee. In this issue, we meet Peter Parker, a high-school student, who is bitten by a radioactive spider. He gains spider-like superpowers from this radioactive bite. He initially wants to win money with his powers, but the death of his uncle Ben makes him realize that "with great power comes great responsibility". Thus, he becomes the well-known superhero, who is still an incredibly powerful worldwide phenomenon in popular culture six decades later. According to Genter, Spider-Man represents the independent, "new teenager" of the 1960s (Genter 2007, 970). He is a young, introspective character (971), whose inner monologues often serve as the narration through which the stories are explained to the audience.

Due to the popularity of the character, Marvel Comics chose *The Amazing Spider-Man* series to commemorate the 9/11 attacks. In November 2001, the 36th issue of the second volume of the series was released with a black cover. Most pages in the comic contain little to no dialogue. The story itself is presented through John Romita Jr.'s art and Peter Parker/Spider-Man's inner monologues. The tone of this type of narration is heavily influenced by his own lived, subjective experience. The opening panel shows him looking at the destruction of the twin towers in utter shock. There is no real villain in the story, the plot is organized around rescuing civilians from the rubble. The heroes of Marvel unite for the common goal, and even villains like Doctor Doom and Magneto help them, showing the unity of America amidst the disaster that shook its foundations. Trauma is articulated within a form of mediation that has a connection to newer generations (Hirsch 2012, 33).

With forty years passing between the initial issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man* and the 9/11 issue, one would expect the titular character to be in his late 50s by that time. However, within the fictional sphere of the Marvel universe, Peter Parker only aged about ten years during that period. This shows the paradox Klock talks about in his book (Klock 2002, 28): in his teenage years, Peter lives in the 1960s, while in his twenties, he lives in the age of computers and smartphones, and no one bats an eye. This is made possible by the sliding timescale I mentioned earlier (Kaveney 2008, 22).

The origin story of Iron Man has also had a strong connection to history. As Genter argues, he embodies a "protective force against the subversive influence of communist infiltration" (Genter 2007, 966). The character first appeared in 1963, on the pages of the 39th issue of *Tales of Suspense*, an anthology series written by Stan Lee. In the comic, we are introduced to Tony Stark, a young weapons manufacturer, industrialist, and billionaire, who works at an American military base in the jungles of Vietnam. He is captured by Vietnamese guerilla fighters, and is taken to Wong-Chu, a communist warlord. In captivity, Tony finds out that his heart was damaged by a shrapnel during the fight, and that he has merely a few days to live. He makes an agreement with Wong-Chu: Tony develops a weapon for the communist regime, and in exchange, one of Wong-Chu's surgeons saves his life. Wong-Chu introduces Tony to Professor Yinsen, another scientist in the cruel warlord's captivity. He tasks Yinsen with the objective of helping Tony develop the weapon. However, instead of working on a weapon for the communists, Tony secretly builds a bulky iron armor that is capable of breaking him out of captivity. The transistor of the armor sends an electric charge to his heart, which keeps him alive. He eventually succeeds in escaping, but Yinsen is killed by the guerillas while trying to win time for Tony to escape. In the climatic final battle, where the newborn Iron Man defeats Wong-Chu, Tony declares his crusade against communist regimes. After escaping, he goes on to become the well-known superhero.

16 years after the release of *Tales of Suspense #39*, the character's origin story was retold in the 122nd issue of *The Invincible Iron Man*. By that time, Iron Man/Tony Stark was a well-established character in the Marvel universe. Therefore, the editors had to reintroduce his origin story to a new generation of comic fans. It is told within the framework of a flashback as Tony flies above the Atlantic Ocean in his Iron Man armor. However, this retelling cannot be considered a revisionary narrative in Geoff Klock's terms (Klock 2002, 27). Although the art style is modernized to fit the aesthetics of late 1970s comics, the story and the dialogues themselves are mostly unchanged. Tony is still captured by communist guerillas in the jungles

of Vietnam, he is still helped by Yinsen, and his opponent is still the reckless warlord, Wong-Chu. However, there is a minor change: the language of Tony's inner monologues is much more explicit (using puns, calling Wong-Chu fat), signifying the transition of the comic book medium from the Silver Age to the Bronze Age. If we accept Serra's theory of comic book continuity as an archive of memories (Serra 2016, 651), then Hirsch's concept of postmemory (Hirsch 2012, 31) can easily be applied here. A story that was relevant to a previous generation is transformed and re-told in a way that is accommodated to the needs of a newer generation. It also fulfills Serra's view of historical continuity (Serra 2016, 647), and respects the events previously depicted in older comic books.

A more radical reimagining of Iron Man's origin story occurred in 2006 with the release of Warren Ellis' *Iron Man: Extremis*. Again, it is important to highlight that this story is still part of the same grand narrative that started in 1963. However, due to the time that passed between the two releases, the authors had to accommodate the story to the new era. The retelling of the origin story occurs in the fifth chapter of the graphic novel after Tony Stark falls into a coma. The framework of the storytelling is a dream in which Tony relives the events of his escape from captivity. As the release of the comic was 16 years after the end of the Cold War, communism was no longer a threat, and the Vietnam war was long gone, the authors had to change major elements in the story. With the trauma of the September 11 terrorist attacks against the World Trade Center in New York City still being relatively fresh, the Vietnamese guerillas were replaced with terrorists. Their nationality is not revealed, which gives the origin story a somewhat ambiguous setting that could easily be interpreted in any historical context. However, their stereotyped appearance implies that Tony is somewhere in the Middle East. The fight against Wong-Chu is completely omitted, Tony's adversaries are unnamed, faceless terrorists with no dialogue. On the other hand, Professor Yinsen is still present in the story, Tony's heart is still damaged, and he still creates the armor in secret. This retelling fulfills the criteria of Geoff Klock's revisionary superhero narrative: the events are retold with major changes while its fundamental elements are still retained (Klock 2002, 27). This is also a prime example of Kaveney's sliding timescale (Kaveney 2008, 22), where history progresses forward, but the characters do not age.

This example shows us that in the narratives of Marvel comics, even the perception of time can be complicated. As the vast majority of the stories advance the overarching narrative, instead of providing prequels and backstories, these contradictions are bound to happen one way or another. However, there are also some prequel comics, such as *Wolverine: Origin* (2001-

2002) or *X-Men: Children of the Atom* (1999), that have been published specifically to re-tell the origins of Marvel characters to newer audiences. The stories retold in these comics also differ from the way in which they were originally told in the 1960s. While we can recount numerous examples of prequel comics from Marvel, mainline ongoing comics are usually set in the present time. This kind of representation of time creates a fluid understanding of canon and diegesis, which is an important feature in multiverse narratives.

This storytelling method was also borrowed by the Marvel Cinematic Universe, where new movies and series usually provide an "up to date" account of the storyworld. There are also some stories set in the past, such as *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), *Captain Marvel* (2019), or *Black Widow* (2021). However, even these are framed in a way that they have some relevance to the present state of the universe. For example, while *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) is set during World War II, the beginning and the end of the movie are set in the present time, where Captain America is melted from the ice block in which was frozen after his accident during World War II. Therefore, the chronological placement of the movie is set approximately at the same time as other Marvel movies that came out during that period. The next movie, *Avengers* (2012), which is the first major crossover in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, also deals with the immediate consequences of *Captain America: The First Avengers*, such as the titular character's challenges in integrating into 21st century society.

On the other hand, *Star Wars* uses a completely different approach to its management of time in its stories. This was more or less set in stone right at the beginning, as the first movie released, *Star Wars* (1977), was chronologically the fourth one in the main storyline. Ever since then, an important aspect of the *Star Wars* franchise was "filling the gaps" or shaping out certain eras of the storyworld in new releases. This is apparent in the media campaign surrounding the first spin-off movie of the Disney era, *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (2016). This movie, which is a direct prequel to the original *Star Wars* film, was accompanied by a vast multimedia campaign, where, among others, the novel *Catalyst* (2016) by James Luceno explained the in-universe political backstory of the film. Meanwhile, the young adult novel *Rebel Rising* (2017) by Beth Revis told the early life of Jyn Erso, the main protagonist. Several years later, the live action Disney+ series *Andor* (2022-2025) was released, which told the backstory of another character, Cassian Andor, leading up to the events of *Rogue One*. As we can see, new releases jump back and forth on the timeline of the *Star Wars* universe.

This type of storytelling comes with certain advantages and challenges at the same time. On the one hand, due to the *Star Wars* saga distancing itself from the real world, there is no

need for the “sliding timescale” (Kaveney 2008, 22). Real-world locations and people are not depicted in *Star Wars*, the entirety of the narrative is set “a long time ago in a galaxy far, far away” (Lucas 1977). On the other hand, due to new content jumping back and forth in time, creators often have to rely on the availability of the original actors. There have been cases where they used special effects and computer animation to bring back characters whose actors were no longer alive, but this also comes with moral issues as I will discuss in a later part of my dissertation about the information crisis.

3.4. Multiverses and Boundaries

As the theoretical framework in this chapter demonstrates, multiverse narratives transcend boundaries in fiction. The distinction between audience and creator becomes increasingly difficult to define. In the digital age, the self-spreading nature of fandom and fan-created content becomes more important. Other elements, such as the perception of reality or the perception of time have also become more fluid. The interplay of various forms of media has also become essential. Overall, the framework proposed here includes both the narrative and metatextual elements of the multiverse. On the one hand, multiverses act as in-fiction story mechanisms that present alternate universes within the boundaries of the narrative (Mendlesohn 2008, Boillat 2022). At the same time, this mechanism is enabled and driven by metatextual factors, such as crossovers and adaptations. Thus, the various channels towards the fictional universe opened by transmedia world-building (Jenkins 2006a, Wolf 2018) present us with various alternate incarnations instead of a consistent universe (Ryan 2013). This creates a fluid, ever-changing entity, shaped both by economic factors, such as studio politics, acquisitions, external decisions (Claverie 2024) and audiences (Jenkins et al 2013).

In the next chapter I will discuss how the information crisis and the age of mass conspiracy theories have mainstreamed multiverse narratives. I will discuss this through an analysis of *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021), with particular emphasis on the months leading up to the release of the film.

Afterward, in the following chapters, I will further explore how multiverse narratives blur these boundaries in *Star Wars* and Marvel. I will focus on one dichotomy in each. The controversy around the series *Star Wars: The Acolyte* (2024) has raised questions about the dual distinction of canon and non-canon. Meanwhile, the case of the Hungarian comic adaptations of the original *Star Wars* trilogy problematizes the distinction between official and unofficial content, which is closely related to canonicity.

Following the chapter about *Star Wars*, I will return to Marvel through two other case studies. The analysis of the LEGO scene in *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* (2023) will demonstrate how the distinctions of fan/creator and paratext/diegesis have changed. The final analysis in the dissertation about *Deadpool & Wolverine* (2024) will discuss the breaking of the fourth wall between audiences and the diegesis of the movie.

Chapter 4. The Multiverse and Popular Culture: Crisis in the 21st Century

Throughout history, technological advancements and culture have had a complementary relationship. New innovations revolutionize the ways we tell stories, and the stories we engage with reflect our changing lives. However, as digital platforms have increased the speed of information dissemination, they have also accelerated the spread of misinformation. In the digital age, fake news, conspiracy theories, and misinformation can have significant consequences on society. Multimedia political campaigns have contributed to unprecedented divisions between voters of different political parties. Online content creators and influencers share false information about health and fitness through YouTube and TikTok to millions daily. AI-generated content, deepfakes, and other technologies have further distorted our sense of what is real and what is not. These factors have led to a fragmented perception of reality, where the philosophical question of objective truth becomes highly relevant again. We find ourselves in the middle of an information crisis, where the ability to filter false information becomes essential[2].

Similarly, popular culture and storytelling have also become fragmented. Forums, fan fiction sites, and social media have facilitated the dissemination of fan created content. Transmedia franchises like *Star Wars* and Marvel have released content that reboots or reinterprets their core narratives through 'What If?' stories, LEGO media, interactive theme parks, parodies, and reboots of older movies with new actors. The multiverse as a narrative device has become a widespread and popular phenomenon in many media franchises.

In this chapter, I aim to explore this new form of storytelling from the perspective of crisis. I will discuss how various historical crises have shaped popular culture, and how the multiverse fits into this pattern. I argue that the information crisis is one of the main driving factors behind the popularity of multiverse narratives. The way in which we engage with the real world through media has shaped our way of interacting with fictional worlds, and vice versa. After discussing the socio-cultural and historical background of this phenomenon, I will analyze *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021) as an example of this interplay between Hollywood movies and online fandom.

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[2] An earlier version of this chapter was published here:

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4.1 Transmedia Storytelling and Crisis

Movie franchises, such as *Star Wars* and the Marvel Cinematic Universe, use transmedia storytelling to expand their narrative storyworld across multiple forms of media (Jenkins 2006a, 95-96). We interact with the storyworld, its characters, and other narrative elements through various media entries. Mark J. P. Wolf refers to transmedia storytelling practices as "multiple windows on the same world" (Wolf 2018, 142). He argues that the development of this form of storytelling runs parallel with real-life history. Historical events, such as World War II or the Vietnam War, were broadcast to Americans across multiple forms of media, including radio, newspaper, and later, television. All these media entries open windows to the real world in this analogy. They help us witness world events from a wide variety of perspectives. Synchronously with these developments, the entertainment industry also expanded its horizons significantly in the 20th century. Wolf cites the turn of the 19th and 20th centuries as the point where fictional worlds started moving beyond the boundaries of novels. In his view, *The Wonderful Wizard of Oz* (1900) by L. Frank Baum is the first modern transmedia project, as it involves the close cooperation of text and image in forming this fictional world (Wolf 2018, 141-142). The characters of the Land of Oz were adapted to films, comics, stage plays, games and merchandise. Then, by the 1970s, Hollywood also adapted this practice with blockbuster movie franchises such as *The Godfather* (1972) and *Star Wars* (1977).

The institutionalization of the comic book medium in the early to mid-20th century was also an important pillar in the development of transmedia storytelling. In his discussion with Sam Ford about superhero comics, Henry Jenkins refers to the comic book medium as the testing grounds on which new ideas are experimented with before being adapted to Hollywood productions (Ford and Jenkins 2009, 304-305). This is particularly true regarding the construction of shared universes. The logic upon which modern cinematic universes operate has its roots in the superhero genre. In the 1960s, Marvel Comics created a shared universe that gives home to its characters whose stories can be followed in various comic book series. Using the same logic, Marvel Studios launched the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) in 2008 with *Iron Man*. Since then, the MCU has expanded significantly, and has incorporated live-action and animated series as well. After acquiring the rights to important characters from other studios, such as Spider-Man from Sony and the X-Men from 20th Century Fox, they used the multiverse to explain the existence of these different cinematic universes. As Anne Besson argues, the multiverse is a form of meta-textuality that serves as a narrative motor in these kinds of narratives (Besson 2023, 2). It enables characters from various franchises to cross over,

treating these franchises as alternate universes. I argue that the popularity of this concept signals a crisis of information, where there is no collectively accepted perspective of reality.

The roots of the superhero genre can be traced back to a time of a different crisis in America. The first ever comic about Superman was released on the pages of *Action Comics #1*, a comic anthology, in 1938. Creators Jerry Siegel and Joe Shuster gave American society a mythical figure during a difficult historical period.

> As a relatively new society, America created monomythic heroes that best personified the way Americans wished to see themselves – youthful, physically vigorous, morally upright, a people capable of existing in the melting pot of American technological society without sacrificing an individual sense of value. (Lang and Trimble 1988, 159)

The Great Depression cast a shadow on the ideal of the American dream. The earliest hero figures of the American nation were statesmen like George Washington and scientists like Henry Ford. However, the Great Depression shattered this ideal (Lang and Trimble 1988, 159). The new socio-cultural environment led to the development of a new type of hero, the American monomythic superhero.

Many mythical stories and folktales around the world align with Joseph Campbell's concept of the monomyth or the Hero's Journey (Campbell 1949, 3). Following the release of Campbell's seminal work, *The Hero with the Thousand Faces*, it became the basis for many scientific works attempting to find the underlying structure behind all these stories. Furthermore, many writers and film directors (most notably, George Lucas) have drawn inspiration from the book. However, as decades passed, and scientific research on archetypes and the psychoanalytical aspects of storytelling progressed, several scholars started criticizing Campbell's work for its generalizing approach. For example, it was written from an overwhelmingly male-centric viewpoint and fails to address female heroes adequately (Nicholson 2011, 189). It became apparent that Campbell's framework was not sufficient for gaining deeper understanding of how narratives around the world are structured and it also ignored many important factors.

One of the issues with Campbell's theory is its failure to address American heroes. While it is true that the structure of the monomyth can be applied to many stories around the world, American heroes are radically different. Traditional American heroes, such as the hard-boiled

detective and the western hero, are usually outsiders who save a community and then disappear. While Campbell's monomyth focuses on the heroes' call to adventure and their eventual reintegration into society, American heroes are not interested in this reintegration. As a result, Robert Jewett and John Shelton Lawrence came up with the idea of the American monomyth to improve Campbell's theory.

> A community in harmonious paradise is threatened by evil; normal institutions fail to content with this threat; a selfless superhero emerges to renounce temptations and carry out the redemptive task; aided by fate, his decisive victory restores the community to its paradisical condition; the superhero then recedes into obscurity. (Lawrence and Jewett 2002, 6)

Superheroes, such as Batman and Superman, usually hide their real identities. Although there are many stories where their villains or loved ones find out, they are generally kept secret. For example, the average citizen of Gotham city does not know that Batman and the enigmatic young millionaire Bruce Wayne are one and the same. When he saves a person from criminals, he disappears swiftly without any form of reward or compensation. It is no different in the case of Superman. As Lang and Trimble argue, "he does not represent the American legal system, but a secularized version of New Testament justice. He personalizes the values of the Puritan work ethic in its most virtuous form" (Lang and Trimble 1988, 160). Superman's and Batman's first enemies were not villains. Instead, they were robber barons, corrupt politicians, and businessmen. They represented the everyday person's struggle against the system that led to the economic difficulties between the two World Wars.

However, as times changed, the superhero genre adapted to reflect societal changes. The first turning point came in the 1950s, when the Comics Code Authority was implemented in response to Fredric Wertham's book *The Seduction of Innocent* (1954). In his book, Wertham criticized comics for their violent content, and argued that they had a bad influence on children. This led to strict censorship in the medium, with resulted in a huge drop in sales of comic books. It was not until the start of the 1960s that the superhero genre found its lane among the changing circumstances. Stan Lee, Jack Kirby, and Steve Ditko authored a new line of superheroes at Marvel Comics, which resurrected the interest toward the genre. They decided to create stories where the human side of the heroes is more emphasized and publish them in a soap opera-like style. Robert Genter discusses the historical and socio-cultural roots of four these publications publications: *The Fantastic Four*, *The Incredible Hulk*, *The Invincible Iron Man*, and *The*

Amazing Spider-Man. All these series launched in the 1960s, after a long period of draught in American comic publishing. Many scholars, including Genter, and comic fans alike argue that these series heralded the second major period in the history of American superhero comics, "The Silver Age" (Genter 2007, 953).

The Fantastic Four (1960) is usually credited with launching the modern, shared universe of Marvel characters. Although characters such as Captain America and Namor had already existed in the 1940s, at was not until the 1960s when Marvel truly started focusing on developing a shared storyworld where all the characters from their various titles exist simultaneously. According to Genter, the main characters in *The Fantastic Four* represent the transition from multiple generations living together to the nuclear family in American society. Reed Richards/Mr. Fantastic serves as the head of the family; Sue Storm/The Invisible Woman is the "mother"; and Sue's teenage brother Johnny Storm/The Human Torch is the "adolescent". With his brutish features and pair of blue underwear as his only clothes, Ben Grimm/The Thing represents the "infant" of the family (Genter 2007, 957). This brutish side also takes a prominent role in the stories of Bruce Banner/The Hulk, the main character of *The Incredible Hulk* series. Genter argues that the Hulk represents two crises in Cold War-era American society: the fear of a full-scale nuclear war against the Soviet Union and a crisis of American masculinity (Genter 2007, 960). His origin story involves an accident during a gamma ray experiment, during which the scientist Bruce Banner gains his uncontrollable alter ego.

The final character discussed by Genter in his paper is Peter Parker/Spider-Man, the main protagonist of *The Amazing Spider-Man*. Unlike the protagonists of other superhero series, Peter is a teenage boy. He gains spider-like superpowers after being bitten by a radioactive spider. Besides his battles against supervillains, he also must deal with everyday teenage problems, such as school, bullying, social life, finding a job, and family issues. Genter explains the enormous popularity of the character with the rise of a new social group in the postwar period, the "teenager" (Genter 2007, 970).

From this overview, we can conclude that while superheroes show a lot of similarities with the traditional hero figure from folk tales and mythological stories, they also have some radical differences. These differences have their roots both in the periodical nature of superhero comics and the general self-image of American society. Both factors contributed to the popularity of the genre in the United States. Another interesting factor in this context is the ambiguous relationship of the genre towards nationalism and power. On the one hand, we can argue that characters such as Superman and Captain America are representations of American nationalism

and exceptionalism. On the other hand, some of the most significant superhero stories and characters were heavily inspired by crises in American society and feature a strong critical attitude towards the political establishment. Furthermore, while the comic book itself can be considered a democratic and inclusive medium, in the case of corporations like Marvel and DC Comics, it would be naïve to ignore their highly industrialized, profit oriented nature. As Ezra Claverie argues, the narratives of comic books and their film adaptations are often shaped by the Marvel-DC duopoly's internal mode of production (Claverie 2024, 5-6). Villains in these stories often threaten the heroes by copying their powers, which reflects the two main publishers' concerns about copyright infringement. When analyzing these narratives, it is essential to account for their legal and economic environments, as well as for studio politics.

As we can see, the evolution of transmedia storytelling is closely tied to both historical and technological developments. The superhero genre, which has been essential to transmedia storytelling, is rooted in historical crisis. As examples like Superman and the Hulk show, real world crises have often influenced the creation and development of superheroes.

4.2 The Multiverse and the Information Crisis

In the 21st century, we have faced new crises, such as the 9/11 terror attacks, the 2008 economic crisis, the COVID-19 pandemic, and the rise of far-right politicians across Europe and America. These events have brought a sense of distrust towards traditional institutions. Furthermore, the early 2020s have seen rapid advancement in artificial intelligence (AI) and deepfake technologies. These technologies are now easily accessible to the public as well. We can observe that digital technologies have a central role in these developments.

The September 11, 2001 terror attacks caused significant trauma in American society, which also left its mark on American culture. The attacks happened in one of the largest and most diverse cities in the world and had full media coverage (Joyner et al 2016, 325). General paranoia and the declined trust in national institutions led to the rise of conspiracy theories (Stempel et al 2007, 353). Many of these theories accused the American government of involvement in the attacks. As Christine Muller argues, these concerns and dilemmas drive the plot of *The Dark Knight* (2008), the second installment in Christopher Nolan's Batman trilogy (Muller 2011, 47). She points out that even the promotional campaign of the movie featured heavy allusions to the attacks, such as the "bat-shaped fiery crash zone penetrating the upper floors of a skyscraper's façade" (Muller 2011, 47). The movie is filled with references to the post-911 American experience, such as the Joker's role as a terrorist, the camera angles

throughout the action scenes, and the skyscrapers that serve as locations to these action scenes (Muller 2011, 50-51).

During the COVID-19 pandemic in 2020, preventive measures were implemented by authorities worldwide to slow down the spread of the virus. The virus spread rapidly through airborne transmission and had a high mortality rate, especially in the case of elderly people and people with pre-existing health conditions. Even in younger and healthier populations, the outcome of infection was difficult to predict, and had the potential to cause long-term damage in the heart, brain, and other organs. Hospitals in countries with high case numbers had difficulties keeping up with the number of patients admitted to intensive care, which led to situations where triage became necessary. Meanwhile, several different vaccines against the SARS-CoV-2 virus were in development, with the first patient getting her injection with the Pfizer vaccine in December 2020. All these factors made it necessary for governments to implement measures, such as lockdowns, curfews, school closures, banning of public events, and requiring the use of face masks at stores, workplaces, and other public facilities. While these policies did indeed slow the spread of the virus, they had severe negative effects on the world economy and on the physical and mental health of millions of people worldwide.

Due to the sudden and severe changes in daily life, people started creating theories about the origins of the virus. The rise of conspiracy theories was further exacerbated by American president Donald Trump. During the initial phase of the pandemic, he purposefully downplayed the threat posed by the virus and refused to take action against the spread. However, after several months, when SARS-CoV-2 became widespread in the United States, he proposed treatments such as taking a rheumatic arthritis drug called hydroxychloroquine and injecting disinfectant (Cohen 2024).

Conspiracy theories have been cited as a new type of social myth (Chlup 2023, 219). Myths and mythologies often helped societies give explanations to phenomena they did not understand. In Ancient Greece, storms and earthquakes were attributed to the anger of Poseidon, the god of the sea. This is not different from how people in postmodern societies attempt to understand the world through conspiracies. The complex factors behind phenomena such as economic recession and a global pandemic can be difficult to understand for laymen. At the same time, they impact their lives heavily, so they often demand explanation. Conspiracy theorists prey on people in hopeless situations and offer simplistic and sensationalist answers to their problems. Movements, such as the anti-vaccination groups during the pandemic and the far-right QAnon construct their own mythology through blogs, videos, social media posts, and

real-life performances. In this sense, we can find similarities between these groups and media fandom.

> Works such as *Star Wars* and *Lord of the Rings*, as well as numerous computer games, are directly inspired by ancient mythologies. However, to function as a myth, a fictional narrative need not contain traditional mythical motifs at all. From my perspective, what matters is that it is capable of capturing the minds and souls of the audience, of expressing their deep concerns, anxieties, and desires, of formulating an ethos, and of doing this in a manner that makes all of this seem "uniquely realistic". (Chlup 2023, 224)

Therefore, while there is currently a strong resurgence of popular media inspired by mythological stories, conspiracy theories serve as a different kind of mythology that aims to explain complex processes in the world. Similarly to fantasy and science fiction fandom, there is a participatory culture around conspiracy theories (Grusauskaite et al 2022, 2). In a participatory culture, "new tools and technologies enable consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content" (Jenkins 2006b, 135-136). There is also a huge emphasis on Do-It-Yourself (DIY) media production, with consumers using these new technologies to create their own content. Grassroots production of media content enables fans to create new interpretations of media franchises. Kamile Grusauskaite, Jaron Harambam, and Stef Aupers argue that conspiracy theories are "oppositional readings" of hegemonic truths in the digital age (Grusauskaite et al 2022, 2). The nonhierarchical structure of the internet gives agency to media users. Participatory culture encourages audiences and fans of media products to produce content. In the digital age, a blog post written by a layman about a health crisis can potentially reach several times more people than one written by a certified professional about the same issue.

During the pandemic, misinformation and conspiracy theories were generated at both grassroots and institutional levels. Right-wing American television channel Fox News has often been accused of spreading fake news. In 2019, journalist David Roth introduced the term "Fox News Cinematic Universe" as an ironic metaphor to describe how Republican politicians and associated media fabricate an alternate reality, much like fictional universes (Roth 2019). Throughout the presidential election campaigns, the character of Donald Trump was built up as a heroic figure who would "drain the swamp" in US politics and remove the old political elite from power. As someone with decades of media experience, such as appearances in reality

television and cameos in movies like *Home Alone 2: Lost in New York* (1992), it was not difficult for him to embrace this role. The parallel between transmedia franchises and political campaigns is also drawn by Jenkins, who argues that a character like Obi-Wan Kenobi and a politician like Barack Obama are both transmedia characters (Jenkins 2010). Political campaigns aim to establish a public image of the candidate (and their opponents) through speeches, billboards, videos, posters, pamphlets, and other forms of media.

The next important common element of conspiracy theories and multimedia franchises is their spreadability (Jenkins et al 2013, 188). The distinction between consumer and producer is blurred within this context, as regular users become the creators of multimedia content that spreads misinformation (Grusauskaite et al 2022, 3). Meanwhile, social media algorithms ensure that the content that reaches users aligns with their worldwide. This creates isolated groups of users with no interaction between the various spheres. As we spend more time on social media, the content we encounter reinforces and affirms our worldview, and makes it difficult to interact with people with different opinions. Traditional transmedia coverage of world events provided multiple windows on the same world (Wolf 2018, 142). I argue that Web 2.0 opens multiple windows on multiple realities.

However, both in the case of social media content and transmedia franchises, the amount of content poses a significant challenge to those who attempt to analyze these phenomena. Lev Manovich, Jeremy Douglass, and Tara Zepel criticize scholars who only focus on a small number of artifacts in a certain field. They argue that the current methodology is insufficient to keep up with the amount of content distributed by media producers and fans (Manovich et al 2011, 2-3). They claim that before the age of digital media, it was much easier for scholars to generate theories from small datasets about phenomena such as the Italian Renaissance or classical Hollywood cinema. They contrast this with websites like IMDb (www.imdb.com), where reviews have been written about more than a million TV episodes and films. This, as they argue, calls forth a change in the methodologies of humanities.

In their essay, they use Japanese manga as a practical example for their argumentation. They argue that a small number of images is not sufficient to draw conclusions about the style of the comics and the authors (Manovich et al 2011, 6-8). Utilizing an experimentative method, they use scans of thousands of pages from *Naruto* and *One Piece* in montages to illustrate the evolution of manga. Through this example, they highlight that the close reading of just one page from each is not enough basis for comparison, as it cannot be known whether these characteristics persist throughout the many thousands of pages published. The same is true

about multiverse narratives. When analyzing a franchise as complex as Marvel for example, one must account for more than 27.000 comic book issues, along with more than one hundred movies, as well as countless animated series and live-action series. These works are in an interactive relationship with each other, regardless of media format. Whatever happens on the pages of a comic book could affect the narrative of a high-budget movie and vice versa. A pop-cultural phenomenon on the scale of Marvel merits scholarly attention, but its analysis requires the development of a framework that reflects the amount of content available.

Anna Kérchy and Björn Sundmark explain that multimedia literacy is the "foundation of transmedia storytelling" (Kérchy and Sundmark 2020, 1). They argue that transmedia storytelling and translation are similar processes as they both involve a "transition between semiotic systems" (2). Both are participatory cultural practices of fan communities, involving rereading and rewriting texts. This is particularly important in the case of vast multimedia franchises. If one aims to be a devout follower of Marvel content, they must be able to navigate the increasingly complex web of cross-references and be up to date with information regarding which series or movie they should watch next. Although Marvel movies still try to follow Stan Lee's and Jack Kirby's philosophy of making sure that even a first-time viewer can understand their new content, it is getting increasingly difficult with the constant cross-referencing throughout content. This is one of the main contributing factors to the "superhero fatigue" (Hughes 2024) of the early 2020s, with newer superhero movies getting less and less critical and commercial success in comparison to those released in the 2010s.

This oversaturation is further complicated by the emergence of AI and deepfake technologies. In its current state, it is still relatively easy to distinguish between AI-generated and human-made content. For example, in the case of images, AI image-generators often fail to replicate human hands. Text can require more familiarity to detect, but certain sentence structures and patterns of word use can be telling signs. AI-generated text is viewed at schools and in academia as a new form of plagiarism. However, it can be much more dangerous when it is used to spread misinformation to susceptible audiences. Deepfake refers to the digital reproduction of a person's identity in sound files, pictures, or videos. In some instances, it can be relatively harmless. Internet users have produced a lot of content with this technology, such AI-generated videos of Donald Trump singing Camila Cabello's song "Havana". However, deepfake has also been used to damage the reputation of real-life people. With the advancement of this technology, it is going to be more difficult to tell if a video of a famous person is real or

computer-generated. It carries the danger of people using it to conduct smear campaigns against people.

On the bright side, AI has also been used to enhance the creativity of media fans. As Martine Mussies argues, "the emergence of AI has further democratized the process of creating visual representations of fandoms, allowing fans to produce their own interpretations of characters beyond the boundaries of the show's official canon" (Mussies 2023, 2). This means that thanks to AI image-generating software, fans with little to no experience in graphic design are now capable of creating high-quality fan art. However, Mussies draws attention to the fact that there must be a clear distinction between digital art and AI-generated art, as the latter involves little human input, raising ethical questions regarding human creativity (3).

CGI technologies have also been used to reproduce the likeness of actors in movies. Some of the most famous examples can be found in the *Star Wars* saga. The 2016 movie *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story*, which serves as a direct prequel to the original 1977 *Star Wars* film, features some of the characters from the latter. Grand Moff Tarkin, one of the main villains of *Star Wars* (1977), has a significant role. However, unlike Darth Vader, who could be played by almost anyone under the helmet, the character of Tarkin is tied to the face of famous British actor Peter Cushing. Cushing passed away in 1994, more than 20 years before the release of *Rogue One*. With a long history of pioneering special effects and CGI, Industrial Light & Magic (ILM), Lucasfilm's visual effects division chose to bring Cushing back to life through CGI. While this solved the challenge of featuring Tarkin in the movie, it raised some serious ethical and moral questions. In 2024, Cushing's oldest son filed a lawsuit against Disney (Noor 2024). In the following decade, CGI and AI technologies have improved significantly, and they have often been used in Hollywood and political campaigns as well.

To summarize this sub-section, social media algorithms, misinformation, AI, and deepfake create a world where everyone is stuck within their own bubbles and hardly interact with different opinions and worldviews. This leads to a crisis of information where we cannot be sure about what is real and what is not. Media in the 20th century provided multiple windows on the same world (Wolf 2018, 142), which also influenced the development of transmedia storytelling in popular media franchises. However, in the digital age, these "windows" do not necessarily let us see the same world. Instead, we experience our own personalized reality in this post-truth world, influenced heavily by algorithms. In the same way, the multiverse has become a massive phenomenon in popular culture, with huge emphasis on alternate realities, different incarnations of the same character, and fluid interpretations of canonicity. Every fan

has their own canon and continuity. Media literacy is a crucial skill both in navigating through fake news (Martínez-Ávila et al 2019, 145) and transmedia fiction (Kérchy and Sundmark 2020, 1). Considering all of this, I argue that we should not view the development of the entertainment industry as a phenomenon isolated from history. Fiction and reality have a profound impact on each other, both back and forth. In the following part, I am going to discuss the movie *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021) to explore how online communication and transmedia strategies in multiverse narratives intersect.

4.3 Fan Theories, Digital Culture, and the Multiverse in *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021)

In this section, I will discuss *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021). I argue that both its narrative and marketing campaign are products of the post-truth information crisis. Released in December 2021, it was one of the first major cinematic events of the post-COVID era. Although Marvel Studios had already released *Black Widow* (2021), *Shang-Chi: The Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021), and *Eternals* (2021) previously, none of these movies achieved the financial and critical success expected by the studio. *Spider-Man: No Way Home* relies heavily on nostalgia and character cameos from other franchises. The development of the movie was shaped by online meme culture, fan theories, and leaks from the very beginning. The COVID crisis also cast a shadow on its release, with many people still being hesitant whether they should go the cinema and potentially endanger themselves with the virus. As such, I argue that this movie is intertwined with the crises I discussed in the previous sections.

The history of *Spider-Man* movie adaptations in the 21st century has been quite hectic. The first trilogy, directed by Sam Raimi, included *Spider-Man* (2002), *Spider-Man 2* (2004), and *Spider-Man 3* (2007). This series starred Tobey Maguire as Peter Parker/Spider-Man and served as the introduction to the character for millions of viewers worldwide. As such, despite its shortcomings, it has a strong nostalgic value in fandom. The second series, directed by Mark Webb, featured Andrew Garfield as the main character in *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2012) and *The Amazing Spider-Man* (2014). These movies told a reimagined version of the character's origin story. After the commercial and critical failure of the second movie, Sony Studios signed an agreement with Marvel Studios which allowed the latter to use Spider-Man in the Marvel Cinematic Universe. The character was recast again, with Tom Holland taking up the mantle. The movies starring Holland, *Spider-Man: Homecoming* (2017) and *Spider-Man: Far From Home* (2019) were integrated into the Marvel Cinematic Universe, with Holland's character

also appearing in other movies, such as *Captain America: Civil War* (2016), *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018), and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). Right after the release of *Spider-Man: Far From Home*, Sony and Marvel started developing the third installment in the series.

Despite the success of Tom Holland's *Spider-Man* movies, a strong nostalgic wave in the late 2010s brought Tobey Maguire's portrayal of the character back to the forefront. In 2017, the Reddit forum "r/raimimemes" was created, where fans could share memes about Maguire's movies. This coincided with other similar sites like "r/prequelmemes" and "r/lotrmemes", which featured memes about the *Star Wars* prequel trilogy and *The Lord of the Rings* trilogy, respectively. Overall, this period saw a nostalgic resurgence of early 2000s millennial movie franchises. Many of the memes about the Spider-Man movies focused on the often-clunky dialogue in the series, particularly in the third installment, where the previously awkward Peter gains newfound confidence after putting on the black symbiote costume. This eventually led to the creation of the "Bully Maguire" memes, where fans edited Peter into scenes from other movies where he "bullies" other characters. Bully Maguire was not a series or a campaign, but rather an umbrella term for memes involving Maguire's Spider-Man, to which any fan could contribute. The grassroots production and circulation of these videos exemplify participatory culture (Jenkins 2006b, 135-136). They reimagine the character, create an over-exaggerated, parodistic interpretation, and insert it into other texts. The sudden resurgence of the popularity of Maguire's character led the studios to scrap their ideas for the next Spider-Man sequel and explore other options.

On October 1, 2020, it was reported by *The Hollywood Reporter* that Jamie Foxx would reprise his role as the villain Electro in the new, then-unnamed *Spider-Man* movie in development (Kit 2020). Then, two months later, the same was reported about Alfred Molina's Doctor Octopus (Couch and Kit 2020). These announcements shocked fans because these characters had originally appeared in *Spider-Man* franchises that were unrelated to the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Molina's Doctor Octopus first appeared in *Spider-Man 2* (2004) as the main villain to Tobey Maguire's incarnation of Spider-Man, while Foxx portrayed Electro in *The Amazing Spider-Man 2* (2014) as Andrew Garfield's nemesis. Meanwhile, the movie in development was the third installment to Tom Holland's *Spider-Man* series, which is part of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. The three *Spider-Man* franchises are set in completely different universes, created by different teams, and feature entirely separate casts. Furthermore, both Molina's and Foxx's characters died at the end of their respective movies.

The movie's promotional campaign focused heavily on the villains. The first trailer, released in August 2021, hinted at their presence: a lightning bolt striking into the middle of a sandstorm, foreshadowing the fight between Electro and Sandman; Tom Holland's Peter Parker leaping away from a shadowy creature, implied to be the Lizard; and a pumpkin bomb rolling on the ground, signaling the return of the Green Goblin. The trailer concludes with the dramatic reveal of Alfred Molina's Doctor Octopus, greeting Peter with his iconic line "Hello, Peter".

Following the release of the trailer, fans started speculating about the elephant in the room: the absence of Tobey Maguire and Andrew Garfield, the two previous Spider-Men. While Maguire stayed out of public eye and avoided questions from fans, Garfield was in the middle of a promotional tour for his other movie, *Tick, Tick… Boom!* (2021). Furthermore, in September 2021, a three-second clip leaked, showing Garfield in Spider-Man costume on the *No Way Home* set. However, at the time, many fans believed the footage was fake. Nevertheless, Garfield's promo run for *Tick, Tick… Boom* was overshadowed by interviewers constantly posing questions about his possible cameo in *No Way Home*. In an online interview with Josh Horowitz on the podcast *Happy Sad Confused*, he famously likened the situation to the party game *Werewolf* where players must guess who the murderer is while the murderer attempts to deceive them (Horowitz 2019).

The second trailer of the movie, released on November 17. The 3-minute-long montage of scenes from the movie confirmed all the returning villains from the other *Spider-Man* franchises. Fans got their first glimpses of both Willem Dafoe's Green Goblin and Jamie Foxx's Electro. However, Maguire and Garfield were still nowhere to be seen. A final, dramatic moment in the trailer shows a scene where Tom Holland's Spider-Man jumps towards Sandman, Electro, and Lizard in slow motion. In the Brazilian trailer of the movie, this scene is one second longer than in the international version. This one second shows the Lizard being punched by an invisible object flying towards him, as if something had been edited out of the sequence. This was immediately noticed by online fandom, further fueling the theories about the involvement of the other two Spider-Man actors.

Garfield's denial of his involvement in *No Way Home* became subject to meme culture, with fans creating video compilations of the interviews in question and fan art portraying him as a werewolf. This, along with the leaked video in circulation, created a participatory environment like that of conspiracy theories (Grusauskaite et al 2022, 2). Fans could never be sure if the leaks were real or not. Furthermore, there were conspiracy theories about the studio leaking the footage on purpose to generate hype and get more people talking about the

upcoming movie. In this case, the studio could have been capitalizing on the spreadability of such content (Jenkins et al 2013, 188). It was not until the theatrical release of the movie that the theories about the cameos were confirmed.

Even though neither the Bully Maguire videos nor the theories about Andrew Garfield were official part of the movie or its marketing campaign, they still had a profound impact on both. As Mussies argues, "the labor of the fans is devoted to the thinking through and building of the noncanonical worlds for their fandom. In that sense, it does not matter how a work was literally created; the contribution to fandom is about the mental envisioning of the fan(s) involved" (Mussies 2023, 7). Here, we can see fan labor influencing the production of the actual canonical text in a direct way. It also shows how studios now utilize the multimedia literacy of online fan communities. Whether the leaks were intentional or not, it required fans to be active in various online communities to pick up the hints and fully experience the suspense during the rollout period. It did not take long for the memes and leaks to become widespread in the participatory sphere of fandom, which led to theories about the movie, that were similar to conspiracy theories (Grusauskaite et al 2022, 2).

The plot of the movie is presented in the framework of a classic intrusion fantasy, where "the world is ruptured by the intrusion, which disrupts normality and has to be negotiated with or defeated, sent back whence it came, or controlled" (Mendlesohn 2008, 115). After Peter Parker, portrayed by Tom Holland, interferes with Doctor Strange's magic spell, with which he tries to make the whole world forget about real identity, villains from other universes start appearing in the world. These villains are the ones who were introduced in Maguire's and Garfield's *Spider-Man* adaptations, such as Willem Dafoe's Green Goblin and Jamie Foxx's Electro. In order to restore normalcy in his universe, Peter must send them back to theirs. However, as all these villains are originally good characters who turned evil due to an experiment or accident, Peter decides to cure them before sending them back. The turning point of the movie comes when the Green Goblin kills Aunt May. Unlike in other Spider-Man adaptations, where Uncle Ben's death is the character-defining moment, here Aunt May utters the famous sentence before her death: "With great power, there must also come great responsibility" (Lee 1962, 11).

The arrival of Tobey Maguire's and Andrew Garfield's Spider-Man incarnations help Peter process his aunt's death. The three Spider-Men are not presented in the movie as one and the same. It is acknowledged that, while they are incarnations of the same character, they come from different backgrounds. As I explained earlier, this kind of doppelgänger, which "has

diverged from the "original" from birth onwards by being brought up in a different society and under different circumstances" (Kogel and Schäfer 2011, 133), is identified as the "parallel universe" doppelgänger in Kogel's and Schäfer's delineation. Although Aunt May never died in the other two Spider-Man series, those Peters have also had to go through losing several of their beloved ones. With their help, Peter defeats the villains and sends them back to their universes. At the same time, he also receives emotional support from his other selves. As Kogel and Schäfel argue, the parallel universe doppelgänger "shows us the potential for personal development that lies within us" (Kogel and Schäfer 2011, 133).

The return of Tobey Maguire and Andrew Garfield alongside their old villains also held strong nostalgic value for fans. On the day of the premiere, video-sharing websites were flooded with recordings of fans giving standing ovations in cinemas worldwide during the scenes where Andrew Garfield and Tobey Maguire first step through a portal. Using the multiverse as a narrative device, each adaptation becomes a separate alternate universe. The lines between the franchises are blurred, and all the different, previously contradictory, incarnations of the character become part of the same continuity. The multiverse rewrites what is considered canon, which reflects the current cultural fascination with alternate histories. In the diegesis of the movie, portals serve as a gateway which allows us to cross the boundaries between series, making meta-seriality the central motor of the narrative (Besson 2023, 2). This format had previously been tested in the 2014 comic book crossover publishing initiative titled "Spider-Verse" and the 2018 animated movie *Into the Spider-Verse*, to great success in both cases. This shows us another case in which cinema incorporates a plot element that was previously tried in comics (Ford and Jenkins 2009, 304-305).

These examples demonstrate how the movie's marketing campaign utilized the digital landscape of the post-truth information crisis consciously. Theories about possible cameos and leaks, such as the video featuring Andrew Garfield in Spider-Man suit, were not part of the official rollout of the movies. The studios capitalized on the spreadability of such content (Jenkins et al 2013, 188) and used it to generate even more media coverage and hype for the movie. Instead of official publications or marketing, these rumors and theories were spread willingly by fans.

The involvement of the multiverse was teased from the very beginning, with posters featuring unnaturally swirling, upside-down urban landscapes and Doctor Strange mentioning it in the trailer. Anything can happen in the multiverse, which gives fertile soil to fan speculations about the endless possibilities in the movie. However, it also shows that studio

politics and financial factors continue to shape the narrative of these movies (Claverie 2024, 5-6).

4.4 Nostalgia, Conspiracies, and the Multiverse: A Conclusion

To conclude this section, I argue that the concept of the multiverse, and the movies that utilize it, are inseparably tied to the digital landscape of the 21st century. *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021) is a prime example, with both its development and promotional campaign heavily relying on the spreadability and participatory nature of online media. The information crisis, which gives an unprecedented opportunity for fake news, conspiracy theories, and alternate facts to spread, created a fractured sense of reality where everyone has their own private beliefs. The existence of multiverse narratives, which utilize alternate canons and continuities consciously, is one of the markers of this crisis. Popular culture often reflects our current concerns and anxieties in real life.

Nostalgia is another important factor. Multiverse movies utilize this plot element to bring back characters from older franchises. They enable discontinued storylines and franchises as alternate universes, which are traversable by characters. Current series target audiences who were children or teenagers in the early 2000s by bringing back characters like Tobey Maguire's Spider-Man and Hugh Jackman's Wolverine in *Deadpool & Wolverine* (2024). This generation also has a stronger online presence than previous ones, which enables studios to capitalize on the new marketing and storytelling methods offered by digital media.

Chapter 5. *Star Wars*: Multiple Canons and Multiple Universes

As I argued earlier, there are two different versions of multiverse storytelling in contemporary popular media. The first one, which uses the concept consciously in the fictional diegesis of the story, is often found in superhero franchises. In these stories, the characters traverse between various universes, in which they find alternative settings and doppelgängers. They are usually told through various forms of media. The second version is when there is limited or no multiverse travel in the story, but the multiplicity of adaptations, incarnations, and fan works still creates multiplicity (Jenkins 2009) similar to those found in multiverse narratives. While these franchises tend to put a greater emphasis on strict continuity and canonicity, factors beyond the creators' control still turn them into multiverses. I argue that *Star Wars* falls into this category. This is the reason why I chose *Star Wars* and Marvel for my analysis, as they both exemplify each of the two approaches. Comparing them could help us gain a deeper understanding of popular culture in the digital age. In the following sections, I am going to focus on *Star Wars*.

Popular film franchises such as *Star Wars*, the Marvel Cinematic Universe, and *Harry Potter* operate on the logic of shared universes, where the various sequels, prequels, spin-offs, and other additions expand the original storyworld. With the addition of other transmedia elements, such as novels, comics, and animated series, it is becoming increasingly difficult for fans to experience the entirety of the storyworld. As a result, there have been numerous attempts to organize all the information into databases and archives. On the one hand, corporates practice narrative authority by only distributing content through subscription-based online services and willfully ignoring content they do not consider canon. On the other hand, fans try to organize knowledge about the storyworld through their own means on fan sites, forums, and wiki databases. However, fandom is not a consistent entity, there are various interpretations of the franchise, and fan preferences can vary significantly. The issue presented in this sub-chapter is not a clear "fan vs. corporate" situation. I aim to highlight the nuances in the processes and tendencies that shape multiverse narratives from the perspective of audiences. As the previous chapter demonstrated, even our perception of the real world is fragmented, there is no unified consensus about our understanding of events happening in our real life. This can be influenced by personal factors and preferences, but also by political, social, and demographic factors. This chapter aims to further illustrate how this fragmentation translates to how we produce and consume narratives in the digital age.

5.1 Narrative Authority and Digital Media: An Introduction

The emergence of digital media at the turn of the 20th and 21st centuries paved the way for new methods of storytelling. Lev Manovich argues that, similarly to cinema replaced the novel as the key form of cultural expression in the modern age, the database is now surpassing cinema in the computer age (Manovich 2001, 194). Databases offer a nonlinear form of storytelling, where the user can view, navigate, and search through collections of items. With the rise of streaming services and cinematic universes in the late 2000s, we can observe Manovich's ideas in real life.

The *Star Wars* fandom is a space of conflict and controversy. Ever since *Star Wars* (1977) was released, fans and authors have debated its storylines and additions. Despite continuous attempts by studios to monopolize power over defining what counts as canon and what does not, the size of the *Star Wars* narrative has led to many inconsistencies and continuity errors. Combined with controversies surrounding certain characters, storylines, and changes to the original films, the *Star Wars* canon has become a volatile and ever-changing entity.

This sub-chapter compares two types of databases that organize the *Star Wars* narrative. These two databases are: Wookieepedia, an online wiki page edited by fans; and Disney+, a subscription-based streaming platform operated by the Walt Disney Company. Through the analysis of these two databases, I will explore the question of narrative authority in the *Star Wars* saga. In the final section of this sub-chapter, I am going to discuss the controversy around the Disney+ series *Star Wars: The Acolyte* (2024) and examine how the challenges of narrative authority in the digital age manifest in its case. The questions I aim to answer in this sub-chapter are the following: How do these databases shape the fandom's collective understanding of the narrative? Who has authority over the canon in a transmedia narrative? Overall, I aim to gain a deeper understanding of how database-structured storytelling and multiverses have challenged the dichotomy of canon/non-canon.

5.1.1 Canonicity in the *Star Wars* Saga

In the following section, I will utilize Cook's definition of canon, in which he claims that "canonicity practices identify a privileged subfiction that constitutes the "real" story regarding what is fictionally true in the MSCF (massive serialized collaborative fiction)" (Cook 2013, 272). During George Lucas's tenure at the helm of Lucasfilm, a tier system was established to define the various levels of canon in the *Star Wars* saga (Proctor and Freeman 2016, 233):

- The highest level was the G-Canon/George Canon, which included the latest versions of the films.
- The second tier was the T-Canon, which included TV series supervised by Lucas, such as *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* (2008-2014).
- The third tier was the C-Canon/Continuity Canon. This included the Expanded Universe (EU) with all the novels, comics, video games, and other media entries. Although most of these were approved by Lucas, he still treated them as secondary to the movies. When a new movie contradicted Expanded Universe material, the content of the movie was always prioritized.
- The fourth tier was S-Canon/Secondary Canon, including role-playing games and LEGO.
- The fifth, lowest tier was the N-Canon/Non-Canon, which included the *Star Wars: Infinities* (2002-2004) alternate universe stories, as well as other material like fanfiction.

This system was in effect until 2014, when Disney decided to reset the entire *Star Wars* continuity, and switch to a binary classification of canon and non-canon. Both systems have been riddled with controversy as fans were often unhappy when a certain narrative entry was added to or removed from the official continuity. It depends on the individual attitude of the fan to decide whether they accept the official narrative or not.

> As we can see, then, authorship is a thorny issue, especially for *Star Wars* fans, and notions of authenticity are intrinsically tethered to whether or not the EU is part of hyperdiegetic continuity; or simply a series of counter-factual narratives which could be contradicted should Lucas 'write over' them with new material. Despite Lucas' authorship being evoked by fans to reify the EU as canonical, it is Lucas' 'author-function' that is summoned forth, even as he delegates the decision-making process to his team of editors at Lucas Licensing who then consult and collaborate with authors, artists and creators who collectively expand the *Star Wars* universe. (Proctor and Freeman 2016, 234)

With the vast amount of content created by various authors in the *Star Wars* franchise, the question of authorship is indeed a tangled web. Even George Lucas himself is notorious for changing and rewriting his prior narrative decisions. In 1997, two years before the release of

the prequel trilogy, Lucas released the "Special Edition" of the original trilogy. The new editions were intended to showcase the capabilities of new CGI (Computer Generated Imagery) technology in Hollywood productions, while also making the originals more coherent with the then-upcoming prequels. In doing so, Lucas made heavy alterations to the original movies. While some of the changes were merely aesthetic, others changed the lore of the universe significantly.

One of the most significant changes was the addition of a laser blast from the bounty hunter Greedo during his conflict with Han Solo at the Mos Eisley cantina in *A New Hope*. While in the original version of the film it was Solo who shot first, the new version changed the narrative so that the initial blast would come from Greedo. Upon seeing the new version, fans felt that this change had undermined Solo's character development from his initial morally ambiguous cynical smuggler persona to the rebel hero at the end of the movie (Brooker 2003, 75-76). While the original theatrical version presented him as a character who was not reluctant to shoot first in a conflict, the new scene turned the shooting into simply an act of self-defense. The uproar around the scene led to the "Han shot first" movement, with the phrase being printed on t-shirts, including one worn by Lucas himself at the set of *Indiana Jones and the Kingdom of the Crystal Skull* in 2008 (Lyden 2012, 781). The controversy around this scene is a classic example of fans refusing the authority of the creator. As Will Brooker puts it, "this authorial intention holds little weight with other fans who, over the past twenty years in some cases, have built up their own firm ideas about what characters would and wouldn't do" (Brooker 2003, 76-77). Brooker's argument is further developed by Philipp Dominik Keidl, who attributes the insufficiency of Lucas's "gospel-gossip" canon model to several factors (Keidl 2022, 172). Beyond the issues around the Special Editions, these also included the expanding body of Expanded Universe material across various forms of media that decentralized authorship in the *Star Wars* narrative; the mixed reception of *Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999); and the increasing visibility of merchandise products. Overall, the case of the "Han shot first" movement is one of the major examples where there is a direct opposition between the authority of the creator and the fandom.

Other Special Edition changes were relatively minor in comparison to the infamous cantina scene. Some of these included adding more rocks in front of the droid R2-D2 while he is hiding from the gang of Tusken raiders in a cave entrance in *A New Hope* or changing the appearance of the Sarlacc monster in *The Return of the Jedi*. Nevertheless, the 1997 re-release and subsequent special editions (2004 DVD release, 2011 blu-ray release) were all advertised by Lucasfilm as the canonical, definitive edition of the *Star Wars* saga. However, as the previous

examples highlight, there were many issues with continuity and canonicity even in the Lucas-era. This was further complicated by the acquisition of Lucasfilm by Walt Disney Company in 2012, and the subsequent development of the sequel trilogy.

In 2014, two years after the acquisition, Lucasfilm decided to "reset" the entire Expanded Universe continuity. This was meant to pave the way for new content without any interference from old lore (Keidl 2022, 164). This meant that all *Star Wars* content, outside of the six movies and *The Clone Wars* (2008) animated series, was deleted from the official continuity and rebranded as "Legends". To make sure that the new canon would remain consistent in its storytelling, Lucasfilm established the Lucasfilm Story Group (LSG) to oversee new *Star Wars* content. This marked a shift from Lucas's total authority over the franchise to the Story Group. While Lucas was still involved in the initial development of the sequel trilogy as "creative consultant", his ideas were largely ignored during production. The tiered canon system of the Lucas-era was also disbanded, with a binary canon/non-canon division taking its place. In practice, this means that all the ancillary multimedia content approved by the Story Group is on the same level of canonicity as the movies.

Star Wars is often considered to be a prime example of transmedia storytelling (Geraghty 2017b, 117). However, this term comes with limitations that cannot explain certain characteristics of the franchise. Despite the studio's efforts to maintain canonicity, *Star Wars* cannot be viewed as one consistent storyworld where all the elements are in synergic relationship with each other. Jenkins's definition of transmedia storytelling, which claims that it "represents a process where integral elements of a fiction get dispersed systematically across multiple delivery channels for the purpose of creating a unified and coordinated entertainment experience" (Jenkins 2007) is discussed by Tobias Kunz, who argues that the word "unified" stands out in the case of Star Wars (Kunz 2019, 62). While the rest of the definition stands in his view, the *Star Wars* canon is not a unified experience. In order to understand why, we must address the contradictions between the stories considered to be canon. As the number of novels, comics books, series, and animated series has grown significantly since Lucasfilm erased the Expanded Universe, many issues arose around the continuity as well. Jenkins also acknowledges this change in later publications, and argues that transmedia franchises use the multiplicity of various iterations of stories and characters instead of a unified continuity (Jenkins 2009).

One of the most infamous examples of contradiction between canon stories is the escape of Kanan Jarrus from Order 66. Kanan is a Jedi Knight, who acts as one of the main protagonists

of the 2014 animated series *Star Wars: Rebels*. Shortly after the release of the first season, he received a tie-in comic book series, titled *Kanan: The Last Padawan*, which explains how he managed to escape from the Jedi purge during the formation of the Galactic Empire. However, in 2021, the debut episode of the animated series *Star Wars: The Bad Batch* revisited the event and presented it differently from the comic book. In this version, the main characters of the Bad Batch help Kanan escape, which showcases their moral differences with other clones. This caused an uproar among fans, who criticized Dave Filoni, the executive producer of the series, for not respecting the established canon. Ironically, since the episode focused on the Bad Batch, the inclusion of Kanan in the episode was arbitrary, and the scene would have worked perfectly with any other Jedi character. However, cameos like this help ease viewers into the series by adding a familiar face.

Secondly, the different levels of canon between the officially licensed products must also be addressed. Although the novels, comics books, and video games released in the Expanded Universe before 2014 are no longer considered canon, many of them are still in publication under the "Legends" banner (Keidl 2022, 164). For many fans, these stories are an integral part of the *Star Wars* narrative, which cannot be changed by corporate decisions. Fiascos, such as the continuity issue with Kanan Jarrus, have further reinforced their stance, and many of them have created their own *Star Wars* canon. Many popular characters, with notable examples being Darth Bane and Darth Revan, only exist in minor cameos in the post-2014 version of the canon. However, the books and games in which these characters were first depicted are still viewed by many fans as definitive versions. While Lucasfilm generally attempted to ignore this in the early years of the new canon, they have since started to make small gestures toward acknowledging it. One example is the inclusion of Darth Malak in one of the LEGO sets released in 2024. Malak was originally part of the *Knights of the Old Republic* multimedia publishing scheme in the mid-2000s, and as such, was erased from the continuity after the Disney takeover. His inclusion in one the LEGO sets in the 25th anniversary series can be seen as a small nod to fans who lament the old *Star Wars*. Other characters, such as Grand Admiral Thrawn, who also originally appeared in Expanded Universe novels, were fully integrated into the new canon in books and series.

LEGO is an intriguing phenomenon in the context of canon and continuity. Over the decades, *LEGO Star Wars* has grown from a toy product line into a transmedia franchise with its own video games, comic books, and animated movies. The pixelated bricolage of LEGO has become a medium on its own, where narrative and play are intertwined (Lee 2020, 150). While

the goofy, parodistic LEGO series, such as the *LEGO Star Wars Holiday Special* (2020) are in no way part of the main continuity, they are still relevant to it. For example, in *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* (2019), the last installment of the oft-criticized sequel trilogy, it was heavily implied that the ex-stormtrooper Finn was Force-sensitive and would train to become a Jedi after the movie. However, due to the widespread negative reception of the movie in the fandom, the characters of the sequel trilogy were put on the sidelines, and their stories were not continued in other media. Yet, in the 2020 *LEGO Holiday Special*, which features these characters in a parodistic LEGO story that also reflects on the infamous *Star Wars Holiday Special* (1978), we see Finn taking on his Jedi training. Therefore, while this movie is not part of the official canon, it still shows the fate the creators had in mind for these characters. This aligns with Cook's definition of interpretationally relevant noncanonical works that "often provide important, albeit indirect, information relevant to our understanding of the canonical fictional world" (Cook 2013, 272). As J. R. Lee argues in his discussion about LEGO and transmedia storytelling, "character toys typically depict not a character's canonical action but rather the character's disposition to act in certain ways" (Lee 2020, 160). Finn's case is a typical example of this, but as I will argue later in my discussion of *Across the Spider-Verse* (2023), multiverse narratives have the potential for a stronger integration of toys and LEGO into their narrative complexity.

Finally, the issue of canonicity and continuity is further complicated by fanfiction and other unofficial works. As a multimedia franchise with immense worldwide popularity, *Star Wars* has spawned countless fan-created videos, short stories, and artwork. Furthermore, alternative takes on the movies and bootleg merchandise products have been produced in certain countries. A famous example of this is a 1982 Turkish movie titled *Dünany Kurtaran Adam* (eng. *The Man Who Saved the World*, dir. Çetin Inanç), or, as known in the *Star Wars* fandom, the "Turkish *Star Wars*". It contains many scenes plagiarized from the original *Star Wars* trilogy. Other prominent examples are the comic adaptation of *Star Wars* by Hungarian comic artist by Attila Fazekas, and the *Han Solo*-trilogy written by Zsolt Nyulászi under the pen name Dale Avery. Both got into commercial circulation without any approval from Lucasfilm.

This complex web of multimedia additions to the *Star Wars*-brand shows us that it is not a consistent transmedia storyworld. Carmelo Esterrich argues that "*Star Wars* is not a universe. It is a multitude of them" (Esterrich 2021, 1). Nowadays the multiverse is a popular element in pop culture, with Marvel as a prime example. In several Marvel stories, most notably in the *Spider-Verse* (2018-) animated series, characters from alternate universes appear together in the

form of crossovers. This can occur between various adaptations of the same character, as exemplified by *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021), where the three major filmic incarnations of Spider-Man, played by Tobey Maguire, Andrew Garfield, and Tom Holland, are brought together in one movie. However, *Star Wars* has never integrated the multiverse into its stories. I argue that there are two major reasons for this. The first one is that even though I demonstrated that the different layers of the *Star Wars* canon are filled with contradictions, Lucasfilm has always tried to hold a firm grip over its continuity. Acknowledging the existence of alternate universes in the *Star Wars* canon would question this authority. Secondly, fans of *Star Wars* are generally less permissive than Marvel fans when it comes to the inclusion of new elements. There have been numerous examples where fans, ironically, deemed a new character "alien" to the *Star Wars* saga. A recent example is the "Modifier gang", a group of cybernetically enhanced steampunk-inspired bikers in *The Book of Boba Fett* (2021-2022). Their appearance was criticized by fans, who compared them to the Power Rangers (Hibberd 2022). It is no wonder then that alternate universes and time travel, both being highly controversial elements in science-fiction fandom, are out of the question for authors. Even if there have been some minor attempts, such as the one in the episode titled "The World Between Worlds" in the *Star Wars: Rebels* (2014-2018) series. Despite these factors, the *Star Wars* narrative has become a multiverse with multiple "coexisting alternative continuities" (Richards 2017, 19). According to Denzell Richards, characters in transmedia texts are "reworked in different forms and for different purposes across a range of diverse media – rather than constructing closed transtextual frameworks resistant to narrative adaptation or audience appropriation" (Richards 2017, 19). This is also present in *Star Wars*. For example, a version of Luke Skywalker who appears in a LEGO adaptation or in the Hungarian comics is different from the one in the original movies.

As a result, fans are left with numerous versions of the *Star Wars* narrative, with conflicting views on their canonicity. John C. Lyden argues that "it is difficult to identify which version of Star Wars actually is the original at this point, given the plethora of versions and the continuing dispute between filmmaker and fans about what constitutes the "canon," and who has the authority to define it" (Lyden 2012, 780). Lyden's paper was published in 2012, and the situation has become even more complicated since then. The release of Disney's sequel trilogy, starting with *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* in 2015, led to further alienation within the fandom. While Lucas was often cited prior to 2012 as the person who is responsible for "ruining" the saga with the prequel trilogy and the special editions, the backlash against the sequel trilogy led to fans view his era retroactively as the "golden age" of *Star Wars*.

As we can see from this sub-chapter, canonicity and authority are complex issues in the case of vast transmedia narratives like *Star Wars* and Marvel. In the following part, I will move on to the discussion of digital storytelling and explore how the various databases influenced these conflicts.

5.1.2 The Narrative and the Database

In 2001, Lev Manovich published his highly influential book, *The Language of New Media*. In this book, he argues that in the computer age, the database will become the key form of cultural expression (Manovich 2001, 194). He claims that "database and narrative are natural enemies. Competing for the same territory of human culture, each claims an exclusive right to make meaning out of the world" (Manovich 2001, 199). While the current popularity of wiki sites and streaming services might challenge this claim, there is still a lot of truth in it. The examples in the previous section highlight that transmedia narratives are not contained within a consistent storyworld. Instead, their narrative elements become entries within a database from which producers and creators can withdraw items for their new stories. A series like *The Mandalorian* (2019-) can take characters from animated series (such as Ahsoka Tano, who originally debuted in *The Clone Wars*), books (Cobb Vanth, who first appeared in the 2016 book *Aftermath*), and of course some classic characters from the original films, like Luke Skywalker and Boba Fett.

While explaining the principles of new media, Manovich argues that "new media follows, or actually, runs ahead of a quite different logic of post-industrial society – that of individual customization, rather than that of mass standardization" (Manovich 2001, 51). This logic derives from the practices of classical cinema and television. At the end of the 19th century, during the emergence of these media, the practices of the Industrial Revolution were still in effect. The factory system displaced artisan labor, leading to the standardization of both the process and the product.

Jenkins argues that fandom models the way in which knowledge-based societies will function in the future (Jenkins 2006b, 134). He borrows Pierre Lévy's idea of collective intelligence and applies it to fandom. Lévy argues that we are currently witnessing the formation of a "knowledge space", which displaces previous anthropological spaces (Lévy 2001, 255). An anthropological space is "a system of proximity (space) unique to the world of humanity (anthropological), and thus dependent on human technologies, significations, language, culture, conventions, representations, and emotions" (Lévy 2001, 255). In Lévy's view, there have been three major spaces of signification formed by humanity throughout history. The first one is the

"earth", with myths and rites as its major modes of knowledge. The second one is the "territorial" space, which arose with the development of states, cities, and agriculture. In this space the exploitation of fields displaced hunting and gathering as the dominant form of wealth, and writing became the main conduit of knowledge. The third form of anthropological space is the "commodity" space, which came to be with the development of world trade. Movement became the new organizing principle, and modern science became the source of knowledge (Lévy 2001, 255-256). The fourth, "knowledge" space, or "cosmopedia", is replacing the previous two, with data and information being the most important sources of wealth.

According to Jenkins, "online fan communities might well be some of the most fully realized versions of Lévy's cosmopedia" (Jenkins 2006b, 137). Although Jenkins focuses on the general mechanisms of fandom, defining them as "expansive self-organizing groups focused around the collective production, debate, and circulation of meanings, interpretations, and fantasies in response to various artifacts of contemporary popular culture" (Jenkins 2006b, 137), I argue that the processes highlighted by Lévy and Jenkins are particularly true in the case of online fan-edited databases. This notion is also reinforced by Jason Mittel, who argues that wiki sites fit in with the theory of collective intelligence and one of their most widespread uses has been to "augment fandom, especially around popular culture" (Mittell 2013, 37-38). As Jenkins argues, "collective intelligence expands a community's productive capacity because it frees individual members from the limitations of their memory and enables the group to act upon a broader range of expertise" (Jenkins 2006b, 139). In other words, while it is nearly impossible for a fan to experience every piece of content within these vast narratives, fan communities enable them to access all information and even contribute to the collective knowledge. A wiki site can help fans "fill in gaps from missed episodes and unknown transmedia extensions, or clarify narrative ambiguities and uncertainties" (Mittell 2013, 40).

In Jenkins's view, forums and e-mail facilitated the development of the collective knowledge of fandom and displaced fanzines and traditional mails (Jenkins 2006b, 141). Since the writing of his essay, social media became the new go-to place for fan communities. Regular forums were unable to compete with the algorithmic structure of sites like Facebook, Instagram, and Reddit. Even in this environment, wiki sites remain a backbone of fandom. They do not just collect and organize narrative elements; they also have the power to shape the common understanding of the narrative:

> Wikis offer a technology that not only challenges our notion of authorship and creativity, but also encourages new conceptions of readership and interpretation. Specifically, by rewriting *and* rereading the narrative text, fans playfully interact with the created world. Wikis offer a virtual sandbox within which fans can enact a philosophy of playfulness by playing with the narrative with a networked space. (Booth 2016, 87)

In other words, wikis enable fans to play with the transmedia world and to shape it to their own liking. Booth refutes Manovich's claim that the database and narrative are natural enemies (Manovich 2001, 199). He argues that "by forging digital links within the narrative chain of the cult serial, fan wiki writers turn a linear story into a multi-accessed archive of narrative material" (Booth 2016, 87). It enables fans to browse and search elements and restructure them by using hyperlinks. In György E. Szőnyi's view, hyperlinks brought a cultural paradigm shift, which is contrary to linear, sequential flows of information (Szőnyi 2003, 229). He compares hyperlinks to the 'zapping technique' of television viewers, which gives audiences agency over the content they consume (Szőnyi 2003, 230). In the case of an online wiki site, users navigate through hyperlinks that are embedded within the texts describing the narrative elements. Reading the narrative as an archive can be a resistant act that counters the "official" *Star Wars* canon hierarchy (Gilmore 2021, 40), but can also aggregate the canon set down by the author (Thomas 2018, 295-296).

Considering all this, what could be the motivations of fans who spend countless hours editing wiki articles? Several scholars have tried to find answers to this question. According to Mittell, wiki sites serve as a tool for collaborative creativity (Mittell 2013, 41). They are capable of documenting cultural objects, and non-canonical extensions like fanfiction as well. They can also host speculation and theories about these cultural objects.

Paul Thomas observes that on the official Wikipedia website, articles skew heavily toward popular culture (Thomas 2016, para. 1.1). He regards fans as some of the most enthusiastic editors. However, as Mittel points out, fancruft, "overly detailed information that is seen as only relevant to the most passionate fans" (Mittell 2013, 39), is usually not welcome on Wikipedia. Wiki sites can fill in this gap as they are usually centered around one specific cultural object. Many fans are interested in documenting these cultural objects instead of creating fan fiction or fan art (Mittell 2013, 41) (Thomas 2016, para. 4.3). Wikipedia and wiki sites also give a higher degree of visibility to a fan's labor, as articles published on these sites are almost certainly going

to be read by many people. They also fit seamlessly into Jenkins's definition of participatory culture, in which "new tools and technologies enable consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate, and recirculate media content" (Jenkins 2006b, 135-136). The infrastructural nature of wiki sites also gives them an advantage over other websites, like YouTube and tumblr (Thomas 2016, para. 6.1). However, it is important to highlight that Wikipedia and major Fandom sites (except for the ones created specifically for fanfiction) almost never contain fanfiction, or fan-canon (fanon) (Mittell 2013, 38-39, 41) (Thomas 2016, para. 6.3). As such, as Thomas argues, fan editors do not take part in the construction of the canon but instead take part in aggregating canon set down by the author (Thomas 2018, 295-296). In cases where more than one author's work is in question, Wikipedia talk pages become the "battle lines" of fans. The example that I explained earlier about the backstory of the character Kanan Jarrus is an interesting case where two official works contradict each other. Wookieepedia (https://starwars.fandom.com), the biggest fan-edited online *Star Wars* encyclopedia has also been at the forefront of many of these issues.

The name "Wookieepedia" comes from the combination of two words: the name of Wikipedia and "wookiee", an alien species in the *Star Wars* universe. The Wookieepedia server is hosted by Fandom, an organization hosting numerous online fan-edited encyclopedias, and the content of the website itself is edited by non-profit volunteers from all over the world. There is an important difference between Fandom, and its predecessor, Wikipedia: while Wikipedia maintains itself through public donations, Fandom uses advertising and sponsored content to gain revenue. However, the base concept remains the same: a community-edited website that provides information on virtually every single object related to a certain topic, navigable through hyperlinks.

The standpoint of Wookieepedia toward canonicity is quite interesting. First of all, it prohibits the addition of fanfiction. Therefore, while there is indeed a sense of grassroots activity in the overall structure of the site, its rules reinforce the official canon. However, it also contains information about aspects of the franchise that are not in line with the current approach of Disney. For example, each article has a "Canon" and a "Legends" section, which document both the pre-Disney and the Disney-era versions of characters.

Disney+ is a streaming service that was launched in 2019 by The Walt Disney Company to compete with the likes of Netflix and Amazon Prime. Nowadays most *Star Wars* and Marvel series are released exclusively on Disney+. *Star Wars* debuted on the platform with the first episode of *The Mandalorian* in November 2019, and the first Marvel series was *Wandavision*

in January 2021. Both series are narratively tied into their respective cinematic universes, and have lasting consequences not only on other series, but on theatrical movies as well. Therefore, to truly embrace the entire *Star Wars* or Marvel canon, one must keep up to date with the exclusive releases on the platform. Disney+ is often viewed as an attempt at centralization (Goudmand 2023, 3), both from a narrative and a legal standpoint. This centralization is characterized by aggressive brand acquisitions and digital expansionism (Pitre 2023, 712). However, complete centralization was different in the case of the two franchises. The distribution rights to the original six *Star Wars* movies were owned by 20th Century Fox until 2019, when Disney acquired the company, gaining full ownership of the franchise. In the case of Marvel, it was much more complicated. In the late 90s and early 2000s, to avoid bankruptcy during a period of crisis, Marvel Comics sold the film rights of their characters to different studios: *X-Men* and *The Fantastic Four* to 20th Century Fox, *Spider-Man* to Columbia/Sony Pictures, and *The Hulk* to Universal. Even after the launch of Marvel Studios and the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) in 2008 with *Iron Man*, the rights to some characters within the MCU were owned by different studios. Disney acquired Marvel Studios in 2009, but even this acquisition did not lead to complete ownership of the characters. Characters from the *X-Men* franchise could not appear in Marvel Cinematic Universe movies until 2019, when Disney purchased 20th Century Fox. Even *The Incredible Hulk* (2008), which is an official part of the MCU, could not be viewed on Disney+ for a long time due to its rights being at Universal Pictures.

In comparison to the complex legal situation of Marvel movies, *Star Wars* is in a much simpler position. With both Lucasfilm and 20th Century Fox under its umbrella, Disney has complete freedom with all the characters and other narrative elements of the saga. Furthermore, Disney does not have to deal with the issue of multiple licenses like in the case of Marvel (Goudmand 2023, 3). The series *The Mandalorian* (2019), which tells the story of a lone bounty hunter seven years after the events of *Return to the Jedi* (1983), became the main selling point of Disney+ when the platform launched. Its exclusive release succeeded in attracting millions of subscribers worldwide. As Anaïs Goudmand points out, Disney also tried to take advantage of the changes in media consumption during the COVID-19 pandemic by releasing certain Marvel movies simultaneously on Disney+ and in theaters in 2021 but ultimately ended up alienating its important partners (Goudmand 2023, 4-5). By the release of *Shang-Chi and The Legend of the Ten Rings* (2021), the studio had returned to exclusive cinema releases.

The way in which the movies and series are distributed through Disney+ has had a lasting impact on both franchises. The fan backlash against Disney's sequel trilogy, especially against *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017) and *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* (2019) impacted the franchise severely. Released less than half a year after *The Last Jedi*, the spin-off movie *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (2018), which tells the origin story of a young Han Solo, became a commercial and financial failure, despite having no explicit connection to the sequel trilogy. After the conclusion of the sequels in 2019, Disney and Lucasfilm decided to delay or cancel all upcoming *Star Wars* movies and focus on the Disney+ series instead. This coincided with the COVID-19 crisis, which saw people abandoning movie theaters for online streaming. Following the success of the first season of *The Mandalorian*, numerous other *Star Wars* series were announced to be in development for the platform. Some of these series, such as *The Book of Boba Fett* (2021-2022) and *Ahsoka* (2023) would continue the narrative threads introduced in *The Mandalorian*, creating the so-called "Mandoverse" (Goudmand 2023, 12). This is a fan-coined term that refers to the shared narrative told through these series with recurring characters like Din Djarin, Grogu, Ahsoka Tano, and Grand Admiral Thrawn. Others, such as *Obi-Wan Kenobi* (2022) and *Andor* (2022-) told new stories with fan-favorite characters from previous movies. Overall, the role of the series in comparison to theatrical movies started becoming more and more significant. We can observe a parallel with the canon policy of Lucasfilm post-2014, in which all releases deemed canon are equally canonical to the narrative, regardless of media form. A similar process was carried out in the case of Marvel. The name "Marvel Cinematic Universe" already implies the priority given to the movies above the series (Goudmand 2023, 8). TV series released throughout the 2010s, such as *Agents of Shield* (2013-2022) and Netflix series focusing on "street-level" superheroes, such as *Daredevil* (2015-2018) and *The Punisher* (2017-2019) had virtually no impact on the movies. The canon status was also in question for a long time, as the producers of Marvel never really gave a direct answer to whether they were canon or not. However, with the centralization of the MCU on Disney+, Marvel series released after 2019 are now all integral parts of the cinematic universe.

Many scholars have criticized Disney for their centralization and brand management. Shawna Kidman argues that Disney has created the era of "corporate auteurism", where studio executives (like Kathleen Kennedy for *Star Wars* and Kevin Feige for Marvel) become the "masterminds" of the studio's biggest brands and "a kind of creative genius once reserved only for directors" (Kidman 2021, 3-4). In practice, this means that the studio executive's role becomes like that of the showrunner in long-running series. They come up with the story ideas

and the main plotlines, then hire directors to create the movies. In case of a commercial failure, like what happened with the *Star Wars* sequel trilogy, the directors become expendable while the executive stays in place. As Kidman argues, "discourses of authorship have long served to justify internal labor practices" (Kidman 2021, 15). Building partially on Kidman's argument, Jake Pitre argues that Disney documentaries, which are also accessible on Disney+, serve as part of an investment in brand futurity. He defines brand futurity as "an imperious instance of brand management for a digital era structured by financialization, which organizes corporate strategy according to moral-economic visions of that which does not yet, or may never, exist" (Pitre 2023, 713). Disney+ docuseries, such as *Inside Pixar*, *Behind the Attraction*, and *Marvel Studios: Assembled*, aim to create a mythos around the company's technological innovations while obscuring the labor of workers (Pitre 2023, 723). Using Pitre's theory of brand futurity, I argue that Disney+ serves as a tool not only for establishing the canon of the storyworlds, but also for shaping the discourse around their extradiegetic elements. In the following part of this chapter, I will discuss this tension between the "corporate" canon and fandom through the example of a Disney+ series, *Star Wars: The Acolyte*. It is important to highlight that while we cannot view "fandom" as one unified entity, this sub-chapter will discuss phenomena that can help us identify and understand general tendencies.

5.1.3 Narrative Authority in *Star Wars: The Acolyte* (2024)

In June and July 2024, the series *Star Wars: The Acolyte* was released in eight episodes on a weekly basis on Disney+. Chronologically, the series is set 100 years before *Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (1999) and is connected to the *Star Wars: The High Republic* publishing initiative. It tells the story of a Force-sensitive set of twins, who get caught in the middle of a murder-mystery plot involving the Jedi and the Sith.

Ever since its first trailers came out, the series has been surrounded by constant controversy. A huge chunk of this controversy revolves around the gender politics of new *Star Wars* content, which ties back to previous controversies around diversity in *Star Wars* in the Disney-era. As Megen de Bruin-Molé argues, while the *Star Wars* franchise has not become fundamentally more or less feminist throughout the decades and it has not adopted radical politics, it has followed mainstream feminist politics (Bruin-Molé 2017, 240). In the case of the original trilogy, the character of Princess Leia subverted the traditional damsel-in-distress role and became a feminist icon (Bruin-Molé 2017, 227). As William Proctor claims, *Star Wars* has been a "hotbed of political antagonism" (Proctor 2016, 35) for a long time, which is demonstrated

by examples like American right-wing criticism against *Star Wars Episode III: The Revenge of the Sith* (2005) for its anti-Bush rhetoric. Overall, there are many examples from any are of *Star Wars* that shows us the potential of immersive fantasy (Mendlesohn 2008, 59) for inserting real-world political messages into fictional worlds.

Since the Disney acquisition in 2014, there has been an increasing focus on strong female characters. The main character of the sequel trilogy was Rey, a young scavenger girl trying to become a Jedi. The main protagonist of the spin-off movie *Rogue One: A Star Wars Story* (2017) was Jyn Erso, a female hero of the Rebel Alliance. Animated series have also introduced other strong female characters, such as Ahsoka Tano and Hera Syndulla. When the first installment of the sequel trilogy, *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015) came out, the character of Rey, played by Daisy Ridley, was criticized by fans for being a 'Mary Sue'. 'Mary Sue' is a negative term for female characters who, according to critics, represent a "wish-fulfillment fantasy" (Jowett 2019, 192), because they are portrayed as unrealistically strong and/or competent. As Lorna Jowett puts it:

> Fan responses to *The Force Awakens* develop ongoing discussions about "strong women" in contemporary media and popular culture: what this means, who it matters to, and whether it has just become a form of tokenism designed to lure female or feminist viewers. (Jowett 2019, 204-205)

Even though feminist themes have been present in *Star Wars* since the very beginning, many fans are unhappy with the inclusion of gender politics in the franchise. There are also many critics who view these tendencies as profit maximization through token characters (Koushik and Reed 2018, 3). *The Acolyte*, a series which features a diverse cast, a female lead, and was written by a female showrunner, soon found itself at the forefront of this controversy. Even before the series came out, the IMDB and Rotten Tomatoes pages of the series were "review-bombed", meaning that fans gave it low ratings with overwhelmingly negative reviews without even having seen the series (Tassi 2024b). Similar hate campaigns, as Will Brooker puts it, are usually driven by "young, immature people who don't actually hold right-wing ideas, misguidedly trolling and typing to provoke a reaction" (Brooker and Hassler-Forest 2017, 292). This is not different in the case of *The Acolyte*. Although the critical reception of the series was indeed lukewarm, with critics citing its pacing issues (Coles 2024), lack of moral core (Hummel 2024), and inconsistent acting performances (Roy Mohan 2024), a huge part of the fan backlash

against the series was aimed at a presumed "woke agenda" driving Disney-era *Star Wars* (Tassi 2024b).

Beyond its involvement in "the ongoing culture wars surrounding Disney and its properties" (Hummel 2024), the series was also criticized for allegedly "breaking the canon" (Tassi 2024b) of *Star Wars* at multiple points. One of the most problematic cases happens in the fourth episode of the show, titled "Day", which features a cameo appearance by Jedi Master Ki-Adi-Mundi (Wilding 2024). The character was originally introduced in *Episode I: The Phantom Menace* as one of the prominent masters on the Jedi Council. In *The Phantom Menace*, after hearing about the fight between Sith apprentice Darth Maul and Jedi master Qui-Gon Jinn, he expresses his disbelief about the return of the Sith, stating that they had not been seen for over a thousand years. However, in "Day", Ki-Adi-Mundi is shown as an active participant in the investigation against the Sith. This inconsistency was seen by fans as an unnecessary disruption to the *Star Wars* canon, which shows how little the studios care about narrative continuity. To further complicate this issue, *The Acolyte* is set approximately one hundred years before the events of *The Phantom Menace*, while Ki-Adi-Mundi was established in old Expanded Universe material to have been only 61 years old during the events of the same movie. While this is not a direct continuity error, as the material originally discussing Ki-Adi-Mundi's age is no longer part of the official canon, it still caused significant uproar within the fandom. "Retconning", short for "retroactive continuity", which refers the "alteration of facts previously established in canon" (Goodman 2015, 671), is often viewed as a form of artistic failure that breaks the continuity and integrity of the storyworld.

Following the release of this episode, many fans jumped on Twitter and other social media sites to voice their disappointment (Wilding 2024). Meanwhile, the Wookieepedia page of Ki-Adi-Mundi was changed to reflect the new information given by *The Acolyte*. As a result, fans started messaging the editors of the site, demanding the change be reversed. Many of these messages contained insults and even death threats. This phenomenon is not without precedent. After the release of *The Phantom Menace* in 1999, fans harassed actors Jake Lloyd and Ahmed Best (portraying the young Anakin Skywalker and Jar-Jar Binks, respectively) to the extent that Lloyd developed severe mental health issues and Best contemplated suicide. However, in the case of *The Acolyte*, this hate was further fueled by the initial controversy around the politics of the series.

This conflict shows us an example of the phenomena discussed in the previous sections. In order to align with the website's guidelines, the editors of Wookieepedia changed Ki-Adi-

Mundi's character page to reflect his age as described in the official canon. By doing so, the database fulfills its role as a resource for documenting the franchise, aggregating the canon set down by the author (Thomas 2018, 295-296). However, by the fourth episode, there had been widespread dissatisfaction with the series in the fandom. The authorial intention of the studio was not accepted by fans, who had different ideas about the backstory of a character. Brooker's theory about the media object's portrayal not meeting the fans' decades-long preconceptions about the character (Brooker 2003, 76-77) is particularly relevant here. In 1999, *The Phantom Menace* presented Ki-Adi-Mundi as a character unaware of the Sith conspiracy. His involvement in an investigation occurring a hundred years before his supposed birth contradicts these perceptions on multiple levels.

It is also important to discuss how yet another change to previously established continuity challenges the studio's credibility as an author. Just as Lucas's changes to the original trilogy in the Special Editions questioned his authority (Keidl 2022, 172), Disney's rewriting of the *Star Wars* canon put yet another dent in their already damaged reputation. As Goodman puts it, "being a fan often means attributing disappointments to the failure of the creator, rather than accepting an incoherent or unsatisfying fictional universe" (Goodman 2015, 671). Since the Expanded Universe was branded non-canon specifically to make place for new stories (Keidl 2022, 164), fans found it difficult to take the official continuity seriously after it had contradicted itself many times. This leads back to the question posed by Proctor and Freeman "whether or not the EU is part of hyperdiegetic continuity; or simply a series of counter-factual narratives which could be contradicted should Lucas 'write over' them with new material" (Proctor and Freeman 2016, 234). Although it is no longer Lucas who is "writing over" previously existing material, the same is true about Disney/Lucasfilm. The new Expanded Universe from 2014 onward was specifically advertised as being on the same level of canon as the live-action movies and series. Yet, there are now multiple instances where the content seen in the series is prioritized over books and comics.

The threats received by the editors of Wookieepedia triggered a countermovement among fans, which started trending through the Twitter hashtag #WeStandWithWookiepedia (Leishman 2024). Many people felt that the hate received by Wookieepedia was unjust, and the editors could not be blamed for updating the website with official information. Furthermore, most Wookieepedia articles have a Canon and a Legends section, to represent both versions of characters from before and after the Disney-takeover. Thus, Wookieepedia became once again the 'battle line' (Thomas 2018, 296) of fandom.

In August 2024, a month after the first season was broadcast, Disney announced that *The Acolyte* had been cancelled (Andreeva 2024). Originally, the series was planned to be a vast multimedia project with multiple seasons. It even included tie-in material, such as Justine Ireland's novel *Star Wars: The Acolyte: Wayseeker* (2024), which tells a story about Vernestra Rwoh, one of the series' main characters. The logo of *The Acolyte* was also included on multiple *Star Wars: High Republic* novels and comics, making the connection between the series and the publishing initiative even more explicit to fans. However, due to plummeting viewership, especially considering the high production budget of approximately $180 million (Tassi 2024a), the series was discontinued. It is highly probable that most of its characters will only have limited appearances in further transmedia products. We have already witnessed this with the characters of the sequel trilogy. Daisy Ridley's Rey and John Boyega's Finn had very few appearances in *Star Wars* stories after *The Rise of Skywalker* (2019) in comparison to more successful new characters, such as Pedro Pascal's Din Djarin and Grogu (also known as 'Baby Yoda' by casual audiences) from *The Mandalorian* (2019-). Therefore, while Disney/Lucasfilm still holds authority over the canon of *Star Wars*, widespread audience disapproval indeed has the power to influence production.

Based on all this, I argue that online transmedia databases, whether it is Wookieepedia or Disney+, are clearly not the utopistic reserves of information as one might assume based on Lévy's (Lévy 2001, 255) or Jenkins's views (Jenkins 2006b, 137). They are highly driven by economic factors, and external factors have a huge influence on their representation of narrative elements. Even grassroots initiatives, like fan-edited wiki sites, often take the corporate route after they reach a certain level of viewership.

5.1.4 Narrative Authority: A Conclusion

To conclude, while it may be tempting to regard the differences between Wookieepedia and Disney+ as a stark binary opposition, reality is much more nuanced. With transmedia franchises becoming increasingly complex and multi-layered, it is understandable that there is a growing need for organizing and curating all their data. However, in the world of media franchises, there is no such thing as a "collective intelligence" (Jenkins 2006b, 139) without outside influences. All the content that is curated and/or distributed in these databases is influenced by corporate factors, with profit being the most important one.

The approaches of Wookieepedia and Disney+ toward canonicity are highly intertwined. Disney+ represents corporate-driven centralization and aims to control the canon and continuity

for profit. It serves as a gatekeeper to content. While Wookieepedia certainly has a grassroots side to it, it cannot be regarded as the binary opposite of Disney+. Although it acknowledges the multiplicity of canon with its distinction of Canon and Legends and its inclusion of behind-the-scenes information about narrative elements, its overall principles help reinforce the canon set down by the studio. Therefore, I argue that while fans do have some power, it is overall still the studio who carries narrative authority. Especially with the era of "corporate auteurism" (Kidman 2021, 3-4), where producers and studio executives become identified as the authors of the narrative, it becomes increasingly difficult for fans to have a say in the grand scheme of things. Again, it is particularly important to emphasize that there is no unified "fan-canon". Certain audiences are indifferent toward narrative continuity, while others accept it as it is presented. Even within subcultures that regard the current canon as a "failure" (Goodman 2015, 663) and attempt to, in Goodman's terms, "fix" the *Star Wars* saga with the tools of participatory culture, there are various different, often opposing views about the canonicity of certain elements.

The case of *Star Wars* carries implications regarding the broader topic of transmedia storytelling and canonicity. As more and more popular narratives, such as *The Lord of the Rings* and *Dune*, expand to new forms of media, the questions discussed here gain increased relevance. These franchises have also had conflicts around the canonicity of their transmedia additions, which seems to be the trend in the digital age. All in all, it shows us how the canon/non-canon dichotomy has become fluid in digital storytelling. In the following sub-chapter, I will present another practical example for this phenomenon.

5.2 *Star Wars* Comic Adaptations

Thus far, I have discussed the multiverse through the examples of media released in the 2020s in both *Star Wars* and Marvel. *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021) and *Star Wars: The Acolyte* (2024) illustrate the interplay between digital fan communities, online memes, and alternate interpretations of fictional universes. However, I argue that the kind of multiplicity discussed in this dissertation was already present in the pre-digital era. The Hungarian comic adaptation of the original *Star Wars* trilogy is an intriguing reimagining of the saga that was produced before the rise of the internet. This subchapter serves as a counterpoint to the central claim of the thesis, which positions the multiverse in the digital era. However, it provides us with a new perspective on the central argument.

The theatrical release of George Lucas' *Star Wars* in 1977 proved to be a global phenomenon that has had a lasting impact not only on the film industry, but also on the entire entertainment industry. Beyond its numerous sequels, prequels, and spin-offs, it has also spawned a wide range of stories across other forms of media, be it animation, comic books, novels, or video games. These media entries form a grand narrative, aligning with Jenkins' definition of transmedia storytelling, where a transmedia story "unfolds across multiple media platforms, with each new text making a distinctive and valuable contribution to the whole" (Jenkins 2006a, 95-96). As I discussed in previous chapters, these media products from the grand narrative of *Star Wars* together.

Comic books played an important role in the development of transmedia world-building. In June 1977, one month after *Star Wars* was first shown in American cinemas, Marvel Comics started publishing its first comic book series of the same title (Thomas and Chaykin 1977). It was published monthly, with the first six issues featuring an adaptation of the original movie. The comic sold exceptionally well compared to Marvel's other titles at that time, enabling authors to expand the fictional world beyond the movie's events in subsequent issues. As of today, there are thousands of comic issues released by Marvel Comics and Dark Horse Comics that expand the *Star Wars* universe. Some of these are in the "Canon" category, meaning that they take place in the same diegetic universe as all other new content released since the Walt Disney Company took over Lucasfilm. Meanwhile, others are in the "Legends" category, which means that they are set in the continuity of books, comics, and video games that was erased from the *Star Wars* canon in 2014. However, this dual distinction does not cover all the *Star Wars* comics, for another series was made in the distant land of Hungary in the 1980s.

Due to the socio-political climate of the Cold War, distributing translated American comics in Soviet-aligned Central and Eastern Europe was very difficult (Kertész 2017, 14). Hungarian publishers focused on well-known, already established works, mainly literary adaptations, in order to make sure that they align with the political ideology of the system. Despite this, the theatrical release of *Star Wars* in these countries, such as Hungary (1979), Poland (1979), and Bulgaria (1982) fueled an increasing demand for movie-related merchandise, including comics. In Hungary, stores sold locally manufactured bootleg merch, such action figures, collectible cards, and calendars (Füle 2007). During this era, local authors Attila Fazekas and Tibor Cs. Horváth created comic book adaptations of the original trilogy. These comics became cult artifacts and have had a huge influence on the experience of an entire generation of *Star Wars* fans (Arany 2025). I argue that these comics present a pre-digital example for the multiplicity of transmedia universes. As Jenkins argues, while studios and publishers aim to establish continuity among transmedia releases to create a coherent experience for audiences, comic book publishers often create multiplicity with alternate versions of their characters outside of the original continuity (Jenkins 2009). I argue that this is what happens here: various cultural, political, and stylistic factors led to the creation of an alternate version of the *Star Wars* original trilogy.

This sub-chapter discusses the Hungarian comic adaptations of the original *Star Wars* trilogy as unique examples of localized franchise artifacts. I argue that they help us understand how the spreadability and the playful nature of unofficial multimedia extensions shape fan interpretations of a corporate-owned transmedia narrative. They create a new layer of interpretation for the *Star Wars* narrative, which further reinforces Jenkins' idea of multiplicity (Jenkins 2009) and the many-texts/many-worlds relation that I proposed as an extension to Ryan's concept of transfictionality (Ryan 2013, 365).

5.2.1 *Star Wars* in the Eastern Bloc

Immersive storytelling, such as *Star Wars*, where the narrative is "set in a world built so that it functions on all levels as a complete world" (Mendlesohn 2008, 59), gives space for various forms of political readings. As Mark Bould and Sherryl Vint argue, this kind of world-building provides metaphorical commentary on various real-life events (Bould and Vint 2012, 107). This aspect of media franchises was also considered by the Hungarian communist government when managing the release of *Star Wars* in the country. The media environment of socialist Hungary in the 1970s and 80s was unique, even in the context of the Eastern Bloc. The so-called "soft

dictatorship" of General Secretary János Kádár followed a strict cultural policy called the "three Ts": ban (tiltjuk), tolerate (tűrjük), and promote (támogatjuk). Although *Star Wars* was originally intended to be moved into the banned category, as it was considered to be "ideologically questionable" (Földi 2019) by state authorities, it was ultimately moved into the tolerated category. The movie also resonated well with the ongoing space race and the socialist fascination with space exploration and technological advancement. As a result, *Star Wars* was released in August 1979 in Hungarian cinemas, two years after its American debut. However, illegal copies had already been in circulation in the country earlier that year.

Simon Grennan argues that "characterizing genres of comics requires an accumulation of inclusive descriptions of the broadest aspects of experience of producing, distributing, and reading" (Grennan 2018, 321). As I aim to discuss a localized, alternate interpretation of a mass media franchise, it is important to discuss its creation. Although Grennan focuses on the differences between anglophone graphic novels and Japanese manga, his framework can also be applied to this study. The key aspects delineated by Grennan about comparing comics from different cultures are the following:

> Historic contingency (reader and market relationships with culture and economy); functions (why a comic is made, bought and read); where and when the comic is made, bought and read; who is making, selling and reading the comic, the subgenres of the comic's storyworlds (expected by readers) and the forms of the comic (from its size and shape to the style of its drawing, color palette, lettering, and language). (Grennan 2018, 321)

Taking all this into consideration, an inter-disciplinary approach is essential to understand the phenomenon discussed in this sub-chapter. Grennan borrows Lawrence Venuti's theories about transculturation of texts, namely two main approaches: domestication, "an ethnocentric reduction of the foreign text to target-language cultural values, bringing the author back home" (Venuti 1995, 20); and foreignization, "an ethnodeviant pressure on those values to register the linguistic and cultural difference of the foreign text, sending the reader abroad" (20). While domestication aims to remove foreign elements from the text in the process of translation as much as possible, foreignization retains linguistic and cultural differences from the source material. For example, in Grennan's case study, the transformation of *Tetsuwan Atomu* (1952-1968) into *Astro Boy* for anglophone audiences can be regarded as domestication, as it was significantly altered to meet the expectations of the NBC Television channel's audience (Grennan 2018, 333). Meanwhile, he regards the use of Japanese culture in Frank Miller's

fantasy comic series *Ronin* (1983-1984) as an example of foreignization, where "a range of ideas and images of eleventh-century Japan are literally imported to near contemporary New York, […] catalyzing anglophone readers a train of a less definable but enumerated cultural concepts more vaguely identified as part of a foreign national culture" (Grennan 2018, 327). Kérchy and Sündmark claim that translation and transmediation are related processes, as "translation regularly involves transmediation, which in turn can be seen as a specific form of translation" (Kérchy and Sundmark 2020, 1). Therefore, I argue that Venuti's and Grennan's ideas can also be applied in my analysis, as this case is a unique instance of transmediation and translation happening at the same time. Before I delve into the analysis of the comics, I will start by explaining their history.

The legal environment of the Eastern Bloc made it very difficult for western media conglomerates to enforce any sort of copyright laws in these countries (Fazekas 2018, 210). Therefore, after the release of the original *Star Wars* trilogy in European countries behind the Iron Curtain, bootleg merchandise produced by local manufacturers appeared on the market (Füle 2007). These products included toys, posters, playing cards, and sticker sheets among others. Some of these were low-quality copies of officially licensed products released in western countries, while others were completely original, often bizarre items that were inspired by the characters of the movie. For example, the surrealist movie posters released by MOKÉP (the state-controlled Hungarian film distributing company), which, much like the comics discussed in this sub-chapter, also became sought-after cult artifacts in Hungarian *Star Wars* fandom.

In 1982, prior to the Hungarian release of *The Empire Strikes Back*, the second installment in the *Star Wars* saga, renowned Hungarian comic book artist Attila Fazekas was commissioned by MOKÉP to draw a comic adaptation of the movie (Kertész 2017, 41). At the time, Fazekas primarily worked for *Füles*, a weekly Hungarian comic magazine. During the socialist era, the comic medium was not regarded as a serious art form. Despite being highly popular in the interwar period, it was increasingly marginalized and came to be subordinated to other media after World War 2 (Dunai 2024, 396). It had a particularly difficult period during the years between 1950 and 1955, as comics were viewed as part of American culture, and as such, they almost completely

Fig. 1: Unofficial Hungarian promotional poster for *Star Wars* by Tibor Helényi (1979)

disappeared from Hungarian press (Kertész 2023, 71). In the second half of the 1950s, the first new comics were published with text under the images instead of speech bubbles and in Russian language (82-83). In the following decades, Hungarian comics were mainly adaptations of literary works in order to popularize literature. While the comic medium had still been popular up until the 1980s, its development was hindered by totalitarian cultural policy. Dunai argues that it is a common misconception that only literary adaptations were released at the time, when, in reality, the comics market was more diverse (Dunai 2024, 397). However, while there had been some original comics, they are usually viewed as exceptions. The content of these comics was heavily influenced by the government, and it was rare that an original comic book could be released independently from anthology collections. Fazekas' comics, as adaptations of Hollywood cinema, are viewed as pioneering works of the medium (Losonczy 2013).

While illustrating the comic, with narration and dialogues by Tibor Cs. Horváth, Fazekas did not have many resources to work with. In the 2018 hardcover reissue of the comic, he recalls his memories. He mentions that he had to draw the scenes from memory after seeing the movie, with only a handful of reference photos as help (Fazekas 2018, 209). This led to some inaccuracies in the artwork and translation which later, ironically, contributed to the cult status of the comics. As Jenkins argues, a cult artifact sparks wide audience response and is often quoted or reinterpreted (Jenkins 2006a, 98-99). Fazekas' comics exemplify this phenomenon in many cases, such as how mistranslations like "sugárpallos" became catchphrases in Hungarian fandom (Szűcs 2010). They also contribute to the "flexible seriality of fan works" theorized by Kustritz (Kustritz 2014, 238) as alternate interpretations of the saga. However, they are in a grey zone as they are neither official products nor fanfiction. Yet, they were elevated to cult artifact status by audiences (Jenkins 2006a, 99), creating an alternate version of the saga in the many-texts/many-worlds relation I proposed in the theoretical part based on Ryan's theories (Ryan 2013, 365).

A few months after the overwhelming success of the first comic (*The Empire Strikes Back*), Fazekas was tasked to create an adaptation of the original *Star Wars* movie too, this time in two issues (Kertész 2017, 42). For this comic, he used a different work method: he went to the cinema with the son of Cs. Horváth and took pictures of the scenes of the movie. These pictures, alongside the official novelization of the movie, helped him create a more accurate comic this time, which even included some deleted scenes (Fazekas 2018, 210). Fazekas's adaptation became one of Hungary's best-selling comic books.

Despite the popularity of the first two adaptations, the Hungarian comic for the third installment, *Return of the Jedi*, was only released in 2012 (Bayer 2012). While Tibor Cs. Horváth was promoting the comics in Yugoslavia in the 1980s, he accidentally ran into one of the representatives of Marvel Comics. Following a heated debate, the development of the comic for *Return of the Jedi* was halted, and Fazekas was forced to shelf his work (Fazekas 2018, 210-211). However, in 2012, after reworking his old sketches, Fazekas was allowed to publish a limited edition of the comic with one condition: it could be only circulated in the Hungarian *Star Wars* Club (Fazekas 2018, 215). Over the decades, Fazekas's comics have become valuable collector's items in Hungarian *Star Wars* fandom (Arany 2025). Although the original issues were produced and sold in mass quantities at the time of their release, their rarity increased over the years. The club-circulated edition of *Return of the Jedi* was extremely rare even during its initial release as it was only printed in low quantities. Its price skyrocketed in the secondary market right after its release (Bayer 2012).

In 2018, the Hungarian *Star Wars* Club issued a hardcover collection, in which they reprinted all three episodes (Fazekas 2018). Beyond the reprints, it also contains a wide range of bonus material, such as an interview with Fazekas, posters, and other textual and visual content. Just like in the case of the adaptation of *Return of the Jedi*, the editors could only gain allowance from Disney for inner circulation of merely 500 copies. The release of this book was quite controversial, as it excluded a lot of fans and quickly turned the comic itself into a sought-after rare item. This re-release exemplifies an important phenomenon observed by Jenkins in his book *Comics and Stuff*. The commercial and critical success of Art Spiegelman's graphic novel *Maus* (1986) played a significant role in starting the era of graphic novels, where comics went from a disposable medium to a more respected one displayed in bookstores and libraries (Jenkins 2020, 4-5). The shift from the original, mass-produced copies to the exclusive hardcover graphic novel in the case of Fazekas's comics aligns with this process. The new release of the comic is collected, archived, displayed, and treated as a rare art piece.

5.2.2 Comics, Collecting, and Spreadability

So far, I have identified points at which digital media and modern transmedia practices create alternate universes in fictional world-building. However, this sub-chapter will present a historical example, revealing how these alternate canons were present long before digital multiverses. In the following sub-sections, I will approach the case of the Hungarian *Star Wars* comic adaptations from two different perspectives. Firstly, I will deliver a formalist analysis, in

which I aim to discern the differences between the official and the Hungarian adaptations. Secondly, I will discuss collecting and cult artifacts within fandom and how they relate to these comics. Although these two approaches might seem distant at first, they are closely related as they both illustrate how alternate interpretations can reframe the transmedia world-building of the *Star Wars* saga.

Will Eisner argues that "the format of the comic book presents a montage of both word and image, and the reader is thus required to exercise both visual and verbal interpretive skills" (Eisner 1985, 8). Reading comics is not just about reading text while looking at images. Text and image create a mix in which the two are inseparable from each other. In Eisner's words, "the regimens of art (e.g. perspective, symmetry, brush stroke) and the regimens of literature (e.g. grammar, plot, syntax) become superimposed on each other" (8). The two elements together form a language with its own distinct grammar. I argue that the comics that are the most effective at conveying their message are those that do not feature heavy walls of text. The comic as an art form thrives if we allow this language to speak for itself. We can observe this phenomenon even at major publishers like Marvel. Initially, when they first started publishing superhero comics, the target audience was younger, so they also featured more text. As time passed, and comics started featuring more mature themes, the amount of text was reduced significantly.

McCloud highlights the difference between received and perceived information (McCloud 1993, 49). He argues that pictures are received information, meaning that the message it conveys is instantaneous and requires no formal education. On the contrary, writing is perceived information, and decoding "the abstract symbols of language" (49) requires formal knowledge. The more abstract a picture is, the closer it gets to perceived information. Abstract images that derive from reality need higher levels of pre-existing knowledge and perception. In the early socialist era of Hungary, comics often featured extensive amounts of text, as speech bubbles were considered to be characteristics of American comics (Kertész 2023, 71). However, after the revolution of 1956, the Hungarian comics market changed drastically. The government decided to greenlight the release of more entertainment products in order to distract people's attention from political events (82-83). As a result, they allowed publishers to release comic adaptations of literature as they did not carry the risk of anti-government sentiment.

Therefore, for several decades, comics were dismissed as children's entertainment. David Worden's address regarding the politics of abstraction helps us understand the government's motivations. Worden argues that the question of meaning is an inherently political question

(Worden 2015, 59), and abstraction in comics enables us to depart from reality and "think about and envision a better world" (69-70). Original comics would have provided the masses with a platform to think about their lives, politics, and question the authority of the regime. This aligns with Mendlesohn's understanding of liminal fantasy, where the lack of clear boundaries facilitates the production of different interpretations (Mendlesohn 2008, 182). At the release of the original trilogy, there were multiple interpretations of *Star Wars*: while some people viewed the Galactic Empire as a metaphor for the Soviet Union, others regarded it as criticism of American involvement in the Vietnam War (Földi 2019). This is also partly the reason why the classification of *Star Wars* in socialist Hungary was problematic, and the government did not have a clear idea about whether it should be banned or not. Nevertheless, all these factors, highlight the liminal nature of *Star Wars*, which is also manifested in these comics. However, Fazekas's comics are not political and do not try to view *Star Wars* through the lenses of any socialist or communist government.

Reading comics is a collaborative practice between the authors and the reader. The gutter (McCloud 1993, 66) and the abstract nature of comics in general invite authors to use their imagination in constructing the narrative as they engage with the comics. Even with corporate-owned franchises, there is much room for customization on behalf of the audience. Another example that attests to this is the case of toys that are usually sold as ancillary products of movies. Beyond their affinity for abstraction and customization, they share another common feature with comics: their collectability. This is also observed by Katriina Heljakka, who highlights the ludic, playful nature of transmedia narratives (Heljakka 2022, 1145). In her research, she focuses on toys and their role in storytelling and fandom. She argues that toys and comics are vehicles for storytelling with many common functions, including collectability (1147). Collecting is appealing not only to children, but also to adults, who are "interested in the hunt for, the ownership and displaying of objects, and the admiration for the designers and artists responsible for creating the characters and the fantastic universes in which they reside" (1148).

Lincoln Geraghty examines the collecting practices of *Star Wars* fans, shedding light on the various motivations that drive fans when collecting expensive merchandise. Merchandise can include toys, comics, or even real props from the film's shooting. On the one hand, fans can aim at acquiring high-value collectibles or completing all items released in a set (Geraghty 2017a, 215). On the other hand, they can also be interested in objects that have emotional attachment to them due to personal reasons. As he observes, the accumulated collectibles

contribute to the person's status in the hierarchy of fandom (Geraghty 2017a, 216). Through the analysis of the example of Stephen J. Sansweet, a renowned collector who opened his own museum of *Star Wars* memorabilia, he draws the conclusion that fan collecting, at its core, revolves around the accumulation of economic and cultural capital (Geraghty 2017a, 217-218). While fandom is often viewed by scholars as a space of struggle between the bourgeoisie and the powerless over cultural capital, the same hierarchies form within its boundaries too. Collecting is an activity that involves class dynamics as fans with more economic capital have more opportunities to collect rare and expensive items. Thus, acquiring a higher status in the fandom.

To differentiate between the various kinds of collectors, Geraghty cites Susan Pearce's three categories (Geraghty 2017a, 215). According to Pearce, there are three predominant modes of collecting: souvenir, fetishistic, and systematic (Pearce 1995, 32). In the case of souvenir collecting, individuals collect objects that are significant to their own personal life stories. Fetishistic collectors obsessively aim to acquire every single item. Systematic collectors follow a rational logic, such as collecting all items within a certain set. Jenkins argues that there has been a shift in trends regarding the logics of collecting: while earlier collectors focused on collecting items with high value or prestige, contemporary ones focus more on meanings and associations they hold for individual or subcultural collectors (Jenkins 2020, 12).

Bart Beaty delineates two different approaches towards collecting. He claims that "what is of particular note is how nostalgia, the endless pining for a past that cannot be recreated, has been structured into the trade of old comics, thereby transforming an affective (Freudian) fetish into one that is strictly economic (Marxian)" (Beaty 2012, 153-154). While both art collectors and comic book collectors can be viewed as a spectrum regarding their relationship toward the two approaches, there is an important difference between them. The traditional art market is dominated by connoisseurs and investors, who collect art according to different logics (Beaty 2012, 157-158). Meanwhile, comic fans and collectors are usually driven by nostalgia and collect comics that are related to their childhood interests. This claim is partly tempered by Jenkins's observation in *Comics and Stuff*. He argues that the era of graphic novels has changed comic collecting practices and made them similar to art collecting (Jenkins 2020, 4-5). However, Beaty's claim still holds up in the context of general tendencies. He later claims that, while there are many old comics that now hold significant value on the secondary market, auction houses have been unsuccessful at applying the logic of the art world to them. However, he observes that comic books and especially collectors indeed strive to elevate the medium to

the level of art. In his view, the phenomenon of slabbing comics, in which they grade the physical condition of a comic book on a scale of ten and then put it into an unopenable protective case is the main evidence of this.

> The phenomenon of slabbed comic books reified their position in the realm of pure commerce. Stripped of their status as readable objects by a thick plastic container, comics were firmly placed in the domain of what J.C. Vaughn had termed the 'ultra-mercenaries,' reducing them to little more than easily transacted fetish objects. Moreover, the collector logic that found its ultimate rationale in slabbing fundamentally undermined the argument that comic books themselves might aspire to the status of art. (Beaty 2012, 180)

Unlike Pearce and Geraghty, who emphasize the individual's personal affection towards collectible items, Beaty regards the economic component as the primary difference between his two categories of collectors. Nostalgia as a driving factor is present in both cases. I argue that it is possible to create a more detailed categorization by synthetizing the two. For example, a fan could aim for a full set of objects (such as a comic series) both for their own pleasure and for the higher resell value on the secondary market. However, certain collecting phenomena, such as the aforementioned slabbing of comics, can strip them of their customizability and playability. Returning to Heljakka's theories, mobility is an important criterion of transmedia play.

> Physical toys are becoming increasingly mobile, and traditional comics have always been portable. In the age of digitalization, the latter may also be accessed on mobile devices. Therefore, both media fulfil another criteria for transmedia play, *mobility*. (Heljakka 2022, 1161)

These examples illustrate how collectibles, including comics and toys, introduce an element of customization into transmedia franchises. This moves beyond the idea of the consistent storyworld as described by Jenkins in *Convergence Culture* (Jenkins 2006a) and aligns with his definition of multiplicity where new versions of the story create new universes (Jenkins 2009). The comics present a version of the *Star Wars* narrative that differs from both the movies and the official comic adaptations at many important points. However, it is not the result of fannish disappointment (Goodman 2015, 664) here, certainly not in the case of the original 1980s prints of the comics. Instead, the creation and popularity of these comics were consequences of various historical and regional factors.

As Roy T. Cook explains in the context of "MSCF" (massive serialized collaborative fiction), "canonicity practices identify a privileged subfiction that constitutes the "real" story regarding what is fictionally true in the MSCF, whereas noncanonical stories are "imaginary" or are de-legitimized in some other sense" (Cook 2013, 272). This canon is usually determined by the corporate owners of the franchise. Yet, to thousands of fans, predominantly in the Hungarian audience, this version is just as "canonical" as the movie itself. I argue that this phenomenon is related to the spreadability of media content (Jenkins et al 2013, 3) and provides us with a pre-digital example. Successful media circulates not only through traditional distribution channels (such as television and cinema), but also through informal networks created and maintained by fans. As I discussed earlier, the concept of spreadability provides an alternative to the logic of "viral" media, as it reflects on the active participation of audiences (293).

Fazekas' comics posit a unique challenge in the context of spreadability. On the one hand, their narrative is contained within a prized cult object that is getting increasingly difficult for regular fans to acquire as time passes. On the other hand, there are grassroots attempts on the internet to facilitate access to these comics, alongside other Hungarian transmedial *Star Wars* products, for wider audiences. For example, on the Star Wars fan forum www.theforce.net, fans started a community-driven grassroots movement to translate the Hungarian *Han Solo* novels to English. Proctor argues that TheForce.Net is one of the best examples of the blurring of the distinction between producers and consumers (Proctor 2013, 201) that was theorized by Jenkins in *Convergence Culture* in relation to *Star Wars* (Jenkins 2006a, 131). The question of spreadability here is also paradoxical, as the comics themselves were much easier to get hold of in the pre-digital environment of the 1980s and 90s. They were first treated by many audience members as disposable object, and they gained their value later as part of the cultural shift observed by Jenkins that I explained earlier (Jenkins 2020, 4-5).

Both identity formation and playfulness play an important role in this analysis. The comics drawn by Fazekas became valuable cult objects, that can be an indicator of their owner's devotion to the *Star Wars* franchise (Geraghty 2017a, 217-218). At the same time, they shaped the thinking of an entire generation of *Star Wars* fans in Hungary and provided an alternate interpretation of the narrative.

5.2.3 Comparing the Adaptations

In the theatrical version of *Star Wars*, many scenes with Luke Skywalker were left on the cutting room floor. One of these scenes was originally intended to happen early on, featuring an old woman nearly getting ran over by Luke in his landspeeder on the planet Tatooine. After Luke passes her, she turns her head towards the camera shouting while shaking her fists furiously. The scene, which would otherwise damage the characterization of Luke as a positive hero of the movie, was understandably left out of the final cut. Interestingly, this scene is present both in the official Marvel adaptation and in Fazekas' comic, in one panel each. However, they are presented in two completely different ways. The comparison of these two panels highlights some very important differences between the stylistic elements of Hungarian and Anglophone comics at the time.

Fig. 2: Hungarian adaptation of *Star Wars* by Attila Fazekas and Tibor Cs. Horváth (1982): Page 3

Perhaps the most apparent distinction between the two is the overwhelming amount of text in the Hungarian comic's panel, especially for such a simple and short sequence. As Will Eisner explains, the comic medium should present a montage of text and image, which requires interpretative skills on behalf of the reader (Eisner 1985, 8). The medium itself has a "grammar", which utilizes both textual and visual elements. In Eisner's view, there is no right or wrong method of blending the two elements (Eisner 1985, 125). While certain comics use solely the imagery to tell the story, others might use an excessive amount of text. A heavy application of narrative repeats or reinforces what the comic is trying to tell (Eisner 1985, 126), as we can see it in the

Hungarian adaptation. This version also strives for more a realistic representation, while the American one employs a stylized, cartoonish style.

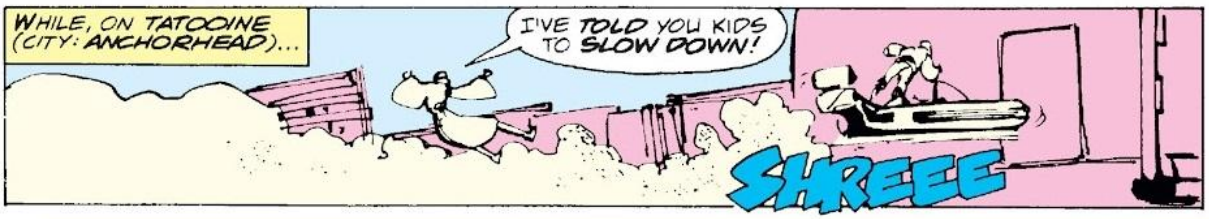

Fig. 3: Official Marvel Comics adaptation of *Star Wars* by Roy Thomas and Howard Chaykin (1977): Page 5.

The next example that highlights the differences between the two comics can be found in the adaptations of *The Empire Strikes Back*. At the beginning of the movie, Luke Skywalker gets attacked by a wampa monster on an icy planet in the Hoth system. He gets dragged into the wampa's cave, where he must use the Force to escape. Both Fazekas' adaptation and the Marvel adaptation derive heavily from what is seen in the movie.

Fig. 4: Hungarian adaptation of *The Empire Strikes Back* by Attila Fazekas and Tibor Cs. Horváth (1982): Page 2

Earlier in the dissertation, I discussed the importance of play in transmedia storytelling, in the context of Katriina Heljakka's paper about collecting. While comics serve as collectible objects that can be used as an indicator of a person's status in a fan community (Geraghty 2017a, 216), collecting them can also give fans an opportunity to play with the narrative (Heljakka 2022). The scene that we can see above demonstrates this playability. Due to the lack of visual references, certain characters, vehicles, and monsters derive from their filmic representations in their appearance in Fazekas's comic. The wampa, which is depicted as a mammoth-like creature with a snout, is completely different from the bear-like beast that we see in the movie. However, these differences did not cause alienation in Hungarian fandom. In fact, they contributed to the cult status of the comics. They provided a space for re-imagining and re-interpretation, which aligns with what Heljakka explains about play (Heljakka 2022, 1162-

1163). It also further reinforces the status of Star Wars as liminal fantasy (Mendlesohn 2008, 182).

As we can see, the escape scene is completely omitted from the Hungarian comic. Instead, it cuts right through to the part where Luke, lying in the snow injured, sees a vision of the late Obi-Wan Kenobi. Once again, we see a heavy application of text, which goes beyond just repetition of what is seen in the images. This phenomenon, in which the text of the story is changed (in this case, expanded) to fit in with the target country's audience, can be viewed as what Venuti and Grennan describe as domestication (Venuti 1995, 20), (Grennan 2018, 333). The Hungarian version of *Star Wars* fits into the tradition of Hungarian comic adaptations, while Fazekas manages to retain his unique artistic voice in the illustrations.

Fig. 5: Hungarian adaptation of *The Empire Strikes Back* by Attila Fazekas and Tibor Cs. Horváth (1982): Page 3

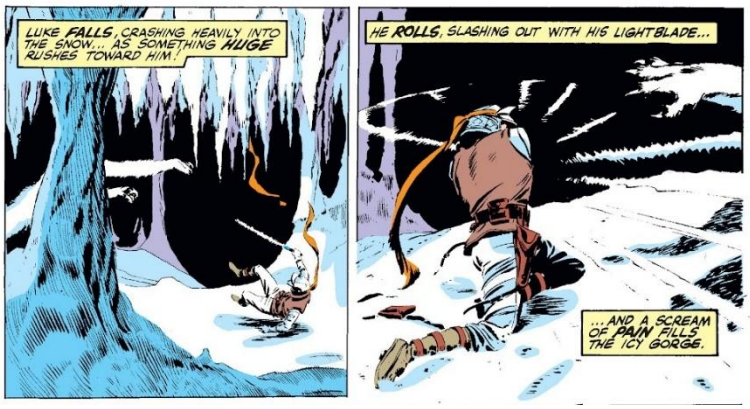

Fig. 6: Official Marvel Comics adaptation of *The Empire Strikes Back* by Archie Goodwin, Al Williamson, and Carlos Garzon (1980): Page 9

The American version also employs a more minimalistic approach to the scene. Here, we do not see the face of the wampa at all. The authors instead utilize the gutter (McCloud 1993, 66), showing only the arms of the creature, leaving the rest to the reader's imagination.

Overall, the changes made to the plot of *Star Wars* and *The Empire Strikes Back* create an alternate *Star Wars* storyworld, which is different from the cinematic version. The *Star Wars* universe presented in these comics is not the same as the one in Marvel's adaptations or in the movies, therefore they add a new layer to the complex intertextual web of the *Star Wars* multiverse.

5.2.4 The Afterlife of the Comics

Although the comics were initially sold in mass quantities, they became rare collector's items throughout the decades. Fazekas has been lauded for his realistic depictions of the movies and his advanced drawing skills. However, their inconsistencies, such as the addition of deleted scenes or the wampa's appearance, are what made them truly memorable among Hungarian fans (Arany 2025). Due to the limited amount of reference material available to the authors, there are also some translation errors in the comics (Fazekas 2018). One of these examples is the word "sugárpallos" when referring to lightsabers.

Fig. 7: Hungarian adaptation of *Star Wars* by Attila Fazekas and Tibor Cs. Horváth (1982): Page 18

The word "sugár" means "ray" in Hungarian, while "pallos" refers to a specific kind of sword in Hungarian history. The compound word formed from the two is different from the official translation of "lightsaber", which is "fénykard". As such, when Hungarian fans mention the word "sugárpallos", it is usually a humorous reference to this comic.

Although the adaptation of 1983's *The Return of the Jedi* was shut down at the time by Lucasfilm, Fazekas received permission to create the comic three decades later (Bayer 2012). In 2012, 500 copies were printed, all of which were sold at the various organized by the Hungarian *Star Wars* Club. These copies were never distributed commercially, the agreement between Lucasfilm and the Hungarian *Star Wars* Club only allowed circulation within the Club. Then, in 2018, a hardcover edition was released, which contained the adaptations of all three movies of the original trilogy (Fazekas 2018). Like the adaptation of *The Return of the Jedi*, it was only printed in 500 copies which were then circulated at club events. It made its debut at a fan celebration at a cinema in Budapest along with the screening of *The Empire Strikes Back*. Fazekas was also present at this event and signed comics and other memorabilia for fans. There were long queues of people waiting for the opportunity to get to Fazekas's table, and many were afraid that the organizers would run out of copies by the time they got there. This even led to verbal insults between some people in the crowd.

The main motivation behind collectors in this case is the nostalgia factor. Regarding Pearce's three types of collectors, it is the 'souvenir' collector that is the predominant (Pearce 1995, 32). Hungarian fans who experienced *Star Wars* in the 1980s in Hungary seek to reclaim a piece of their childhood through acquiring the original comic or its re-release. Considering the strong emotional connotations of nostalgia, it is no wonder that even arguments occurred between fans as they were waiting to get to Fazekas's table. However, not every person waited there simply for nostalgia reasons. As I argued previously, the synthesis of Pearce's and Beaty's categorizations (Beaty 2012, 157-158) gives a clearer picture of these motivations. While many fans indeed bought the comics to fulfill their childhood nostalgia, others looked at them as financial investment. Due to the limited number of copies, fans expected that the comic would become a rare collector's item. Many people stood in the line specifically to capitalize on the situation. The number of copies that could be bought per person was maximized at five to make sure that everyone gets a copy. People who bought all five available were also insulted by others in the queue. Interestingly, while Geraghty associates the possession of valuable items with higher cultural capital within the fandom (Geraghty 2017a, 216), we see the opposite here. If we refer to Beaty's two-fold delineation between nostalgic and connoisseur collectors (Beaty 2012, 158), it is clearly the nostalgic one that is prioritized here. Those who bought the comics for their eventual value on the secondary market were held in low regard within the fandom.

5.2.5 Hungarian *Star Wars* Comics: A Conclusion

To summarize, the case of the Hungarian *Star Wars* comic adaptations is a prime example of how an alternate interpretation of a global movie franchise can become a significant element of a transmedia narrative. The comic succeeds in representing most of the plot accurately, but the inconsistencies are what truly make this case outstanding. The changes to the representation of the plot, which are most visible in the stylistic elements and language use, align with Grennan's and Venuti's descriptions of domestication (Venuti 1995, 20), (Grennan 2018, 333). Thousands of *Star Wars* fans in Hungary grew up reading these comics. For them, they are just as definitive as any official comic book or novel published by Lucasfilm. This is evidenced by their high price on the secondary market and the controversies around the limited release of the newer editions. The comics create an alternate *Star Wars* universe through this domestication, tied to the Hungarian segment of global fandom both culturally and linguistically.

The many-worlds/many-media framework I proposed based on Marie-Laure Ryan's categories (Ryan 2013, 365) is also applicable here. The story of the original *Star Wars* movie

has been adapted to various media. Alan Dean Foster's novelization (under the pen name George Lucas) of *Star Wars* and Fazekas's comics both present the audience with different versions of the *Star Wars* narrative. The "windows" (Wolf 2018, 142) opened by these media do not show us the exact same universe. Obi-Wan in Foster's novelization never uses the word "sugárpallos". The battle between Luke and the wampa is never shown in Fazekas's adaptation. This "Hungarianized", domesticated version of *Star Wars*, while not considered to be an official version, it is completely valid for many fans and is included in their personal canon.

These comics also show us that nostalgia remains an important pillar of popular culture. In the age of sequels, prequels, reboots, and spin-offs, it is a strong driving force behind the popularity of material that is considered secondary or even tertiary behind the films. Fans are willing to go to great lengths to acquire items that were on the market decades ago.

I could also draw conclusions regarding the differences between comic cultures on the two sides of the Iron Curtain during the Cold War. While they put more emphasis on realism in the Eastern bloc, abstraction was more accepted in the Western world. Nevertheless, in the case of *Star Wars* adaptations, both Fazekas and the authors of the official Marvel adaptation often took artistic liberties. Despite Fazekas's general adherence to realistic depictions, the artistic liberties taken in his comics significantly contributed to their cult status.

Overall, as the example discussed in this chapter attests, transmedia storytelling is not always a rigid, centralized system where only the proprietors have control over the narrative. Sometimes the most unexpected elements become the most sought-after and valuable ones. This demonstrates that even a completely reimagined version of a narrative – created independently of the license holders – can become a valuable part of transmedia storytelling.

Chapter 6. Marvel and the Multiverse

In the previous chapter, I discussed the *Star Wars* franchise. I explored how Lucasfilm has generally aimed to maintain a strict approach to canon and continuity. In the official narrative, each element is either considered to be canon or non-canon. However, as this chapter demonstrated, due to the vast amount of content released under the *Star Wars* banner, it is not that easy to discuss the narrative merely in the context of this dichotomy. The creators of *Star Wars* have avoided the use of the multiverse thus far, but as the examples attest, the various adaptations, interpretations, and fan works have also introduced many universes to the narrative. The concept of multiplicity, as described by Jenkins (Jenkins 2009) is applicable here with the many different versions of *Star Wars*.

On the other hand, both Marvel Comics and the Marvel Cinematic Universe use the multiverse consciously in their narratives. Especially after the release of *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), the multiverse became a major plot point in the overarching storyline of Marvel movies. Just like *Star Wars*, Marvel characters also have myriads of different adaptations and incarnations. The difference between the two franchises is that Marvel reflects actively on this multiplicity and uses the multiverse to connect these. For example, my discussion of *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021) in an earlier chapter reflects exactly this. In that movie, various characters from old *Spider-Man* franchises are brought back through the multiverse.

Furthermore, just like in the case of the Hungarian *Star Wars* comics, Marvel stories can also have different interpretations all over the world. One such example happened during the 2022 Parliamentary elections in Hungary, when Mark Ruffalo, the actor who portrays the Hulk/Bruce Banner in the MCU, expressed his support for the Hungarian opposition (Herczeg 2022). By that time, Viktor Orbán's government in Hungary had gone through an illiberal, anti-democratic shift, which raised a lot of concerns in the western world. Thanks to Ruffalo's statement, the phrase "We have a Hulk!" (Whedon 2012) from *The Avengers* became a slogan for the opposition for a short period of time.

Another political case happened in the same year. As a result of the Orbán-government's increasing persecution of LGBTQ+ people, a new law was introduced, which made it necessary to cover all books containing any form of non-heteronormative relationships with protective foils at bookstores. Because of this, the 64th issue of *Hihetetlen Pókember* (Slott 2022), which is the Hungarian translation of *The Amazing Spider-Man*, was also sold with covering at stores. As Anna Borgos argues, the book that sparked the initial debate, *A Fairytale for Everyone*

(2020) by Boldizsár Nagy, stepped out of the sphere of literature and entered a socio-political discourse (Borgos 2020, 142). In this case, the covered issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man* also entered the sphere of politics. What I intend to showcase with these examples is that just like *Star Wars*, Marvel stories can also have various interpretations across countries. However, unlike *Star Wars*, Marvel uses the multiverse consciously.

In this chapter, I will analyze two more parts of the Marvel franchise. The first one is an animated movie, *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* (2023). I will discuss how this movie blurs the boundaries, such as paratext/diegesis and fan/producer. The second one is a live-action movie, *Deadpool & Wolverine* (2024), where the transgressive nature of the multiverse and the fourth-wall breaking character of Deadpool are used to provide metacommentary on the current state of superhero movies.

6.1 Spider-Verses: An Introduction[3]

In 2023, Sony Pictures released *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse*, the second animated movie in the *Spider-Verse* series. Similarly to *Into the Spider-Verse* (2018), the previous installment in the series, this movie features numerous incarnations of the titular character from different adaptations across all media. This crossover revolves around the narrative framework of the multiverse, the idea that multiple parallel realities exist, with each one having its own unique aspects.

Ever since its inception in the 1960s, the character of Spider-Man has had a huge number of alternate incarnations. In 1967, four years after the release of the first issue of *The Amazing Spider-Man* comic book, the first *Spider-Man* animated television series was released. The series loosely adapted the early storylines of the original comics, thus creating one of the first alternate versions of the titular character. In the following decades, many additions were released through a wide variety of media, including comics, cartoons, newspaper comic strips, video games, and live-action movies. However, instead of following the traditional method of transmedia storytelling, where all media products contribute to one singular storyworld (Jenkins 2006a, 96-97), these products usually contained "rebooted" versions of the character, in

[3] An earlier version of this analysis was published here:

Szántó, Bálint. 2024. "Transmedia Storytelling and Media Play in *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse*." In *New Horizons in English and American Studies: Papers From the Doctoral Program*, edited by Anna Kérchy, Korinna Csetényi, and Lívia Szélpál, 48-57. Szeged: SZTE IEAS E-books.

narratively isolated retellings of the story. For instance, while the 1960s version of Peter Parker was bitten by a radioactive spider, newer versions often feature more recent scientific elements, such as genetically modified spiders. For a long time, it would have made no sense for these characters to interact with each other, in the same way as the idea of Robert Downey Jr.'s and Benedict Cumberbatch's Sherlocks in one movie would baffle viewers. However, five decades after the initial version of *Spider-Man*, the *Spider-Verse* series brings together dozens of different variants from across many forms of media. Although this kind of crossover is not without precedent (the 2014 comics storyline *Spider-Verse* essentially laid the groundwork for the animated movies), *Into the Spider-Verse* was the first superhero movie to feature the multiverse as a central driving factor of the narrative in a high-budget international production. The idea also made its way into live-action with the release of *Spider-Man: No Way Home* in 2021, which saw the different live-action incarnations of Spider-Man, portrayed by Tobey Maguire, Andrew Garfield, and Tom Holland, coming together in one movie.

The *Spider-Verse* movies rely heavily on comic-like aesthetics, incorporating elements such as thought bubbles, panels, Ben Day dots, and visual "sound" effects into the cinematic representation. This is different from the style of most earlier superhero adaptations that derived from comic aesthetics and attempted to align with the stylistic criteria of mainstream Hollywood cinematography. This series embraces the style and aesthetics of the source material. All of this is accompanied by a soundtrack influenced by hip-hop, a music genre often associated with remixability, sampling, and intertextuality. These elements together create a synesthesia of variability, multiplicity, and play.

Both *Spider-Verse* movies feature many interesting elements that could be examined using the perspectives of both narratology and media studies. The scene that I aim to analyze in this sub-chapter is a one-minute sequence that occurs during a fight between Spider-Man and Spot, the main villain of the movie. During the fight, a portal is opened into an alternate universe, where everything is made of LEGO. While this short sequence is relatively insignificant to the main storyline of the movie, it still carries major implications about new storytelling methods in popular culture. Unlike the rest of the movie, which was created by a professional studio, this scene was animated by Preston Mutanga, a 14-year-old Cameroonian Canadian artist, who had earlier gained fame on the internet by uploading short LEGO movies animated by himself. I argue that this scene serves as a prime example of how multiverse narratives provide a space for transgression between the diegetic and paratextual elements of a movie. I also argue that this type of storytelling blurs the lines between fan and author.

6.1.1 Media Play and LEGO

Play has become a defining logic of contemporary culture. It shapes not only entertainment, but also the ways in which value, participation, and meaning are created. As Joost Raessens argues, this "ludification of culture" extends even into domains not traditionally associated with games, such as education and politics (Raessens 2014, 94). He cites Johan Huizinga's definition from *Homo Ludens*, where Huizinga explains "play" as an activity which stands consciously outside of ordinary life and offers no profit or material interest (Huizinga 1955, 13 in Raessens 2014, 13). In Raessens' view, the concept of play comes with a paradox. On the one hand, it represents the freedom of humanity. However, on the other hand, it comes with rules and boundaries (Raessens 2014, 101-102). Play has a strong relationship with new media, as digital technologies offer a high degree of variability for audiences.

When discussing fan-created content in the context of media franchises, it is important to mention the notions of *affirmative* and *transformational* fandom (obsession_inc 2009). This binary distinction, first delineated by Dreamwidth user obsession_inc, refers to the two main approaches of fans towards media franchises. In affirmative fandom, the content created by the fans does not derive from the author's intentions. Instead, it celebrates the creators' authority, and recreates the source material in some form, such as cosplay. As opposed to this, transformative fandom alters the source material and repurposes it to its own liking. This can be viewed as a process of democratization as it enables wider audiences to produce their own content and gives space to minority representation. However, obsession_inc also acknowledges the fact that these two categories form a spectrum instead of a clear dichotomy, with major overlaps between them. In the end, both types can be considered as *celebratory* fandom, which takes pleasure in the creative process of engaging with a text.

Media scholar Paul Booth defines the term "media play" as "a characteristic of contemporary media culture to focus on those instances in which individuals create meaning from activities that articulate a connection between their own creativity and mainstream media, all the while working within the boundaries of the media text" (Booth 2015, 15). While he acknowledges that the term "play" is inherently ambiguous, he cites the definition of games scholars Katie Salen and Eric Zimmerman as the one on which he based his own: "play is free movement within a more rigid structure" (Salen and Zimmerman 2003, 11 in Booth 2015, 15). Play exists within boundaries but also has the potential to transgress them. Booth cites obsession_inc's definitions of affirmative and transformative fandom and argues that there is a hybrid interaction between the capitalist practices of the media industry and the fandom's

resistance (Booth 2015, 12). He draws a conclusion that is quite similar to that of obsession_inc and claims that while fandom exists as separate from the industry, the relationship between the two is dialogical and negotiable. Media play emerges during these interactions.

Booth also explains the term "fan pastiche", which refers to fan/industry interactions where fans reproduce what is seen on screen (Booth 2015, 18). He borrows Matthew Hills' term "mimetic fandom" (Hills 2010) to refer to the meticulous craft going into fans replicating industry practices. Hills attempts to deconstruct the view that there is a binary opposition between the attitudes of fan creators in terms of whether they imitate or transform the media product. Even in the case of fan works that reproduce or imitate the original text, there is a degree of individualization.

Katriina Heljakka discusses the canonization of toys and comics in the era of the ludic turn (Heljakka 2022, 1157). She argues that adult audiences are more willing to engage with playful and toyish products of popular culture, which are no longer associated with the infantile. In a similar vein, comics are also acknowledged as "transgenerational genre of sequential art" (1157). Both comics and toys have been stigmatized for a long time, which, in Heljakka's view, is slowly disappearing. She concludes that they have an intertwined relationship (1162-1163), as both rely on the imagination of the audience as an active participant in the construction of narratives. Going back to Booth's definition of media play (Booth 2015, 15), we can argue that when fans play with toys, they engage in media play, as they create new meanings with industry-produced merchandise products. This phenomenon is further amplified by the presence of stop-motion animation, where these licensed toys are used by fans to produce actual content, which is often published on the internet. Toys also contribute to the intersection of multiple different film universes that I discuss in my research. There is no copyright law that can stop a fan from playing or creating stop-motion videos with toys from different franchises at the same time.

Jonathan Gray views licensed toys as paratextual elements of movies. He argues that while there is much criticism over the consumerist aspect of these products, toys also contribute to the accessibility of transmedia storyworlds (Gray, J. 2010, 21). They bring an element of play into the narrative, one which does not always align with the corporate-endorsed "proper" way (Gray, J. 2010, 187-188). Toys turn the narrative into a malleable entity, opening opportunities for personalization.

Throughout his analyses, Gray argues that paratexts play an important role in the creative process of a text. This leads him to disagree with critics who dismiss film merchandise as mere

commercialized cash-grabs. He argues that a proper study challenges the logic of "primary" and "secondary" text and should recognize that paratextual elements "often play a constitutive role in the production, development, and expansion of the text" (Gray, J. 2010, 175). These paratextual elements do not simply include toys, but also posters, trailers, cereal boxes, and trading cards. In the case of most major film franchises, one of the most popular and most recognizable kind of merchandise is LEGO. It serves many functions, as it can be customized, displayed, and played with. Furthermore, it produced an entire aesthetic style over the years, leading to many LEGO-themed cartoon series and feature-length movies. Franchises, such as *LEGO Star Wars* and *LEGO Marvel,* have gained a "life on their own", making us question whether they can be considered merely as paratextual additions to the main franchise.

In a critical approach, Matthew P. McAllister and Jared LaGroue regard LEGO movies as a "gateway" for children to a "branded and commodified society" (McAllister and LaGroue 2019, 47-48). Using the example of the *LEGO Batman Movie* (2017), they argue that this cross-promotion between the LEGO brand and the *Batman* brand serve as a way of driving children towards consumerism. While they applaud the ability of the brand to render itself accessible to a wide variety of audiences, they still primarily view it as a form of commodification (McAllister and LaGroue 2019, 56). However, they also acknowledge the fact that the *LEGO Batman Movie* indeed includes self-reflexivity on its own status in consumer culture. Overall, their analysis contrasts with Gray's ideas, who argues that toys can transfer power over the narrative to audiences (Gray, J. 2010, 187).

J. R. Lee refers to LEGO as "a rare blend of brand *and* medium" (Lee 2020, 148). He argues that "LEGO has constructed an entire paradigm of transmedia storytelling in which narrative and play are intertwined according to the pixelated playful bricolage that defines the LEGO medium" (Lee 2020, 150). The LEGO universe itself is a transmedia storyworld that is different from the official franchise whose stories it adapts. It has its own unique rules and aesthetics. In this case, LEGO itself can be regarded both as the main text and the paratext. The toys, sold in stores, are also the ones that are used to tell stories in other media products, such as video games and movies. Moreover, they are also a popular tool among fans in the creation of fan art or YouTube videos.

Starting with *LEGO Island* in 1997, the company has released a wide variety of video games, many of which are based on LEGO's original product lines, while others are based on the licenses acquired by the company (e.g. *LEGO Star Wars*, *Indiana Jones*, *Batman*). These games offer a relatively consistent storytelling style, in which the variable nature of these toys play an

important role in both the gameplay and the narrative. In the case of licensed franchises, they often present a loose adaptation of these movies, re-told in the same style. LEGO has also released a plethora of cartoons, including four full-length theatrical movies: *The LEGO Movie* (2014), *The LEGO Batman Movie* (2017), *The LEGO Ninjago Movie* (2017), *and The LEGO Movie 2: The Second Part* (2019). In the chapter about narrative authority and databases, I cited Lev Manovich as one of the most important theorists of new media and database-structured storytelling (Manovich 2001, 194). He regards modularity and variability as two of the main principles of new media, alongside numerical representation, automaton, and cultural transcoding (44). While, of course, LEGO cannot be characterized as the perfect metaphor of databases and new media, it still has some similar elements that make it relevant to this discussion. Manovich describes media elements as, "be it images, sounds, shapes, or behaviors, are represented as collections of discrete samples (pixels, polygons, voxels, characters, scripts)" (51). Narrative elements can be added, removed, and swapped. New media objects consist of smaller, independent parts that can be assembled or disassembled (52). The other important principle, variability, shows us how "a new media object is not something fixed once and for all but can exist in different, potentially infinite, versions" (56). These two principles are true both about LEGO and multiverse narratives in general. LEGO provides users and audiences with a huge degree of variability and modularity, which also translates to its storytelling in movies and video games.

In his analysis of transmedia LEGO narratives, Lee cites Scott McCloud's ideas about iconic representation (Lee 2020, 161). Exploring the reasons behind our culture's fascination with the simplified reality of cartoons, McCloud discusses how cartoonists and comic artists use abstraction to focus on specific details (McCloud 1994, 30-31). He exemplifies this with the ability of the human brain to perceive two dots and a line in a circle as a human face. As a result, the facial features of a person or a fictional character can be stripped down to eliminate unimportant elements. Lee takes this idea and argues that the same can be applied to LEGO-based storytelling. In both cases, the authors theorize an interactive form of storytelling, in which the audience is invited to use their imagination to fill in the gaps left by the authors of the comic.

Although LEGO had been regarded previously as a line of products aimed specifically at children, we can no longer consider it as such. The adult as a *toy collector* is becoming more and more prominent in critical discourse (Heljakka 2022, 1148). The term AFOL (Adult Fan of Legos) has gained immense popularity recently, especially in the wake of the COVID-19

pandemic. Quarantined within their homes, many people rediscovered their childhood obsession with building with bricks. Nowadays, many LEGO products are aimed specifically at adults. These sets are generally bigger, more complex, come with smaller elements, and are more expensive than their child-friendly counterparts. Some of the most well-known examples are the LEGO ICONS series (containing products such as the massive Eiffel Tower or Rivendell from *Lord of the Rings*). However, these sets are usually intended for display and not for play. This shows that, while toy collecting is no longer considered to be exclusively a children's activity, there is still a stigma attached to the act of play itself. Even if we move into other domains, such as action figures or Funko Pops, enthusiasts of these items often store or exchange them without ever removing them from their original packaging. Furthermore, in the case of LEGO, each set comes with a manual that shows the "proper" way of assembling it. Therefore, even if we think of LEGO as a customizable toy that gives freedom to the owner, there are boundaries within which they are encouraged to play. This connects back to how Raessens views play as an activity that represents freedom but is performed within rules and boundaries at the same time (Raessens 2014, 101-102).

All the approaches outlined here imply a high degree of interactivity between the narrative and the audience. They also reflect on how comics and toys, two separate forms of media, often intersect in the way they present a narrative. While Heljakka and Gray regard playability as the main common denominator between comics and toys in terms of their storytelling capabilities (Gray, J. 2010, 175) (Heljakka 2022, 1162-1163), Lee views iconic representation as the point at which the two media collide (Lee 2020, 161). The modular nature of LEGO fits seamlessly into multiverse narratives. Even more so than regular action figures, which, as Jenkins argues, can also contribute to transmedia narratives through their play (Jenkins 2009).

The understanding of play discussed here is closely related to the dissertation's theoretical framework about the multiverse. The multiverse contains a high degree variability, which is further accentuated by LEGO media. In the analysis of *Star Wars: The Acolyte* (2024), I explored the peculiarities of the multiverse through it archival and database-structured logic. The chapter about Hungarian *Star Wars* comics demonstrated an alternate, regional iteration of its transmedia extensions. This analysis will show an example of the reframing of the relationship between the narrative and transmedial satellite products.

6.1.2 LEGO in *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* (2023)

The scene that I wish to discuss occurs during the first confrontation between Miles Morales/Spider-Man and the antagonist of the movie, the Spot. Using his ability to open portals into alternate dimensions through the multiverse, the Spot arrives in a world where everything is made of LEGO. The Peter Parker of this universe notices the disruptions caused by the arrival of the villain, and calls Miguel O'Hara, another universe's Spider-Man. As I mentioned earlier, while this scene has no significant impact on the plot of the movie itself, it indeed leads us to important conclusions about the current state of storytelling and transmedia world-building in popular culture. On the one hand, it shows us in a major franchise like *Spider-Man* the strong influence the internet has on movies. Digital media made it possible for Preston Mutanga's homemade LEGO videos to reach the directors of the movie, leading to the inclusion of his work in the final version. On the other hand, this scene also shows the increasing orientation of transmedia franchises towards media play by breaking the fourth wall through the incorporation of LEGO. This also breaks through another important wall, described by Lee, who argues that "toy play does not produce circulatable texts along the lines of most other fan media" (Lee 2020, 152).

At the beginning of the scene, we see a text panel showing the designation of this universe as "Earth-13122". Marvel has been using numbers to differentiate between its fictional worlds for a long time, with Earth-616 being the original mainstream comics universe. This demonstrates that the authors acknowledge the fact that the LEGO world is not merely an adaptation of the original *Spider-Man* comics in a different style. It is another plane of existence, which is just as canonical as any other, which adds another layer to the multiplicity (Jenkins 2009) of Marvel universes. As a result, the boundary between the paratextual realm of toys and the diegetic world of the movie becomes less defined. In other movies, such as *The LEGO Movie* (2014), there is still a clear line between the realm of toys and that of human beings. However, in *Across the Spider-Verse*, LEGO is treated just like any other aesthetic style in the movie, whether it is noir, anime or live-action. The main concept of the entire series is that the different realms are depicted using different animation styles, all of which are connected through the multiverse.

When the Spot breaks into the LEGO world, he retains his style as a "traditional" animated character, while the rest of the characters and the setting around them are fully made of LEGO. His arrival causes disruption in this world, causing a taxi to crash into the wall of the Daily Bugle building. As the collision occurs, the taxi runs over several people and objects, which fall

into pieces. Interestingly, what would be an exceptionally bloody and disturbing scene under any other circumstance, is presented merely as a fun gig in LEGO style. Instead of blood and gore, we simply see plastic LEGO characters losing their parts and we assume that they could be reassembled at any moment. The "playful bricolage" described by Lee (Lee 2020, 150) is highly visible here, in a universe where anything and everything can be disassembled into the tiniest pieces. A scene like this would have been very difficult to create in any of the other universes presented in the movie. In the other universes, which are drawn in "regular" art style (I put the word "regular" in quotation marks here as I find it important to emphasize that the movie presents the audience a wide variety of unique art styles – they are "regular" in the sense that they are not created in LEGO style), it would obviously be problematic to present a car running over people and heads falling off in a movie aimed at all age groups. The abstract nature of LEGO bricks makes this scene look like as if these were just simple toys falling apart.

The scene also exemplifies the intertextual spider-web of the story. While the Daily Bugle and J. Jonah Jameson are not featured anywhere else in the first two installments of the series, they are still present in the scene without any exposition. The creators assume that the audience is familiar with them from the comic books or earlier adaptations, so their presence is reduced to a simple Easter Egg. The background also features some Easter Eggs for split seconds. The wall behind Jameson contains a photo, featuring a LEGO character, who bears a striking resemblance to the late Stan Lee, the creator of Spider-Man. The people sitting in the room next to Jameson are reading a newspaper with the words "DOC OCK STILL AT LARGE!" on its cover page. These small references, which characterize the entire movie in general, are nods to the well-versed audience members.

The creator of the sequence in question, Preston Mutanga, has an extensive oeuvre of animated short videos on YouTube. Although the most popular form of LEGO videos on YouTube is stop-motion animation, Mutanga creates computer-generated 3D animation with Blender. The video that led to his eventual breakthrough was a LEGO remake of the official trailer of *Across the Spider-Verse*. He uploaded it to YouTube in January 2023, about half a year before the release of the movie. The video gained millions of views, and eventually caught the attention of Sony's production crew, which led to writer-producers Christopher Miller and Phil Lord contacting Mutanga's family for a potential collaboration. In the following months, Mutanga worked on the scene while still attending school (Rindtner 2023). Despite the tight schedule, Mutanga succeeded in finishing on time, and the scene made its way into the movie.

Grassroots LEGO animation has a strong element of play. Fans who create stop-motion videos use toys to form narratives. Due to the limited number of tools available to them, they often must tell complex stories in a simplified way. This is particularly true in the case of non-CGI videos, as they do not have access to animation that would allow them to play with the facial features of the characters. Even artists like Mutanga, who do use CGI in their work, have to face the limitations of LEGO characters. However, as I discussed earlier in the context of iconic representations (McCloud 1994, Lee 2020), this is not necessarily a limiting factor. In McCloud's view, abstraction techniques, such as caricatures, can amplify a person's facial features (McCloud 1994, 30). In LEGO, where faces are simply represented by two dots as eyes and a line as a mouth, this is exactly the case. After the LEGO Peter Parker changes into his Spider-Man outfit in the scene, it is only the lenses on the mask whose movement is used as a form of facial expression.

Regarding the distinction between affirmative and transformative fandom (obsession_inc 2009), it is hard to judge on which side this case falls. Fan authors who upload their short videos to YouTube and other social media platforms usually do not do so with the intention of getting hired by Sony or Disney. In most cases, they do not even receive any form of financial compensation. Although the partnership system of YouTube makes it possible for creators to acquire money through views, usually only the most popular ones make a significant amount. In the traditional sense of the definition, one would argue that Mutanga belongs to the affirmative side of this dichotomy. Even more so, as the video that originally made him famous is a LEGO recreation of a trailer – a video that is supposed to advertise a media text. Moreover, in doing so, he used the aesthetic system of LEGO, which is tied inseparably to a multinational company. However, there is undoubtedly a unique style to Mutanga's videos on his YouTube channel, which is also visible in the scene that became a part of the movie. Furthermore, his case might open the way for other young artists and animators to express themselves within franchises that reach millions of people around the world.

Overall, Mutanga's case is a prime example of a fan becoming the author of an official media product. I argue that this is an inverse of the process that McAllister and LaGroue criticize. They generally view LEGO movies as a gateway for children into the world of consumerism (McAllister and LaGroue 2019). However, for Mutanga, it was a gateway into the world of filmmaking. Although the tools, such as the look and the design of LEGO minifigures and the franchises of which he made his animated videos were already existing, he brought his own element of play into them, creating something completely new. The shift

towards playfulness in popular culture indeed made fictional universes more accessible (Gray, J. 2010, 21). The question is where this accessibility stands on the scale between grassroots and institutionalized modes of engagement. Can we still regard it as "fan pastiche" (Booth 2015, 16), or is it in the realm of corporate media production?

The experimentative attitude of the creators of the *Spider-Verse* series is highlighted in many scenes in the two movies. Since Sony Pictures owns the movie rights of the characters of the *Spider-Man* franchise, they have created several standalone live-action movies. As of the writing of this dissertation, these are *Venom* (2018), *Venom: Let There Be Carnage* (2021), *Morbius* (2022), *Madame Web* (2024), and *Kraven the Hunter* (2024). All these movies have been criticized for their formulaic storylines. They are typically regarded as prime examples of corporations trying to use the franchise as a cash-cow. They have also greatly contributed to the increasing "superhero fatigue" (Hughes 2024) of the 2020s, with audiences slowly moving away from the genre that dominated cinemas in the 2010s. However, while the *Spider-Verse* movies were also produced by Sony Pictures, they are highly experimental, especially in relation to other superhero movies. The concept of the multiverse gives artists the chance to incorporate different cartoon styles (noir, anime, sketchbook), opening the way to scenes like Mutanga's LEGO animation.

However, this still raises the question of whether it can be viewed as honest artistic experimentation, or the appropriation of fan labor to increase profit. In Booth's view of media play, fandom and the media industry are not regarded as dual opposites (Booth 2015, 150). He claims that the two are in a complementary relationship. I argue that Mutanga's case is a further step in blurring the boundary between the two. In the age of the internet, we cannot view media corporations as the sole proprietors of profit from a given media franchise. YouTube contains hundreds of fan-operated channels that have no connection to Disney, Sony or any other media conglomerate and yet generate significant revenue from reviewing and discussing their movies. On the other hand, given the multi-generational nature of a franchise like Marvel, many established writers and directors grew up as fans of the original comics before taking charge of a series or a movie. With its many layers of references and intertextual additions, *Across the Spider-Verse* is a perfect example of how these established lines can be blurred. In the same way as there is no clear distinction between fan and producer, the binary opposition of diegetic and paratextual is no longer appropriate either.

Historically, LEGO products used to be simply paratextual elements of a movie. Marketing schemes for Hollywood franchises, such as *Star Wars* or *Harry Potter*, have involved LEGO

releases since the late 90s. In the early 2000s, these were expanded into other forms of media, predominantly video games and short animated movies. Through these media products, the transmedia storyworlds of these franchises (e.g. *LEGO Star Wars*) were developed. However, the LEGO worlds all kept their distance from the actual storytelling of the mainline narrative. For example, in the case of *Star Wars*, although they were officially licensed, just like the novels or comic books of the franchise, they were still treated as simple fun additions without impacting the story in any way. Meanwhile, other transmedia products released under the aegis of Lucasfilm, such as animated series, novels, or comic books, could contain characters or settings that were referenced even by the theatrical *Star Wars* movies. For LEGO products, this would have been quite difficult to imagine. As Lee describes it, *LEGO Star Wars* is an "odd amalgam of relatively linear, scripted gameplay and whimsical, parodic cutscenes that reenact Star Wars scenes in comic pantomime" (Lee 2020, 172). In the case of *Across the Spider-Verse*, this boundary between the diegetic world of the movie and the paratext is blurred, making it difficult to distinguish between the two.

Fans of vast narratives also tend to create their own "plates" with media texts they like, while dismissing some others that they dislike. Terms like head-canon and fanon, referring to fans' own preferred versions of the narrative, are in everyday use within fan circles. Within the context of multiverse narratives, these alternate interpretations of a media text can become canonical. There is also much more communication between authors and fans than before, and fans can have a direct influence on the media text.

Overall, it can be argued that this approach is slowly becoming the norm in commercial filmmaking. In the past decade, there have been several examples of fan feedback influencing the production of movies. In 2019, after the release of the first trailer of the live-action *Sonic the Hedgehog* (2020) movie, the appearance of the titular character had to be changed due to widespread online backlash (Pulver 2019). In the case of *Star Wars*, after *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017) and *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (2018) were considered critical and commercial failures, Lucasfilm executives decided to bring back the character of Emperor Palpatine for *Star Wars: The Rise of Skywalker* (2019), the final installment of the sequel trilogy. This decision was greatly influenced by the fascination of online meme communities with Ian McDiarmid's performance as Palpatine in the prequel trilogy. With its plethora of Easter Eggs and intertextual references, the *Spider-Verse* series incorporates several elements that were not originally developed by Marvel, with Mutanga's animated short movies being one of them.

6.1.3 Intertextuality and Media Play – What is Next?

In this sub-chapter, I attempted to carry out an analysis of the LEGO scene in the 2023 animated movie, *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* and discussed its long-term implications for new media. Using the approaches of various scholars regarding the idea of play as my main theoretical framework, I exemplified through this scene how play and variability constitute an integral element of multiverse narratives.

We can notice the increasing integration of fan elements and playful aesthetics into commercial filmmaking, and this scene is an exemplary of this phenomenon. Although it is often difficult to tell whether it is a simple profit-oriented spectacle or an actual new paradigm in transmedia storytelling, this scene does carry important implications regarding recent advancements popular culture. Through its example, we can see that fringe genres, such as LEGO animation, are now being acknowledged as part of our cultural canon and are viewed as a legitimate form of storytelling. At any rate, Mutanga's success in getting into a production of this scale as a completely self-taught teenager is a remarkable achievement, which has seemed to be impossible so far. The inclusion of alternate universes in the narrative made it possible for such a breakthrough to happen. The "postmodern chaos" (Cardenas 2021) that is brought by this movie and its use of different artistic styles creates an ideal environment for experimentation with new forms of storytelling.

This example provides a new perspective for the theoretical framework of the dissertation. Fans can access the Marvel multiverse through various windows (Wolf 2018, 142). Adult audiences first accessing it through series like *The Punisher* (2017-2019) might regard it as a brutal, bloody world with cartoonish brutality and violence. Meanwhile, younger audiences are more likely to first encounter it through animated or LEGO media. Despite being highly distinct from each other in terms of characters, aesthetic and narrative styles, and target audiences, these media entries are still parts of the same transfiction (Ryan 2013, 365). Different styles can also represent different universes within this transfiction. However, Jenkins's dichotomy of continuity and multiplicity (Jenkins 2009) does not work here. The two concepts are blended as multiplicity becomes continuity in the *Spider-Verse* series. Characters, that had previously resided in completely different segments of the *Spider-Man* transfiction, meet in one crossover narrative. The LEGO universe is elevated to the same narrative value as the filmic and animated iterations, and is accessed by characters through the multiverse.

Overall, as this analysis has shown, multiverse narratives provide an opportunity for the blurring of historically rigid lines, separating the official and unofficial; amateur and professional; diegetic and paratextual; fan and author. With its unique blend of styles and intricate web of intertextual references, the *Spider-Verse* series remains one of the most prominent and more interesting examples of this form of storytelling. While both Marvel Studios and DC can be criticized for using the multiverse as an excuse to bring characters from obscure franchises back to life, the creators of the *Spider-Verse* series have so far avoided such criticism. The idea of alternate universes represented through different art styles creates a space for artistic experimentation, both aesthetically and in terms of narrative modes.

6.2 "Merc with a Mouth": Humor and Violence Across Media in *Deadpool*

In the previous sections of my dissertation, I discussed multiverse narratives from a wide variety of perspectives. One aspect that I have not yet elaborated on is their use of humor. The transgressive qualities of multiverse narratives in the context of fantasy storytelling and media strongly contribute to this humoristic side, particularly in an absurd, self-reflexive form of humor. When discussing absurd humor, the Marvel character who instantly comes to mind is Deadpool.

Deadpool was originally created in 1990 by Rob Liefeld and Fabian Nicieza. He first appeared as a villain in issue 98 of *The New Mutants* as a supervillain. He then went on to make guest appearances in other Marvel characters' series before receiving his own miniseries in 1993. While Deadpool is part of the broader Marvel universe, his stories are different from other Marvel characters in many ways. *Deadpool* comics feature significantly more violence than other superhero publications. His regeneration ability and immortality enable authors to feature absurd depictions of violence and gore in his stories. Wolverine also possesses these abilities, which has also led to numerous examples of very graphic depictions in his comics, such as in *Wolverine: Old Man Logan* (2010) or *Wolverine: Weapon X* (1991). However, the general tendency is that *X-Men* titles are usually less graphic. Meanwhile, *Deadpool* comics exaggerate violence, which is paired with dark humor through which Deadpool often addresses the audience directly. This makes him one of the few Marvel characters explicitly aware of his own fictional status.

Like many other Marvel characters, Deadpool has also appeared in various forms of media. He was first adapted to film in an oft-criticized installment of the *X-Men* movie series, *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (2009). Although this version of the character was unpopular among fans,

actor Ryan Reynolds got a second chance to portray him in the much more successful *Deadpool* (2016) movie. Its sequel, *Deadpool 2* (2018), was released two years after. With the acquisition of 20th Century Fox by Disney in 2019, Deadpool also became the property of the studio alongside many other characters associated with the *X-Men* franchise. A third movie, *Deadpool & Wolverine* (2024) was released in the summer of 2024, which connected the franchise to the mainline Marvel Cinematic Universe movies through the multiverse.

In this part of my dissertation, I will discuss the film *Deadpool & Wolverine*, the third installment in the *Deadpool* movie series. This movie is relevant to my research mainly because of two factors. On the one hand, it is the product of a crisis that started due to the overabundance and interconnected nature of superhero films. The analysis of this film helps us understand the nature of this crisis and how Marvel Studios reacted to it. On the other hand, it features the multiverse heavily, and highlights the transgressive nature of multiverse narratives, which is used to create humor in this case. The fourth wall-breaking personality of *Deadpool*, coupled with the self-reflexive nature of multiverse narratives, creates a platform for the studio to speak directly to audiences. Throughout the movie, there are many humorous references to the burnout of superhero movie audiences. I argue that in many ways, this form of self-deprecating humor is the studio's way of dictating the critical discourse around these movies. For this analysis, I chose a transmedia approach, in which I will explore how this style of humor changes as the character travels through various forms of media.

6.2.1 The Fourth Wall, Performativity, and Rebellion

In movies and comics, the multiverse is often portrayed as a broken mirror. This broken mirror goes beyond just simple cinematographic spectacle – it is a metaphorical representation of all the possibilities lying in the multiverse. The mirror shows a reflection of ourselves, and the distorted image created by the cracks provides a glimpse into alternate realities. In *Deadpool* comics and movies, these cracks can also be understood in a more literal sense. One of Deadpool's main characteristics is him addressing the audience directly by breaking the fourth wall between the diegetic world of the movie and the viewers. Federica Cavaletti describes direct address in a transmedia environment the following way:

> A direct address – in visual and audiovisual forms of communication – occurs any time one or more characters inside the fictional world look straight at the spectators, blurring the threshold that separates the images from flesh-and-

> blood reality. However, different forms of direct address can take place in several media contexts, based on the specificity of each given medium. (Cavaletti 2018, 135)

Breaking the fourth wall, as a concept, comes from theatre. According to Elizabeth Bell, "performers "break the fourth wall" between themselves and the audience when they address the audience directly, making observers aware that they are being watched and that performers, in turn, are watching their own behavior" (Bell 2008, 203). In other words, the characters in the story have knowledge of the fact that they are part of a play or a film, and they let the audience know it. This is often used as a source of humor. The format of comic books, with their panels and speech/thought bubbles, offers a great platform for direct address as well. The narration of the story is often delegated to protagonists, whose thoughts can be read in thought bubbles. Jeff Thoss argues that webcomics, which he views as the successors of the comic book medium, are even more effective in this case, as they are "all closely modelled on the 'a gag-a-day' three-to-four panel format found in many classic newspaper strips" (Thoss 2011, 552). Indeed, breaking the fourth wall was more popular in the era of comic strips, as nowadays it does not align well with the meticulous world-building of comic universes. However, webcomics often reach back to this tradition.

In the case of *Deadpool*, as Yasemin J. Erden argues, the act of Deadpool breaking the fourth wall confronts the audience's passivity and makes it "complicit with his actions and behavior" (Erden 2020, 55), turning him into an existential antihero. As she further argues:

> Where the fourth wall is challenged continually, the structure of the work is compromised, and the audience's passivity – their very identity as audience – is confronted. The character Deadpool regularly and uncompromisingly directs his attention outside of his story, toward author and audience alike, and to the surprise of other characters. (Erden 2020, 69)

In previous parts of my dissertation, I discussed the liminal and transgressive nature of multiverse narratives. The liminality of fantasy, as described by Mendlesohn, in which no clear boundaries exist (Mendlesohn 2008, 182), is also expanded to audience/narrative relations in this case. The way in which Deadpool adresses the audience, further blurs the traditional boundaries of storytelling. The in-universe explanation to his fourth wall-breaking is often understood by fans as schizophrenia, although it is never acknowledged in any of the comics.

It is clear here that this kind of storytelling moves away from, for example, the type proposed by Tolkien. Tolkien aimed for a storyworld where all the narrative elements are organized in consistent way, which gives the impression of a real, existing world (Tolkien 1997, 140). Furthermore, *Deadpool* also goes beyond the multiverse described by Mellier, where the diegesis contains the various universes traversed by the characters (Mellier 2017, 307). What we can observe here is a significant blurring of diegesis and extra-diegesis. I argue that this evokes theatrical traditions.

The character of Deadpool has a strong theatrical aspect to it. I argue that he is very similar to Alan Moore's and David Lloyd's character, V, from the graphic novel *V for Vendetta* (1989). However, at the same time, they can also be considered polar opposites. As Maggie Gray argues, "V's rebellious performativity demonstrates how the authoritarian state depends on passive acceptance of established roles" (Gray, M. 2010, 45). Just like Deadpool, V has a remarkably theatrical and dramatic personality. Beyond his menacing presence, he also has an area of playfulness around him. He recites Shakespeare while fighting his enemies. He plays Beethoven's *Symphony No. 5* while blowing up the Lady Justice statue on top London's Old Bailey. His costume with the top hat and the smiling face of Guy Fawkes gives him an almost comical, yet blood-chilling appearance. With his psychotic outbursts and allures, he is almost comparable to the infamous Batman villain, the Joker. This theatrical aspect is further emphasized in the movie adaptation of the comic, where V performs a heated monologue with "v" alliterations after saving the female protagonist, Evey, from her attackers. With his rebellious attitude he presents a multi-layered resistance against the political system.

Both characters are also seemingly indestructible. In Deadpool's case, it is his regenerative ability that prevents him from getting gravely injured. Meanwhile, while V is a formidable warrior who can easily take on multiple foes at the same time, he is also indestructible on a metaphorical level. This side of the character is greatly accentuated in the movie adaptation, where we see huge crowds of people marching in Guy Fawkes masks at the end of the movie. V represents an ideology, which is made indestructible by the people following it.

The main difference between V and Deadpool lies in their motivations. While V is highly driven by his own moral and political ideals and his strong sense of justice, Deadpool is a much more individualistic character. On a surface level, V is much more political. While *V for Vendetta* features a lot of mature and political themes, the content in it is not even nearly as explicit as in *Deadpool*. Yet, alongside Art Spiegelmann's Pulitzer Prize-winning graphic novel, *Maus* (1980), it was banned from schools in Texas and Tennessee in 2021 (Ebbs 2022). V's

mask, representing the face of Guy Fawkes, became a cultural icon of resistance, which Henry Jenkins views as a new form of "clicktivism" (Jenkins 2016, 9-10). However, many scholars argue that Deadpool himself is also political. Matthew Brake argues that the humor in *Deadpool* stories, especially in the film adaptation, humor serves as a "vehicle for liberation" (Brake 2023, 975) from the self, from oppressive systems, and from genre tropes. However, he also cautions that "mass-produced pop culture, like the cartoons of Donald Duck, is a form of amusement that suppresses any desire to resist the status quo and demand a better world" (Brake 2023, 971). Therefore, we must be cautious when analyzing the rebellious nature of these stories.

6.2.2 *Deadpool* and Crisis

The importance of the *Deadpool* movies can only be understood in the context of other Marvel movies. *Deadpool & Wolverine* was released at a time when the so-called "superhero fatigue" (Hughes 2024) was already in full effect. The 2010s are generally considered to be the highest point of the superhero movie genre. Marvel introduced key characters, such as Robert Downey Jr.'s Iron Man and Chris Evans's Captain America, to the shared cinematic universe in 2008 and 2011, respectively. By the second half of the 2010s, there had been multiple *Avengers* movies (2012, 2015), in which these characters crossed over, and their personalities were further developed. Movies featuring other lesser-known characters, such as *Guardians of the Galaxy* (2014) and *Ant-Man* (2015), also became huge successes, propelling these characters to worldwide popularity. The build-up culminated in the two-parter finale, *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018) and *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), where almost all the heroes of the Marvel Cinematic Universe crossed over.

Although the trajectory of the MCU until *Avengers: Endgame* avoided major missteps, other studios also produced many superhero movies at the time, most of which had a much worse reception than the movies of the MCU. Starting with *Man of Steel* (2013), DC Comics also started working on their own cinematic universe. *Man of Steel* introduced a rebooted version of Superman played by Henry Cavill. While Cavill's portrayal of the character became highly popular among fans, the DC Extended Universe could never become the same worldwide phenomenon as the Marvel Cinematic Universe. Subsequent major releases, such as *Batman v. Superman: Dawn of Justice* (2016) and *Justice League* (2017), both of which aimed to mimic the crossover storytelling of Marvel, became critical and financial failures. Ultimately, the DCEU was discontinued in 2023, with a rebooted version in the works with director James Gunn as the main creator. This, alongside failed Marvel adaptations created by Sony, such as

Morbius (2022) and *Madame Web* (2024) contributed greatly to the "superhero fatigue" (Hughes 2024). The saturation also made it difficult for audiences to follow the overarching storyline of these movies. As Duan argues, there are many factors that influence this phenomenon, such as "the constant replacement of actors and the continuous development of the Marvel universe, which can create a burden on the audience, making them confused, unable to understand, unable to keep up, and even distinguish each superhero" (Duan 2024, 398). At this point, there is too much content for new viewers to catch up with in order to understand new movies and series. Introducing the multiverse as a major plot element further aggravated this issue. Therefore, while it is often hailed as an innovative and creative mode of storytelling, it can also be the opposite. The humorous meta-commentary in *Deadpool & Wolverine* reflects this phenomenon.

While Marvel Studios managed to acquire the filmic rights to many Marvel characters in the 2000s, 20th Century Fox retained the rights to most of the characters associated with the *X-Men* franchise. This led to the release of thirteen *X-Men* movies, starting with *X-Men* (2000) and ending with *The New Mutants* (2020). *Deadpool* (2016) was one of these movies, and while it was not part of the series per se, it was set in the same universe and featured cameos from some *X-Men* characters. Ryan Reynolds reprised the role of Deadpool from the movie *X-Men Origins: Wolverine* (2009), which is generally considered to be one of the weaker installations of the franchise. The movie received widespread acclaim and quickly became a fan favorite. *Deadpool* was followed by a sequel, *Deadpool 2* (2018), which involved a time-travel plot with *X-Men* character Cable.

After the release of *Avengers: Endgame* (2019) and the subsequent COVID-19 pandemic, the new phase of the Marvel Cinematic Universe introduced the multiverse as the next major overarching plot of the series. With movies like *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021) and *Doctor Strange in the Multiverse of Madness* (2022), the MCU fully transitioned into what Boillat describes as the Alternate (Story)Worlds (Boillat 2022, 148), which integrated storylines from even previously abandoned Marvel movie franchises as alternate universes. However, following the critical and commercial failure of several Marvel movies released in the early 2020s, Marvel Studios decided to dial back on the frequency of new movies and keep *Deadpool & Wolverine* as the only theatrical release in 2024. By that time, there were many problems at Marvel. The decrease in the production value of the films was also apparent. The technical staff working on special effects in Marvel movies was severely underpaid and overworked.

The crisis was further exacerbated when sexual harassment allegations against actor Jonathan Majors came to light. Majors played Kang the Conqueror in the series *Loki* (2021-2023) and the movie *Ant-Man and the Wasp: Quantumania* (2023). Kang was built up as the next major villain across the entire Marvel Cinematic Universe and was to be featured heavily in upcoming movies and series. However, after Majors was found guilty of assault and harassment in December 2023, he was dropped from all projects (Vary 2023). The sudden removal of such an influential character from the Marvel Universe led to an urgent need to essentially re-write the entire future slate of Marvel movies. This crisis showed the fragile nature of an inter-connected storyworld.

Deadpool & Wolverine was Marvel Studios' response to the crisis. Instead of ignoring all the criticism received by Marvel movies in the preceding years, they decided to reflect on them in the movie. Throughout the film, Deadpool addresses the audience repeatedly, talking about the superhero fatigue and how the multiverse plot is getting boring. This kind of self-reflexive humor was already present in the *Deadpool* series even in the previous installments. In a post-credit gig at the end of *Deadpool 2*, a movie centered around a time-travel plot, Deadpool travels back in time and shoots portraying actor Ryan Reynolds in the head as he is about to sign his contract to star in the failed 2011 *Green Lantern* movie adaptation.

Crisis and Deadpool are not alien concepts. The character was created in the 1990s when Marvel was going through a major financial crisis. Comics sales were at an all-time low, and the company was on the edge of bankruptcy. The solution was selling the film adaptation rights to major studios. This came to fruition when *Blade* was released in 1998 by New Line Cinema, followed by *X-Men* by 20th Century Fox in 2000 and *Spider-Man* by Sony Pictures in 2002. These are set in a storyworld that is separate from the shared Marvel Cinematic Universe, which started with *Iron Man* (2008). In the 2010s and 2020s, we witnessed a total centralization attempt from Disney and Marvel Studios. The launch of Disney+ in 2019, which is an online streaming service providing exclusive access to numerous Marvel and *Star Wars* series, is one of the flagships of this centralization and a clear example of "aggressive brand acquisitions and digital expansionism" (Pitre 2023, 712). In the process, the studio gained more control over the film licenses associated with Marvel Comics. The multiverse is often used to tie up loose ends in certain cases, such as connecting the 20th Century Fox *X-Men* universe to the MCU in the post-credit sequence of *The Marvels* (2023). It takes an extra-diegetic boundary between two movies (such as being under two franchises, like the MCU and the *X-Men* universe), and turns

it into a diegetic one. As a result, the dichotomy of multiplicity and continuity theorized by Jenkins (Jenkins 2009) is breached, as distinct universes form a continuity together.

The multiverse is also often used to bring characters from the dead. Due to their periodical nature of their stories, death is rarely permanent in superhero stories (Kaveney 2008, 215). In the Marvel Cinematic Universe, the most prominent example of this phenomenon is Loki. Played by British actor Tom Hiddleston, the God of Mischief quickly became a fan-favorite after his appearances in *Thor* (2011) and *The Avengers* (2012). However, he is killed by Thanos at the beginning of *Avengers: Infinity War* (2018). As part of the multiverse plot of the next movie, *Avengers: Endgame* (2019), the main characters accidentally let a variant of Loki escape from another universe. This variant later becomes the main character of the series *Loki* (2021-2023), in which he helps the TVA (Time Variance Authority) in hunting down other variants in the multiverse. The TVA is an organization that serves to maintain the integrity of the "sacred timeline" and end the prevent the existence of anomalies. At the end of the first season of Loki, the multiverse becomes accessible, which creates this intertextual link between the various cinematic universes. As a result, characters from other franchises become part of the MCU, which also gives opportunity for more metacommentary in the films. The integration of multiverse continuity leads directly to the intertextual jumble of *Deadpool & Wolverine*.

This idea is also reinforced by the definition of the multiverse by Gabriele D'Amato and Luca Diani that I cited earlier in my dissertation, which says that "the multiverse, as one of the most important strategies of the show, allows the actualization of intertextual references on a diegetic level, by providing infinite parallel universes in which the allusions actually exist" (D'Amato and Diani 2024, 602). In this definition, they refer to *Rick and Morty* (2013) as "the show", but it is equally applicable to *Deadpool & Wolverine*. The appearance of other characters from other Marvel franchises, such as Jennifer Garner's Elektra from *Daredevil* (2003) and *Elektra* (2005) introduces new characters to the Marvel Cinematic Universe, while also providing commentary on the current state of the license. It also serves as a form of criticism, as it presents these characters as disposable, and unimportant compared to the main characters. At the same time, Deadpool's nods to the audience criticize the over-abundance of multiverse plots and the superhero fatigue.

This kind of narrative, in which the fourth wall breaking of Deadpool is combined with the multiverse to provide meta-criticism about the superhero genre, is not unique to *Deadpool & Wolverine*. In Cullen Bunn's *Deadpool: Killogy* series, the very notion of a superhero

uni/multiverse is challenged, which leads to Deadpool literally murdering the entire Marvel multiverse.

> Having regularly broken the fourth wall to interact with the audience, Deadpool had formulated the thought that he – and all the heroes alike – existed as a fictional character on the pages of a comic book. This existence was burdened by the Continuity, and it is best understood as the continuous narrative that sometimes calls for the hero to die and then to be resurrected. Examples abound – and Deadpool is aware of all these. Deadpool plans to provide release from the continuity to all heroes – by mercy killing them. (Manninen 2024, 2029)

In the following part of this analysis, this idea will gain relevance as I will discuss how direct address in the movie *Deadpool & Wolverine* (2024) provides metacommentary about the current state of the Marvel Cinematic Universe and how it reflects on the ridiculousness of the multiverse.

6.2.3 Breaking the Fourth Wall Across Media

Direct address toward the audience has been a defining characteristic of *Deadpool* comics since the very beginning. Beyond this, the stories are usually structured in a postmodern way with flashbacks. In the comic book *Deadpool: Suicide Kings*, Deadpool's direct address serves as a meta-narration that ties the various plot threads together.

The inserted page (Benson and Barbieri 2010, 2) shows us the beginning of the story. It takes us to the "present time", after which we jump back to a previous state with Deadpool getting prepared in front of the mirror. Deadpool's narration ties the two scenes together. The over-exaggerated display of violence and gore is quite apparent right on the first page, as we jump into the middle of Deadpool's fight with a group of mercenaries.

Fig.7: Page 2 of *Deadpool: Suicide Kings* (Benson and Barbieri 2010)

As we can see, *Deadpool* comics like to operate with postmodern story structures. Deadpool's direct address does not only serve as comic relief, but it also serves as narration. This aspect of the character becomes even more important in another comic book, *You Are Deadpool* (2018). This comic combines *Deadpool* comics with role-playing books from the 1980s, where the reader has the power to decide the direction in which the story goes. This gives an interesting new perspective for Heljakka's claims, who argues that while the common function of comics and toys is their collectability, comics' readability and toys' playability is a distinction between the two (Heljakka 2022, 1147). In *You Are Deadpool*, the comic gains a playable aspect as well. I argue that Deadpool is the perfect character to lead a comic like this: his playful, theatrical personality and fourth-wall breaking make him suitable for a playable comic.

The storytelling of the film *Deadpool & Wolverine* also operates with postmodern methods. The movie starts with a fight montage between Deadpool and a group of TVA (Time Variance Authority) agents, with NSYNC's "Bye Bye Bye" playing in the background. Afterward, the movie cuts into another sequence showing Deadpool's everyday life as he tries to integrate into the Marvel Cinematic Universe.

The plot of *Deadpool & Wolverine* puts a multiversal twist on classical intrusion fantasy structures, where the normalcy of the world is threatened by an intrusion which must be solved (Mendlesohn 2008, 115). As Blair Davis argues, "at the core of multiversal storytelling is the idea that an established narrative world does not exist in isolation within time and space. Rather, that world exists in alternate forms and permeations via a multitude of universes" (Davis 2024, 162). Indeed, it is well-established that neither the Marvel Cinematic Universe nor the 20th Century Fox *X-Men* universe exist in isolation. We have already seen a connection between the two in the post-credit scene of *The Marvels* (2023), where Monica Rambeau gets teleported to the Fox universe. Unlike *Star Wars*, whose studio avoids the possibility of other continuities existing outside of the official continuity, Marvel stories use this phenomenon as a major plot point.

During one of the scenes, the main characters get teleported into the Void, a place between universes. This is the site where the TVA sends multiversal anomalies. It is essentially a *Mad Max*-like wasteland with remnants of characters and objects from older Marvel franchises. Among the ruins of the Void, we see objects like a comic-accurate Thor helmet and an old copy of the original Marvel *Secret Wars* comic. Deadpool and Wolverine engage in a fight in front of a giant, ruined 20th Century Fox logo, which is a humorous reference to Disney's takeover of

the studio. The ruined remains of old franchises symbolize the Marvel Cinematic Universe's monopoly over future Marvel adaptations.

Not long after their arrival, they meet a mysterious character played by Chris Evans. Evans previously played Human Torch in the two movies of the now-discontinued *Fantastic Four* series created by 20th Century Fox: *Fantastic Four* (2005) and *Fantastic Four: The Rise of the Silver Surfer* (2007). After the series ended, Evans went on to play Captain America in the Marvel Cinematic Universe, with *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011) as his first appearance. He then portrayed the character for ten years in various MCU productions until his final appearance in *Avengers: Endgame* (2019). With *Deadpool & Wolverine* also being an MCU production, the scene builds on the audience's assumption that Evans would reprise his role as Captain America. When the group meets a group of marauders, Deadpool gets excited, expecting Evans to say Captain America's iconic line: "Avengers, assemble!". However, Deadpool's (and the audience's) expectations are subverted when Evans shouts "Flame on!" instead and turns into the Human Torch. The build-up that leads towards this punchline uses the intertextual nature of Marvel movies. With viewers expecting the climatic return of Evans's iconic portrayal of Captain America, they are taken by surprise by the fact that in reality, Evans reprises his previous characters from a less-popular Marvel franchise. This kind of humor only works with the assumption that audiences are familiar with more than twenty years of Marvel movie history.

Later, we meet other characters from older Marvel franchises: Wesley Snipes' Blade, Jennifer Garner's Elektra, and Laura Kinney's X-23. All of these characters are reprised by their original actors and actresses from movies that were originally developed outside of the Marvel Cinematic Universe. The link between these universes can be described with Mark J. P. Wolf's idea of retroactive linkages. Here, two storyworlds, that were developed separately, cross over (Wolf 2012, 216). It is made possible through the inclusion of the multiverse and the absurd humor of *Deadpool* movies. These retroactive linkages then help the actualization of intertextual references in the diegesis (D'Amato and Diani 2024, 602). In the same group as the aforementioned heroes, we also meet Gambit, an *X-Men* character played by Channing Tatum. Although Tatum had never appeared in *X-Men* movies as Gambit, he had long been associated with the character through fan theories and speculations, and the movie integrated this. Something similar happened with Henry Cavill and Wolverine. Fans have long demanded that Cavill should be cast as the new Wolverine once Hugh Jackman quits the role. In an earlier scene in the movie, Deadpool accidentally encounters the "Cavillrine", an alternate universe

version of Wolverine played by Henry Cavill. Just like in the case of Channing Tatum, the fan theories regarding Cavill got integrated into the movie.

After Deadpool and Wolverine encounter the Resistance, the group of superheroes from older Marvel franchises, they go on to fight Cassandra Nova, the main villain of the movie. Nova kills Chris Evans's Human Torch by removing his skin with her telepathic powers. After a huge battle between the Resistance and Nova's forces, Deadpool and Wolverine manage to escape, while the rest of the heroes stay there injured. However, at the end of the movie, after Nova is defeated, Deadpool asks the TVA to return the alternate-universe heroes to their own universes.

Claverie's arguments about studio politics being one of the most important driving factors in the development of superhero movie narratives (Claverie 2024, 6) are particularly true in the case of *Deadpool & Wolverine*. The uncanny mixture of new characters and characters brought back from older Marvel franchises represents the current chaotic and unfocused storytelling of Marvel Studios. The way in which previous characters are discarded in the Void is a strong statement from Marvel. The brutal murder of Chris Evans's Human Torch makes it even more apparent. As of 2025, most Marvel characters' filmic rights are held by Marvel Studios. While they aim to build a continuity where the MCU versions of the characters are the canonical ones, they also have to deal with previous adaptations by other studios. At the same time, these older adaptations are also potential sources of profit. We have seen this in the case of *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021), where the entire plot of the movie is based on the nostalgia of characters returning from previous *Spider-Man* franchises. In Deadpool & Wolverine, the banishing of old characters to the Void and their eventual resurrection is a symbolic representation of how Marvel treats these characters. They are disposable and secondary next to the mainline MCU characters. But, at the same time, they can always be used by the studio for newer installments.

6.2.4 Beyond the Fourth Wall

In this chapter, I explored the multiverse from the perspective of two important Marvel characters: Spider-Man and Deadpool. Firstly, I analyzed the LEGO scene in *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* (2023). I argue that this scene blurs the line between the diegetic ontology of the movie and the paratextual world of toys. The variability of LEGO, which combines narrative with play (Lee 2020, 150), is an excellent illustration of how the multiverse works. Even though it is a short, gag scene in the movie, it plays an important part in our understanding of new media. According to Manovich, modularity and variability are two of the

most significant aspects of new media (Manovich 2011, 44). Similarly to LEGO bricks, new media objects can be modified in infinite ways. While playing with the intertextuality of various Spider-Man adaptations, Across the *Spider-Verse* adds an extra layer of complexity by including LEGO in its narrative.

In the second half of the chapter, I explored the use of humor, violence, and direct address in the context of multiverse storytelling through the example of *Deadpool*. I argue that in Deadpool stories, these can serve both as meta-criticism and as meta-commentary that shapes the critical discourse around the state of the superhero genre. Deadpool's addresses toward the audience in *Deadpool & Wolverine* (2024) can be regarded as the studio's commentary about the state of the superhero movie genre. The reintroduction of characters from previous, unconnected Marvel franchises can serve as the studio's commentary on what they intend to do with these characters and franchises. At the same time, it can also enhance the nostalgia factor of these films for fans who have been following them for a long time. Overall, the inclusion of the multiverse in the movie serves narrative purposes and profit-oriented purposes as well.

As these two analyses attest, the multiverse is a complex entity, shaped by industrial and audience factors as well. These examples further support the argument that the two main pillars of the multiverse, alternative universes in the narrative and intertextual/medial complexity cannot be separated from each other.

Chapter 7. Beyond Universes: A Conclusion

In the introductory chapter of the dissertation, I explained that the aim of the dissertation was to explore how the multiverse functions simultaneously as a narrative device and a transmedia framework in contemporary popular culture. I argue that it is a new form of transmedia storytelling, with two major defining aspects.

The first one aspect is its diegetic side, which involves the existence of various universes within the storyworld of a narrative. I explored this aspect through Tolkien's ideas on the Secondary World and sub-creation (Tolkien 1997, 122), Boillat's (Boillat 2022) and Mendlesohn's (Mendlesohn 2008) categories of fantasy worlds, and various other fantasy elements, such as the doppelgänger (Živković 2000, 124) and portals (Mendlesohn 2008, 1). These ideas and elements are all relevant in the context of multiverse narratives, as they are all present in them in some form.

The diegetic elements are complemented by the second main aspect of multiverse narratives, their transmedia and intertextual side. It encompasses the different versions of the narrative, no matter if they are canonical or fan made (Jenkins 2011). Some scholars isolate these two aspects and consider them two separate phenomena (D'Amato and Diani 2024, 602). At the same time, others conclude that the multiverse is constructed through narrative elements and the multiplicity (Jenkins 2009) of various adaptations, fan works, and transmedia extensions (Esterrich 2021, 1). This intertextuality is evidenced by the interconnectedness of various media entries within the transfiction (Ryan 2013, 365). In a transmedia storyworld, these entries cross-reference each other and characters and narrative elements migrate between them. In a multiverse, this intertextuality is an even more integral part of the narrative: various, previously unrelated adaptations gain a retroactive link (Wolf 2012, 216), different iterations of a character become parallel universe doppelgängers (Kogel and Schäfer 2011, 133), and they impact each other's storylines and character development. As I argued in this dissertation, the multiverse is a fluid entity with strong interplay between intertextuality and narrative complexity. The case studies demonstrate that the intensity of this interplay can vary between franchises.

There can be various motivations for the creation of new universes. In some cases, corporate factors, such as studio acquisitions, reboots, or the creation of a new franchise can lead to the development of a new, diegetic world, separate from previous ones. For example, the 2014 reset of the *Star Wars* Expanded Universe was greatly influenced by Disney's

aspiration to start a clean slate for the then-upcoming sequel trilogy (Keidl 2022, 164). In other cases, creators decide to re-imagine new a character with new version, inserted into a different environment. This is what happened to the DC Comics' Joker, who became the main character of a serious socio-drama in *Joker* (2019, dir. Todd Philips). He was portrayed by Joaquin Phoenix, and his representation only contained minor traces of the character's origins as a supervillain. This version differs radically from other Jokers in other *Batman* adaptations both in its representation and its underlying motives as a character (Saidi 2022, 8-9). In the greater scope of the DC transfiction (Ryan 2013, 367), this storyworld becomes one of the many in the multiverse. This understanding of fictional universes was greatly inspired by the comic book medium, which often serves as testing ground for new ideas before being adapted to movies (Ford and Jenkins 2009, 304-305). Furthermore, fan works and fan reinterpretations also lead to the creation of new universes (Jenkins 2011). As this dissertation demonstrated with the chapter about the Attila Fazekas' *Star Wars* comics, these reinterpretations can often have great significance in the grand scheme of the transfiction.

For my analysis, I chose two media franchises that highlight these two sides of the phenomenon. While *Star Wars* has no multiverses in the diegetic world, its many different versions and adaptations turn the narrative into a multiverse. Meanwhile, Marvel stories, both movies and comics, use the multiverse consciously. However, as this dissertation has shown, while the two franchises have very different approaches, the end result is much more similar. This is due to both fan and corporate factors.

To demonstrate how multiverse narratives change storytelling, I decided to choose examples that highlight different binary distinctions that are changed in the context of the multiverse. In the case of *Star Wars*, the Hungarian comic adaptations of the original trilogy, which became valuable collector's items in Hungarian fandom, represent the blurring of the boundaries between what audiences view as official and unofficial. Even though these comics were localized, unofficial versions created in a specific historical context, they have been elevated to cult artifact status (Jenkins 2006a, 99) within *Star Wars* fandom. It also shows how the various ways of collecting can also influence the transfiction. Meanwhile, the case of the controversy around the live-action series *Star Wars: The Acolyte* (2024) questions the narrative authority of the creators and shows that the distinction of canon and non-canon is more flexible. The clashes between various groups of fans show us the variety of audience expectations and experiences in these franchises.

This multiplicity of experiences ties back to one of the earlier chapters in the dissertation. Audiences observe transmedia universes through various lenses, for which Wolf uses the metaphor of windows (Wolf 2018, 142). He makes the observation that the evolution of media coverage of real-life events has had a synchronous relationship with transmedia franchises. A historical event, such as the Vietnam war, can be followed through various forms of media, including newspapers, television, and radio broadcasts. With the rise of the internet and digital media, our experience of the world has become increasingly fragmented. This has led to the proliferation of conspiracy theories, which is a viewed by scholars as a form of participatory culture (Grusauskaite et al 2022, 2). Both conspiracy theories and transmedia franchises rely heavily on the spreadability of content (Jenkins et al 2013, 188), which assumes an active participation of audiences. As this dissertation demonstrates through the example of fan theories around *Spider-Man: No Way Home* (2021), conspiracy theories and transmedia franchises can even be intertwined sometimes.

In the case of Marvel, I analyzed the movie *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse* (2023) to demonstrate how its LEGO scene transgresses various boundaries like diegetic/paratextual and fan/creator. In a multiverse narrative, these boundaries can be blurred much more easily than in traditional transmedia storytelling. Afterward, I discussed how Deadpool stories, more specifically the comic *Deadpool: Suicide Kings* (2010) and the movie *Deadpool & Wolverine* (2024) break the fourth wall through Deadpool's direct addresses to the audience. The use of the multiverse in the movie provides an opportunity for ironic meta-commentary about the current state of the superhero genre. From a more critical perspective, it can also be understood as the studio's attempt at controlling the discourse around these movies. Nevertheless, both case studies demonstrate how much contextual understandings matter in multiverse storyline.

Overall, I argue that these examples highlight some important changes in modern storytelling. While digital media is not the sole driving factor behind these changes, it has contributed significantly to them. For example, audience participation had existed way before the internet. Marvel Comics had already had letter columns in the 1960s, which played an important part in shaping the superhero genre. However, internet forums and social media have accelerated these changes and made it easier for audiences to make their voices heard.

At the same time, it cannot be expected that this framework be applied universally to all sci-fi and fantasy franchises. While this dissertation has attempted to answer certain questions, it has also raised many. As there are many understandings of canon and multiverses, as the differences between *Star Wars* and Marvel have highlighted, the insertion of the multiverse into

the narrative and its transmedia extension can vary greatly. The two franchises have many other elements that would merit further research in this context. My intention with this dissertation was to identify certain tendencies and to contribute to the growing body of literature around the subject. Hopefully the examples discussed here can help readers make sense of the complex, multi-layered, often erratic nature of the multiverse.

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I hereby disclaim that the present dissertation is the result of my own work.