Fans feeling a disturbance in the Force
Star Wars and the power of paratexts

Claus Toft-Nielsen

Associate Professor at the School of Communication and Culture at Aarhus University. His research is centred around digital media and popular culture, with a particular focus on fan culture, digital games, transmedia storytelling and gender studies.

Abstract

Ever since Disney acquired Lucasfilm in 2012, the *Star Wars* franchise has been widely praised for its updated take on and inclusion of diversity (extending in particular to women), having moved away from its image as purely a boys' club to include everyone. While this may seem true at first glance if we regard the blockbuster films of the *Star Wars* franchise, such a sentiment proves to be more problematic when we consider the merchandise accompanying the films. This article starts by reading the gender diversity of the *Star Wars* franchise as "plastic representation" (Warner 2017), branching out to include Star Wars merchandise as paratexts (Genette 1997, Gray 2010, Scott, 2017). Reading *Star Wars* toys, action figures and play sets as culturally significant objects and markers of fan identity (Geraghtly 2014), I argue that these paratexts serve to bolster gendered franchising and to work as "fanagagement" (Hills 2010) to promote certain types of fan engagement in *Star Wars*, while at the same time policing others.

Keywords *Star Wars*, paratexts, gender, fandom, franchise, merchandise

Star Wars is for everyone! Or is it?

Star Wars has recently seen a surge of new female leads and heroes: Jyn Erso in *Rogue One* (2016), and Rey in *The Force Awakens* (2015) and *The Last Jedi* (2017). These characters have been hailed as new and feminine ways of expressing heroism within the *Star Wars* franchise; and the films have been championed as feminist, multicultural and progressive. So far, Disney's strategy of appealing to a wider spread of audience demographics has certainly paid off at the box office. The diversity in Disney's *Star Wars* has led commentators and critics to proclaim that "Star Wars is for everyone" (Roberts 2015); while others point to a shift taking place within the franchise, which "has historically been viewed as a 'boy's club' (and remains so, in many ways)" (Proctor 2016, n.p.). While this may be true if we focus purely on the *Star Wars* films, such an approach is too narrow in terms of what *Star Wars* is: it is the "most voluminous paratextual entourage in entertainment history" (Gray 2010, p. 177). From its earliest days, the story of *Star Wars* existed well beyond the films, in novels, comics, TV shows, digital games and of course toys, expanding into an international franchise with decades of cultural history and multi-billion-dollar merchandising. Due to this strategy of having a core narrative in the films and relying on a multitude of surrounding media paratexts to supplement this core narrative, the diversity and femininity of *Star Wars* are anchored in all of these many texts – not just the films. In this article I will examine how this much-hailed and newfound feminism of *Stars Wars* is configured; and what we may be able to discover if we shift our focus to some of the many merchandise paratexts surrounding these films.

Off-screen studies: reading merchandise as paratexts

Film-related merchandise is a very lucrative part of film business, and five of the top ten licensors are entertainment companies under Disney, earning a total of 53 billion dollars in merchandise sales (Affuso & Santo, 2018, n.p.). The acquisition of *Star Wars* in 2012 cemented Disney's status at the absolute leader of licensed merchandise sales. In addition to the blockbuster successes of the *Star War*s films themselves, George Lucas famously made the decision to forego his salary for the films in exchange for retaining the licensing rights to the merchandise (amongst other things). This is a large

part of the reason why Disney paid 4.6 billion dollars in 2012 for the intellectual property rights to *Star Wars*.

In analysing the importance of merchandise, Jonathan Gray has argued that "we need an 'off-screen studies' to make sense of the wealth of other entities that saturate the media, and that construct film and television" (Gray 2010, p. 4). Within film and media studies, merchandise is traditionally framed as an industrial imperative to widen revenue streams thanks to the fact that toys can "extend the 'shelf life'" of a particular film (Wyatt, 1994, p. 148). Franchise films occur at certain intervals, with merchandise providing links between them to keep audiences engaged between instalments. But fan studies offer a different reading of merchandise in the light of fan identities, with fandom being closely related to the wider shifts within "consumer culture, such as the increase in consumption-based social and communal identities" (Hills 2002, p. 28). Along this line of thinking, Lincoln Geraghtly views merchandise as material culture, carrying both a social history and a deeply personal history – for instance for adult fan collectors, for whom *Star Wars* merchandise functions as a form of cultural capital and an engrained part of their self-identity: "Star Wars toy collecting is about constructing an identity as a fan and creating new meanings from a pre-established universe" (Geraghtly 2014, p. 121).

The first step towards a wider consideration of *Star Wars* merchandise is to acknowledge the prominent position of media *paratexts* as opposed to the centrality of specific *texts*. As stated in the original introduction by Gerard Genette in *Paratexts. Thresholds of interpretation* (1997), paratexts create a zone not only of transmission "but also of *transaction*" (p. 2), setting up expectations and shaping meaning in anticipation of the main text itself. Adapting Genette's work for media culture, Jonathan Gray's work on media paratexts (2010) considers branded merchandise as paratextual surroundings around the main text of the film. Merchandise is often part of the promotional material for franchise films, with products being available to consumers many weeks before the film itself premieres and often serving as a vehicle to guide customers about what to expect when the film finally opens. Gray argues that toys "have never merely been 'secondary' spinoffs or coincidental: they have played a vital role in, and thus have become a vital part of, the primary text and its unrivalled success" (Gray, 2010, p. 183). Mer-

chandise such as action figures have the ability to not only continue the story from a film, but also "strengthen or weaken established meanings" (ibid., p. 178). They can function as both *in medias res* paratexts, keeping us connected to the franchise in-between sequels, and as *entryway paratexts*, serving as our primary way into the franchise (see also Waade & Toft-Nielsen, 2015). Franchise paratexts such as toys and action figures cannot be divided easily into either category, as they occupy both simultaneously. For some fans, toys serve as paratextual clues into the not-yet available main text of the upcoming film; while for other fans they are inevitably situated in and draw upon decades of paratextual meanings and understandings of *Star Wars*. Toys thus exemplify the slippages between paratext, intertext and text in reading and understanding a franchise (Gray 2010, pp. 117-118). Suzanne Scott argues that the fact that modern media paratexts "are so frequently rooted within marketing and merchandizing frameworks demands that we confront their overwhelmingly conservative and hegemonic functionality" (Scott 2017, p. 139). Toys and merchandise are paratextual agents that serve gatekeeping functions, allowing certain types of fan engagement and deterring others; and as such, they become sites of struggle between the owners of a franchise and particular consumers / fans of that franchise.

'I contain women, so I must be feminist': plastic representation in and around *Star Wars*

Reading through the various promotional paratexts that are produced in anticipation of media texts that are not yet available, we automatically engage in "speculative consumption": setting up anticipations and creating ideas of "what pleasures any one text will provide, what information it will offer, what 'effect' it will have on us and so forth" (Gray 2010, p. 24). The many paratexts that flourished prior to *The Last Jedi* (2017) fed into fans' speculative consumption, a large part of which centred around the continuation of the female lead of Rey first introduced in *The Force Awakens* (2015) as well as several new female characters in the *Star Wars* mythos, one being Rose Tico (Kelly Marie Tran), the first woman of colour to portray a leading character in a *Star Wars* film. While viewer expectations fuelled by the promotional material were massive prior to the film's premiere, the disappointment afterwards was evident:

"The movie diminishes the role of its own female lead, mishandles its characters of color, and gives women no meaningful impact on the final story. […]. *The Last Jedi* doesn't let women drive their own stories. It's only wearing a sign that says, 'I contain women, so I must be feminist'" (Queen 2018, n.p.). In other words: the parts are all there, but the execution is lacking. This very precisely reflects Kristen J. Warner's sentiment that in an age in which diversity matters, "the degree of diversity became synonymous with the quantity of difference rather than the dimensionality of those performances" (Warner 2017, n.p.). Both female characters and persons of colour in *The Last Jedi* function as what Kristen J. Warner calls "plastic representation":

> a combination of synthetic elements put together and shaped to look like meaningful imagery, but which can only approximate depth and substance because ultimately it is hollow and cannot survive close scrutiny […]. Plastic representation uses the wonder that comes from seeing characters on screen who serve as visual identifiers for specific demographics in order to flatten the expectation to desire anything more (ibid., n.p.)

Plastic representation ticks all the boxes of diverse representation, allowing the franchise to sidestep any real work of creating a nuanced and empowering representation, while still being able to claim visible but superficial diversity. In the April of the year that *The Last Jedi* premiered, Disney announced its first female-targeted instalment within the franchise: *Star Wars: Forces of Destiny*, a YouTube series and toy line which featured *Star Wars'* most famous female characters. While being marketed as gender neutral 'Adventure Figures', they are extremely doll-like, with their brushable hair, slender limbs, large eyes and calm expressions more than hinting how "the use of the 'Adventure Figure' label seems first and foremost a branding strategy aimed at feminist audiences" (Bruin-Molé 2018, n.p.).

Figure 1. *Star Wars: Forces of Destiny* cast of female heroine characters. Picture from initial press release.

The way in which the franchise appeals to girl and women fans is just as important as whether it does this at all. *Forces of Destiny* seems to be a direct response to the growing demands for more inclusion of female fans in the *Star Wars* franchise. In her insightful analysis, Megen de Bruin-Molé (2018) points out that the *Forces of Destiny* series was a low-risk investment by Disney, freely distributed on YouTube (rather than Disney XD, where *Star Wars: Rebels* and part of *LEGO Star Wars* aired). The episodes often included cute and cuddly companions, underscoring the fact that it ultimately served to sell toys to girls and "encourages girls and women to 'buy into' a very specific and peripheral kind of fandom" (ibid.).

Forces of Destiny functions as yet another example of *plastic representation*: objects that "serve as visual identifiers for specific demographics in order to flatten the expectation to desire anything more" (Warner 2017, n.p.). Warner uses Barbie as an example, but the reading applies to *Forces of Destiny* as well: Mattell produces visibly diverse versions of their dolls, yet the canonical version of Barbie is slim, white, straight, blue-eyed and blonde. Changing the skin tone or the body shape serves to give marginalised audiences represen-

tation within the franchise, but only on the surface, on a plastic level. While on the one hand *Forces of Destiny* acknowledges that there is a demand for more women protagonists and female fans within *Star Wars*, on the other hand it also meets those demands only in niche products, through easily marketable ways that reinforce gender stereotypes (dolls are for girls and female fans) and divisions (female fans are relegated to niche product lines).

To be fair, Disney *have* tried to market branded merchandise not just to girls, but also to women. Elizabeth Affuso takes the *Star Wars* CoverGirl makeup line as her case study and argues that the move of fan merchandise into a feminised market speaks volumes to the growing dominance of female fans in contemporary fan cultures. But at the same time, she points out that even though female fans are recognised as *Star Wars* fans, they are (yet again) relegated to a space that restricts their fandom to traditional, feminine modes of expression. This tendency "illuminates that as fan practices become more gender inclusive, they often simultaneously reinforce gender divides" (Affuso 2018, p. 184). Derek Johnson arrives at a similar conclusion in his analysis of the *HerUniverse* clothing line that was specifically created for female fans of *Star Wars*. According to Johnson, *HerUniverse* carved a specific niche for female consumers within the overall merchandising, with diversity being framed and compartmentalised as consumer choice. Rather than destabilising or challenging gender norms, this fan merchandise relies on classic Disney princess tropes (for young female fans), as well as doubling down on sexualised merchandise (for the older female fans). Either way, it reifies gendered stereotypes and "ushers female consumers into a hegemonically aged, gendered, and sexed iteration of *Star Wars* fandom" (Johnson 2014, p. 899). In other words: *HerUniverse* assumes it was necessary to create separate fan merchandise for girls, because regular *Star Wars* merchandise and fandom is not for girls in the first place.

Rey and Rose not included: the policing and protesting functions of paratexts

While *Star Wars* films have always been blockbusters and heavily merchandised properties, this commercialisation reached new heights when Disney's first *Star Wars* film (*The Force Awakens*) was marketed. Thousands of licensed products were released and

bought up by eager fans – children and adults alike. But almost immediately, fans felt a disturbance in the Force: amidst all the *Star Wars* mania and the avalanche of products for *The Force Awakens*, the film's central character, Rey, was conspicuously missing. This was especially noticeable because the film had been hailed for its feminine agenda and attention to the diversity of the characters.
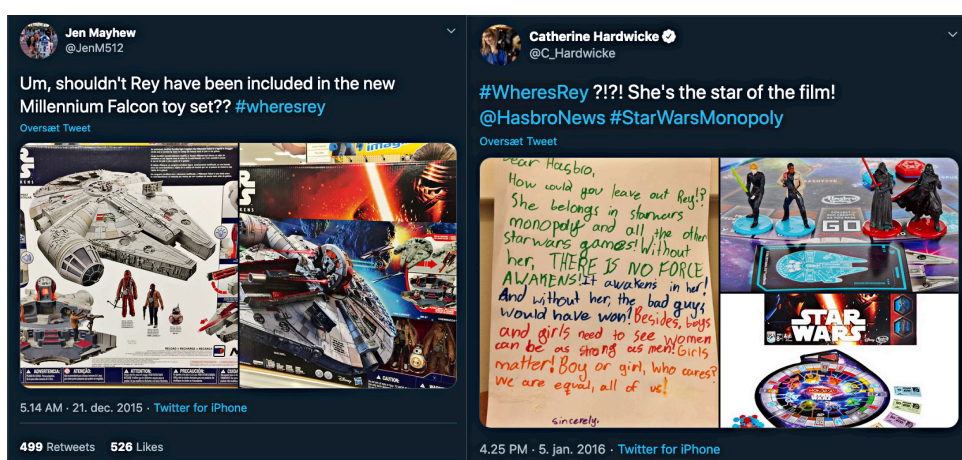

Figure 2. Fan outcry on Twitter, under the hashtag '#wheresrey', due to the absence of the main character Rey in the many toy-merchandise paratexts of *The Force Awakens*.

Even in packages of action figures, Rey was missing. Fans were quick to draw parallels to other Disney-owned franchises which had also erased a female character from the package of action figures (Black Widow from the *Avengers* set, and Gamora from the *Guardians of the Galaxy* set). The only difference being that Rey is not just one member of an otherwise all-male ensemble of heroes, but the lead character of the film. The premium Hasbro play set came with a light-up Millennium Falcon, a BB-8, a Finn, a Chewbacca, but no Rey. The omission of Rey from The Millennium Falcon – a spaceship she steers in several key scenes in the film – quickly drew criticism from fans, who took to social media platforms and created the #wheresrey social movement, demanding a response. The movement merged fan-based and feminist-informed demands with social activism on social media platforms and "demonstrated how social-media-based protests targeted at consumer culture may become one of the most productive strategies for promoting gender

equality in modern culture" (Brown 2018, p. 337). In the same way as branded fan merchandise serves a paratextual function of policing a franchise, the fan activism on social media platforms functions as a paratextual reaction and public protest to the gender politics of such merchandise. The kind of fan activism represented by #wheresrey means that "fan-produced paratexts are weaponized to stage a broader feminist intervention" (Scott 2017, p. 142). Working with fan activism, Lori Kido Lopez points out that when we talk about fan activism, we are in fact usually describing active fans rallying around a common goal, "[y]et their goals often remain within the world of the text itself" (Lopez 2011, p. 432). In the case of #wheresrey, the fans were addressing a real-world social issue, targeting the systematic exclusion of female-based toys for fans.

One month prior to the film's release, Hasbro released the *Star Wars* Monopoly set, which also lacked the character of Rey. After the film premiered, fans yet again criticised Hasbro for not including Rey in the set. The initial response by Disney and Hasbro to the protests was that they wanted to prevent paratexts produced before the film premiered from spoiling any plot secrets. This excuse can be seen as an instance of *paratextual scapegoating*: "positioning the lack of Rey action figures and play sets as a benevolent act, an industrial effort to shield fans from being 'spoiled' on key plot points from the film" (Scott 2017, p. 144). This excuse disregards the fact that Rey was featured in numerous other paratexts in the promotional material. One of these is the first official film poster, released three months before the film: Rey and Kylo Ren are clearly positioned as adversaries, with Finn on Rey's side holding a lightsabre. Film trailers are another type of paratext, showing scenes of Rey and Finn running from a First Order Tie Fighter, clearly positioning both characters on the same side of the Rebellion.

Rey was eventually included in the *Star Wars* merchandise, the Monopoly set, the play sets and the action figure packages, probably as a reaction to the vocal critique and the fan activism on social media (Brown, 2018). Let us now fast forward to late 2019, when anticipation for the upcoming and final film in the *Star Wars* saga, *The Rise of Skywalker* (2019), is building. The promotional paratexts reveal that the film will feature many characters from the previous films, including the fan favourite Rose Tico (Kelly Marie Tran), the first woman of colour to portray a leading character in a *Star Wars*

film. Fans quickly noticed a clear difference between the promotional pre-release material and the final merchandise available in the Disney Store. This time, it is Rose Tico that is missing.
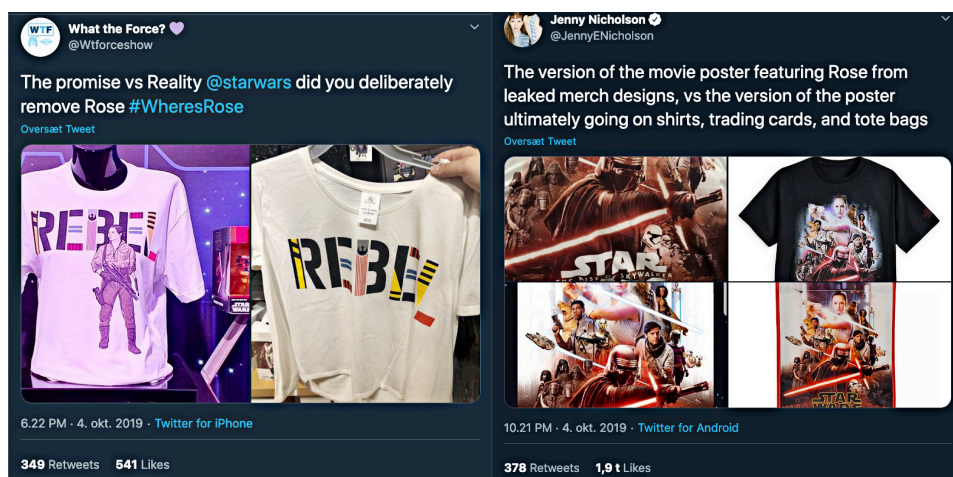

Figure 3: At the time of writing, *Star Wars* fans are taking to social media once again to protest against the absence of Rose Tico from the official merchandise, under the hashtag '#wheresrose'. The official material has paratextually erased Rose Tico by removing her completely. In one instance, Rose Tico was erased from a poster and replaced by a CGI alien slug.

According to Disney's Q3 Financial Report, a growth in overall merchandise sales has been offset by a decrease in sales from specifically *Star Wars* merchandise (Bloomberg 2019, n.p.). This seems to suggest that Disney is not only returning to but also doubling down on the attempt to secure and increase the *Star Wars* brand amongst boys. According to an anonymous source, business magazine Forbes reported that prior to *The Force Awakens* "toymakers were specifically directed to exclude Rey from their products because *Star Wars* toys are geared at boys and boys allegedly don't like playing with female action figures" (Kain 2016, n.p.). This aligns with Johnson's analysis that "the historical organisation, production, and marketing of the *Star Wars* franchise has relied upon logics of gender difference that suggest unequal industry interest in reaching boys versus girls, and men versus women" (Johnson 2014, p. 900). From a franchise logics standpoint, Disney already has the girls' demographics market well covered, primarily through The Disney Princesses, which quickly became the top licensed mer-

chandise property in the world. And that demographic is already buying *Brave* and *Frozen* products, so why should *Star Wars* cater to them too? In fact, this *paratextual policing* done by Disney could possibly be read as yet another bolstering of the boys' franchise. After all, Disney's acquisition of both Marvel in 2009 and Lucasfilm in 2012 can be seen as a move to gain access to a demographic group that Disney did not yet cover adequately: boys. The Disney Princesses line owes much of its success to the fact that it reinforces traditional and conservative conceptions of feminine ideals rather than challenging them, and why should *Star Wars* change a formula that already works?

Conclusion: the power of paratexts

Merchandise provides us with paratextual clues about the primary text of a film; but Gray reminds us that it also has the capacity to "strengthen or weaken established meanings", and to "provide a space in which meanings can be worked through and refined" (Gray 2010, p. 178). In the case of *Star Wars*, the paratexts have a gatekeeping function, acknowledging certain audiences (men) while deterring others (female fans). In her analysis of the fan activist movement of #wheresrey?, Suzanne Scott points out that the apparent absence of Rey in the merchandise undermines the film's pseudo-feminist focus on a female protagonist by insisting on the continued exclusion of girls from its imagined fan base, exposing "how paratexts both reflect and refract franchises' gendered valuation of their (imagined) audience" (Scott 2017, p. 139), as well as, I may add, erasing the possibility that some boys might identify with heroines as much as heroes in *Star Wars*. This paratextual erasure of Rey highlights how "paratexts function to codify gendered franchising discourses" (ibid.). Paratextual material in all forms not only shapes our understanding of a text, but is also imbued with intense financial and emotional investments by fans. Sometimes this emotional investment turns into a site of struggle over the absence of a central character or a fan favourite from the merchandise paratexts, as was the case with both Rey and Rose. As such, merchandise can serve as a way of paratextually policing a franchise as well as the type of fandom it allows, while at the same time serving as a paratextual erasure and devaluation of female fans. Although the films promise to foreground diversity in representations and

female heroism, they are surrounded and walled off by paratexts rooted in reactionary franchising logics. When female fans are offered a paratextual pathway into the franchise, this is often done through various forms of "pink media franchising" (Johnson 2014), relegated into gendered spaces and stereotypes. This echoes the girl power rhetoric of the 1990s, in which the pursuit of physical perfection was recast as empowerment rather than freedom from traditional gendered constraints, with girls being "free to choose" these constraints if they so desired (Orenstein 2011, p. 7). A similar move, argues Derek Johnson, has been made by Disney with regard to *Star Wars*, "offering girls limited cultural choices based in hegemonic gender roles and narrow beauty ideals alone, but perhaps more so by making 'pink' choices attractive to consumers (both parents and children) as seemingly active routes to empowerment" (Johnson 2014, p. 897). This can be read as an expression of a broader *post-feminist culture* in which media serve as sites for new negations of gender, identity and power (in the aftermath of feminism's call for change) in which girls are important figures. Through "consumer agency", feminist politics are "articulated and repudiated, expressed and disavowed" (McRobbie 2009, p. 163). When fans took to social media platforms to ask the question #wheresrey, they were fighting back against the paratextual absence of female characters in toys and merchandise, protesting against the historically male-centric heroism of *Star Wars* as well as the implied postfeminist logics of Disney's pink franchising offered to female fans. This kind of social media activism is just one amongst several types of paratextual fan resistance. Other forms include female fans creating their own DIY Rey merchandise (T-shirts and art), repurposing Bratz and Barbie dolls into Rey figures, and creating cosplay Rey costumes (Brown 2018, p. 345).

These examples all indicate the existence of a paratextual struggle between Disney and feminist-informed fan activism, which at its core can be read as a form of fan-disciplining described by Matt Hills as *fanagagement*: industrial modes of "responding to […] fan criticisms, as well as catering for specific fractions of fandom who might have otherwise be at odds with the unfolding brand, and attempting to draw a line under fan resistance" (Hills 2010, p. 410). Fanagagement takes place in media tie-ins and paratexts (novels, radio plays, toys), seemingly celebrating the fan's growing power

as important consumers of a media franchise, but ultimately shutting down particular types of fan debates and fan identities and diminishing "fan criticism of the brand" (ibid, p. 425). The male-centric culture of the *Star Wars* franchise thus expresses an inclusive gender ideology but steers female fans into appropriate gendered forms of their fandom. This type of gender-specific marketing and approved fan activity sends a strong signal that even though the *Star Wars* culture could in theory be for everyone, the reality is that boys are the primary target group and female fans are relegated to certain compartmentalised paratextual spaces outside the blockbuster main text.

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