

## Research paper

Changes in the Star Wars saga over time: Issues with political narrative  
and fan backlash

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## **Changes in the Star Wars saga over time**

### **1. INTRODUCTION**

The Star Wars saga is one of pop cultures most iconic movie franchises, everybody knows of villains such as Darth Vader and heroes like Luke Skywalker. The original trilogy of movies released between 1977-1983 were all met with heavily positive reviews during their release and they are still coveted as the holy grail of sci-fi cinema today. Beyond this, there have been two more trilogies of Star Wars movies (along with loads of other media) being the prequel trilogy released from 1999-2005 and the sequel trilogy 2015-2019. George Lucas was the primary director and storyteller for the original trilogy and the prequel trilogy, but he passed the project on to Disney and the directors subsequently chosen for the sequel trilogy. Amongst fans, the original trilogy is generally the most liked and whilst the prequel trilogy is also mostly liked there are some glaring issues that most fans point out, regardless they are still generally seen as good movies. The issue mostly comes from the sequel trilogy, movies directed by directors other than Lucas due to him having sold the franchise to Disney in 2012. These are by far the most disliked bunch of the sets of trilogies with fans even trying to retcon these movies, despite having last appearances from beloved actress Carrie Fisher. This is mostly due to the fault of directors as well as changes in pop culture in general, where directors try to play into a more 'inclusive' narrative at the unfortunate cost of the storytelling that Star Wars once had down so well.

This is important as the atmosphere for storytelling and directing of movies in recent times have moved to suit political biases more than fulfill an actual narrative. This is shown the best with the Star Wars trilogy in particular for the reasons aforementioned above. Being a fan favorite series, it stands to reason that the series is also one open to the most criticism, this is especially useful given how long the series has lasted and in which points of time the series has had its major trilogies in. This research paper will tackle these political biases and its involvement in Star Wars with a heavy emphasis on Disney and the directors hired after George Lucas.

## 2. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. How have the movies in the Star Wars saga changed over the last few decades?
2. Who has directed the movies and has there been a significant change?
3. Why has there been changes throughout the saga/trilogies?
4. What can be fixed and do there need to be any changes in the first place?
5. When were there significant changes in the movies?

### 3. REVIEW OF LITERATURE

One of the more important books written on this subject is “Start Wars After Lucas – A critical guide to the future of the galaxy” where the author Dan Golding goes into more depth about the politics behind Star Wars. What is more interesting to note here however is why George Lucas actually sold the Star Wars franchise off to Disney and the results that came thereafter. This is put together perfectly in a review written by James Sweeting in that after the prequel trilogy came out (1999-2005 as mentioned before) leading up to 2012 there was not that much Star Wars media that could be considered mainstream. There was the show, Star Wars the Clone Wars that aired from 2008-2014 before taking a hiatus, but it could not be considered mainstream as the viewership the show held despite being more than up to standard was low compared to the numbers Star Wars was used to. As mentioned in the article there was a game (later scrapped) in the works but overall, Lucas was not all too happy with the criticism laid on the prequel trilogy. In retrospect this criticism was not all that bad, it was more over dialogue concerns and minor nitpicks compared to what was to come later. Even so, this was enough for Lucas to sell all creative rights and control to Disney in 2012. This also came with a caveat however, as Lucas was in the works of another trilogy, he had handed off an unfinished script to Disney fully expecting them to continue the work after it was sold. Upon release of first sequel film in the trilogy in 2015, the review article quite rightly states that the films “took a form that Lucas would unlikely have made himself” which quite obviously does not sound good in retrospect as the franchise was solely built by George Lucas back in 1971. Furthermore, whilst directors of the sequel trilogies went against what fans would expect (JJ Abrams and in particular Rian Johnson) it is very likely that Disney higher ups had more creative control of the project themselves and the films would have been written in a way where the fan backlash stayed more or less the same, especially given the content produced by Disney after these movies.

What is interesting to note in the book itself are the comparisons made to real world politics and how they have always been a thing when concerning Star Wars. From making comparisons nowadays to political enemies as the “Emperor” or even slapping in Return of the Jedi references back in 1983 about Ronald Reagan, political comparisons have always been somewhat present in Star Wars. This is not all too surprising as part of the Star Wars plot is revolving around politics, for example rebelling against the Empire. What is interesting to note here however, is that most

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if not all of these political comparisons go from applying Star Wars terms to real life and not letting real life politics effect what was written in the storytelling of the movies.

In an article written by Kailash Koushik titled “Star Wars: The Last Jedi, Beauty and the Beast, and Disney’s commodification of Feminism: A Political Economic Analysis” further insight into this issue is explored and whether or not changes made in the sequel trilogy have any sort of effect on society.

The article starts off by stating industry trends in Hollywood, mainly those of women (specifically abuse/sexual harassment) and how frequent these trends are. This is of course important as the industry would try to sway away from this image in whatever means possible, whether it be by empowering female directors or by making characters in films follow this political narrative. This was also a trend along with these scandals, where women were in leading roles. The article goes on to identify that specifically in the movie Star Wars: The Last Jedi, the reviews were very poor especially considering the once legendary franchise the movie was titled under. This is also a good time to mention the characters that are causing an “uproar” according to the article. Rey is the female lead, Finn is a stormtrooper who is black (something that is usually not seen in Star Wars) and most of the people actually in power are women throughout this film. The reasoning for this given by the article is that Disney were trying to expand their audience to female consumers whilst also attempting to keep their main demographic if male consumers. This goes back to the negative reviews written online, where the article states that some people think that sites such as rotten tomatoes have been taken over by people who lean far right, going against female protagonists in particular.

This goes onto whether if these ‘attempts’ actually do something positive to modern society or effect it in any way like its predecessors have before. The article goes onto say that no – it does not have any positive effect due to the way its implemented. Disney is a capitalistic company at heart and ultimately is more interested in making profits than actually solving issues via marketing, film or by any other means that they have as stated in the article. When talking about solely “the greater good of the world” it is quite clear that this article demands a higher standard of narrative if any difference is to be made like the trilogies predecessors had made before it.

Further talk on gender and race is discussed in an article by Rebecca Harrison. What is interesting to note here is how the author makes comparisons from current films going back to

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previous films. In a section titled “fan backlash” it is clear that there were indeed fans who had problems with the main character being a female, or a stormtrooper being black as they voiced opinions on twitter.

Whilst there are obviously those bad eggs who are racist or sexist when concerning the films, the main issue is more so pointed out towards the end of the section, where Todd VanDerWerff gave a point of view that essentially states ‘most evil characters are white men, the film’s strongest characters are almost all women.’ This heavily implies that the narrative itself is being modified by Disney in order to appeal to these fantasies for modern day media popularity which is quite clearly what the majority of the fans are upset about. This is further backed up by what comes next in the article, where the author rightfully states that even in the original trilogy as well the prequels, there were always strong female characters as well as characters of colour.

All of this being said, the author states in the conclusion that she believes that Star Wars ‘will continue to depict gender and race unfairly’ as she more so leans to the side of feminism. This is obviously a valid point, as it could certainly be argued that there are racial stereotypes, such as Lando (the only black character) in the original trilogy being portrayed as a swindler and a gambler. However, most of what the author says is a bit of a stretch putting it lightly. For example, comparing clones fighting the emperor a white man to slavery could certainly be seen as outlandish and all in all is something that Lucas didn’t even consider when making this plot point. Therefore, points such as “the prequels contribute to, rather than critique, the racism of slavery” should certainly not be taken at face value when thinking about some of the comparisons made.

The last article discussed by Bethany Lacina is more of a statistical overview of tweets concerning characters in the new trilogy against some of the characters in the older trilogies still showcased in the sequel trilogy in particular.

The toxic rating is said to be ‘based on an algorithm developed by Google’ where essentially toxic comments are divided into one group separate from other comments. This creates an interesting table as shown on page 3, where it is clear that the sequel trilogy protagonists are generally far more prone to toxic comments compared to those of the original trilogy. The lowest having a toxic rating of 12% for the sequel trilogy protagonists would not even be the highest for the original trilogy protagonists, which sits at around 10%. Further taking in context to the films

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and how they were written and perceived by the fans, that 10% number might even be inflated in favour of the sequel trilogy due to the way Luke Skywalker was written in the newer movies. On the subject of the writing, it is important to note that these statistics do not show why or for what reason these characters were being hated on, but rather provide a statistical number to look at. For example, Rose Tico who sits at a whopping 19% toxic rating when concerning tweets is generally regarded by fans to be very poorly written and there is a general consensus that she is not a good character due to the way the writers chose to portray her on screen as opposed to any racial stereotype.

The shipping twitter discussed later on in the article is not that relevant to the comparison being made in this research article, as it mainly discusses another subject entirely when concerning the main characters rather than the political nature being discussed in this paper. Still, the author has stated in that section that she checked for false positives (via a sample) when concerning the toxic rating being discussed.

#### 4. FINDINGS/ANALYSIS

Considering everything mentioned above, it is clear that Disney's sequel saga is where the main point of contention comes in regarding fan backlash as opposed to any other trilogy. Comparing the backlash from the sequel trilogy to the prequel trilogy, we can see that despite going down in quality in the eyes of the fans the prequel trilogy was still written and directed Star Wars was envisioned to be.

A review of the saga and other media over the last few decades shown in Dan Golding's book shows that throughout the ages of 1977-1999 Star Wars was in its prime here and was almost unanimously loved by everybody. There were political references made in real life that took inspiration from Star Wars, including things such as clumsily labeling political leaders of opposite sides as "The Emperor" and much more. Yet these references never put the saga itself in a bad light, nor did Star Wars take any sides to the point where it had any issues. The prequel era is where some issues started to come through the cracks, even to the point where the backlash caused a silence of Star Wars media throughout 2005-2012 (other than the Clone Wars television show mentioned earlier) eventually becoming one of the factors to make Lucas sell the franchise to Disney in 2012. Despite this and the far heavier emphasis the movies themselves had on political nature, the issues of the prequels themselves rather often falls to clumsy writing and dialogue that was vastly different than from its predecessor trilogy. There was backlash on some of the political nature, but it was never really as big of a talking point concerning the prequels, as many if not all of the articles have pointed out, politics has always been a thing in Star Wars, and it has always intertwined with real life. More importantly, compared to the sequel trilogy the dialogue was never altered in a way to push forward a political narrative onto the consumer.

The sequel trilogy is of course where most of the problems come in and is generally where a significant portion of changes came into Star Wars and its media. Whilst one of the research questions asks, "Who has directed the movies and has there been a significant change?", the answer is that according to the research it probably didn't even matter who directed them given that the Disney higher ups most likely had close to all the creative control. Rian Johnson in particular did receive a lot of backlash for "The Last Jedi", the 2<sup>nd</sup> movie in the sequel trilogy and JJ Abrams received his fair share of criticism as well, however other projects discussed in Dan Golding's book after Disney bought Lucasfilm goes on to show that this choice probably



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didn't even matter in the end regarding the politics behind it. As for the significant change part, all the articles quite clearly show that the sequels in particular have tried to push a more 'inclusive' narrative onto the films, letting political culture take over creative decisions and pushing the film in a direction that George Lucas would not have written himself. Furthermore, even the articles reviewed who are on the side of a more 'inclusive narrative' are against the sequel trilogy themselves. Kailash Koushik's article shows that even those who appreciated what Disney could politically bring to the table regarding the saga were disappointed in the result. This mainly came down to sloppy writing and an overall terrible narrative being told, a narrative that was sacrificed for 'inclusion', whether that was racially, or gender based. This change is what caused all of the fan backlash to begin with, whilst the article from Rebecca Harrison shows that yes, there are obviously racist and sexist Star Wars fans, there is simply no denying that Disney chose to change Star Wars in a way where they let political influence take over into the movies themselves and the cost at the end was not worth it – even to those who were looking forward to this new inclusive narrative.

This goes onto what needs to be changed, and this one is rather obvious given everything the articles have to say. If Disney wants to push their political agenda onto the films more, the overall writing and story of the films should be what is expected of such a legendary saga – including a script that is written on the same level as the original trilogy. The original trilogy is a great example of an inclusive narrative, whilst not sacrificing any storytelling in order to push forward a certain goal. The fact that fans who both wanted a more inclusive narrative and those who were against it both were let down by the outcome of the sequel trilogy is very telling to how subpar the writing is thought to be, this very obviously shows that the directors and Disney could not cater to the fans or the political groups they were trying to please. The only real change that needs to be made is quite clearly that the writing needs to be better, and the plot should absolutely never be sacrificed for the sake of outside political agendas. Star Wars already had a proven formula whilst catering to all sides of politics in the past and had never received anywhere near as much backlash as it did during the era of the sequel trilogy, even back in the prequel times where there was backlash about other things.

## 5. CONCLUSION

In conclusion, Star Wars as a saga has progressively gotten worse as new iterations of trilogies have come out according to the fans, the reviewers, and the researchers. Whilst movies are often subjective, a massive consensus of people often believe this especially due to how the sequel saga in particular was written. For the prequel and sequel trilogies it is clear what went wrong with both. The prequel trilogy had issues with dialogue, but politics was not an overall boon to the films, whilst the sequel trilogy suffered a lot regarding the plot/characterization and political involvement. Whether this is surprising or not depends on how the reader views Disney, as the franchise does have a history with appealing to media regarding politics especially in recent times. However, when regarding a franchise as big and iconic as Star Wars this should be done very carefully, which has not been the case upon reviewing these articles and fan backlash – even those who side with the more inclusive narrative were disappointed with the sequel trilogy. Hopefully Disney goes to improve their narrative regarding Star Wars, as this has been an issue with all Star Wars related media especially as seen in Dan Golding's book, whether this is by improving their inclusive narrative up to Star Wars standards or by going back to the old and proven formula as shown by Lucas in the original trilogy.

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