

Containing the Canon

The Impact of Disney's Acquisition on Canonicity in the Star Wars Franchise

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I'm going to talk today about the containment of the *Star Wars* canon and how its canon has been imagined over the history of *Star Wars*. To begin, I present our friend Cad Bane holding what's called a holocron, as I'll talk about holocrons quite a lot in this talk (Holocron Heist 2009). I'll start with an overview of how canonicity has been thought of as historiography both within the *Star Wars* canon and around *Star Wars*, because it has two lives. Specifically, I will focus on Disney's acquisition of Lucasfilm as a turning point both in the fan discourse as well as in the actual descriptive language about *Star Wars*.

I have three things that I'm going to cover today. One will be the branding of the *Star Wars* Extended Universe as what is now called "Legends," a move that catalyzed a struggle over canon continuity that ran for the entire '90s up until the present, and the introduction of Leland Chee, who has been dubbed the "Keeper of the Holocron" at Lucasfilm. Then I'll consider the appearances of holocrons as narrative devices, starting with the comic-book series *Dark Empire*, all the way up *Star Wars Rebels* in 2018. And finally, I'll consider the most recent appearances of holocrons in Disney *Star Wars* films, including *Solo: A Star Wars Story* (dir. Ron Howard, 2018) and *Star Wars: Rise of Skywalker* (dir. J.J. Abrams, 2019), as well as holocrons as physical objects that you can buy at a Disney theme park near you. Hopefully, that will give you a sense of how I'm exploring this issue as part of a larger, ongoing project.

I'm going to treat *Star Wars* as an archive. I propose that we should take *Star Wars* (all of it) seriously as its own archive, reading the texts and paratexts of *Star Wars* as a corporate transmedia franchise against itself, focusing on holocrons as both increasingly canonical storytelling devices and as tools for managing the *Star Wars* franchise. This resistant reading method might allow us to counter the "official" *Star Wars* hierarchy and canonization and decanonization of its own stories, while making sense of the elements that persist or reemerge. If you weren't paying much attention to the business news of 2012 to 2014, the details of how Disney bought Lucasfilm were actually pretty public. You can see that the acquisition of Lucasfilm in 2013, as announced and detailed, included talking about Luke Skywalker and Han Solo joining Disney's "roster of heroes" and that Lucas would step aside to be "creative consultant" and then retire (Krantz et al. 2012). Bob Iger at Disney emphasized that "Lucasfilm has a stockpile of similarly rich material—aka intellectual property—for more *Star Wars* installments" contained in a "database called the Holocron," with Lucasfilm sending over

technical advisors like Pablo Hidalgo, to advise Disney on what they could mine. As was very publicly said by Alan Horne, “we needed to have an understanding that if we acquire the company, despite tons of collegial conversations and collaboration, at the end of the day, we have to be the ones who sign off on whatever the plans are” (Leonard 2013).

This caused some consternation amongst fans, especially those skeptical of Disney. Then the next year, in 2014, Disney issued a press release establishing what they would consider canon, telling fans how they were going to proceed. They described “Lucas as open[ing] up that universe to be a creative space for other people to tell their own tales. This became the Extended Universe of comics, novels, videogames, and more.” But, “Lucas always made it clear that he was not beholden to the EU. He set the films he created as the canon. [...] These stories are the immovable objects of *Star Wars* history, the characters and events to which all other tales much align.” And regarding the new, projected films under Disney, “Episodes VII-IX will not tell the same story told in the post-*Return of the Jedi* Expanded Universe. While the universe that readers knew is changing, it is not being discarded. [...] Demand for past tales of the Expanded Universe will keep them in print, presented under the new Legends banner” (StarWars.com 2014).

Very quickly, Disney produced explanations for how to think of the Extended Universe, as you can hear in this range of speakers then working with the *Star Wars* franchise (Star Wars YouTube 2014):\

- Amy Beth Christenson (concept artist, *Star Wars Rebels*, *The Force Unleashed*): “We pour a lot of ourselves into creating these things that were new to the *Star Wars* universe. As like a lifelong *Star Wars* fan, that definitely means the most to me”
- Leland Chee (Keeper of the Holocron): “With *Star Wars*, we want the world to be real. And it feels real if everything is in line.”
- Dave Filoni (Executive Producer, *Star Wars Rebels*): “And I think that that’s the challenge for all of us going forward with *Star Wars*. How are we responsible with what was and how do we, you know, still move forward, even if things become very different?”
- Howard Roffman (EVP, Lucasfilm franchise management): “We now have a story department, so that there truly can be one consistent narrative. And that’s always been the dream.”
- Kiri Hart (Head of Development, Lucasfilm): “I think the idea of aligning the content is actually a really fantastic and exciting opportunity that no other fictional universe could really even support.”

So, you can see that story alignment under Disney’s licensing arms became the logic under which the Extended Universe became Legends. We see the branding elements of this pop up very quickly across the comics collections that were reissued by Marvel [also owned by Disney]. *Star Wars* Extended Universe novels were reissued, often confusingly marketed using phrases like “for decades, the Legends novels have expanded the universe,” as though “Legends” has always been in use (Penguin Random House). Wookieepedia, which many of us rely on for research, actually restructured how it presents its own data into “Canon” and “Legends” tabs.

This, then, brings us to the question of what actually counts (or counted) as *Star Wars* canon. Who claims they can decide that answer? This has been a debate about *Star Wars* since the ’80s and ’90s, since the interregnum between *Star Wars*, *Episode VI: Return of the Jedi* (dir. Richard Marquand, 1983) and *Star Wars*, *Episode I: The Phantom Menace* (dir. George Lucas, 1999). Originally, Production Editor Sue Rostoni and Continuity Editor Allan Kausch were put out to answer these questions. So, in 1994, they described an “in-house timeline” and an “in-house extension of the *Guide [to the Star Wars Universe]*,” the popular press book by Raymond L. Velasco from 1984. In the same piece, they identified a “‘gospel,’ or canon” that

included “the screenplays, the films, and the radio dramas and the novelizations,” and they acknowledge that “fans are sophisticated and demand a cohesive approach” (Snyder, 18). You’ll notice the impulse here is to treat fans and their demands as driving force for this cohesion.

When people wrote about working with Lucasfilm, they would often refer to these elements. So, Mark Cotta Vaz, writing about the *Shadows of the Empire* project in the ’90s: “nothing can contradict the history or logic of what has gone before.” He goes on: “there is ‘the Canon’ [...] prepared by the continuity editors at Lucasfilm and considered the in-house bible of the *Star Wars* universe [...] located on the grounds of the famed Skywalker Ranch” (Vaz, 21). In the popular press, items like a 1997 *New Yorker* article reinforced that it was Lucas’s impulse to create this “finite, expanding universe,” under “‘The Bible,’ a burgeoning canonical document [...] maintained by ‘continuity editors’ Allan Kausch and Sue Rostoni.” The piece went on to stress that “new developments [...] were] always approved by Lucas himself” (Seabrook 1997). So that was the public perception of how the *Star Wars* canon was contained.

We can then see a variety of places where Lucasfilm displayed this logic, including descriptions of the West End Games role-playing games, which were considered “bibles.” According to West End editor Peter M. Schweighofer, “Everything that [is approved] by Lucasfilm is official. [...] while] Everybody—from individual writers, artists, to Lucasfilm itself—has their own view of the *Star Wars* universe” (Kogge, 20). But this raises an underlying question: if there’s so much material being put out, what steps in to differentiate the canonicity of elements?

An interesting example of asserting how to differentiate elements of the canon is Sue Rostoni in 2001, responding to a dust-up over the use of the “Infinities” branding (supposedly only for non-canon stories): “Canon refers to an authoritative list of books that the Lucas Licensing editors consider an authentic part of the official *Star Wars* history. Our goal is to present a continuous and unified history of the *Star Wars* galaxy, insofar as that history does not conflict with, or undermine the meaning of Mr. Lucas’s *Star Wars* saga of films and screenplays” (*Star Wars Gamer* 2001). What this eventually led to by 2008 was the consolidation of all branches of the *Star Wars* canon under a system maintained within the *Star Wars* franchise and via its public disclosures. The franchise was described as having a “unique” extended universe, but with levels of canonicity, which are maintained by Leland Chee in Lucasfilm’s holocron—a database that has interior canon hierarchies (Wallace, 36).

So how did Lucasfilm present this now-standardized internal logic? They publicly promoted one individual, Leland Chee, called the “Keeper of the Holocron.” Chee was presented as responsible for systematizing all of the previous claims to the canon within *Star Wars*. So, the *Incredible Cross-Sections* books about the vehicles of *Star Wars* which were presented as canon, and then contested, were now contained (Reynolds, 36). When Lucas said in 2005 that he’d never read any of the extended universe stories,¹ Leland Chee was sent out to clean that up in the fan forums, insisting that, in fact, there was internal logic (StarWars.com forum 2005).

Chee was featured in a *Wired* profile in 2008, in which he lays out the details of maintaining *Star Wars* canon, like the portrait of an Ithorian scholar holding a holocron that hangs in his office. In the profile, we can see that Lucas licensing vets ancillary properties and that “careful nurture of the *Star Wars* canon—thousands of years of story time running through all the bits

¹ “I don’t read that stuff. I haven’t read *any* of the novels. I don’t know anything about that world. That’s a different world than mine. But I do try to keep it consistent. The way I do it now is they have a *Star Wars Encyclopedia*. So if I come up with a name or something else, I look it up and see if it has already been used. When I said [other people] could make their own *Star Wars* stories, we decided that, like *Star Trek*, we would have *two* universes: My universe and this other one. They try to make their universe as consistent with mine as possible, but obviously they get enthusiastic and want to go off in other directions” (Spelling, 48).

and pieces of merchandise—has kept the franchise popular for decades” (Baker, 135). So, this is ultimately a licensing problem, and it’s one that Lucasfilm, and now Disney, is careful to manage, because “as long as there’s the Holocron, *Star Wars* will not reboot” (Chee 2012). Until recently, this is the sort of profile used to manage fans’ notion of the *Star Wars* canon: in 2018, it was described as having 80,000 entries, and that it “furthers the immersiveness of the franchise’s multimedia empire and creates more devout fans” (Zakarin 2018). And Leland Chee now appears in credits for films, books, and games as “Keeper of the Holocron,” as in the credits for *Rise of Skywalker*. There’s also now a “Story Group” within Lucasfilm/Disney, and you can watch a handy introductory video to Chee and the Holocron on YouTube (LucasFilm 2019).

In the last part of my talk, I’m going to show you what a holocron is (or at least, was). Some of you who have read quite a lot of *Star Wars* over the years know that holocrons have popped up in a variety of places over many years. Holocrons originated in the 1991-92 *Dark Empire* comic-book series, when a clone of Emperor Palpatine presented one, after *Return of the Jedi*, to Princess Leia to try to persuade her to join the Dark Side (Veitch & Kennedy, 5). They appeared as glowing cubes that gave immediate access to converse with past Jedi, and in later appearances, also with Sith masters. Holocrons quickly became canonized through the 1990s. So, they popped up across the comics, then the novels, the video games, the television shows, and eventually in films. There are Sith versions, which are pyramidal structures. And we see them pop up in the official guides to *Star Wars*; see, for example, the *Official Star Wars Fact File #46* (2002).

This is how they become codified—as geometric objects able to contain past lore. Interestingly, they almost made their way into *Star Wars, Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (dir. George Lucas, 2002). In the film’s production materials, they appear as *de facto* objects that would have appeared on screen. Three models were built by the prop masters of *Attack of the Clones* and were described as giving access to a “unique form of living instruction” (Reynolds 2002, 29).”

But, you might think, “I’ve seen *Attack of the Clones* and I don’t remember this...” Which is in part why holocrons are fascinating. In the film, when Obi-Wan Kenobi consults Jocasta Nu at the Jedi Archive, he asks about the planet Kamino. She notably replies, “If an item does not appear in our records, it does not exist!” However, this short scene is excised from a longer version of the *Attack of the Clones* script that at one time included Sith holocrons as specific, on-screen narrative objects. That version of the script, and some production materials, indicate a backstory in which Qui-Gon Jinn and Obi-Wan had tried to find a Sith holocron, Anakin and Obi-Wan had successfully done so, and this visit to the archive would allow them to revisit the holocron (compare Hearn 2002, 44 with Windham 2002, 9). So, these holocrons were made as physical objects to be put in the film and instead they pop up in the ancillary materials (Sansweet & Neumann, 333). In the current *Star Wars* continuity, holocrons physically reside in the Jedi Temple, in a section called the Archives.

But now that holocrons exist (in some form) in the highest tier of the *Star Wars* canon, they start getting integrated into the history of how *Star Wars* presents itself. In the reference guides, such as *Jedi vs. Sith: The Essential Guide to the Force* (2007), they are the starting point for the history of *Star Wars* (Windham 2007, 4, 9, 7, 11). And previous appearances from lower levels in the canon can be recontextualized. Now, holocrons can appear in the *The Clone Wars*, in the “Holocron Heist” arc, in *Rebels* for “Holocrons of Fate,” in *Lego Star Wars* videos, like “The Holocron Hunt.” You can even get Lego Holocron Droids. They now appear in the Disney/Lucasfilm encyclopedia entry for information technologies (Bray, Horton, & Barr, 150-151).

As I close, I'll note that we've seen holocrons appear in *Solo: A Star Wars Story* in Dryden Vos' meeting room. Production designers actually made a Sith holocron prop and when it appears in the ancillary materials, it's identified as a reconstructed holocron that Vos will use as a gift (Hidalgo, 74). A version of holocrons appear in *Rise of Skywalker* as "wayfinders," which are distanced very slightly in the production materials as being like holocrons: "We're not saying it's a holocron, but it has the language of one. It's in the same family and it's holding information" (Szostak, 83).

This increasing narrative inclusion leads to a kind of internal narrative of the same thing Leland Chee is doing to shape and contain the franchise. The last thing I want to show you is that you can now go to the Disney theme park, consult your friendly Ithorian shopkeeper, Dok-Ondar, and he'll see you a holocron from his great wall of them, so you can take one home yourself and way to mimic the work of *Star Wars* canon containment (Horton, 66).

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