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Abstract

Taking as its object of study the character of Grand Admiral Thrawn from the *Star Wars* franchise, this article examines how character identity is managed in narrative transmedial franchises. Focusing on the notion of ›canonicity‹, it suggests a way of conceptualizing how hierarchical systems of continuity can affect the mental modelling of characters. Furthermore, it discusses what strategies are employed—both textually and paratextually—to maintain a sense of character identity in the face of a reboot like the one undergone by *Star Wars* in 2014.

Introduction

On April 25, 2014, roughly one-and-a-half years after the Walt Disney Company had bought Lucasfilm Ltd., *StarWars.com* published a short press release which confirmed that in preparation for the release of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* (2015), Lucasfilm would drop the majority of *Star Wars* continuity established outside of George Lucas's six feature films.[1] This marked a substantial »shift in […] transmedia economy« (PROCTOR/FREEMAN 2016: 232) for one of today's most commercially successful and extensive transmedia franchises; a

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[1] Cf. http://www.starwars.com/news/the-legendary-star-wars-expanded-universe-turns-a-new-page [accessed September 9, 2018].

shift that has been received with mixed feelings on the part of fans.[2] In this context, a recurring point of controversy is the depiction of characters in the new canon, and said depiction's consistency with other works of *Star Wars* fiction, both canonical and non-canonical.[3] While there have already been some scholarly analyses of some of the reboot's implications (cf. CANAVAN 2017a; 2017b; GERAGHTY 2017; PROCTOR/FREEMAN 2016), the question of how character identity and consistency is managed in its wake has remained largely unaddressed as of yet.

In the present article, I aim to conduct a detailed analysis of such management procedures in the form of a case study, taking as its object the character of Grand Admiral Thrawn, who was first introduced in Timothy Zahn's novel *Heir to the Empire* (1991) as a new villain for the heroes of the original film trilogy (1977–1983). I have chosen Thrawn for three reasons: First, the fact that he never appeared in any of the six original films or the television series *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* (2008–) means that with the de-canonization of the former ›Expanded Universe‹ (EU) of books, comics, videogames etc., Thrawn was completely erased from official continuity before being re-introduced in the third season of *The Clone Wars*'s successor programme, *Star Wars: Rebels* (2014–2018). From a production standpoint, this eliminated all creative constraints with regard to the attributes of his canonical version, which enables an analysis of all aspects of his portrayal in the new canon as deliberate creative decisions. Second, Thrawn's original iteration was one of the most popular characters from the EU, appearing at number ten on IGN's 2010 list of the 100 greatest *Star Wars* characters—bested only by characters from the original trilogy.[4] This suggests a strong awareness of the character and his original characterization among fans, which in turn makes the ›faithfulness‹ of his depictions in post-reboot works a potentially controversial issue. As a third point, however, the new iteration of the character was received with near-unanimous favour and approval for its consistency with the EU Thrawn (cf. GOLDMAN 2016; TABER 2016; TERRY-GREEN 2016),[5] indicating a ›successful‹ transition from old to new continuity in terms of fan appreciation.

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[2] Some of the most extreme expressions of discontent have been associated with a fan group called ›Give us Legends‹, who successfully raised money for a San Francisco billboard urging Lucasfilm to continue the stories told in the novels and comics released prior to the reboot (cf. PHEGLEY 2016). The group has also been associated with online harassment targeted at actresses involved in the production of *Star Wars: The Force Awakens* and *Star Wars: The Last Jedi* (2017) (cf. WARD 2018).

[3] The two most prominent examples of this would be the controversies about Luke Skywalker's characterization in *The Last Jedi* (cf., for example, WATERCUTTER et al. 2017) and the casting of Alden Ehrenreich as a young Han Solo in the eponymous spin-off film (2018) (cf. VERHOEVEN 2016). The fact that the former controversy focused on questions of characterization, whereas the latter was mainly concerned with Ehrenreich's looks (and therefore matters of representational correspondence), shows the wide variety of issues connected to this, as well as the huge amount of scholarly work still to be done.

[4] Cf. http://web.archive.org/web/20120530015102/http://www.ign.com:80/star-wars-characters/10.html [accessed September 1, 2018].

[5] It is noteworthy that, of the three reviews cited here, two (Taber and Terry-Green) speak of ›consistency‹, implying that the two iterations of the character are regarded as essentially *one* entity. Goldman, on the other hand, frames his comparison in terms of ›similarity‹, suggesting a viewpoint that clearly differentiates the two iterations from each other. The fact that Goldman is reviewing

Taken together, these three factors add up to the overall question of this article: How is Lucasfilm, as a corporate IP (intellectual property) owner, addressing »fan anxieties about authenticity and canon« (PROCTOR/FREEMAN 2016: 237) with regard to characters in the face of a substantial shift in the »›intended structure‹ of its transmedial universe« (THON 2015: 33)? I will address this question in three steps: In order to establish an adequate theoretical framework for the ensuing analysis, I will first draw on several theories of transmedia storytelling to describe the storyworld(s) and canonicity system of *Star Wars* in suitable terms. Following this, I will examine Thrawn's old and new iteration from the perspective of semiotics and cognitive narratology, determining how they relate to each other in terms of *identity*. Lastly, I will analyse the paratexts surrounding Thrawn's re-introduction into *Star Wars* canon to show how shifting attributions of narrative authority can contribute to contested questions of consistency between (contradictory) depictions of a popular character.

1. Canon and Contradiction in the *Star Wars* Universe

»Transmedia storytelling 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: n.pag.). Henry Jenkins's influential definition of ›transmedia storytelling‹ seems to apply to the *Star Wars* franchise for the most part—with the notable exception of his attribute ›unified‹. While Jenkins himself has already problematized this particular part of his original definition (cf. JENKINS 2009: n.pag.), Jan-Noël Thon argued that *Star Wars*, in particular, »exemplifies transmedial entertainment franchises' potential for synchronic complexity and diachronic variability, which makes analysing them based on the model of the single world appear overly reductive« (THON 2015: 39). Nevertheless, consistency of and coherency between various narrative elements—including characters—have been identified as central attributes of TS (transmedia storytelling) (cf. HARVEY 2014: 279). One of the tools for relieving the tension between the contradictory multiplicity of a given transmedia franchise and its recipients' unwillingness to imagine paradoxical fictional worlds (cf. THON 2015: 28) is the notion of ›canon‹. Roy T. Cook defines ›canon‹ as the result of practices which »identify a privileged subfiction that constitutes the real story regarding what is fictionally ›true‹ […], whereas noncanonical stories are ›imaginary‹ or are delegitimized in some other sense« (COOK 2013: 272). In order to examine the relationship between the different iterations of the character Thrawn, it is essential to understand the canonicity practices of Lucasfilm, both before and after the EU reboot. Hence, the following section will attempt to give a theoretical

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for professional media website IGN, whereas Taber and Terry-Green are writing for fan websites, can be viewed as a first indicator that different recipient groups are encouraged to adopt different readings of the relationship between the original Thrawn and his rebooted version (cf. section 1.2).

account of said practices in order to indicate how they might pertain to individual characters.

1.1 The Expanded Universe

Up until 2014, Lucasfilm had been developing an increasingly sophisticated system for classifying elements of the *Star Wars* universe with regard to the ›accuracy‹ with which they depicted the ›actual‹ fictional world of *Star Wars*. When the EU was discontinued in 2014, Lucasfilm's ›Holocron Continuity Database‹ comprised six different levels of canonicity mirroring the corporate structures organizing the production of *Star Wars* works (cf. CANAVAN 2017b: 160).[6] Due to this duplicity of corporate and diegetic levels, the structure of the *Star Wars* canon (until 2014) can be conceptualized in terms of Colin B. Harvey's (2014) taxonomy of transmedia storytelling, which is based on the legal relations regulating memory across individual franchise entries. Harvey's taxonomy is more generalisable and less complex than Lucasfilm's own system, while retaining all features of the latter that are relevant to the purposes of the forthcoming analysis.

With regard to works that do not require any form of user participation,[7] Harvey distinguishes three levels of transmedia storytelling (TS): ›Directed TS‹, over which the legal owner of an IP exerts close authorial control and which is therefore regarded as the highest authority on the state of the world it depicts; ›devolved TS‹, which is still bound to directives from the IP holder, but in which »certain aspects of established continuity can be forgotten or otherwise misremembered« (HARVEY 2014: 282); and finally ›detached TS‹, which is not under the IP holder's control and might deliberately alter aspects of established continuity to avoid copyright infringement (cf. HARVEY 2014: 282–283). In the case of *Star Wars*, the IP owner originally coincided with what Mark J.P. Wolf (2012: 273–274) addressed as the ›originator and main author‹, i.e. George Lucas. Works in whose production Lucas was closely involved automatically took precedence over others when canonicity was in question (cf. CHEE 2006).[8] Therefore, these works can be classified as directed TS *sensu* Harvey. The subordinated level of devolved TS was constituted by works that were produced by commissioned authors, with little or no input from Lucas himself (cf. PROCTOR/FREEMAN 2016: 229). While most of these works attempted to correctly ›remember‹ all elements from directed TS works, Lucas's ongoing additions and alterations to his own body of work often resulted in inconsistencies that were retroactively framed as ›mis-rememberings‹ on the part of the devolved content. A notable example for this can be found in Timothy Zahn's novel *The Last*

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[6] Cf. http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Canon [accessed September 2, 2018].
[7] While video games and supplements for pen-and-paper role-playing also formed part of the EU, they were only ever considered partly canonical and are negligible for the purposes of my analysis.
[8] This means the six *Star Wars* feature films released between 1977 and 2005, as well as the *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* television series and its pilot film. The only exceptions to this rule would be the *Star Wars Holiday Special* (1977) and the two *Ewok Adventure* TV films (1984–1985), which were already treated as part of ›devolved‹ content prior to 2014.

Command (1993), the final instalment of the so-called ›Thrawn trilogy‹ that had started with *Heir to the Empire. The Last Command* describes the clone wars—an event that had so far only been vaguely alluded to in the original *Star Wars* film (1977)—as a conflict between the Galactic Republic and a number of ›clone masters‹.[9] This was later contradicted by *Star Wars: Attack of the Clones* (2002), with all subsequent (devolved) productions adhering to the ›new version‹ of events. This does not only show how, in many instances, remembrance »flows from the films into the various transmedia compartments, but not in the opposite direction« (PROCTOR/FREEMAN 2016: 233); it also demonstrates the usefulness of Jan-Noël Thon's (2015) three-level model of transmedia storyworlds.

In the face of inconsistencies like the one described above, it is clearly no longer adequate to treat the original *Star Wars* trilogy, the prequel trilogy, as well as the Thrawn trilogy as one single, noncontradictory storyworld. Instead, Thon offers

> a systematic distinction between the local mediumspecific storyworlds of single narrative works, the glocal but noncontradictory transmedial (or, in quite a few cases, merely *transtextual)* storyworlds that may be constructed out of local work-specific storyworlds, and the global and often quite contradictory transmedial storyworld compounds that may, for lack of a better term, be called transmedial universes (THON 2015: 32, original emphasis).

The three trilogies in question could therefore each be regarded as distinct glocal, transtextual subworlds of the global (partly contradictory) *Star Wars* universe. As Nicholas Rescher and Robert Brandom have noted decades earlier, this approach would allow to treat contradictions as »a *local* and not necessarily *global* anomaly« (1980: 24, original emphases).[10] In fact, this is precisely the strategy that many fans seem to have adopted: *Wookieepedia*, the most extensive fan-maintained *Star Wars* encyclopedia, states that »in the absence of [...] *ad hoc* solutions [such as retcons], the EU [was] considered incorrect only on the particular points of contradiction [with directed content]«.[11] The result of this practice would be another glocal subworld of the transmedial *Star Wars* universe, one that is not so much »constructed out of local work-specific storyworlds« (THON 2015: 32), but rather out of individual elements of said local worlds, according to a fixed set of rules. This approach to canonicity on the level of elements (rather than entire works) was also practised and encouraged by Lucasfilm, with ›Keeper of the Holocron‹ Leeland Chee stating that, when in doubt, »the canon level of the entry [i.e. an individual character, vehicle, alien species etc.] would override the canon level of the source [i.e. an entire work]« (CHEE 2006: n.pag.).

This principle became especially relevant with the release of *Star Wars*: *The Clone Wars*. Set during the narrative gap between *Attack of the Clones*

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[9] Cf. http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Star_Wars_Legends#Lucas.2FEU_contradictions [accessed September 9, 2018].

[10] Thon (2015: 31) has already used Rescher and Brandom's results in this way.

[11] Cf. http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Star_Wars_Legends [accessed September 3, 2018]. While *Wookieepedia* does not offer any official sources for this statement, its inclusion in the article can be regarded as an indication of the prevalence of said practice among fans, if nothing else.

(2002) and *Revenge of the Sith* (2005), the series freely adapted characters and other elements from already existing, yet devolved material set in that timeframe, often making salient changes to some of these elements' attributes. For example, the character of Asajj Ventress, originally created for Dark Horse's *Star Wars* comics, is one of the main antagonists in the TV series, with depictions of her childhood and death being subjected to substantial changes in comparison to the earlier comics.[12] Following the principle outlined above, Chee clarified that *only* elements of the comics regarding the specific circumstances of Ventress's death (and, by implication, her ›origin story‹ as well) should be regarded as non-canon.[13] Accordingly, her *Wookieepedia* entry is a compound of information stemming from both directed and devolved TS material, with all elements of the latter (which do not explicitly contradict directed works) being integrated into a coherent biographical narrative.

What follows from all this for a theoretical conception of characters suitable to describe the actual complexity management by recipients and fans is something similar to what Jens Eder (with reference to Fotis Jannidis) calls an »ideal character model determined by the intention of a work or of an author« (EDER 2008: 49, translation T.K.).[14] In the case of *Star Wars* (prior to 2014), the system that ruled over canonicity could be understood as a paratextual expression of such work/author-intentions. As such, the canonicity system managed how a model reader, a »construct with knowledge of all relevant codes and equipped with all necessary competences to successfully execute all operations required by the text«[15] (JANNIDIS 2004: 254, translation T.K.), would construct an internal representation—i.e. a mental model—of a given character, based on its external representations in a body of works (cf. EDER 2008: 53). As the example of Asajj Ventress shows, the ideal model for some *Star Wars* characters seems to be a compound of biographical details taken from different glocal subworlds, with conflicting versions of individual events being treated as local anomalies and resolved via the precedence of directed TS.

1.2 Canon and ›Legends‹

While Thrawn was, originally, a product of the EU and therefore subject to the canonicity practices described above, his appearances in *Rebels* and three subsequently published novels (*Thrawn*, 2017; *Thrawn: Alliances*, 2018; *Thrawn: Treason*, 2019) form part of the new continuity established from 2014 onwards. After George Lucas had sold Lucasfilm to Disney, the newly appointed President of Lucasfilm, Kathleen Kennedy, formed the ›Lucasfilm Story Group‹. While not technically the IP owner, the group replaced Lucas as the overarching

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[12] Cf. http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Asajj_Ventress/Legends#Behind_the_scenes [accessed September 9, 2018].
[13] Cf. before.
[14] Original: »ideales, werk- oder autorenintentional bestimmtes Figurenmodell«.
[15] Original: »Konstrukt, das gekennzeichnet ist durch Kenntnis aller einschlägigen Codes und auch über alle notwendigen Kompetenzen verfügt, um die vom Text erforderten Operationen erfolgreich durchzuführen«.

authority for canonicity questions on any given *Star Wars* work.[16] Consequently, any work in whose creation the Story Group was involved—which effectively encompasses almost all films, novels, and comics released from April 2014 onwards—is now added to the level of directed TS as established under George Lucas and therefore considered *canonical* on the same level. The novels, comics, and other media forms that had formed the EU were consequently rebranded as *Star Wars Legends*.[17] In its initial press release on the matter, Lucasfilm emphasized that »while the universe that readers knew is changing, it is not being discarded. Creators of new *Star Wars* entertainment have full access to the rich content of the Expanded Universe«.[18] The release went on to cite several characters and vehicles that were introduced in the EU, but later formed part of *Star Wars: Rebels*. This emphasized the continuation of some aspects of the established system of canonicity management, but also showed clear structural changes in other respects.

On the one hand, the works of the EU can still be classified as ›devolved TS‹: They have been created without direct involvement from either George Lucas or the Story Group and are therefore still framed as ›mis-remembering actual continuity‹ in some instances, while being ›accurate‹ in others (e.g. the elements featured in *Rebels*). On the other hand, Lucasfilm's paratextual statements regarding the *default* relationship between directed and devolved TS have reversed: Whereas originally, the EU was implicitly treated as part of the official continuity *if not otherwise indicated* (i.e. in cases of open contradictions), nowadays *Legends* only regain that status *if explicitly referred to* in a work of directed TS. As before, this mechanism does not pertain to the level of entire works, but isolates individual elements such as characters, institutions, or locations, which are only considered ›canonical‹ to the degree that they actually appear in directed TS.[19]

While this policy change would certainly appear as a violation of the established social contract between author and audience (especially with regard to the adherence to formerly established facts of a diegetic world, cf. WOLF 2012: 213), Lucasfilm and its associates have also released statements with a slightly different tenor: Shelly Shapiro, Editor at Large of Del Rey (the publisher currently holding the license for *Star Wars* novels), told *ScreenRant* in 2014 that the *Legends* label was chosen »[s]o [the EU] wouldn't get shoved off too far to the side, and treated like it never happened«, comparing *Star Wars*'s devolved TS to the legends of King Arthur, which ostensibly had »kernels of truth in [them]« (DYCE 2014: n.pag.). Beginning with the claim that »we don't want to just disappear stuff that everybody read and loved« (DYCE 2014: n.pag.), Shapiro's statement is framed as a reaction to fan concerns about the canonicity of established, well-loved characters. As such, long-time fans may

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[16] Cf. http://www.forcecast.net/story/home/ForceCast_273_The_Galaxy_Is_Reading_154431.asp [accessed September 9, 2018].
[17] Cf. http://www.starwars.com/news/the-legendary-star-wars-expanded-universe-turns-a-new-page [accessed September 9, 2018].
[18] Cf. before.
[19] Cf. http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Jennifer_Heddle/Twitter [accessed September 9, 2018].

justifiably read it as an invitation to continue imagining the *Star Wars* universe and its characters on the basis of is pre-2014 ideal model, integrating devolved *Legends* into the directed narrative wherever they do not explicitly contradict each other.

When it comes to communicating an authorial intention as to what kind of mental model of the *Star Wars* universe an ideal recipient is supposed to construct, Lucasfilm seems increasingly keen to reconcile two opposing interests: creating a ›blank slate‹ for future works to be both more accessible to new audiences and more strongly coordinated than before while at the same time avoiding to alienate *Star Wars*'s established ›hard-core‹ audience that has an invested interest in the perpetuation of the »reading contract that the franchise has been forging with its consumers […] over the last 40-years which have [sic] created a sort of transmedia baggage« (JENKINS 2018: n.pag.). In order to theoretically account for this ambivalence, I will differentiate between two model readers (MRs) in the following: The dominant MR, i.e. the model reader who only takes directed TS into account when constructing his mental model of the *Star Wars*' storyworld (thereby following the rules of *Star Wars* canon that are currently and ›officially‹ in effect); and the subordinate MR, who follows Lucasfilm's paratextual invitation to compound directed and devolved TS into a unified model, according to ›technically‹ outdated rules of canonicity. Of course, the subordinate MR's marked ›inferiority‹, at least in terms of projected economic impact,[20] means that his mental model construction will not always be considered relevant for all elements of the *Star Wars* universe.[21] However, as the next sections will show, Grand Admiral Thrawn constitutes an example for a character where multiple intra- and extratextual strategies are being employed simultaneously in order to support the effectiveness of Lucasfilm's ambivalent canonicity practices and enable *both* (dominant and subordinate) MRs to successfully integrate newly released works into their respective mental models.

2. The Importance of Being Thrawn. Grand Admiral Thrawn and his Versions

As I already stated in the introduction above, one of Thrawn's interesting features is that his character was effectively erased from *Star Wars* canon by the EU reboot. This has wide-ranging consequences for any attempt to analyse his portrayal in directed *and* devolved TS: Since Lucasfilm's current canonicity practices essentially treat the two levels as ontologically separate, we can no

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[20] Any comparison between the sales figures of devolved and directed *Star Wars* works will demonstrate that only a fraction of *Star Wars*'s overall audience are invested in the former EU, cf. CANAVAN 2017b: 160.

[21] For example, given the depiction of Luke Skywalker's death in in *Star Wars*: *The Last Jedi*, it would be hard to integrate any part of the devolved *Legacy of the Force* series of books into Luke's overarching biographical narrative: said series is set later in the timeline, while still featuring him as a main character—very much alive.

longer speak of *one* ›Grand Admiral Thrawn‹ but should rather conceptualize the directed TS's Thrawn by drawing on Uri Margolin's concept of character versions. Margolin operates under the premise that some characters in fictional worlds »can be intuitively regarded as a version of an original, bearing the same proper name, which is located elsewhere« (MARGOLIN 1996: 113). This notion seems applicable to Thrawn, at least if we take ›intuitively‹ to mean ›bearing in mind current canonicity practices‹, with the devolved *Legends* iteration constituting the ›original‹ for the more recent, directed ›variation‹ (cf. MARGOLIN 1996: 115–116). Hence, I will use Margolin's approach as a structural foundation for my analysis. An examination of how the two existing versions of Thrawn relate to each other will elucidate in how far his portrayal caters to both the dominant and subordinate MR.

2.1 A Taxonomy of Character

In order to make meaningful statements on the relation of two versions of a character, several theoretical preliminaries are necessary: First, the term ›character‹, which was only vaguely defined in the sections before, needs to be clarified. Going forward, a ›character‹ will be understood in the sense of Fotis Jannidis's ›Figur‹[22], which he defines as a »[m]ental model of an entity in a fictional world, which is incrementally constructed by a model reader over the course of the reading process, based on the attribution of character information and characterization« (JANNIDIS 2004: 252).[23] In this conceptual framework, ›information‹ designates all propositional as well as sensorial data on a character that is directly given by a text (thus constituting a fact about the character within the storyworld), whereas ›characterization‹ is dependent on more indirect reader inferences (cf. JANNIDIS 2004: 252–253). Since it has been acknowledged that such inferences are often dependent on culturally and historically specific knowledge (cf. EDER/JANNIDIS/SCHNEIDER 2004: 14) and given that this article is mainly concerned with model readers rather than empirical recipients, my analysis will be limited to the level of more or less explicit information.

To further differentiate between different levels of character information, I will draw on Eder, Jannidis and Schneider's notion of a character ›base type‹, understood as a set of basic attributes supposedly shared by all mental models of the respective character. Such a base type consists of a) his[24] corporeality, i.e. all stated attributes of a character's body; b) his psyche, which encompasses all mental states ascribed to the character; and c) his sociality, which refers to »particular qualities [that] emerge from social interaction, e.g., social roles« (EDER/JANNIDIS/SCHNEIDER 2010: 13). However, this typology is not

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[22] Since Jannidis, in contrast to other scholars (cf. DENSON/MAYER 2012), does not differentiate between ›character‹ and ›figure‹, I have taken the liberty to translate his potentially ambiguous German term ›Figur‹ as ›character‹.

[23] Original: »Mentales Modell einer Entität in einer fiktionalen Welt, das von einem Modell-Leser inkrementell aufgrund der Vergabe von Figureninformationen und Charakterisierung im Laufe seiner Lektüre gebildet wird«.

[24] For the purposes of readability, and given that the subject matter of this article is a male character, I will use masculine pronouns for the remainder of my analysis.

entirely sufficient when dealing with characters in a franchise like *Star Wars*, with its strong emphasis on a consistent diegetic timeline. Margolin notes that »[a]ny comparison of original and version […] must also take into account the crucial role the temporal aspect plays in all story worlds [sic], the fact that the life histories they contain are the verbal representations of time bound phenomena and [individuals]« (MARGOLIN 1996: 121). Therefore, to retain the base type's heuristic value in this specific context, I will add to it the category of ›biography‹, which refers to the temporal order and the intervals of/between significant events in a character's fictional life history. I deem events ›significant‹ if they alter the makeup of the character's base type (by modifying and/or adding to its corporeality, psyche, and/or sociality) in ways that cannot be tacitly reversed by works representing later points in time if consistency is to be maintained. Examples for this would be the death of a character's spouse (sociality), the suffering of an injury with permanently debilitating effects (corporeality), or the obtaining of extensive knowledge in the field of media studies (psyche). While not all works contributing to a character's life history after such a diegetic event would necessarily have to explicitly depict its effects (depending on the situations represented), any manifest reversal to the previous state of the character's base type would have to be explained.

Of course, examining the textual information provided on a character is not equivalent to examining the ideal mental model of said character (constructed on the basis of such information), a problem which has been discussed in detail elsewhere (cf. JANNIDIS 2004: 198–207). To resolve this issue in a way that avoids further theoretical elaboration and increases reliability, I will again use *Wookieepedia* as a resource. Self-identifying as »a wiki that strives to be the premier source of information on all aspects of the *Star Wars* universe«[25], the website's entries on characters can reasonably be treated as approximations of ideal character models, i.e. a MR's approximate model of the character, constructed in full consideration of all existing *Star Wars* material and in observance of Lucasfilm's rules of canonicity.[26] Nevertheless, an exhaustive survey of character information is neither possible within the constraints of this article, nor is it intended.[27] Instead, I will first discuss particularly salient similarities and then direct contradictions between the two Thrawns on the level of their base type, before providing an extended analysis of how the characters relate to each other in terms of biography and its management.

2.2 Moving Parts. Thrawn in Legends and Canon

In any transmedial franchise encompassing visual media, iconography is one of the primary means to ensure consistency (cf. HARVEY 2014: 279). Therefore, it is especially noteworthy that in terms of visible corporeality, Thrawn's

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[25] http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Wookieepedia [accessed September 9, 2018].
[26] For all characters occurring in both *Legends* and canonical works, *Wookieepedia* holds two separate entries that conform to the old and new canonicity rules, respectively.
[27] In fact, any attempt to do so would probably result in something akin to the famous map in Borges' short story, taking up almost as many pages of writing as the primary works themselves.

original and his new version are almost identical. Both are depicted as humanoid, with blue skin, red eyes, and blue-black hair.[28] *Legends* material added information to this by providing his exact height and weight, information which has (so far) not been established in canonical material. This constitutes a first example of one level of TS containing an informational ellipsis which readers could fill in by referring to another level. At the same time, this ellipsis can be expected not to be salient to readers who do not do so.

Fig. 1:
Thrawn as he appears in the canonical *Star Wars: Rebels* Episode »An Inside Man« (left) and in a 2003 *Legends* article in *Star Wars Insider* (right; WALLACE/PEÑA/CORRONEY 2003: 45)

With regard to psyche, consistency issues are less frequent, mostly due to the fact that many if not most changes in a character's interiority from one work to another can theoretically be attributed to »reidentification over time« (MARGO-LIN 1996: 121). However, it is noteworthy that both (canonical and *Legends*) Thrawns are frequently described as military geniuses (as »brilliant military

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[28] http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Mitth'raw'nuruodo [accessed September 9, 2018]. In the remainder of this section, all information on the character that is not otherwise indicated is drawn from this source.

strategist« and »master of military tactics«, respectively) who study works of art owned or created by their opponents in order to predict their behaviour.

On the level of sociality, Thrawn has been ascribed a variety of affiliations, social roles, and co-actants. Both original and variation hold, at least at some point during their life histories, military positions in an alien government called the Chiss Ascendancy, and also within the Galactic Empire. For both affiliations, the sub-groups with which Thrawn is associated differ slightly in name and function between canon and *Legends*. However, other details, like the name of a spaceship that Thrawn commands for the Empire (›Chimaera‹) or the names and social roles of several of his associates (›Captain Pellaeon‹, ›Rukh‹, ›Ar'Alani‹), are identical for both iterations. Again, devolved TS offers more information, additionally stating Thrawn's affiliation to a secret political organization and his role as leader of the ›Empire of the Hand‹, another autocratic government. Similar to his corporeality, none of these additional pieces of information clash with information from directed TS.

Most of the contradictions between Thrawn's original and variation occur on the level of biography, with the order and point of occurrence of significant events markedly altered. For example, in *Legends* continuity, Thrawn first assumes command of the Chimaera several years after the events of *Star Wars: Episode VI – Return of the Jedi*, whereas the new canon sees him commanding the ship years prior to *Star Wars: Episode IV – A New Hope*. Similarly, in *Legends*, his relationship to the character Rukh, a personal assassin and bodyguard, goes back to some point between the events of *Episode V – The Empire Strikes Back* and *Return of the Jedi*, whereas *Rebels* already shows it at a point prior to *A New Hope*. The same goes for his promotion to the rank of Grand Admiral.

What all these biographical shifts have in common is that they move significant events to what used to be a substantial narrative ellipsis in Thrawn's life history. On the level of devolved TS, Thrawn's earliest appearance in terms of storyworld timeline, presented in the novel *Outbound Flight* (2006), is set between *Episode I – The Phantom Menace* and *Episode II – Attack of the Clones*. He next appears in the short story *Mist Encounter* (1995), taking place shortly after the events of *Episode III – Revenge of the Sith*. What follows is a gap of 18 diegetic years, after which he reappears in a novella titled *Dark Forces: Soldier for the Empire* (1997), set one year prior to *A New Hope*. All directed TS material featuring Thrawn that has been released or announced to date[29]—the third and fourth season of *Rebels* as well as the novel *Thrawn*, its comic book adaptation (2018), and its sequel—is set within this ellipsis, so that no point in the timeline is occupied by two contradictory events.[30] Notably, the entire first chapter and parts of the second chapter of *Thrawn* are an adaptation of *Mist Encounter*, with the only alterations being the addition of a focalized character

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[29] That is, by January 2019.
[30] The only exception to this rule is formed by a series of extended analepses in *Thrawn: Alliances*, which take place between *Attack of the Clones* and *Revenge of the Sith*. This time window, however, is not covered by devolved TS content either.

witnessing the events, the deletion of specific references to another minor character, and some alterations of a spaceship design (in order to match one established by the prequel trilogy).[31]

This temporal ›overlap‹ between directed and devolved TS would, of course, be obvious to the subordinate MR of *Star Wars*,[32] and can easily be integrated into Thrawn's ideal character model on the basis of pre-2014's canonicity rules by ›adjusting‹ *Mist Encounter*'s representation of events in accordance with the novel.[33] With their marked reference to a *Legends* work, *Thrawn*'s initial chapters can be seen as a hint for the subordinate MR that, other than Lucasfilm's official stance on canonicity may sometimes suggest, the life history of Thrawn has been left largely unaltered. In fact, there is (so far) little evidence to the contrary: Due to the specific temporal relation between the directed and devolved TS featuring Thrawn,[34] *all* licensed works in which he appears can theoretically be compounded into a unified life history, with local contradictions occurring mostly on the level of biography, i.e. the level on which numerous precedents for resolving contradictions have already been set prior to 2014 (cf. section 1.1).

With regard to the level of actual empirical recipients, the biographical changes made to Thrawn may actually have a positive effect on the perceived ›faithfulness‹ of the new Thrawn to the original: All of the temporally ›displaced‹ (altered) elements mentioned above were originally featured in Timothy Zahn's Thrawn trilogy, which, apart from introducing Thrawn to the *Star Wars* universe, has also received much stronger public attention than most *Star Wars* works beyond the films,[35] making it, for many recipients, the first and most formative encounter with the character. This means that Thrawn, as he appears in *Rebels*—a Grand Admiral commanding the Chimaera, with a personal servant named Rukh and an officer named Pellaeon—[36] is, with regard to these base type attributes, *more* similar to the character audiences remember from *Heir to the Empire* than he would have been if his ›original‹ biography (the sequence of significant life events as it was established in *Legends*) had been more closely observed.[37]

However, this strategy for ensuring character recognizability also pushes the limits of directed TS's ability to accommodate the reading strategies of the subordinate MR. While the alteration of biography in itself is, as

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[31] http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Thrawn_(novel)#Continuity [accessed September 9, 2018].

[32] This assumption is supported by the fact that the *Wookieepedia* entries for *Thrawn* and *Mist Encounter* both make explicit note of the adaptation.

[33] Interestingly, *Mist Encounter* was itself ›adjusted‹ for re-print in 2007's *Outbound Flight* paperback edition, with references to past events being altered in accordance with the prequel trilogy.

[34] I am—again—referring to intradiegetic time.

[35] The first novel topped the *New York* Times bestseller list and proved popular enough to merit a ›20th anniversary edition‹ in 2011. Furthermore, the entire trilogy was voted one of the ›top 100 Science-Fiction and Fantasy Books‹ in a poll conducted by NPR in 2011 (cf. WELDON 2011: n.pag.).

[36] In this context, Thrawn's rank holds special significance, since one of his most obvious iconographic features—the white uniform—is tied to it.

[37] In this latter case, none of the mentioned base type attributes could appear in *Star Wars Rebels*, since *Legends* continuity has established other, contrary attributes for this point in intradiegetic time.

explained above, largely unproblematic in this regard, the further development of some elements from their new points of introduction has led to contradictions that are somewhat harder to resolve: Rukh's implied death in the fourth season of *Rebels* is particularly problematic, because it would preclude his substantial involvement in the events of the Thrawn trilogy, especially his responsibility for Thrawn's death. Here, simply ›forgetting‹ certain elements of the novels while keeping the overall narrative intact would seem hardly feasible. While, as stated above, Rukh is never explicitly shown to have died in *Rebels*,[38] the *Wookieepedia* entry on the subject indicates a wide consensus that he did.[39] Consequently, while it would be theoretically possible to explain his appearance in the Thrawn trilogy (e.g. by assuming that he did, in fact, survive, or by treating his devolved TS iteration as a different character with the same name), all such explanations would go beyond the usual amount of charity required of the subordinate MR.

In summary, it can be stated that when re-introducing a version of Thrawn into their transmedial universe, Lucasfilm was, to a large extent, accommodating the interests of the subordinate MR: On the level of base type, the *Legends* original and its canonical version share a majority of basic attributes, while most existing contradictions can be dealt with by applying the now-outdated canonicity rules of the EU. Furthermore, all directed TS featuring Thrawn so far has only ›filled‹ an ellipsis in the original's life history, facilitating the compounding of a single, unified course of events. Nevertheless, some of the biographical changes have resulted in inconsistencies that stretch the established requirements of charity on the part of the subordinate MR. It may be in anticipation of or reaction to such problems that Lucasfilm has strategically used attributions of narrative authority to increase acceptance of Thrawn's new version. This will be discussed in the next section.

3. Heir to the (Corporate) Empire. Thrawn and His Authors

When it comes to the question of how transmedia storyworlds are constructed by recipients, it has long been acknowledged that questions of authorship can have a strong impact. Wolf notes that »[t]hose works […] that typically possess the highest degree of canonicity are those which come from the innermost circles of authorship, which surround the originator and main author of a world« (WOLF 2012: 271), while Margolin specifies that

> we associate a fictional [individual] with the circumstances of its creation, hence with its originator. Accordingly, if original and version occur in texts by the same author, and if they and their surrounding worlds can be seen as compatible, we are ready to construe

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[38] Toward the end of the *Rebels* episode *Family Reunion* (2018), Rukh is trapped in a power generator that has just been switched on. In an audio transmission heard later in the episode, his screaming and electric noises can be heard in the background. He is neither mentioned nor represented after this point.

[39] http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Rukh [accessed September 9, 2018].

each of these texts as a partial description of one and the same [individual]'s life story (MARGOLIN 1996: 117).

For dealing with transmedial universes, Margolin's phrasing needs to be slightly modified to accommodate some specific elements and aspects of such universes: First, we need to acknowledge that we can no longer speak of individual texts to which ›original‹ and ›variation‹ must be attributed, but rather of separate glocal subworlds or continuities, which are each based on a number of texts. Second, the idea of individual authors is not sufficient to describe narrative authority in the context of franchises like *Star Wars*: While individual authors have been credited by fans with the creation of certain characters,[40] these were always kept subordinate to George Lucas, the overarching ›auteur‹ of *Star Wars* (cf. LYDEN 2012). Due to his role, Lucas could choose to borrow some elements from other authors' works for his films and series, thereby granting them the canonicity status of directed TS, while rendering others apocryphal as ›mis-rememberings‹ (cf. PROCTOR/FREEMAN 2016: 231). Therefore, acceptance and compounding of a character version with its original (in a MR) does not (only) depend on singular authorship, but also on adherence to more complex authorization practices. Third, given the canonicity practices described in section one, the condition of ›compatibility‹ should not be taken too strictly, since overriding certain incompatibilities is the exact purpose of said practices.

Keeping this in mind, Margolin's principle, re-formulated to be applicable to *Star Wars* as a transmedial franchise, would run as follows: ›we associate a fictional individual with the circumstances of its creation, hence with its originator and their degree of narrative authority. Accordingly, if original and variation occur in texts by the same author or authors with higher narrative authority, and if they and their surrounding subworlds can be seen as compatible according to established canonicity practices, we are ready to construe each of these subworlds as a partial description of one and the same individual‹.

The authorial attributions made in connection with Thrawn's re-introduction to canon seem designed to ensure maximal readiness to accept his iterations as partial descriptions of one and the same character in the subordinate MR. The first announcement of his ›return‹ in *Rebels* was made on July 16, 2016, during a convention panel at *Star Wars Celebration Europe* by Dave Filoni (cf. TACH 2016). Filoni, who served as supervising director of *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* before fulfilling the same function on *Rebels* (eventually abandoning this position in favor of executive production duties), has, on several occasions, framed himself as a kind of ›spiritual successor‹ to George Lucas, with whom he directly collaborated on *The Clone Wars*. He stated that he saw it as his task to »be a guide to other people [i.e. authors] coming on board just as George [Lucas] was a guide to [him]« (as quoted in BROOKS 2013: n.pag.), and he repeatedly stressed his commitment to maintaining the »integrity and the authenticity of *Star Wars*« (as quoted in HUVER 2018: n.pag.) by doing so.

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[40] *Wookieepedia* entries frequently include information on the creators of specific characters, cf. for example http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Aayla_Secura/Legends#Behind_the_scenes [accessed September 9, 2018].

These statements position Filoni somewhere between what Wolf calls the ›heir‹ and the ›torchbearer‹ of a transmedial franchise, respectively: Whereas the ›heir‹ is directly chosen by the originator of a franchise, a ›torchbearer‹ would be appointed by whoever owns the franchise's IP after it no longer belongs to the originator (cf. WOLF 2012: 274–276).[41] What both have in common is that they are generally attributed the authority to make additions and changes to a franchise, up to the same degree that the originator had the right to. Of course, Filoni was never technically appointed as George Lucas' successor — neither by the man himself, nor by Kathleen Kennedy, who now manages Lucasfilm and its intellectual property — but the fact that his statements to that effect are being published on the official *Star Wars* website indicates at least tacit acceptance on the part of Lucasfilm's corporate leadership. As pseudo-successor to Lucas, Filoni could be assumed to also ›inherit‹, in the eyes of the subordinate MR, Lucas' authority to adapt characters from devolved TS works with notable alterations, which is exactly what happened to Thrawn.

Additionally, on the very same day as Filoni's initial reveal of the new Thrawn, a second statement was made via an official Twitter account of publisher Del Rey, announcing the novel *Thrawn* for spring 2017 (cf. TACH 2016). It would be written by none other than Timothy Zahn, Thrawn's original creator. Not only did this cover Margolin's condition for character compounding in a narrower sense.[42] Zahn's statements in an interview on *StarWars.com* also notably underscore and reinforce the possibility of integrating the new, directed TS into the character's established life history. Asked how he approached the character's psyche »at this point in his life and career«, Zahn responded that »[h]e's the same character« and that

> [i]t was simply a matter of getting as much information of what he does and how he acts on *Rebels* and start back where I had last left him in the timeline with the ›Mist Encounter‹ short story. [...] In the Thrawn trilogy, he is essentially the leader of the Empire or at least the Imperial Remnant. Here, he is having to prove himself (as quoted in FLOYD 2017: n.pag.).

What is striking here is, on the one hand, the explicit framing of Thrawn's life history as simply being ›picked up from where it was left‹, and, on the other, the comparison of the character's sociality and psyche in *Thrawn* with that in the Thrawn trilogy — a comparison that seems to be conducted merely on an axis of temporal, rather than ontological, difference. Given that the Thrawn trilogy is the work that is probably the hardest to reconcile with the biographical changes made to Thrawn (cf. section two), this claim to consistency is as salient as it is puzzling.

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[41] Wolf assumes the originator's death to be the only possible circumstance that could cause such an ownership to change. While this is not the case for *Star Wars*, Wolf's terms can otherwise be imported without modification.

[42] Despite the complex system of authorship governing *Star Wars*, Zahn's role as creator of Thrawn still seems to be relevant, as it has been repeatedly emphasized in paratexts, and even explicitly framed as the reason for his authorship of *Thrawn*: »Who better to pen this tale than the man who created the character himself, Timothy Zahn?« (FLOYD 2017: n.pag.).

It can therefore be ascertained that, in addition to a textual structure that facilitates the integration of two worlds that are ›officially‹ ontologically separate, Lucasfilm also deploys the authority of specific authors to a) justify the changes made to a character and to b) resolve resulting continuity issues. Interestingly, while Dave Filoni was tasked with making the original announcement of Thrawn's inclusion in the new canon, the other paratext—which includes the more notable attempts to »police proper interpretations, insisting on how [it] would like us to read the text« (GRAY 2010: 79)—is focused on Timothy Zahn, indicating that, despite all insistence on a »need to radically shift our understanding of what authorship is« (JENKINS 2018: n.pag.) for transmedial franchises, there may still be some contexts in which a work, or part of it, is considered subject to the authority of its direct author, rather than a storyworld-originator.

Conclusion

As I have attempted to show, up until 2014, *Star Wars* characters—understood as mental models of an ideal model reader—were frequently constructed by accumulating a unified life history from various individual texts that were contradictory when taken as a whole. This accumulation was regulated by a set of canonicity rules built around the idea of circles of authorship. While the reboot and the re-branding of the EU to *Legends* created a new model reader, who was no longer expected to remember any previously published *Star Wars* works other than the films (and, possibly, the television series), Lucasfilm and its associates also released statements implying that, apart from this dominant model reader, they were still targeting a second, subordinated model reader. This latter MR is assumed to be familiar with and invested in *Legends* material and to still create his mental model of the *Star Wars* storyworld and its characters according to old canonicity rules, where possible.

In the case of the character Thrawn, the subordinate model reader's interests are notably accommodated in two areas: first, the temporal and semantic relations between the new, canonical texts on Thrawn on the one hand and his prior appearances in *Legends* on the other. By setting all new texts that feature Thrawn (released to this day) in what used to be a narrative ellipsis, as well as by keeping the character's base type largely intact, the integration of *all* texts into one continuous, non-contradictory life history is facilitated, albeit not perfectly. Secondly, on the level of paratexts, the (mainly biographical) changes made to the character are legitimized by resorting to the authority of Dave Filoni, who is framed as an heir or torchbearer to George Lucas; at the same time, the implication that Thrawn should still be understood as a single character with a single life history was reinforced by Timothy Zahn, who, as the original creator of Thrawn, is framed as *the* (or at least *a*) legitimate authority on the character and his attributes. Judging from fan reactions (cf. introduction), the combination of these strategies may indeed have resulted in

audiences accepting the ›new Thrawn‹ as identical with the original, or at least as a ›faithful‹ adaptation.

Questions on the complicated relationships between transmedia texts and their respective storyworlds, fan practices, issues of distributed authorship, as well as the management of canonicity between these various actors are getting increasingly complex. I hope that this article, with its combination of theoretical models and analytical approaches, has successfully provided an example of how transmedial franchises and their corporate owners are addressing questions of character identity and consistency in an »Age of Reboots« (CANAVAN 2017b: 153). Of course, much work remains to be done in this area. Considering my focus on model readers and ideal character models, the reading strategies and continuity discussions of empirical readers seem to be a particularly intriguing field of inquiry. What remains to be seen is whether Lucasfilm will continue its strategy of accommodating fans of *Legends* material in the ways described here, or whether their multiple model readers will, much like *Star Wars*'s canonicity levels, eventually make way for a less differentiated system.

Acknowledgements

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