

‘I’ve seen a lot of talk about the #blackstormtrooper outrage, but not a single example of anyone complaining’: *The Force Awakens*, canonical fidelity and non-toxic fan practices

William Proctor,
Bournemouth University, UK

Abstract:

In November 2014, Lucasfilm, now operating beneath Disney’s corporate umbrella, released a short teaser trailer online, offering an introductory glimpse at J.J Abrams’ *The Force Awakens* (2015), the first live-action *Star Wars* film in a decade. Running at less than two minutes, the teaser trailer swiftly became a hot topic on social media, with many fans uploading highly emotional reaction videos on YouTube, creating fan art, vids and Lego adaptations, and cheer-leading the Disney-era of *Star Wars* in earnest. Over on Twitter, however, the ‘dark side of geek culture’ was hard at work denouncing John Boyega’s appearance as a First Order Stormtrooper because of the actor’s race — or so we were told. In many press accounts, the hashtag #blackstormtrooper was cited directly as evidence of a racist-fuelled fan culture. This article examines this ‘controversy’.

By conducting a discourse analysis on the hashtag in question, I want to show that the citation of #blackstormtrooper by journalists as unequivocal ‘proof’ that there is something rotten in the state of contemporary fandom is complicated by several factors — if not outright debunked as little more than gossip or ‘click-bait’. Firstly, the hashtag was *not* created to protest Boyega’s role in *The Force Awakens*, despite multiple press accounts claiming so. In actual fact, #blackstormtrooper was first activated in 2010 — four years before the teaser’s release and two years prior to the sale of Lucasfilm to Disney — to promote *Scrub*’s alumni, Donald Faison’s series of parody Lego films marked by the same title. Secondly, by scraping the contents of the hashtag to analyse the discourse in full demonstrates unequivocally there is no evidence of overt racism contained within, but a series of quarrels regarding the constitution of *Star Wars* canon, that is, what is deemed ‘factual’ within the imaginary world — or what I term ‘canonical fidelity’. These findings

demand that scholars fully examine the veracity of press discourses more robustly, as opposed to reproducing journalistic chatter without question and query. In this article, I call for academic methodologies and protocols to remain high on the agenda for future research into hashtag publics, internet ‘communities’ and conflicts and, perhaps more urgently, to confront the way in which journalists ‘cherry-pick’ from social media platforms and end up manufacturing controversy, be it intentional or not.

Keywords: *The Force Awakens*, *Star Wars*, #blackstormtrooper, non-toxic fan practices, discourse.

On November 28th 2014, the first *Star Wars* live-action film trailer for almost a decade was released online and swiftly became a hot topic. Offering audiences a sneak peak at *The Force Awakens* (TFA) a full year prior to its cinematic release was certainly a promotional gamble, especially given director J.J Abrams’ usual strategy of ‘keeping footage from his films under wraps’ (Graser 2014). Abrams’ penchant for secrecy aside, the 88-second teaser trailer formed part of a carefully orchestrated marketing campaign that discursively constructed TFA as an ‘authentic’ continuation of ‘The Skywalker Saga’, while also strategically withholding information from wide circulation. By summoning the Original Trilogy as blueprint – and symptomatically devaluing the maligned prequels by simply ignoring them – Abrams and Lucasfilm aimed to paratextually envelop the Disney-era of *Star Wars* with an ‘auratic resonance’ (North 2007, 165) as a ward against potential criticism. Indeed, the fallout from the prequels – what Henry Jenkins describes as an ‘open wound for the original *Star Wars* faithful’ (quoted in Peterman 2012) – had been so pronounced, prolonged and, more pointedly, public, meant that TFA’s marketing campaign functioned to rehabilitate the value of the franchise for both fans *and* general audiences. As McDermott argues, ‘the worldwide popularity of the *Star Wars* franchise has assured that criticism of [the prequel trilogy] would expand beyond the purview of nitpicky fans and affect the public at large’ (2006, 243).

In the hours following the trailer’s debut, fans turned to the affordances of cyberspace and began utilising their affective energies in creative ways. As I have written elsewhere,

I am not sure if I have ever bore witness to such a flurry of fan activity and creativity within such a short period of time [...] Within hours of the trailer’s release, fan vids and art began to surface in cyberspace. Live reactions were filmed and uploaded to YouTube: some of these were intensely emotional, while others were fan parodies of fan reactions (usually of those who visibly wept), and others were negative or indifferent (like the Amazing Atheist who maintained that caution was the best approach citing the Prequel Trilogy as evidence of how things could go horribly wrong). ZachFB Studios uploaded a

home-made version of the trailer as homage created entirely with LEGO, and numerous others followed suit (Proctor 2014).

Within this network of performativity, productivity and affect emerged reports of ‘a disturbance within the force,’ signalled by an awakening of fandom’s dark side; of the ‘good’ (progressive) fan pitted against the ‘bad’ (reactionary) ‘non-fan’; as binary enemies drawing battle lines between the politics of pro-diversity and strategies of racist exclusion. A series of news reports (professional, amateur and/ or pro-am) castigated ‘geeks’ for turning to social media — for the purposes of this chapter, Twitter — to question the opening salvo of the teaser trailer: John Boyega dressed in the uniform of a First Order Stormtrooper. Fans, we are told, let loose with a barrage of racist invective on Twitter given voice by the creation of the hashtag, #blackstormtrooper. This article examines this so-called ‘controversy’.

From the outset, I would like to admit that I followed these stories about #blackstormtrooper with a grim and cynical view of fan cultures. Faced with a variety of media representations telegraphing fans as racist, sexist and homophobic, I started to re-evaluate the way I think about fan cultures generally. I strongly believed (incorrectly, I should add) that the political and ideological bent of fandom had been misrepresented by the fan studies discipline; or, at least, not fully wrestled with in any meaningful way. Of course reactionary fans exist, I monologued internally; of course the heightened visibility provided by new media would shine a discerning light on what Adrienne Massanari terms ‘toxic technocultures’ (2015). For if fan cultures are not homogenous, but, instead, ‘are often enormously heterogeneous with values and assumptions that fragment along axes of class, age, gender, race and sexuality’ (Jenkins, Ford and Green 2013, 54), then it would surely stand to reason that reactionary fans exist (and of course, they do). But once I started to examine data retrieved from #blackstormtrooper, I was faced with an altogether different narrative, one which significantly problematized the online discourse and the representation of fans within related news stories.

In this article, I will show that the inclusion of a black Stormtrooper is less about race than it is about what I call *canonical fidelity*. For a fan minority, the Boyega sequence was viewed as a perceived violation that disrupted pre-established continuity, largely based on arguments relating to canonical Clone Troopers being genetic replications of Jango Fett, played in *Attack of the Clones* (2002) by the non-white Polynesian actor, Temuera Morrison. From this perspective, I will demonstrate how these fan interpretations are ‘not “merely” or “simply” about race’ (Deis 2007, 102), but, in the main, about issues related to canonical authenticity. To me, this convincingly demonstrates that scholars, like audiences in general, are not immune to the power of the paratext. What I have unveiled through the research process is that the formation of online racist discourse communities, as a discursive civil war between progressive and reactionary fan politics, is far too reductive, too simplistic and, put simply, quite wrong. This is not to pretend that racist fan audiences do not exist or that this is principally an issue within geek culture (see for example, literature on racism in sports such as: Farrington et al, 2012; Kilvington, 2016). Clearly, the range of academic

literature that examines the activities of online audiences illustrates that there is a widespread concern regarding cyber-bullying, cyber-sexism and other ‘technopanics’ (Marwick, 2008): from the rise in online gambling (Kruse 2011) and the widespread availability of cyber-porn (Lille 2011), to the issuing of rape and death threats, as well as the troubling reality of online suicide (see for example, Burgess and Matamoros-Fernandez 2016; Chess and Shaw 2015; Hardaker 2010; Hardaker 2013; Hardaker and McGlashan 2015; Luce 2016; Massanari 2015; Poland 2016).

Background

The online release of TFA teaser trailer on November 28th 2014 was generally met with excitement and anticipation. According to *Digital Trends*, the trailer was viewed over eighty million times within the first twenty-four hours (Marshall 2016). As the debut footage of the first live-action *Star Wars* film in almost a decade, and the first to be produced under Disney’s corporate umbrella, the purpose of the trailer — at least according to Disney executive, Bob Iger — was to attend to ‘the rabid *Star Wars* fan base’ (quoted in Serrano 2014). As mentioned above, many fans felt burned by Lucas’ prequel trilogy (Brooker 2002) and effectively shrouded the franchise in an ‘intertextual pall’ (Gray 2010, 131). Given that ‘texts can also cast dark shadows when they have been panned and hated’ (ibid), then, the promotional discourse surrounding TFA, of which the teaser trailer was a ‘first reading head’, can be viewed as a kind of *paratextual rehabilitation*. From this perspective, any new post-prequel *Star Wars* text, especially one that is embedded within the canonical architecture of the film series, would be ‘faced not only with the task of winning audiences, but of winning them *back*’ (135, emphasis in original).

The teaser trailer certainly did its job, not least because of ‘the chill-inducing John Williams score and seeing the Millennium Falcon soar through the air’ (Gray S., 2014), a shorthand technique that harkens back to, and activates, the authenticity of the Original Trilogy (read: not the prequels). However, in the hours following the teaser’s debut, fans turned to the internet to celebrate, while a minority corpus questioned the veracity of a black Stormtrooper in canonical terms. Various news outlets interpreted this discourse as clear evidence of fan racism.

For example, Matthew Rosza writes that ‘the racist #blackstormtrooper backlash shows the dark side of geek culture’:

There is a deeper lesson to be learned by the racist backlash against the casting of John Boyega as a major character in *Star Wars: The Force Awakens*. It’s cliché these days to point out that “geek is chic”, but 2014 may be remembered as a turning point for the nerd subculture once associated with social marginalization — namely, the year it was held accountable for its own dark side. The Boyega *controversy* began after the British actor experienced *racist backlash* following the premiere of the new *Star Wars* teaser trailer. *Soon there*

was even a Twitter hashtag, #blackstormtrooper, which went viral (2014, my emphasis).

Writing for *The Atlantic* (2014), Kriston Capps states that some fans were ‘alarmed’ and ‘registered mere racist shock’ when confronted by the ‘sight of a black man’s head emerging from the white plate armour of an Imperial [sic] Stormtrooper’. Some commenters on social media platform, Reddit, ‘compared the trailer to a scene from the 1987 Mel Brooks spoof *Space Balls* [sic], a gag that plays up a black Stormtrooper as jive talkin’ (ibid). Other fans set the grounds for canonical fidelity and ‘turned to the internal logic of the *Star Wars* universe to appeal the presence of a black Stormtrooper. Didn’t the prequels reveal that all Stormtroopers were white clones?’ Capps then proceeds to offer a (fannish) rebuke of such canon arguments by first explaining that actor Temuera Morrison, he of the genetic template, is Polynesian, not white, which she interprets as a clear indication of fan racism. Even then, ‘the Empire has been recruiting from general populations for years’, fansplains Capps smugly. (*The Atlantic* article was the most widely shared link on #blackstormtrooper as a way to silence and shame those who would actively challenge or ask questions about *Star Wars* canon.)

These initial news stories were a minor skirmish, but this reached a crescendo two days following the trailer’s premiere on November 30th when Boyega ‘responded calmly to an online backlash’ (Wyatt 2014) on his Instagram account by thanking fans for their support and concluding with a message for fan racists: ‘To whom it may concern. Get used to it’. Most major news outlets picked this up. In the *Daily Mail*, Charlie Caballo states that,

The inclusion of a black Stormtrooper in the seventh installment of the franchise became *so controversial* that it *led to* the hashtag #blackstormtrooper to surge as a trending topic on Twitter, leading to some writing overtly racist statements (2014, my emphasis).

Similarly, Rebecca Hawkes for *The Telegraph* writes: ‘while most fans were pretty excited to see Boyega in the trailer, others took to Twitter to voice their dissatisfaction that a black man had been cast as a Stormtrooper’ (2014). Here, Hawkes includes an admonishment from another cast member, Oscar Issacs, who plays X-Wing pilot Poe Dameron: ‘What I loved about the trailer too is, like, the giant middle finger of the first thing you see, right off the bat: John’s face – BAM! So it is, yeah, “just deal with it”’ (ibid).

What these select examples illustrate is that the Twitter hashtag #blackstormtrooper is drawn upon as a key source within which exists a loud and angry (fan) public united by a racist politics. It is a ‘discursive event’, an issue public ‘born of friction’ (Rambukkana 2015a, 30) that clearly evinces that there is ‘something rotten in the state of fandom’. #Blackstormtrooper is interpreted as the chief, originating site of ‘a racist backlash’, a lightning rod, or ‘affective amplifier’ (Rambukkana 2015b, 2), spearheaded by a compilation of reactionary fans, protesting John Boyega primarily because of his ethnicity.

This is problematic, even erroneous, not least because #blackstormtrooper was already in operation and had been active since 5th September 2010, over four years prior to the premiere of *TFA* teaser trailer, and in no way functioned as a discursive assemblage of a racist-fuelled fan fever. Rather, the hashtag was created to promote former *Scrubs* actor Donald Faison's series of animated Lego parodies featuring an eponymous 'Black Stormtrooper'. To date, Faison has produced three of these parody sketches, all of which were promoted on the hashtag in question. From this perspective, then, reports centring on #blackstormtrooper as reputable source material are undoubtedly questionable, raising fundamental concerns about the way in which such discourses are framed, produced and circulated — and indeed *re-framed*, *re-produced* and *re-circulated* — by online news platforms. As Nathan Rambukkana explains (2015a, 31):

As researchers, to understand the power and embeddedness of a specific discourse, we need to trace it, to discover both its conceptual relevance and its temporal arc – to trace *both* its affects *and* its points of origin, points of change (author's italics).

The next section moves to examine the hashtag #black stormtrooper as a 'discursive event' (Foucault, 1972; Rambukkana, 2015b).

Methodology

In Rambukkana's edited collection, *#Hashtag Publics: The Power and Politics of Discursive Networks* (2015), a series of essays examine the political potential and extant uses of social media platforms, especially the affordances provided by Twitter hashtags, as discursive assemblages of 'techno-social events' (2015a, 3). Twitter can thus be viewed as

a platform for the emergence of publics, where publics are understood as being formed, re-formed, and coordinated via dynamic networks of communication and social connectivity organised primarily around issues or event (Bruns and Burgess 2015, 13).

Given that hashtags 'have the ability to mark the discursive flows of an event' (30), the analysis of #blackstormtrooper was carried out through the lens of discourse analysis which, following Perreault and Vos, 'brings to the foreground the discursive strategies and techniques used by speakers and writers to create meaning' (2015, 6; see also, van Dijk 1988). In so doing, the discursive mechanics of *meaning-making* is of especial interest for the purposes of this chapter.

Data from hashtag #blackstormtrooper was scraped manually and was bound between 28th November 2014, when the teaser trailer debuted, to 10th December 2014, which followed peak involvement in the hashtag. All tweets quoted in this article have been

anonymized. The limitations of binding the research within these spatial and temporal parameters, and indeed by analysing the hashtag as paradigmatic/ emblematic of a wider discursive apparatus that inevitably extends beyond the Twitter echo chamber, should be noted. While such analyses can certainly ‘piece together a picture of this discursive event’ (Rambukkana 2015a, 33), it only pertains to a partial portrait given the tendrils of discourse stretching and interpenetrating other sites on- and offline. However, the central thrust of this research is located primarily within the hashtag #blackstormtrooper as a method of excavating what was summoned as source material – as ‘proof’ – of toxic fan practice. To reiterate, in no way am I suggesting that fandom, whatever its fan-object of choice, is bereft of reactionary politics nor is it a harmonious collective of like-minded individuals. Racism in fan cultures is rather easy to find should one go looking for it on other social media channels and platforms, such as YouTube or the toxic technocultures of Reddit, 4Chan and 8Chan. It is entirely plausible that racism was masked or coded in debates about canonicity but, as Whitney Phillips and Ryan Milner (2017) have argued, ‘not knowing who created what, what the(se) creator(s) meant to accomplish, or what a given text “really” means, *forces one to stay empirical and focus on the things that can be known and confirmed*’ (my emphasis). I do not believe that we should be making unequivocal, unsubstantiated claims about ‘structural racism’ being much of a factor in #blackstormtrooper given that issues raised around canonicity in this study are related to *a black actor replacing a Polynesian (non-white) actor*. That said, it is also possible that Morrison represents an ethnicity that fans were more comfortable with: that is, closer to being white than Boyega’s blackness.

The tweets were examined qualitatively and manually coded. These were then categorised as belonging to a series of discursive clusters as follows:

Discursive Clusters

- a. Affirmative Positive
 - b. Parody, Jokes, Captions
 - c. Canonical Statements/ Questions/ Answers
 - d. Challenges to Perceived Racism (non-hostile)
 - e. Challenges to Perceived Racism (hostile)
 - f. Links (news, blogs)
 - g. Links (trailer)
 - h. Links (Boyega’s response)
 - i. Donald Faison (Lego blackstormtrooper)
 - j. Anxieties about the fate of character
 - k. General Enthusiasm
 - l. Challenges to manufactured controversy
 - m. Overt Racism
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Example Tweets

- a. 'We made it' (first tweet about trailer celebrating diversity).
 - b. 'When you gotta piss and forgot to install a flap in your cos-play' (ironic captions).
 - c. 'I thought all stormtroopers were clones of Jango Fett?' (first tweet regarding canonicity).
 - d. 'when did #starwars fan become so racist?'
 - e. 'If you're upset about a #BlackStormtrooper you need to 1. Die slowly. 2. Don't watch the damn movie'.
 - f. Most common linked source: *The Atlantic* story about racism in *Star Wars* fandom (Capps, 2014).
 - g. Links to trailer.
 - h. Links to Boyega's response to perceived racism ('Get Over it').
 - i. '@donald_faison made #blackstormtrooper cool before the new *Star Wars* trailer'.
 - j. 'Better not die first or I'm going to be pissed'.
 - k. 'I may wet the bed with joy'.
 - l. 'So I've seen a lot of talk about #Blackstormtrooper outrage...but not a single example of anyone complaining...manufactured tears?'
 - m. 'You fucking peckerwood'.
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Although each of the discursive clusters is worthy of investigation in their own right, this is beyond the scope of this article. As a result, I shall focus on examples of perceived racism and responses to such.

In the main, the so-called fan backlash centres on canonical fidelity and thus is *not* an example of toxic fan practice. While it is difficult, if not impossible, to fully recognise the identity of the twitter corpus as *fan publics* – indeed, the evidence indicates a larger 'coalition audience' (Hills 2002) marked by hashtag activism generally – the way in which questions, statement and counter-statements regarding canonical fidelity seem to demonstrate a fannish desire for continuity logics and an exchange of fan cultural capital. Effectively, the collaborative appeals of a user-generated minority are certainly performative utterances 'imbued with affect' (Rambukkana, 2015b, 5), of fans as 'textual conservationists' (Hills 2002) and protectionist gatekeepers.

To begin with, analysis of the data demonstrates that there are two possible examples of racism, one of which provided a link to a meme on Reddit – thereby, transferring an example from one platform to another -- and another whose intentions and personal context cannot be determined, nor the racial identity of the commenter ('WHAT IF THE #blackstormtrooper AIN'T RUNNING **FROM** SHIT IN #StarWaRs #TheForceAwakens? A NIGGAS GOTTA DO WHAT A #NIGGAS GOTTA DO').

Textual Conservatism, Protectionism & Fan Cultural Capital

Fandom may be a many-splintered thing, but ‘affective alliances’ (Jenkins 2013, 55) might also be formed to work through what are perceived as ‘possible threats to textual authenticity’ (Hills 2012a, 114). In *Using the Force* (2002), Will Brooker examines the ‘civil war’ between competing factions of *Star Wars* fans discursively coalesced around the first prequel film, *The Phantom Menace* (TPM). The resulting online ‘scrap’, as Tom Shone describes it (2004, 284), drew lines in the sand between those who loved the film – the ‘gushers’ – and those who vehemently disliked it – the ‘bashers’. The argument thus constructed a binary opposition between TPM as a ‘good’ object to be celebrated and deified, or as a ‘bad’ object to be vilified and hated. Hence, the so-called ‘Gusher-Basher Wars’ are marked not by communal solidarity harmoniously congregated around the fan-object, but by open hostility, ‘fierce, prolonged, passionate and not without an element of ironic role-play’ (ibid). This kind of conflict has only risen in prominence since the inception of web 2.0: from dial-up connections and relatively slow speeds, to the fibre optic, broadband capabilities of the contemporary moment. Indeed, the advent of social media has led the figure of the fan out of the marginal chat-room dungeon and into the popular mediasphere.

As Matt Hills explains about the release of *The Phantom Menace* in 1999, ‘having the *Star Wars* franchise alive again through a contested but canonical film text presents its fans with new possibilities for communal in-fighting and factionalism’ (Hills 2003, 74). Despite the belief that Lucas had finally completed his galactic space opera with the release of third prequel, *Revenge of the Sith* (2005), the sale of Lucasfilm to Disney in 2012 again opened up new possibilities for conflict and confrontation, possibilities that have since become actual. That said, these kinds of conflict and combat are not necessarily what we might describe as ‘toxic fan practices’ (see Editor’s Introduction).

As discussed above, the central issues regarding the inclusion of Boyega as a First Order Stormtrooper largely relied on canonical information developed in *Episode II: Attack of the Clones* (which features Polynesian actor, Temuera Morrison as Jango Fett). In the film, Obi-Wan Kenobi (Ewan McGregor) is led to the world of Kamino to investigate the assassination attempt on Senator Amidala (Natalie Portman). Kenobi discovers that the Kaminoans are engineering an army of clones based on the genetic template of Jango Fett. Hence, *Star Wars* ‘fact’ – that is, *Star Wars* canon – dictates that all of these Clone Troopers are exact genetic reproductions of Fett (and thus, by extension, Temuera Morrison).

This side of the debate on Twitter, then, pivots on questions – and answers – regarding *Star Wars* canonicity, providing grounds for the promotion and exchange of fan cultural capital.

Canonical Statements and Questions

'it's not about a #blackstormtrooper...it's that troopers are clones of Jango Fett. We want to see the storyline continue and be true'.

'I thought they were all clones of Jango Fett and he was definitely Latino, did the Empire become ethnically diverse?'

'I'm confused. If stormtroopers are clones (non black I thought), who is the black stormtrooper? Inner nerd needs to know!'

'But I thought Stormtroopers were clones...What happened to the saga?'

'Pretty sure galaxy is patrolled by bad ass Polynesians'.

Based on this select sample, which is representative of the cluster, *there is no evidence of racism*. Fan tweets of this type function, at least partly, as advertisements of storyworld knowledge and expertise. Such canonical deliberations are significantly challenged by those who provide textual evidence in order to prove that Clone Troopers and Stormtroopers are in fact different kinds of soldiers altogether. This exchange of textual evidence is generally typical for various fan cultures, *Star Wars* included. As North explains, fans are often 'protective of what they see as the coherent and immersive *Star Wars* universe – they police the texts, branding as abject those elements which seem either incongruous or destructive of that immersion' (2007, 166). Brooker (2002, 101-114) dedicates an entire chapter to a series of factionalist quarrels – dubbed 'the canon wars' in *Star Wars* fandom – in relation to the canonical authenticity (or not) of the *Star Wars* Expanded Universe (EU) of novels, comics, video-games and so forth. These 'canon wars' between EU fans and *Star Wars* film purists is an often heated and hostile terrain wherein 'the overriding impression' is of

an arena like the Galactic Senate in *The Phantom Menace*: a hubbub of voices speaking in turn but with little agreement save for temporary alliances, and little progression as the participants stick to their deeply-held beliefs. If nothing else, it reminds us that to talk of the fan reaction or the fan viewpoint – in cases such as this, at least, is to impose an imagined consensus on a community that thrives on debate (Brooker 2002, 113; see also Proctor 2013; Proctor and Freeman 2016).

As part of the discursive cluster that focused on canonical fidelity, fans responded to the Jango Fett/ Clone Trooper information armed with textual evidence drawn from multiple sources, including the *Star Wars* wiki, the animated TV series, *Star Wars: Rebels*, and, on one occasion, the videogame, *Star Wars Battlefront II*.

Firstly, the *Star Wars* Wookieepedia entry on Stormtroopers explains: ‘the clone’s accelerated aging process began causing their physical skills and abilities to deteriorate [and] they were replaced by non-clone volunteers and conscripts’ (http://starwars.wikia.com/wiki/Stormtrooper#cite_note-7). In the *Star Wars Rebels* episode, ‘Breaking Ranks’ (1.4), this is represented explicitly by the inclusion of black character, Zare Leonis, as a Stormtrooper-in-Training. The *Star Wars Rebels* wiki explains it clearly:

The clone troopers were grown on the world of Kamino, being cloned from a single cell of Jango Fett. During that period, they served for the Grand Army of the Republic alongside Jedi Knights, and were deployed to fight against the Confederacy of Independent Systems in the intergalactic conflict that became known as the Clone Wars. In the last months of the war, the Kamino Clones were supplemented with other troops grown from various templates. Following the formation of the Galactic Empire and the end of the Clone Wars, the clones were rebranded as Imperial Stormtroopers, serving as the first generation of the Empire’s new soldiers. In the years to come, the Empire *would gradually phase out cloned troops* and transition to human recruits as their primary infantry (<http://starwarsrebels.wikia.com/wiki/Stormtrooper>, my emphasis).

One fan posted a video of *Battlefront II*, which is subtitled with the following information: ‘After the Kamino Uprising, the Emperor decided that an army of genetically identical soldiers was susceptible to corruption; future troopers would be cloned from a variety of templates...the Imperial Army gradually became more and more diverse’.

Analogous with a high-stakes poker game, fans gamble not with playing cards, but with story-world information, placing bets in the pursuit of winning fan cultural capital. Fans that challenge the notion that black Stormtroopers simply cannot exist within the story-world, raise the stakes as if playing a ‘game’, placing counter-bids to defeat their opponents and, hopefully, ‘win’ the match. The winning bet, then, successfully accumulates fan capital while seeking to convert the opposing team’s ‘hand’ into *fan bankruptcy* (‘fan-kruptcy?’) – that is, when bids for fan capital are repelled and the player’s ‘bank’ is emptied. Such bankruptcy may also be utilised as evidence of the ‘bad’ fan, or even to construct losers of the game as ‘non-fans’, which we shall see below.

Also, discursive conflicts such as these illustrate that tensions often form between factions within (constructed) fan communities, shifting ‘continually due to internal arguments over authenticity, taste, and displays of [canonical] mastery’ centred on the fan-object in question (van de Goor 2015). These internal tensions can be hostile and

inflammatory, especially when fans employ strategies of intra- (or inter-) fandom Othering (Bennett 2011; Hills 2012b; Jones 2016; van de Goor 2015; Williams 2014; Stanfill 2014) as a way to shame those who do not fit into a framework of what is perceived as the 'correct' way to 'do' fandom. Conflict, then, can be seen as a *sine qua non* of the fan experience in general terms, and not necessarily a form of 'toxicity'. As Brooker puts it, '[d]ebates over what constitutes an official text in the fictional universe, as opposed to quasi-official or apocryphal material, are not unique to the *Star Wars* community' (2002, 101).

From this perspective, playing the high-stakes game of fandom can lead to fan-shaming or intra-fandom Othering: 'by embodying a specific performance of [*Star Wars*] fandom on Twitter, fans cement their place in the fandom while defending the object of fandom" (Jones 2016: 55; see also, 2012b). By extension, 'geek hierarchies' (Busse 2013) can be formed via the construction of binaries – Hills' 'moral dualisms' (2002) – between 'good' fan winners and 'bad' fan losers — or here, between real fans and non-fans.

Real Fans V Non-Fans

'Real Star Wars fans know that Mandalorian clones were phased-out at the end of The Clone Wars. #BlackStormtrooper is not unusual'.

'If you were a real "Star Wars" fan you would know the Empire doesn't use clones'.

'Upset about a #blackstormtrooper? Even by the time of Ep. IV the Empire was recruiting from the general population. Get a clue. Also racist'.

'All the fuss over #blackstormtrooper isn't about purist sticking to the canon, it's about "fans" not knowing the canon in the first place'.

'Like racist whites aren't even real fans you've done no research'.

This cultural exchange highlights the discursive cluster as one of debate and deliberation as opposed to racism. In fan discussions of this kind, then, 'the importance of secondary evidence is stressed ... as is attention to dates, sources and correct citation that approaches academic standards and is valued more than accurate spelling or punctuation' (Brooker 2002, 113). Fans may be 'textual conservationists' but they're also protectors and completionists, the latter being utilized as a method of fan-shaming those who are unaware of the wider hyperdiegetic tapestry of *Star Wars*. From this position, those fans who play their cards first open themselves up to communal challenges and thus run the risk of losing the game. Moreover, fans not fluent in the wider parameters of the *Star Wars* universe may

be shamed for not being up to scratch, with their incomplete knowledge signalling bankruptcy and ‘non-fandom’.

If I may speculate for a moment, it is possible that discussions about canon are part of broader discourses around ‘Disney’s *Star Wars*’ and anxieties about the transitional fan-object (Proctor 2013). Given that the formation of the Lucasfilm Story Group, an official body of continuity cops, have already rebooted EU continuity to prevent chronological clashes with new *Star Wars* material – such as the Sequel Trilogy, the Anthology spin-offs and a new canonical series of *Star Wars* comics and novels – it is hardly surprising that there might well be a degree of anxiety about canonicity. As ‘the idealized fan-object is potentially threatened’ (2012a, 114) by an infantilized Disney-fication (Scott 2017), then this discursive cluster can be interpreted as ‘working through’ such threats,

[n]ot because [fans] are somehow neurotic or pathological, but rather because these fans’ sense of self-identity ... is so firmly enmeshed with the narratives of their beloved [fan-object]. Threats to diegetic narrative can thus be felt as threats to these fans’ self-narratives’ (ibid).

This should not be viewed as a new phenomenon or, indeed, a ‘new breed of fan’ (2016). Indeed, those factional disputes between EU canonists and cinematic purists — ‘gushers’ versus ‘bashers’ — were evidently more venomous and uncivil than #blackstormtrooper, at least as far as fans go. What is especially troubling about #blackstormtrooper is that the most hostile tweets were not written by racists at all, but, rather, by those challenging – and Othering – an imaginary and imagined corpus of reactionary fans.

Challenges to Perceived Racism

‘The proper response to people who don’t like the #blackstormtrooper is, GO FUCK YOURSELF!’

‘GET. A. FREAKING. LIFE. And who’s complaining? White dorks’.

‘Dear Fanboys, if you are raising hell because John Boyega is a #BlackStormTrooper, please throw yourself off a cliff. #YesYoureRacist’.

‘I take #suicide seriously but...If you have a problem w/a #blackstormtrooper go ahead and #killyourself’.

‘If you’re genuinely angry because of a #BlackStormtrooper please jump off a goddamn bridge. Jesus. You people make me sick’.

I am certain that the majority of tweets are not serious, whether originating with *Star Wars* fans or not, meaning that, hopefully, such ‘death wishes’ are indeed ‘performative utterances’ (which is not to condone them). As Jones argues, ‘Twitter accounts are expressions of fan capital – the more extreme the response to a threat against the object of fandom, the more subcultural [fan] capital’ (2016, 56). To this, I would add that comments such as these might not simply (and solely) be appeals for fan capital, but for *politically progressive cultural capital*, especially for users who do not self-identify as fans at all. (Incidentally, bids for progressive cultural capital have been described pejoratively in discourse as ‘virtue signalling’.) Indeed, given the anonymity provided by Twitter pseudonyms, it is difficult to ascertain fans from general commenters, those that may have been attracted to the hashtag via other sources, such as the much publicized Boyega reprimand, in order to lambast discursively constructed racist-fans and, in turn, constructing themselves as healthy, ideologically moral citizens (Butsch 2008). The wealth of tweets demarcating racist-fans as principally male (‘fanboys’), indicates that it is not only ‘fangirls’, for instance, that are stereotyped and ‘negatively feminised’ (Busse 2013) within the representational spaces of media and fan discourse, but that male fans continue to be pathologised as well and, ultimately, *negatively masculinized* – or, in some cases, *emasculated* (see Proctor 2018). I am certain that racist fans exist, but I am equally certain that this is not easily binarized into ‘good’ fan-girls versus ‘bad’ fan-boys, as I point out elsewhere (2017).

At the same time, however, rather than admonish those users who respond to perceived fan racism with open aggression, it is necessary to understand the socio-political context of broader discursive instantiations. In his analysis of ‘race-activist hashtags’, Rambukkana exhibits the way in which the hashtag generally has been utilised as a form of political activism within the ‘new regimes of discourse and communication’ accommodated by the proliferation of computer-mediated technologies (2015b, 29). Here, Rambukkana focuses on #Racefail and #Ferguson. The former emerged out of an online quarrel regarding representations of race in the genre of contemporary science fiction and fantasy, just as the ‘sad puppies’ hijacked the Hugo Awards (see Stevens and van der Merwe in this themed-section). Thus, #RaceFail worked as a solidarity movement that ‘turned up the heat on an unaddressed issue’ and can be viewed as prosocial (as opposed to anti-social) (37). The formation of such a ‘racialized hashtag public’ (39) addressed and criticised artefacts of popular culture via a flurry of tweets directed at producers, such as the infamous ‘yellow-face’ episode of sit-com, *How I Met Your Mother* – to which showrunners, Carter Bays and Craig Thomas, issued a public apology (38).

The latter, #Ferguson, emerged in 2014, following the tragic shooting of teenager Michael Brown by police officer Darren Wilson in the small town of Ferguson, Missouri. Writes Rambukkana: ‘the shooting in Ferguson and its continuing aftermath have found a powerful articulation through social media discussions and in particular through the mobilization of #Ferguson’ (39). Moreover, the online emergence of the so-called ‘alt-right’

and the discourse surrounding the 2016 US Presidential election, with reality TV villain, Donald Trump now sitting pretty in the White House, has assuredly ratcheted up tensions both at home and abroad. To this, we could also add the highly public and visible infractions symbolised by #GamerGate, #Sadpuppies, #Comicsgate etc. (see Editor's Introduction).

Thus, the hashtag #blackstormtrooper should not be addressed in isolation from wider discursive contexts about race and racism. Twitter hashtags 'emerge out of, are part of, and can shape events in the wider online and offline world' (Rambukkana 2015a, 39). It would be equally reductive to castigate Twitter users for failing to check the validity of online discourses, whether in mainstream news outlets or across the blogosphere. Clearly, anxieties and tensions race relations in Western culture are emblematic of an ideological conflict that extends way beyond the minority confines and concerns of *Star Wars* fandom. The analysis provided by Rambukkana demonstrates a rising tide of internet counter-publics – that is, users and commenters who utilize the social mediasphere to speak out against reactionary actors galvanized by a hashtag activism that collectively form 'an activist critical objection – a quarrel – levelled at unjust abuses of power' (43). Given the discursively constructed furore about #blackstormtrooper emerging within the same time period as #Ferguson and, later, #blacklivesmatter – with the former sadly trending more than the latter – one can view the hostile 'tweeting back' as part of a wider public debate centred on issues of racism (and, by extension, misogyny, homophobia and other political issues). Certainly, the contemporary landscape is populated and 'pervaded with *discourses about diversity*' (Vertovec 2012, 287, author's emphasis). I believe that the canonical struggles of a minority of *Star Wars* fans is interpreted as racist, at least in part, because of the sensitivity around such issues in the current historical moment, and that Twitter can be an integral instrument for general audiences to respond to, and criticise, conservative ideologies and the reactionary politics of neoliberal capitalism. Still, this is rather too neat and should not be tidied up so readily. Hashtag publics are often messy, complicated and complex while simultaneously offering provisions for 'digitally networked individuals' to create 'counternarratives to build community online' against invidious inequalities and 'dominant interpretative publics' (Korn 2015, 129). What the discursive assemblage of #blackstormtrooper reveals is that the 'dominant ideology' contained within is empathically and overwhelmingly *anti-racist and 'super diverse'* (Korn 2015), rather than a viper's nest of reactionary neoliberalism. This side of the story has been completely sideswiped in press and academic discourse hitherto.

Conclusion: This is not the racism you're looking for.

I do not claim that this chapter has solved this thorny aporia but, hopefully, that this might serve as a spark for further debate. The influx and impact of social media is clearly a minefield for researchers to contend with and this chapter can only pretend to tell part of the story. For instance, what might the impact have been following the volume of news articles that featured John Boyega's statement to toxic fans ('get over it!')? Is it feasible to speculate that general audiences may have read these reports as proof that

#blackstormtrooper was a ‘racial uproar from your basic American bigot’ that proves ‘the delusion of post racial America’, as one commenter put it; and in turn, logged onto Twitter to join in the vocal protestations? What potential effect might a celebrity repudiation of fan-racists have on other tweeters (see Scott in this themed-section)?

While I would not expect Twitter users to research the hashtag prior to commenting, it is interesting that several commenters expressed difficulty in finding evidence of a racist backlash, some of which accused the (monolithic) media of race-baiting, of manufacturing a controversy in order to attract readers, or as a social justice conspiracy marked by excessive political correctness. It is hardly surprising that professional media outlets did not pick this up, especially given that the hashtag had become a cacophony of protest against discursively constructed racist *Star Wars* fans and difficult to parse with any rigour. At the time of writing, I have yet to find a mainstream media news story that either redresses #blackstormtrooper or does not axiomatically treat the claim that the hashtag is brimming with racist banter.

By the same token, should people turn to the Twitter echo chamber to join in the melange of anti-racist hate and criticism, even in the face of contrary evidence, then it behoves the academic community to wrestle with some important questions rather than contribute to the discursive binary constructed between the *moral, ethical, politically progressive anti-racist ‘good’ fan* and the *appalling reactionary politics of racist ‘bad’ fans*. How do we, as scholars, determine who is actually speaking, what is being said, and within what context? As researchers are currently ‘grappling with a potentially indefinite range of communicative behaviours [...] influenced by any number of contextual variables’ (Hardaker 2010, 217), what methods and methodologies can we develop to test the validity of claims that Twitter users are either fans or general audiences? What about the phenomenon of ‘trolling’ which has ‘become a catch-all term for any number of negatively marked online behaviours’ as a method of ‘posting incendiary comments with the intent of provoking others into conflict’ (ibid)? How can one determine trolling from genuine discourses of fan affect, whether toxic or benign? (Suler 2004) What are the effects of cyberspace anonymity and the ‘online disinhibition effect’ (ibid), an elemental factor that may ‘encourage a sense of impunity and freedom from being held accountable for inappropriate online behaviour’ (Hardaker 2010, 215)? How can fan studies wrestle with these challenges given that fans continue to be stereotyped and often represented unfairly? ‘How are journalists appropriating fans’ tweets?’ (Hills 2016, 272). And, more pointedly perhaps, what constitutes racism in the twenty-first century?

These questions, and many more besides, challenge the academic community, both inside and outside fan, audience and reception studies, to check the validity of journalistic claims, whatever their cachet, rather than accept *a priori* choruses of disapproving social media users. For if ‘the media’ are powerful enough to manufacture consent, as famously argued by Herman and Chomsky (1988), or to serve as moral and ethical watchdogs that have discursively constructed ‘moral panics’ (Barker and Petley 2001), how should the academic community confront the challenges of internet-based communication

technologies and the extant discourses which show that controversy may also be manufactured? How shall we address – and indeed redress – the construction of social media ‘issue publics’, a territory marked by aggressors and transgressors on both sides of the discursively constructed divide? Although this is often viewed as a binary conflict – as, for example, ‘alt-right’ activists versus left-wing social justice warriors – the challenge for scholars is to move beyond such reductive denunciations and rigorously examine the apparatuses that render discourse manifest in order to fully test and measure discourses of this kind, quantitatively and qualitatively.

Biographical Note:

William Proctor is a Senior Lecturer in Popular Media Cultures at Bournemouth University. He has published articles and chapters on a broad range of topics in popular culture. At present, William is completing his debut single-authored monograph, *Reboot Culture: Comics, Film, Transmedia*, to be published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2018/ 19. He is also co-editor on the books *Global Convergence Cultures: Transmedia Earth* (with Matthew Freeman, Routledge 2018), and *Disney’s Star Wars: Forces of Production, Promotion and Reception* (with Richard McCulloch, University of Iowa forthcoming). William is Director of the World Star Wars Project. Contact: bproctor@bournemouth.ac.uk.

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