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December 19th, 2017

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So We're Just Abolishing Worldbuilding Then?

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I want to be clear from the outset, The Last Jedi is a great film with intense artistic and entertainment value. And I don't begrudge those who enjoyed the shit out of it, not even those reviewers that made snide noises about how they never really liked Star Wars until now. The Last Jedi is a fun and at times moving and original film.

However.

It's also a abomination that needlessly fucks over Star Wars as a *world* and as a *saga* and for all the highs I had experiencing it as a *film* I left with a stone in my stomach. A sense of loss, alienation, and insult.

It would, for example, only have taken a passing sentence or two of Snoke bragging while hitting Rey in the head with Anakin's lightsaber to make any token effort towards explaining why in the fuck such a powerful force user exists and where he's been for the last six films. To give some kind of plot and worldbuilding coherence with everything that had come before. And so on. I don't begrudge The Last Jedi's twists, I begrudge that

they're mostly *unearned* and cheapen the other films rather than strengthening them. A sequel should make all the films before it BETTER, not worse. Hundreds of thousands of fans agreed to temporarily suspend judgement with *The Force Awakens* because we were promised some manner of explanation in the sequel that would tie the saga films back together and strengthen the *Star Wars* setting. Instead these desires were casually dismissed. And no amount of resonant character or cinematic thrills can eclipse that.

This irritation is made a little worse by those that enjoyed the film collectively howling in derision at the widespread disappointment among fans. "All those super fans are never happy with anything, they love nothing more than bitching and moaning."

It's never been more clear that people get very different things out of *Star Wars*. And the gulf between the camps on *The Last Jedi* feels unbridgeable.

I want to try to explain where the negative reaction many of us had comes from. My hope is that people will at least begin to understand the different sort of joy or nutrition many of us get from media like *Star Wars* and the validity of that approach.

Specifically I want to talk about worldbuilding.

There is little more despised or generally ignored aspect to storytelling in the mainstream zeitgeist. If you take courses on literature and creative writing it's rarely if ever mentioned and never examined as a valuable aspect of storytelling.

Constant is the annoying refrain among english majors that "science fiction and fantasy are only valuable insofar as they reflect on our experiences today." That statement is just completely wrong, but it does speak to the limited manner in which people who aren't strongly attracted by science fiction and fantasy are sometimes able to positively engage with them. For such people the characters, their emotions and growth, are of chief importance and the setting or plot can be as shallow and as contradictory or contrived as need be. They may laugh or passingly complain about a plot hole

in a larger story and world. The Last Jedi and The Force Awakens were clearly not created with such in mind, but not only that, they didn't even make token gestures to include fans that care about such things, they aggressively undermine them. That's a shame.

or pretense, but they don't care because the journey is the important component, to such a degree as to vastly outweigh literally everything else.

I want to be clear: this is a valid way of engaging with stories and media.

But so too is it valid to care more about the complexity and cohesion of a setting, the deft and intricate acrobatics of plot. To look at the whole as a structure and be amazed at the mechanism or to lose yourself in the world to consider it as one might the real world, with a skewed physics and politics, but one that makes sense, that is predictable and analyzable. That doesn't fall apart under any scrutiny, but rewards it. And specifically in the case of Star Wars, that encourages escapism, a deep dive into considering the Galaxy Far Far Away as a real environment.

I don't seek to wage war between these two camps. Neither one is objectively better than the other. Both can, ideally, coexist. Some media can be heavier on one or the other, in truly wonderful instances both are strong.

As Julia Galef put it, "having fantastical elements in your world doesn't exempt your plot from obeying the logic of *your own world*. Without internal consistency, you can't have challenges, stakes, & resolutions that feel real and satisfying."

Personally I enjoy worldbuilding and character, but in different contexts. I think a lot of people these days snap to pictures of the Other Side in this divide as "subhuman autistics" or "shallow hipsters." But there is no objectively superior way to engage with media. Both are valuable frames of mind. Neither should be discarded or disparaged as inferior. Classical music and hip hop, for example, focus on different dynamics, different talents and different ways of experiencing.

But when it comes to worldbuilding there does seem to be a war on.

We are rapidly running out of media focused on plot and worldbuilding, with those franchises and settings most historically

synonymous with such investment increasingly eroded. Star Wars and Star Trek were never actually very good at anything BESIDES worldbuilding, they weren't very good at character or resonance and that was fine because they at least made *attempts* to flesh in a detailed and consistent world, and yet both have had their settings publicly excoriated to an almost absurd degree. Those that objected or felt an intense sense of loss have become public punching bags by reviewers who, as a class, are decidedly more english major than canon nerd.

Not a single review of the Star Wars and Star Trek soft reboots truly grappled with what it means to do such damage to the existing world and in the process the preexisting stories. In both cases an formative media for boomers (the original series, and the original trilogy) were privileged above the material that came after them and that a good portion of the fanbase had stronger attachments to. Critics invariably looked at films in isolation as singular films, rather than as pillars of a universe, because that's how mainstream film criticism is done. But such approaches disingenuously frame Star Wars and Star Trek as merely a collection of isolated films, rather than as a whole universe. This is a bit like reviewing Moby Dick chapter by chapter in way that totally ignores each chapter's interplay with the ones before.

Granted, in the cases of both Star Wars and Star Trek the established universes before JJ Abrams' reset were mostly a fucking ugly mess. But they did reward immersion. And what has followed in both cases has been films oriented towards being fun for as wide an audience as possible, with essentially zero regard for cohesive story and worldbuilding. The product of this very capitalist calculation has been content that does not reward more than passing fandom. It's harder to want to live in an escapist universe that is poorly stitched together and offers little interconnection or sense of internal logic beneath the surface.

A huge part of fandom, historically, has been searching for patterns. Media like Babylon 5 rewarded this because JMS had spent

Empire or millennials who cheered Ahsoka through The Clone Wars long before they saw any films have an exclusive or primordial claim to what Star Wars is. Star Wars is a mix of all those things, a quilt where no piece should invalidate any other, only strengthen them.

But the way that capitalist behemoths have reached out to wider audiences has often been through entirely discarding the things that attracted their core fans but that never clicked with wider audiences. Worldbuilding and multi-piece storytelling appears to be one of them. And that's a fucking shame. Because there's just so few fucking places where worldbuilding has been allowed on the scale of Star Wars.

It's an overreaction to the prequels and one that has done more damage than them.

Sure the prequels were largely devoid of casual fun, they sucked when it came to character and dialogue. But they were at least thoroughly recognizable as Star Wars, they excelled at worldbuilding and – for the most part – at crafting a coherent multipart story. It was incredibly rewarding for many of us to watch Lucas piece together Palpatine's rise, the context of the Old Republic, the political complications, the shades of grey and tragedy. Such fans absolutely loved and adored Rogue One, off-saga tho it was, because it studiously worked to improve the existing world and the story.

In isolation The Last Jedi is a great Star Wars film, but it's a terrible entry into Star Wars the whole. Regarding the preposterous world-breaking cartoon of Snoke in particular, but in myriad other respects it invalidates and undermines the prequels, any cohesive structure of the Trilogy Of Trilogies, gives no remote feint at worldbuilding, and generally fractures or cheapens what has gone before.

I don't begrudge Rian Johnson his status as a fan. It's clear he cares about the material, and he has even talked about the steps he took to make The Last Jedi internally coherent as a single film. But to many fans Star Wars films aren't isolated films, they're chapters

over every page of the Thrawn Trilogy that enabled Star Wars' return.

This isn't a matter of fandom gatekeeping.

I am constantly derided as a fake geek, like the hipster with acursed social skills that is so deplorable he brings *beer* to the D&D session. I've lost entire friendships over my treasonous capacity to navigate the non-geek world, much less my interest in it. There is a tomb of cheetos-smudged Warhammer 40K figures strewn on gaelic inscribed tapestries that my sellout ass is forever barred from entering. And I am well aware there's strands of fucked up reactionary politics to be found in geek circles.

But inclusivity has to go both ways. The widening of access to fandoms and media shouldn't mean the public rejection and humiliation of most of what those who came before found value in. For decades now a huge fraction of people have felt like they're being gentrified out of their fandoms. Some of that is the necessary pains of giving up privileges built on exclusion. But some of it is totally unnecessary.

Replaying a half-remembered script from gamergate several critics have tried to shoehorn outcry among Star Wars fans into the same mold. But I am no reactionary. I loved the castings in TFA. Hell, I want Rey Finn Rose and Poe to come out as a queer poly quad and have multiracial babies. I want aliens to challenge the implicitly human supremacist ranks of the resistance (in no small part because it would make Star Wars' worldbuilding *stronger*). And if The Skywalker Saga is going to deal with how fucked up dynastic bloodlines are, then I'm down with that, although it has to be earned in a way Rey's history-breaking powers just haven't been. I want Star Wars to be accessible to people regardless of gender, race, sexuality, etc, but I want it to remain Star Wars with the richly detailed setting and rewardingly coherent narrative arcs that implies. Those absolutely don't have to conflict.

I don't think that boomers who saw A New Hope when they were teens or gen-xers who devoured Tales of the Jedi and Dark

decades of his life fleshing out the world, the political factions, the history, etc. On the other hand media like Lost and Battlestar Galactica infamously spat in the faces of their fans, never actually having any deep underlying pattern to be found. There was never any plan, there was never any logic to their worlds, it was all just a jumble of thrown together *moments*.

Time and time again creators have responded "haha but who cares! it's all empty fantasy! coming up with explanations and being wrong is just part of the ride!" In both Lost and Battlestar they literally went with "everything major we didn't explain was because a wizard did it." And a lot of people are totally okay with this.

The disconnect is stupendous. I mean it's truly astonishing.

I don't know, maybe JJ Abrams and Ronald Moore never really connected with fan media the same way many others did. Maybe they somehow derived enjoyment without seeing deeper structures. There's this fictional film of JJ as a kid playing with Star Wars toys in a haphazard random way like "now t-rex fights the death star!" and I was surprised by how alienating I found it. Maybe I have a stick up my ass, but as a child my play was always trying to grasp at greater structures, explanations, make things more coherent and revealing. At eight years old my action figure play was, "*Okay so for Jurassic Park 2 the only thing that makes sense is a survivalist tale in the mountains of Central America with the compys, ornathids and raptors that escaped but maybe we could have like a political struggle with some kind of Zapatista stand-in and like Biosyn could be getting into GMO agriculture, which ties into the lysine contingency obviously...*"

We are clearly coming from different places.

I don't begrudge the JJ Abrams of the world their realm of enjoyment, but it doesn't have to come at the expense of the fans that like deeper structure. Even if something is conceived "character first" it can still make even the most passing sort of feints towards worldbuilding and saga coherence.

Right now with Star Wars we've got a situation where the Disney saga films stomp around without any regard for the prior films, the world or any attempt at a nine episode arc. So the structure-seeking fans get punched in the gut by the films and then retreat to a few meager comics and books made by like-minded-geeks that try to salve the wounds.

It's worth saying that unlike the old "expanded universe" since the Star Wars canon reset Lucasfilm's Story Group has actually worked quite diligently to build a coherently structured world and story. The Darth Vader comics bridging Episodes 3 4 and 5 have been truly sublime and are worthy of all the accolades they've received. They strengthen the story of the films, the world, and the character. However it's painfully clear that the relationship with the tentpole movies is one-way; their work is janitorial. The films have always been given deeper weight than anything else, and thus it is incumbent upon them to at least try to be internally coherent. Yet neither *The Force Awakens* nor *The Last Jedi* made any attempt to grapple with or strengthen the universe and aggregate story of the other films. Where Lucas' films returned some of the same background species, played ideas in setting logically forward, etc, TFA and TLJ do nothing of the sort. Even the most trivial and painless measures of world continuity (like throwing something like a Rodian or Twi'Lek in the background) are never even considered.

It's a stark break. And it's hard to ignore or avoid seeing.

I realize that for a number of casual fans the prequels don't exist and so there's no need in their mind to have continuity with the existing six episode saga, the only thing that should matter is revisiting some of the highs of the original trilogy, at whatever cost. But never mind the prequel's positive components that have grown more essentially "Star Wars" for hordes of fans than the old people trilogy, Disney and Lucasfilm *didn't expunge the prequels*, they still exist as canon tent-pole saga films. And *even the original trilogy did more worldbuilding*. A New Hope has a long fucking boardroom scene discussing galactic politics. The Emperor is framed as a crit-

ical component of the story and setting from the first film. Every single film builds worldbuilding on the prior films directly. Even in *The Empire Strikes Back* they have Lando do walking hallway scenes discussing economics under the Empire. There aren't giant gaping questions or narrative jumps that aren't specifically and directly addressed.

Further when it comes to worldbuilding in the first six films references are constantly dropped that give an impression of a wider and richer setting. Planets, political and military developments are just randomly namechecked. It all builds up to a sense of living in a tiny slice of a larger, coherent setting. TFA and TLJ largely abandon this as well. The excuse given is that such exposition "slows things down" but films deserve pacing settings that aren't "rollercoaster." And in particular films in a series – much less a supposedly single "trilogy of trilogies" saga – deserve cinematic and thematic common threads. The kinetic fluttering of TFA and TLJ is a cheap way of keeping viewers' attention without actually earning it, and it retroactively cheapens the original trilogy's 70s pacing.

It wouldn't have taken much at all, it wouldn't have detracted an iota from Rian Johnson's artistic vision for *The Last Jedi* to have done some meager fucking world building and tied itself in to the existing tapestry of the saga films. A sentence or two from Snoke, a line in the Canto Bight subplot, some alien species continuity, a couple extra words from Leia rather than "allies in the outer rim."

The fans that care about worldbuilding and story would still have recognized we were getting short shrift, that our enjoyment was not remotely a priority, but we would have recognized we still had a seat at the table of Star Wars.

And it's the world-building obsessed fans that have really powered Star Wars, because whacking each other with plastic lightsabers is fun for a little while when you're kids, but it's the kids who trade cards to read all the errata and piece together the world that have played a huge role in keeping the fandom going. It was the kids reading West End Games supplements and going