

## Reflective Cover Letter

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Dear Professor Belli,

To start things off, I'll talk about my motive behind this Research Topic. Reflecting on the difference of works we did in class and what society sees as Science-Fiction nowadays in popular media, I wanted to compare the two ideas and see where the divergence of works that looked like they aimed more at talking about issues became more of a means of providing entertainment to a large percentage of audiences. When first coming into class, most of the Science-Fiction I was exposed to has had some Commercialization involved with it (mostly film and video games), and being a byproduct of growing up with these franchises, I wanted to look at the subject in a more outward way to understand how things came to be. I wanted to analyze and get meta with the process of making a work, because as of late I've noticed more and more social trends about people facilitating "nerd culture" into popular media where in the past it was viewed as a negative to be a nerd for certain franchises, like Marvel Comics and Star Trek. I wanted to look at what made up these franchises, and I came down to the fandom that surrounds the product, the merchandising that's done to promote and gain revenue for a Commercial Science-Fiction text, and, ultimately, the Science-Fiction text itself as it stood on it's own. This idea also came to me because I recently got a fascination with *Warhammer 40,000* and didn't understand how, 1) the brand was so niche considering how interesting the universe and story that is revolved around it, and 2) how it's able to maintain itself despite not having such a large following to fund it. It also struck me because when looking at the backstory of how *Warhammer 40,000* came to be, it was initially made to try and market a table-top game. Then other examples came to me as I thought about this, and thus this topic came to be.

The preliminary research of this topic consisted of a few things. I first looked at multiple sources in a wide, general Google search of things relating to the topic; from looking at sample service agreements to forum posts about why people liked certain brands (like for *Warhammer 40,000* and it's community) and the hate for certain works (like with the *Star Wars* prequels). I also had some prescribed hypotheses about my topic, such as what determined a "good" franchise in the perspective of both the consumer/fan and the content creator. As mentioned, I thought of multiple franchises I would want to talk about in my project and looked into their histories. This included *Star Wars*, *Warhammer 40,000*, *Marvel*, *Transformers*, and *Doctor Who*. After this preliminary research, I decided (after your recommendation of finding more objective sources) to research on Google Scholar and overall doing more refined source gathering. I focused my research more into a look at Commercialized Science-Fiction holistically to get a basis to work from the ground up. And while actually writing this Write-Up, I actually found the need to link to other definitions and minor facts that people might not inherently know about, like defining merchandising and fandom and describing "the hero's journey" (even though I knew about it since high-school).

Iterations on doing this Write-Up took up a majority of class time, and the weeks flew by from our midterm all the way up to doing this final Write-Up; even though we were still within half a semester, the drafting, revisions, and finalization of proposals took up a lot of time, a lot more than I would've expected. This, coupled with balancing school work with other classes, lent to a lot of balancing of when to research and in what capacity research needed to be done; i.e., some weeks I was researching a lot while other weeks I needed to focus on other classes and proved difficult to get back into research. The mandatory presentations for this project actually

helped greatly in outlining what I want to talk about, and was a good means of making a “pre-outline” to my actual outline, that I extensively worked on and thought of before tackling the draft. And although I did not properly flesh out that outline into a proper draft Write-Up in time for peer revisions, I was able to get some critical insight into what I should talk about and focus on more, even with just an introduction and outline to my topic (thank you Tajay for that, it was much appreciated and technically not needed since I didn't present a full draft).

One of the biggest things I struggled with in this Write-Up is the condensing of everything I researched into a concise idea. There were so many other things I wanted to include in this paper, and even with all these pages dedicated to the topic, I could've wrote double the amount had it been required. I could've gone in much, much, much more detail with the examples portion, but I opted to get the basics of defining a Commercialized work first and merely touching on those examples in order to help illustrate an original idea that I had while looking into each one of these franchises. It was also tough tying all these ideas together, because while they were all related in some respect, they are all still individual pieces of scholarly documentation. I needed to both know how to incorporate them in the Write-Up (inline citations) while also conveying my own thoughts and what I reflecting on from reading these; a lot of the time while reading these sources, I thought of something myself and was inspired to make a claim that none of these sources actually addressed (the biggest one is the paragraph after I list my examples, where I claim why Commercialized Science-Fiction texts are “dumbed down”). Hopefully through my use of logic, these claims are sound in reasoning.

Overall, I hope this Write-Up is coherent and fits the bill of the assignment. And hopefully you'll also learn something or gain a different perspective on this topic.

Cheers,

Pellegrino Cioffi

Pellegrino Cioffi  
Archive Project: Final Write-Up  
Professor Belli  
12/19/16

The Alternate Reality of “Could Have Been Good”:  
Commercialization of Science-Fiction and its Unwarranted Effects

There are many classic Science-Fiction novels, such as *Brave New World* and *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, but those works were made with the intention to state a message to their audiences. Those texts aim to reflect society’s problems and bring these problems to light in the hopes to change opinions and prevent to human folly. Modern Science-Fiction as the captivating escapism of entertainment also, in a way, aims to reflect society; unfortunately, it's a reflection of what society wants out of the genre now rather than what the genre should be doing. Social norms for modern Sci-Fi stories like *Star Wars* and the *Marvel* cinematic universe now aim at being a facet of entertainment rather than being an outright message that the original creator may have wanted to make to their audiences. The shift from the philosophical thinking that Science-Fiction was able to pose in the past are now replaced with visually stimulating spectacles that have the main goal of entertaining their audiences. Commercialization of Science-Fiction works slowly devolved it’s focus on storytelling, being more focused on entertainment and being commercially successful rather than to convey a deeper message.

Before starting this discussion on the topic, it needs to be clearly said what is meant by a Science-Fiction work that is “Commercialized”. In the scope of this research, these are works that have taken part in some form or another merchandising of products to fall in line with the main text. This merchandising may have either been a result of the text's original creation (i.e. *Transformers* and *Warhammer 40,000*) or may have become a

byproduct as a result of the success of the text, like with *Star Wars*. Merchandising, while on the subject, can be defined as such: “Branded products used to promote a particular movie, popular music group, etc., or linked to a particular fictional character; merchandising.” (*Oxforddictionaries.com*) and this definition is what will be focused on ahead. Lastly, the term “fan” and “fandom” come into play when talking about these works, since without the fans, all the marketing and intent to make money for the original product go to waste. A fan/fandom is a collective group of people that have strong interest in a particular person or thing, and in the case of this research it's for Science-Fiction texts. Fandoms are the following that come as a result of the release of these texts or of the products that are associated with these texts. Moreover, for convenience sake, a majority of these concepts will be talked about in association with the franchise *Star Wars*, since this is the most all encompassing and most understandable connection that can be made to most people (a large amount of people know about *Star Wars* and the demographic of appeal varies across many different generations). After these concepts are explored in full, different texts will be touched on that fall under the category of Commercialized Science-Fiction. The understanding of merchandising and fandoms is integral in understanding why Commercialization comes into play for these texts, since these are the key reasons why this happens.

If the evolution of Science-Fiction were viewed from an outside perspective, it can be noted that there is a shift in intent compared to earlier works. Science-Fiction started out as a medium to explore concepts and ideas that were too hard to put into perspective. For example, exploring alternate realities where a Utopia was veiled by

control of the masses (*Brave New World*) or unrealized futures that questioned humanity and what it meant to be human (*Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*). Albeit, there are examples of earlier texts geared towards entertainment rather than actually discussing deep philosophical and societal questions, like Science-Fiction periodicals (*Asimov's Science Fiction* and *Fantasy*) or even many stories by Jules Verne (*Journey to the Center of the Earth* and *Twenty Thousand Leagues Under the Sea*). But in these examples, the focus still relied on compelling storytelling and imagery to capture the audience's attention, contrary to the focus of audience draw nowadays. With the most notable entry in recent years, *Star Wars* drew audience attention with its advanced technological feats of visual spectacles. *Star Wars* is viewed as a visual masterpiece of its time and in a lot of respects this is what earned its status as one of the greatest films ever. If *Star Wars* were to be looked at in its base form without the “spectacle”, however, the story essentially describes the trope of “the hero's journey”. This is a recurring pattern in many texts described by American scholar, Joseph Campbell (*TheWritersJourney.com*). Subjectively, it can be said that the plot is very simple and, at its core, *Star Wars* is reliant on compelling characterization and visual effects rather than compelling story and plot. As said by Vivian Sobchack, Science-Fiction transitioned from the “poetic” to the “political”; the transition of texts attempting to be moving and compelling with ideas from their authors, versus a “political” Science-Fiction text that aims to be safe and abide by tropes and stricter structures (Sobchack, 11). These aspects are what draw viewers nowadays to ingest this media and this focus has caused Science-Fiction to stray more away from telling a good story and more focused on visual appeal.

With this viewed success from presenting Science-Fiction texts as “visual spectacles” (as shown with audience turnout), the advent of merchandising came into play with Science-Fiction works. Merchandising has been around for some time, ever since the early 20<sup>th</sup> century. One of the earliest examples of this was with Disney and their merchandising with their successful short animation called *Steamboat Willie*; Mickey Mouse (the main character of the animation and current corporate mascot of Disney) had his likeness sold to a company that made writing tablets with his image for \$200 (*FilmReference.com*). Merchandising and brand recognition is an aspect that many companies incorporate into their businesses in order to produce more revenue for their company and help fund themselves for other projects. This merchandising has been done in countless ways to try to remain concurrent with social trends, while still being able to create the draw affect that consumers have to inevitably purchasing these products. One such type of merchandising that seems to be a trend with more recent works is “retrobranding” (*Brown, 19-33*); that's where an older brand is revitalized to fit into a more modern setting. According to Stephen Brown, *Star Wars: Episode I* is essentially a reinvented form of branding to the original work, but presented in recent years to bring back it's relevance and potentially appeal to a different market and audience. The concept of retrobranding involves the idea of remaking a brand while still holding true the following: Allegory (the brand story), Aura (the brand essence), Arcadia (the idealized community), and Antinomy (the brand paradox). The first three are clear, keep the brand as close to possible to the original work while also maintaining the goal of appealing to an idealistic community that will see it as the same, but the Antinomy/Brand Paradox is

the juxtaposed difference that is involved with making the brand “new” while still being able to say that it's faithful to the original work. And there in lies the “paradox” because the texts essentially become the same without any added form of innovation actually being attributed to the revamped works. This, which is one of many forms of branding that even involve Commercialized Science-Fiction texts, can be seen in action when browsing what's available in most retail stores, even long after the release of these texts. Continuing with the established example, there are various product lines that involve *Star Wars*. From products that are meant to replicate the characters (like figurines and replicas) to appliances or other products that are made in reference to the works (like the *Lego: Star Wars* line of toys, or simply a coffee mug that looks like R2D2). The focus on this merchandising and revenue inherently shows that there is a lack of effort in making the texts more worthwhile. When more man-power and collective thinking is done for the products around the brand rather than the brand's text itself, it can be said that there is a lose in the “what could've been” for that text. If there isn't as much attention towards, maybe the stories that these products are centered around could've been more compelling and interesting, lending back to the creator being able to be the “poetic”.

This effort in merchandising isn't a one-sided blame towards the holders of these Commercialized Science-Fiction brands; the fans and fandoms that stemmed out from these works are also to blame. Since companies try to appeal to what gives the most profit, there are products and even revamps of texts that are associated with trying to bring back appeal from fans of these series. The newer releases in the *Star Wars* franchise can be associated with this kind of pandering to fan demands. Looking at the overall

audience failure of the *Star Wars Prequels (Episode I, II and III)*, Disney acquired the *Star Wars* brand and tried a different take. Rather than taking the direction that George Lucas did with focusing on characterization (and the term “characterization” is used loosely, since it failed to do so in the eyes of many fans) of a vast amount of newer characters that expanded the universe, Disney focused on appealing to older fans by essentially re-telling the same plot of *Episode IV* for *Episode VII (Hypable.com)*. This attempt at making a movie “for the fans” can be attributed to the idea of fans having “ownership” of the brands that they follow (*Jancovich, 185-202*). When a fan claims this type of ownership, the fan may have even more influence on the brand than the owner of these brands themselves. Since they can dictate what they see as appropriate for the text and can project this into negative comments when texts stray away from what is seen as the “intended path” (i.e. a movie critic who finds the negatives of the text, so word is spread). This can also fall under the idea of who really dictates what's canonical with iterations of a work through sequels; more deeply rooted fans can see and project the idea of a fan-made work that they believe is more “canonical” than what a franchise's owner deems canonical. In the case of *Star Wars*, many of the Extended Universe (EU) texts that were made during the absence of *Star Wars* films (in between the original trilogy, the prequel trilogy, and sequel trilogy) are not deemed as canonical by Disney, and yet many fans clamor to these texts (including myself) thinking they were more suited to be the “true” sequels or prequels to *Star Wars*. These fans and their influencing powers to the text all come from the idea of fandom being a form of escape; rather than living out one's own life, a person can live vicariously through franchises and stories that they grew up

with. This deep connection that fans have to Commercialized Science-Fiction texts, ironically enough, is linked to the Science-Fiction concept of being “the other”; people feel like “the other” in the real world and can relate to the characters that they feel are more strongly associated with themselves (*Tulloch & Jenkins*, 50-66). Ultimately, companies play on the appeal of fans when making Science-Fiction works in order to create a connection to the audience as a group of people, rather than making the works that the creators wanted to initially make. This, coupled with the fact that fandoms have as much power in determining what is appropriate for a franchise, all weigh on what is produced in the form of the Science-Fiction text's quality and intent of being made.

Even though *Star Wars* was heavily talked about so far in regards to Commercializing a Science-Fiction work, there are other examples of this occurrence. To fall in line with *Star Wars*, a franchise that was sold to Disney from its original owner, *Marvel* falls heavily in line with Commercialized Science-Fiction. With *Marvel* becoming a bankrupt company and in danger of losing their assets, they partially sold off many of their brands to various companies; Fox was able to acquire the *Fantastic Four* and *X-Men*, while Sony was able to obtain *Marvel's* mascot *Spider-Man*. Inevitably, *Marvel* was bought by Disney who now own a majority of all the characters and brands that weren't sold off to other companies at that point. After that acquisition, Disney's *Marvel* pushed out many successful films with these acquired characters.

(*Britannica.com*) There are fans of the comics that feel like the cinematic universe is merely a means of marketing/merchandising the superheroes and lose the compelling storytelling that is more evident in the comics. Plots to major story arcs are either limited

in who is presented in them (as to not confuse audiences with characters who did not have their origins blatantly talked about in their own dedicated movie) or for lack of time constraints that come with producing a movie. After all, the idea of having a time constraint on a film is to maximize the most attention that viewers would offer for a film while still being long enough to entertain; an extension of marketing and the “politics” coming into play for making movies. Next is *Warhammer 40,000*, which is a Games Workshop brand. This series started out as a tabletop game similar to Risk, but set in the distant future of 40,000AD and layered with deep lore and story embedded into it; as an example, the original *Warhammer 40,000* rulebook is 400+ pages and most of it is background description of each possible faction you can play as (*Slate.com*). The game was made in 1987 and has slowly evolved with a niche cult following (a small, but devoted group of people who are a collective of fans), which brought about enough support to add more lore into the universe through the continuous release of new books. The series, with its modest success, even has some video games that fall in line with the lore and other medias that illustrate the universe. And to juxtapose *Warhammer 40,000*, *Transformers* started out as a toyline that essentially created the “action figure” craze in America (*ComingSoon.com*). Later on, a show and many other iterative works followed the world of *Transformers*, all in order to help promote the brand and marketing potential. Compared to the original show that was explicitly made for the toy line, its revival in cinema more recently created a backlash with devoted fans who grew up with the series. The movie version of *Transformers* felt like a disconnect with the show, in an ironic sense because they fell into Hasbro’s intention of appealing to younger audiences. The

show's main goal was to promote the topline in a kid friendly way (i.e. the story-line was essentially intended to appeal to kids). Whereas the movies try to paint *Transformers* in a more dark, serious, and dramatic tone to try and tell a more compelling story. This backlash and refusal of recognition by it's fans shows the strength that fandom has on determining whether a brand's iterated texts.

Although only briefly touched on, each of these brands provides a very in-depth analytic dissection of what constitutes success in Commercialized Science-Fiction brands. As mentioned, merchandising and fandom go hand in hand with determining how a Commercialized Science-Fiction text is made. But, entertaining this notion, if a text can become as all inclusive as possible, wouldn't that provide the most marketing potential for a company and also appease fans for having their brands more venerated in a social norm? There in lies the reason why more successful Commercialized Science-Fiction texts are “dumbed down”, they are trying to appeal to as many people as possible (*Jenkins*). This includes the attempts at honoring the fandom's ideal of what constitutes the lore and story of that work. With this balance of telling a story that is more general while having characters that fans can relate to, Science-Fiction works that were made for merchandising can flourish in a wider market. That is why *Star Wars* has a basic plot fluffed with special effects and characterization. That is why Disney sees this and is able to be as commercially successful with their products and brands. That is why *Warhammer 40,000*, despite being rich with lore and a nearly endless backstory, will remain a niche market to a small collective of fans. Complexity in story telling dismays the holistic, collective audience dubbed “society” and is why many successful Commercial Science-

Fiction stories tend to falter in having a compelling story.

There is recognition that a counter-example to this claim could be seen with *Doctor Who*, though only aptly if not looked at through its historical production. People who look at the series now note the balance of characterization, visual appeal, and even compelling story-telling as the series' strong suits. The series not only has a strong cult following (known as “whovians”) but is also casually watched by a large and wide ranging demographic of people around the world. *Doctor Who*, unbeknownst to many people who watch the show more casually, was a failing BBC show that got a revival more recently; the show has been airing on and off since the 1960s and what people see as the (*Tardis.Wikia.com*). Moreover, this shift in story-telling actually does cause backlash with different sub-sectors of the fandom. Fandom, as mentioned before, is multifaceted and incorporates a lot of different demographics of people and in the case of *Doctor Who* there is actually a division of fandom based on “waves”. Noted in Tulloch & Jenkins, there existed a “third wave” fandom of Doctor Who that actually hated the attempts that the series' creators did in story-telling; minor differences in plot points and revamping of ideas caused a division in fans. This “wave based” fandom came about because of the structure of the character; every fan has their own favorite Doctor with their own distinct traits, since each actor before portrayed the Doctor in different ways. The more recent revival of the series focused on having the Doctor remain as one character archetype, despite the change in actors; each Doctor now always has a companion who assists him and they all tend to have similar quirky characterizations. So essentially, *Doctor Who* did change their formula to try and be more all inclusive over the

years, starting as a niche following in England and is now viewed equally world-wide; they discovered which Doctor archetype worked and stuck with it in the recent years. This was done by forsaking different generations of fans of the series, dismissing previously established ideas of the Doctor in order to make an appealing Doctor that could relate more to a holistic audience. And although the stories are more compelling, the series technically did not honor older fan's ideas, strayed away from the original work and is a result of trying to appeal to the larger of two audiences, the purists of older generations or the “whovians” of today.

These texts are all examples of Commercialized Science-Fiction text and looking into the making of these texts and why they become successful is necessary to reflect on. Aptly put in the introduction of *Science Fiction Audiences*, looking at a popular medium such as Commercialized Science-Fiction shows the values of our society:

"There are many good reasons for studying popular fiction. The best, though, is that it matters. In the many and varied forms in which they are produced and circulated – by the cinema, broadcasting institutions, and the publishing industry – popular fictions saturate the rhythms of everyday life. In doing so, they help to define our sense of ourselves, shaping our desires, fantasies, imagined pasts, and projected futures. An understanding of such fictions – of how they are produced and circulated, organized and received – is thus central to an understanding of ourselves; of how those selves have been shaped and of how they might be changed." (*Tulloch & Jenkins*, viii)

What we learn from this is that society as a whole have fallen into marketing and merchandising intents from big companies. Society is also afflicted by criticisms of fans for what is believed to be the appropriate form of such texts and “ownership” over these brands through trivia knowledge apparently empowers the fandom to influence the texts that are being created. And overall, people in the social norm ingest these texts through piecemeal versions of potentially interesting and compelling stories. Science-Fiction's “domain of the possible” (*Andromeda.Rutgers.edu*) is very eloquent way of putting these works into perspective; the possibility of these works being more compelling and interesting is always the hope for future implementations of Science-Fiction in popular media.

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