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Decoder Ring — Legends, Or What's An Expanded Universe?

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By now your patrons, and probably you yourself, are going through serious Star Wars withdrawal. Fans are trying to work out their best possible theories on who Rey's parents are, how large or small archvillain Snoko actually is, and how exactly Maz Kanata got Luke's lightsaber. They may be wondering how to dive into the no-longer-canon yet maybe-not-exactly-not-canon continuity of what was once the Star Wars Expanded Universe, or "EU."

Before it had a name, the EU began with all the stories told in the Star Wars universe beyond the Original Trilogy. It goes all the way back to the beginning in the 1970s, when **Alan Dean Foster**, armed with the first film's script, ghost wrote *Splinter of the Mind's Eye* for **George Lucas**.¹ Forty-year spoiler warning: like the problematic kiss on Hoth, the flirtation between Luke and Leia in **Foster's** novel strongly suggests **Lucas** had not decided the pair were brother and sister yet.

There was also a classic and wonderfully motley run of Star Wars comics from **Marvel** beginning in 1977.² The comics began with work from writer **Roy Thomas** and artist **Howard Chaykin**, who would move on after the first ten issues. They would eventually see contributions from such talents as writer **Archie Goodwin** and a bevy of great artists, including **Walt Simonson** and **Klaus Janson**.³ **Bill Sienkiewicz** even did covers for *Return of the Jedi* era.

As these works show, the early years were eclectic and messy in the best way. A lot of particulars of the Star Wars universe were not written in stone yet. Things started to get more regular in 1991, when **Lucasfilm** moved heavily into licensed novels published through **Bantam** and later **Del Rey**. These began with *Heir to the Empire*, the first of the Thrawn trilogy from Hugo winner **Timothy Zahn**.⁴ Set in the years after the original three films, these new adventures of Luke, Han, Leia and company focused on fighting the remnants of the Empire, as led by the last Grand Admiral, Thrawn. The **Zahn** novels were generally well received by hungry fans, who respected the author's treatment of classic characters as well as his interesting additions and twists like Luke's love interest Mara Jade, the Emperor's Noghri assassin sect, and Force-canceling amphibians called ysalamiri. This is when the term "Expanded Universe" was officially introduced.

The growth of the EU, with increased oversight and coordination from **Lucasfilm**, coincided with the move of Star Wars comics from **Marvel** to **Dark Horse** in 1991. Like the explosion of new novels, the comics started strong with the excellent *Dark Empire* limited series from writer **Tom Veitch** and illustrator **Cam Kennedy**.⁵ These featured stunning covers from artist **Dave Dorman**. *Dark Empire*

would be followed by *Dark Empire II* and the popular *Tales of the Jedi* series.

Then there were the video games and other interactive media. With solid gameplay and a finale reveal that would make **Agatha Christie** swoon, *Knights of the Old Republic* won a lot of acclaim for **LucasArts** and **BioWare** in 2003.⁶ Somehow this game achieved a holy grail of balancing narrative with player-controlled action.

By the time of **Disney's** purchase of **Lucasfilm** and related properties in 2012, the EU was littered with stories from prose, comics, animated television, radio dramas, table-top role-playing games from West End Games and Wizards of the Coast, those Ewok movies, and video games covering thousands of years of galactic history.⁷ These included some interesting "multimedia projects" that attempted to closely coordinate storylines across films and other media that were all being created and released at the same time or in very close proximity to each other. Perhaps most notable were the numerous properties that covered the events of the Clone Wars between the second and third prequel films, including *Samurai Jack* creator **Genndy Tartakovsky's** *Star Wars: The Clone Wars* animated series. *Clone Wars* was originally a limited series but eventually became ongoing serial.⁸

Suffice to say that as the law of big numbers suggests, most of the EU materials were not as well-regarded as **Zahn's** Thrawn trilogy, *Dark Empire*, or *Knights of the Old Republic*. With too much continuity to keep track of, it probably shouldn't have surprised anyone in 2014 when **Disney** announced that the new stories would not be beholden to the old EU.⁹ The way they did it, however, was interesting. The old EU is acknowledged as "legends" of the galaxy, with canon being reset to the official films and *Star Wars: The Clone Wars*, and media produced from that point forward, including the *Star Wars Rebels* animated series.¹⁰

The inclusion of *The Clone Wars* in canon is interesting. Not that it's not a quality show. It certainly is. But we've seen quality thrown out. For one, I think *The Clone Wars* and its descendant, *Rebels*, are hard to separate. If one should be in canon, the other should. But more importantly both of these series are popular with younger generations of fans. I think that's the real hook. Fans of a certain age don't seem to dismiss the Prequel Trilogy quite as harshly as those who watched the originals in the theater. I'd venture that some don't necessarily connect with the Original Trilogy as strongly, either. Many are too young to have played *Knights of the Old Republic* when it was released, though they might have played the iOS rerelease. *The Clone Wars* may be their strongest anchor to the franchise.

So that's where we are as of *The Force Awakens*. Fans can't help but notice some similarities between one of Han and Leia's children

in the EU and their child in *TFA*. Does that mean there will be other similarities? Other children? If you're hoping that Supreme Leader Snoko turns out to be Darth Plagueis, should you be combing the 2012 *Darth Plagueis* novel, despite the fact that you know it's out of continuity?¹¹ If you think the identity of Rey's family line is important, you could go back to the prequels, *Clone Wars*, and *Rebels* to find potential grandparents. Should fans go over everything they can, looking for potential clues to prop up their One True Theory?

If fandom has taught me anything, it's that people will anyway. But maybe that's not such a bad thing. With all the feelings I got from *The Force Awakens*, December 2017 seems like a long way off.¹² We need some Star Wars to watch, read, play, and talk about until then. 🐼

Endnotes

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