

## STAR TREK: THE WRATH OF FANDOM

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**SUMMARY:** When, if ever, are fans justified in being angry at franchise owners over the stories they tell? Are resentful fans just entitled crybabies, or could the truth be more complex?

### ABSTRACT:

Science fiction fandoms tend to contain significant numbers of fans who feel angry and resentful about the handling of the franchise they are fans of, because of the stories the franchises owners have told. The paper addresses the question of when, if ever, such anger and resentment are justified. Special attention will be paid to Star Trek fandom, but other fandoms will be considered, including those for Star Wars and Doctor Who.

Various proposed justifications for anger and resentment will be considered, including that franchise owners have misled fans about the stories they would tell, have wasted opportunities to produce good art, have reduced the value of older art, have engaged in a form of cultural appropriation by repurposing old characters, have caused needless offense of a sort akin to the offense of religious sensibilities, have offended against the principle of utility, and have taken advantage of unjust copywrite laws.

The paper does not champion a conclusion about when, if ever, fan anger and resentment are justified. However, it is concluded that, contrary to what is often assumed, it is not obvious that fan anger and resentment are always unjustified, and so fan anger and resentment cannot always be dismissed out of hand.

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## 1. Introduction

Science fiction fandoms tend to contain significant numbers of fans who feel angry and resentful about the handling of the franchise they are fans of, because of the stories the franchises owners have told. This paper addresses the question of when, if ever, such anger and resentment are justified. Special attention will be paid to *Star Trek* fandom, but other fandoms will be considered, including those for *Star Wars* and *Doctor Who*. The project is potentially important for the philosophy of art. Fans are, by definition, enthusiasts about art, especially popular art. If love of art and popular taste are both important topics for philosophy of art, then love of popular art must be an important topic for philosophy of art.

Various proposed justifications for anger and resentment will be considered, including that franchise owners have misled fans about the stories they would tell, have offended against utility, have wasted opportunities to produce good art, have reduced the value of older art, have engaged in a form of cultural appropriation, have caused offense of a sort akin to the offense of religious sensibilities, and have taken advantage of unjust copyright laws.

The paper does not champion a conclusion about when, if ever, fan anger and resentment are justified. However, it is concluded that, contrary to what is often assumed, it is not obvious that fan anger and resentment are always unjustified, and so fan anger and resentment cannot always be dismissed out of hand.

When I make claims about criticisms that fans have raised against artworks, I'm not suggesting that they are representative of fan opinion. Nor am I suggesting that the criticisms are accurate or justified. For our purposes, they will provide examples as we explore the question of whether fan resentment can be justified in principle. It doesn't matter for this purpose whether the criticisms we consider are good criticisms of the art or not.

Before moving to the case that fan resentment can be justified, it's worth addressing one intuitive argument that fan resentment can't be justified. According to this argument, fan resentment can't be justified because nobody owes it to another person to provide art that they like, or to refrain from producing art that they don't like, unless they have entered into a contract explicitly saying so. Just as you have no duty to make *Star Trek* fan films that satisfy the tastes of *Star Trek* fans, so too CBS has no duty to produce televised *Star Trek* that satisfies the tastes of *Star Trek* fans. Just as you have no duty to stop writing your *Star Trek* fanfic just because I dislike it, so too CBS has no duty to refrain from producing series of *Star Trek* that some fans dislike.

There are two problems with this argument. Firstly, not all justifications that can be offered for fan resentment depend on failure to make the art that fans wanted or in making art that fans didn't like. Secondly, the claim that nobody owes it to another to provide art that they like, or to refrain from producing art that they don't like, is not obvious.

## 2. False Advertising.

Of the justifications that don't rely on fans either not getting the art they wanted or getting art that they didn't like, the most obvious is that fans could be justifiably resentful if they have been misled through false advertising. It seems that many disgruntled fans received a product that was not what they were expecting. Many complaints focus on discontinuities between earlier and later instalments of a franchise. For example, some have complained that the society depicted in the TV series *Star Trek: Discovery* (2017-) is not the utopian Federation depicted in the TV series *Star Trek* (1966-1969) and developed in later shows. The grim, unfriendly crew and morally grey Federation hierarchy of *Discovery* are at odds with the warmth and idealism shown in earlier series. Cultural differences include different uniforms and the popularity of hologram communicators. The Klingons in *Discovery* are different in look, culture and religion from the Klingons encountered by Kirk, or any subsequent Klingons, and use technology that should not yet exist. The mood of the show is different to any previous *Star Trek*, with more violence, action, and swearing, but less philosophical reflection and technobabble.

Likewise, complaints have been made that the film *The Force Awakens* (2015), and even more so, *The Last Jedi* (2017), aren't consistent with the original *Star Wars* trilogy (1977-1983). Some objected that the new films changed the way the Force operates, with Rey and Leia using it without first going through the required training, and the ghost of Yoda able to use it to influence the world of the living. Other criticisms include that Admiral Holdo's starship-ramming tactics make nonsense of previous battles, and that the dominance of the First Order makes no sense given the state of politics at the end of *Return of the Jedi* (1983).

For both franchises, there have been accusations that characters from early instalments have been out of character in recent instalments. When *Discovery* brought back characters from the original *Star Trek* series, some fans complained that Spock is too emotional, Sarek too supportive of his human daughter, Captain Pike too enthusiastic, and Harry Mud too violent and sadistic. Some fans have claimed that the forlorn character of Luke Skywalker in *The Last Jedi* is not the heroic character Luke Skywalker from the original *Star Wars* trilogy. Mark Hamill, who played Luke, complained to *Cinemablend* (Dec, 2017) that, "I was the most optimistic, hopeful character in all the movies. How could he arrive at a place where he's a cynical hermit. It's beyond comprehension." He told *SensaCine* (Dec, 2017) that he had to "think of Luke as another character. Maybe he's Jake Skywalker; he's not my Luke Skywalker."

It has long been common for producers of art to interest consumers in new art by associating it with art they already like. For instance, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle (1859-1930) could sell his Sherlock Holmes stories as fast as he could write them because the character was popular. Even mere name recognition can help to sell art based on older art, even if it is very different to the original. So, for instance, Disney produced the successful comedy-musical family film *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* (1996), vaguely based on Victor Hugo's very serious 1831 novel of the same name. Tie-ins of the most tenuous sort were already common in early cinema. Fans of Charlie Chaplain were faced with a sea of imitators wearing Chaplain's iconic costumes. Likewise, the 1925 comedy *The Wizard of Oz* featured images of the iconic scarecrow, tinman and lion in its promotional material, though the characters do not appear in the film, and the closest we get is three unrelated characters briefly

wearing the iconic costumes out of sheer happenstance. In later years, fans of martial artist Bruce Lee were tempted by innumerable knock-offs, including Bruce Li, Bruce Lai, Bruce Le, Bruce Lie, Bruce Ly, and Bruce Lea.

Obviously, it can be a matter of interpretation as to how well the artwork advertised matches the artwork delivered. What looks like development of a story or franchise to one person may look like an abandonment of core principles to another. What looks like character development to some looks like character assassination to others.

Still, it is at least possible for a work of art to be so misleadingly advertised that consumers have legitimate complaints. In Mark Twain's novel *Huckleberry Finn* (1884), two conmen trick townsfolk into paying to see a play, "The Royal Nonesuch", which turns out to consist of nothing but a few minutes of capering by a naked man in colourful body paint. The townsfolk are quite rightly enraged. Likewise, if the film advertised as *The Last Jedi* was just Mark Hamill doing the same, then filmgoers could rightly complain of having been cheated. Similarly, if Disney's *The Hunchback of Notre Dame* had been marketed as a serious adaption of Victor Hugo's novel, cinemagoers might be rightly indignant.

### **3. Obligations to create art, or refrain from creating art.**

The second possible response to the argument that fan resentment can't be justified is to claim that there can be a duty to provide people with art that they like, or to refrain from producing art that they don't like, even in the absence of a contract. That there can be a duty to provide people with art they like is most intuitive in cases where the desired art has already been created. If someone owns a great painting, it's intuitive that they owe the public access to it, and even more intuitive that they shouldn't destroy it. Likewise, even if one had the copyright to all Beatles songs, it would be wrong to keep others from ever hearing them, and even worse to wipe the songs from existence. To take an example closer to home, it would at least arguably be wrong for Disney to ensure that the film *A New Hope* (1977) is no longer legally available in its original form, but only in an altered version in which Greedo fires before Han and Tatooine has zany creatures. It's even arguably wrong for them to do as they do now, refraining from publishing any high-quality editions of the original film, while distributing high-quality editions of the altered version.

Most of the interesting arguments that fan resentment can be justified by art produced or not produced are at their strongest in cases where copyright law gives the owner of an artwork or franchise a monopoly over the use of certain ideas, such as characters, stories and settings. All of the remaining arguments that fan rage can be justified will be of this sort. It should be kept in mind that almost everyone agrees that copyright on art should eventually run out, at which time all associated ideas become public property. Whatever reason justifies the eventual transfer of ownership of an intellectual property to the public, that reason potentially gives the public a claim on intellectual property that is still under copyright.

### 3.1. Utility

One possible justification for fan resentment is that owner treatment of a franchise offends against utility, with fans being the most negatively affected. According to this argument, franchise owners might act wrongly because they had an opportunity to bring a lot of happiness into the world, but instead caused needless suffering. Where this wrongdoing was foreseeable, fans have grounds for resentment.

Obviously, franchise owners are unlikely to take a direction that they can foresee would lead to less profit. But the route to most profit need not be the route to most pleasure. For instance, franchise owners might alter a franchise to broaden its appeal, even when they can foresee that some hardcore fans won't like the changes.

Applying this to real cases, some fans became unhappy from watching *Star Trek: Discovery* or *The Last Jedi* or a season of *Doctor Who*. Some fans missed out on the happiness they would have felt if these franchises had taken a direction they preferred. It could be argued that if such disutility were bad enough, after being weighed against positive factors like the pleasure others have received from the art, then the franchise owners acted wrongly. It may be further argued that if the franchise owners could have foreseen this disutility, then fans would have grounds for resentment.

Arguments from utility are strongest in cases where copyright law gives franchise owners a monopoly on the use of certain ideas, such as characters, stories, and settings. Exclusive rights to these ideas mean that unhappy or unsatisfied fans have limited opportunities to find what they wanted elsewhere. Fans who wanted a more traditional interpretation of the Federation than they received in *Star Trek: Discovery*, or a more optimistic interpretation of Luke than the one in *The Last Jedi*, can at best hope for fan productions that are low budget enough not to be seen as competition. As of 2016, Paramount's rules for *Star Trek* fan films require that they not last for more than fifteen minutes, and that no story may last for more than two instalments.

We don't usually think of anyone as having an obligation to provide us with art that we like. But then, we don't usually think of anyone as having an obligation to provide us with water, yet we might if they had a monopoly on water.

Strikingly, there is a long tradition, especially in the US, of basing copyright law on utility. The US Constitution (article 1, section 8, clause 8), for instance, justifies copyright on the grounds that it will "promote the Progress of Science and useful Arts, by securing for limited Times to Authors and Inventors the exclusive Right to their respective Writings and Discoveries".

### 3.2. Missed opportunity for good art

Another possible justification for fan resentment is that franchise owners missed an opportunity to create good art. Again, this charge carries most weight when copyright prevents others from taking said opportunity. If you think that *Discovery* could have been more artistically significant, you can't mount your own competing production. The charge of missing an opportunity for good art also carries most weight in cases where a work of art is an integral element of a larger story conveyed

by the franchise. Luke Skywalker only gets to die once, so if the story of Luke's death could have been better art than it was, nobody will ever have a chance to take that missed opportunity.

Arguably, there are cases in which the good art that fails to appear can include an overarching story of which individual films, television series or books are just a part. So, for instance, if we consider the nine core films of the *Star Wars* franchise as a single artwork, the so-called "Skywalker Saga", then a bad film in the series is not only a missed opportunity for a good film, but for a good saga composed of nine films.

### 3.3. Reduced value of older art

Another possible justification for fan resentment is that new art has reduced the value of older art. The word "ruin" crops up a lot in fan complaints online. Some fans have complained that *Discovery* "ruins" the character of Mr. Spock for the original series. Others have complained that *The Last Jedi* "ruined" Luke's character arc in the original trilogy, or that the dominance of the First Order in *The Force Awakens* ruined the rebels' triumph.

Still, it's counterintuitive that one work of art could reduce the value of another. If I write a bad sequel to *Hamlet*, or even produce a crude parody of it, it seems implausible that I've reduced the artistic value of the original. At most, one work of art might distract from the artistic value of another. If a large, flashing neon sculpture were placed directly beside the *Mona Lisa*, this would be wrong not because the *Mona Lisa* is ruined, but because the other artwork is a distraction. In the same way, maybe the portrayal of Spock in *Discovery* or Luke in *Last Jedi* distracts some fans from the artistic value of the original *Star Trek* TV series or original trio of *Star Wars* films. It isn't clear to what degree we are responsible for not distracting others from art, but that we have some such responsibility should be uncontroversial. Most of us would agree that at a concert, people should put their mobile phones on *mute*. Again, arguments of this sort will be strongest in cases where copyright prevents the creation of competing artworks that might lessen the distraction. Someone who is distracted by a depiction of Spock they dislike might become less distracted if given a depiction they like.

### 3.4. Cultural appropriation

Another possible justification for fan anger is that franchise owners are engaging in a form of cultural appropriation by exploiting the culture of previous generations. So, for instance, CBS might be accused of taking the *Star Trek* universe, already beloved by generations of fans, and distorting it inappropriately to sell their product to new generations. Or Disney might be accused of taking the story of Luke Skywalker, likewise important to generations, and twisting it to serve the story of Rey in *The Last Jedi*.

The continuation of one generation's stories by new generations is certainly not generally seen as cultural appropriation. Culture is usually seen as something that is passed on to future generations and placed in their keeping. What's more, it can't be

the case that later generations shouldn't tell new stories based on the stories of previous generations. This would be a crippling restriction for any culture. From ancient Greek heroes to Arthurian knights to modern vampire fiction, new stories have always borrowed from old ones. At most, the charge of appropriation would have to apply to cases where the spirit of the original is felt to be twisted or abandoned in some way that causes offense.

Again, arguments of this sort will be most powerful in cases where legal ownership of cultural traditions is maintained through copyright. Culture in such a case is not simply being used, but it kept from the use of others.

### **3.5. Offense akin to offense of religious sensibilities**

Another possible justification for fan anger is that works of art cause offense something akin to religious offense. In the case of religion, there are stories that are important to people, and some religious people are offended when those stories, or people who appear in them, are depicted in certain ways. Fans, likewise, are often highly attached to stories and characters from those stories. Disrespectful treatment of the character of Mr. Spock or Luke Skywalker might strike some people in something like the way that disrespectful depictions of Christ or Muhammad strike others. Indeed, there are *Star Wars* fans who take themselves to be of the Jedi religion.

It isn't obvious that we have a duty not to offend people's religious feelings with our art. Still, it seems plausible to have a duty not to offend them needlessly, and to weigh offense as a negative factor when considering whether to produce a work of art. So, for example, while it's not necessarily wrong to produce artworks that offend some Christians, like the film *The Life of Brian* (1979), the series *South Park* (1997-), or the book *Good Omens* (1990), it's fair to weigh offense along with artistic and entertainment value when deciding whether to do so.

Once again, the argument will be strongest in cases where copyright provides a monopoly over ideas. When the franchise owners are the only ones allowed to tell or continue the stories that are important to people, the art they produce has particular power to cause offense.

### **3.6. Copyright laws are unjust unless balanced by a duty to the public.**

Some philosophers have argued that copyright is intrinsically unjust. If they are right, then presumably, copyright should not be recognized by society unless the injustice is outweighed by some social good.

A common objection to copywriting is that information, being intangible, is not the sort of thing that can be owned. On this model, you can no longer own the idea of Captain Kirk than you can own a musical note or the number 3. Nimmer (1970) and Hettinger (1989) have argued that copyright is wrong because it violates freedom of speech. It prevents you, for instance, from publishing your own commercial novels about Captain Kirk or Luke Skywalker. Philosophers including Kuflik (1989) and (Hettinger 1989) argue that copyright is wrong because copying someone's information doesn't deprive them of anything. If you pirate *Discovery*, you aren't

taking anyone else's copy away, and if you are using the character of Kirk or Luke for a story, it doesn't stop anyone else from using the character. So, while taking someone's wallet is theft, because you deprive them of their wallet, taking someone's idea is no wrong at all, since they still have the idea.

Other philosophers, including Proudhon (1840) and Grant (1987) argue that copyright is wrong because ideas are always drawn, at least in part, from the culture in which they arose. Since the ideas come from society, society should own them. So, for instance, *A New Hope*, first film of the Star Wars franchise, drew on World War II films, the films of Japanese director Akira Kurosawa (1910-1998), especially *The Hidden Fortress* (1958), and on the long tradition of interplanetary science-fiction adventure, in film, print and radio, especially the adventures of Flash Gordon (1934-).

The television series *Star Trek* likewise drew on the tradition of spacefaring science fiction adventure, especially the film *Forbidden Planet* (1956), on the tradition of naval adventure fiction, particularly the adventures of Horatio Hornblower<sup>18</sup>, the tradition of Western adventure fiction, and the ancient tradition of tales of wanderers in strange lands, such as Homer's *Odyssey*, the tales of Sindbad the Sailor from *One Thousand and One Nights*, and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726).

The television series *Doctor Who*, when it launched in 1963, drew again on a long tradition of intergalactic wandering, with the Doctor taking the already familiar role of genius scientist with a private spaceship, like Dr. Zarkov from the adventures of Flash Gordon or Mr. Caver from H.G. Wells' novel *The First Men in the Moon* (1901). It also drew on the tradition of time travel science fiction, such as Well's novel *The Time Machine* (1895), popularized through radio and film, and innumerable less memorable films, pulp novels and comics. As years passed, the show drew on Greek myth, Sherlock Holmes, James Bond films, and Hollywood horror and action cinema, among many other sources.

#### 4. Conclusion

In light of the above, it is not obvious that fan resentment is always unjustified. Consequently, fan resentment cannot always be dismissed out of hand. Rather, more work must be undertaken to establish on what grounds, if any, fan resentment can be justified. The above paper will hopefully provide useful groundwork for this task.

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<sup>18</sup> There is a good discussion of *Star Trek*'s roots in the literature of sail in Stefan Rabitsch, *Star Trek and the British Age of Sail: The Maritime Influence Throughout the Series and Films*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland and Company, 2018.



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