

RESEARCH

Marvel, Star Wars and the Risk of Being a Hero: Social Responsibilities for Transmedia Storytellers in the Age of Collective Journey

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In 2018, James Gunn and Chuck Wendig both lost lucrative jobs as storytellers for the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU) and Star Wars, respectively, as a result of their aggressively political social media communications. This paper argues that these events can be understood in part by Gunn and Wendig's social media profiles being blurred with their role as custodians for their respective franchises, and their interactions being out of sync with the aspirational themes associated with the MCU and Star Wars storyworlds. Compounding this issue is the significant structural evolution that modern, popular and commercial stories are undergoing, towards a collective journey model. Collective journey stories are an evolved version of traditional hero's journey tales, and showcase the importance of listening and negotiating to drive systemic, collective action. Such stories have increased capacity to improve the civic imagination and provide symbols that individuals can draw from to manifest meaningful change. The appearance of these stories in popular commercial entertainment is a reflection of our increasingly digital lives and heightened connectivity, as well as a by-product of our increasing tendency to transmedially tell stories. The professional troubles Gunn and Wendig encountered are a result of them contrasting this storytelling modality, and can be understood in the context of a semiotic cultural shift, as we collectively come to better understand the impact of the Internet and our participatory digital culture.

Keywords: Marvel; Star Wars; transmedia; collective journey; civic imagination

Introduction

Our story begins a short time ago... on a social media platform not too far away... in the year 2018 and on Twitter to be exact. It was during this time that two prominent storytellers, from the two largest commercial entertainment franchises in Western culture, lost their jobs in separate, but similar incidents: James Gunn, the writer and director behind Marvel's *Guardians of the Galaxy* films, and Chuck Wendig, the author behind a number of Star Wars novels and comics produced shortly after Disney took control of the franchise.

Both storytellers had produced stories for their respective franchises that were socially progressive and inclusive, even beyond the standards already set within each storyworld. *Guardians of the Galaxy* was the first cinematic entry in the MCU to introduce a team of characters and foregrounded a diverse cast. Gunn considered his film to be about finding strength in others, describing the plot as, 'adults who were abused as children starting to heal, uneasily and in fits and starts, by building relationships with other adults who were abused as children' (Gunn 2018). In his Star Wars novel *Aftermath*, Wendig introduced the Imperial turncoat Sinjir Rath Velus, the first majorly foregrounded LGBTIQ hero in the new Star Wars canon. In response to fans who were disgruntled by his inclusion of a gay character, Wendig pointed towards the inclusive ethos of the Jedi to defend this decision (Wendig 2015).

Gunn and Wendig each ran into trouble professionally following their continued use of social media to speak out habitually and aggressively against the Trump government. Take for instance, the following Twitter exchange between Gunn and a fan, beginning with Gunn's politically themed tweet:

Transcription of Trump with anyone he's appointed to anything.
 TRUMP: Do you know anything about the position?
 CANDIDATE: No, sir, I do not, nothing.
 TRUMP: Are you on my dick?
 CANDIDATE: Yes, sir, I am completely, always on your dick, forever.
 TRUMP: You're in.
 (Gunn 2017b)

This tweet prompted Twitter user Captain Common Sense, who features Captain America in his profile picture and is ostensibly a Marvel fan, to reply, 'Director James Gunn losing fans with every one-sided political tweet he makes. You're alienating half your audience and I'm losing interest fast! @MarvelStudios @WaltDisneyCo' (Sense, 2017). To which Gunn responded:

In my years on social networking I have never spoken out politically. But we're in a national crisis with an incompetent President forging a full-blown attack on facts and journalism in the style of Hitler and Putin. I'm okay with losing fans with my choice to speak out. (Gunn 2017a)

In July of 2018 right-wing trolls targeted Gunn in a social media attack, resurfacing and bringing to public attention highly offensive tweets Gunn had posted years earlier, in which he flippantly made fun of serious issues like paedophilia and rape. In response, Marvel's parent company Disney chose to publicly fire him.

Likewise, Wendig has a history of being outspoken on social media, particularly on political topics. In October 2018 and in response to Trump's appointment of a Supreme Court judge, who had been accused of sexual assault, Wendig tweeted, 'Winter is coming, you callous fucknecks, prolapsed assholes, grotesque monsters, racists, rapists, wretched abusers and vengeful petty horrors.' (Wendig 2018a). The tweet attracted attention and outrage from right-wing personalities. Wendig's editor at Marvel chose to fire him based on the negativity and vulgarity in which he expressed himself. Wendig claimed there was no prior warning, and was surprised by the news given his history of speaking his mind (Wendig 2018b). There's a level of irony in noting that while Gunn and Wendig's commercial creative works had focused on social inclusion, negotiation and overcoming differences, their divisive and forceful personal communications created situations that lead to their professional woes. However, it was questioned in the media whether the firing of Gunn and Wendig was a result of Disney kowtowing to the demands of a vocal, outraged minority.

For the sake of context, it is pertinent to mention that only a few months prior, in May 2018, comedian Roseanne Barr was sensationally fired from her newly resurrected television show *Roseanne*. Barr tweeted a message directed at Barack Obama's advisor that was considered by many to be racist. ABC Studios, owned by parent company Disney, publicly fired the comedian. Due to the intended target of the tweet, Barr's pro-Trump government views, Barr's fictional *Roseanne* character being a Trump supporter, the traditionally strong Republican-voter support for the show, and Trump's own vocal support for the show and the comedian, the public discussion of Barr's firing became immensely politicized. Whether accurate or not, Disney firing the proudly Conservative comedian was seen by many right-wing personalities as a political move by Hollywood to silence non-liberal popular media.

Barr, Gunn and Wendig were all ultimately working for Disney-owned companies. It is reasonable to speculate that the firing of Barr, and the public debate it created around politics and censorship, as well as Disney's interests in being perceived as a family-friendly brand, may have influenced the subsequent decisions to fire Gunn and Wendig, who were both making overtly left-wing political statements. However for the purposes of this research, we will focus on the storytelling-related aspects of this situation, and how it connects more broadly with evolving cultural semiotics.

Social media, identities and play within commercial storytelling

Gunn and Wendig's use of social media for overtly political messages was complicated by the fact that their online identities had become blurred with their professional role as custodians of Marvel and Star Wars storyworlds. While realistically this is nothing new – brand ambassadors have always had to consider the commercial implications of their words when making public statements – social media has become an important site of play within modern entertainment for storytellers and fans alike (Gray 2010; Jenkins 2006a; Jenkins 2006b). Our participatory culture allows the paratextual expansion of narratives and storyworlds through social media-based play and interaction, and Gunn and Wendig's use of the same space to broadcast such stark views clearly upset some fans.

We see the importance of social media as a site for developing story through both of the storytellers' social media practices. Wendig maintains a strong Twitter presence and a personal blog in which he discusses and offers insights into his creative works, and Gunn interacts regularly with fans through social media, adding more narrative layers to his Marvel films by answering questions and addressing theories.

Across the commercial entertainment industry, we see that the actors who portray characters in large franchises are often involved in this kind of play too. Brie Larson, the actor who portrays Captain Marvel in the Marvel Cinematic Universe (MCU), often uses her social media presence to playfully engage with the strong, female aspects of her fictional character. For example, after the release of *Avengers: Endgame*, Larson posted an image of herself on Instagram, out of costume, casually holding the prop of Thor's hammer *Mjolnir*, with the caption 'Not to be whatever, but...told you I could lift it 😊' (Larson, 2019). Her post is a casual call back to Captain Marvel lifting the hammer in *Avengers: Endgame*, a feat generally only limited to the male character Thor, re-emphasising Captain Marvel's power and worthiness within the MCU. Larson holding the hammer in civilian attire makes a broader statement about gender equality and evokes the feminist philosophy attached to her character. In response to the post, Natalie Portman, who plays the role of Jane Foster in the *Thor* films, and who will be wielding Mjolnir as a female version of Thor in the upcoming *Thor: Love and Thunder*, commented, 'Hey muscles, easy with my hammer!!! ❤️👉❤️👉❤️👉❤️' (Portman 2019). For fans, this banter between actors provides a playful extension of the fictional storyworld, teasing future adventures to come, and blurring the lines between the actors' fictional and real identities.

Likewise, actor Ryan Reynolds, who is both the actor and one of the primary creative forces behind the cinematic portrayal of Deadpool, continues to push the boundaries of entertainment and play using social media. After the massive commercial success of Marvel's *Avengers: Infinity War*, Reynolds notably tweeted the image of a fake letter, sent from Tony Stark to Deadpool, denying Deadpool entry into the Avengers (Reynolds 2018). While Reynolds framed this as a fun means to congratulate those involved in the production of *Infinity War*, is also served as a clever paratext that ostensibly signalled that Deadpool and the X-Men existed within the fictional storyworld of the MCU, during a time when the characters could not cross over due to the cinematic rights to Deadpool sitting with 20th Century Fox (prior to Disney purchasing the film studio and acquiring the rights to Deadpool in 2019).

Play is inseparable from storytelling (Dena 2009) and Gunn and Wendig's political communications were inextricably linked to their site of social media play, and therefore their fictional storyworlds and roles as custodians, by association. While they may have believed that their communications were in line with the ethos of their creative works, there is no guarantee that paratextual elements of communication will be received by audiences in the manner in which they were intended (Gray, 2010; Konzal, 2011). Clearly some fans did not find their words to be consistent with the values of their commercial storyworlds.

At the same time, we need to acknowledge the complex, corporate realities of the social media environment. It is wise to question whether these sorts of exchanges between storytellers, actors and fans are truly participative, or more strategically interactive and performative manoeuvres on the part of the parent companies for which Gunn, Larson and Reynolds work. As Caldwell (2013) notes, corporations use social media strategically to hype blockbusters, and the seemingly transparent view behind the scenes of a Hollywood production can be a calculated way to grow fan loyalty and leverage the free labour produced by fan engagement.

Through this lens, we could interpret James Gunn's fan interactions as a means for him to extend his intellectual and commercial control over his cosmic corner of the MCU, Brie Larson and Natalie Portman's banter can be viewed as a strategy to build hype for their next MCU films, and Ryan Reynolds' tweet can be read as a means to boost the commercial profile of his Deadpool character by leveraging off the world-building achievements of the MCU. Although it is likely that these examples are a fusion of both personal and corporate motivations, it can be difficult to tell where human agency ends and corporate control begins in these kinds of communications (Caldwell 2014, p. 144).

Storytelling and the civic imagination

Nevertheless, fans will utilize and remix the signs and symbols derived from commercial entertainment to tell their own stories, and as a means to form communities around aspirational ideas. We can see this occurring across a range of examples. The #CarolCorps use Kelly Sue DeConnick's comic book version of Captain Marvel (which the cinematic version is heavily based on) as a means to discuss and celebrate the feminist philosophy DeConnick imbued into the character. Fans created fan art, shipping the two female MCU characters Captain Marvel and Valkyrie and promoting LGBTIQ inclusion in the MCU, with Brie Larson and fellow actor Tessa Thompson happily retweeting the content. Fans and actors banded together using the

#WheresRey and #WheresBlackWidow hashtags to push for greater representation of female characters in Star Wars and MCU merchandise, respectively.

This kind of play can have significant cultural implications through its capacity to influence the 'civic imagination' (Jenkins 2019b). The civic imagination is a term Jenkins uses to describe our ability to collectively dream of a better future, unencumbered by the realities of our daily existence. Jenkins argues that only through such open-minded visualisation, can we collectively create opportunities to advance society beyond what we currently believe is possible. In this way, fictional stories can allow the expression of radical ideas. For example, *Star Trek* offered a generation of fans an example of what real racial harmony could look like, in an era where civil rights were still not established in America (Jenkins 2019b, para. 11).

Furthermore, modern audiences look to popular commercial stories for guidance on managing power and responsibility, in the same way that previous generations looked to biblical narratives and great morality tales (Jenkins, Ito, & Boyd 2016). Stories, such as those contained in Star Wars and the MCU offer signs and symbols that individuals can use as a means to discuss and navigate real-world issues. Consider for example, the Twitter post James Gunn shared, showcasing the Guardians of the Galaxy being used to support positive action on climate change. The image showed a placard spotted at a climate change rally featuring Rocket Raccoon asking 'What has the planet ever done for you?! Why would you want to save it?!' and Peter Quill responding 'Because I'm one of the idiots who lives on it!!!' (Gunn, 2019). Similarly, Star Wars actor Mark Hamill used Twitter to draw public attention to the story of a young boy in California who refused to retaliate against his bullies because it wasn't the Jedi way. Hamill endorsed the boy's behaviour, 'I'm so proud of you for showing that you can be a Jedi in real life. Congratulations, Aiden- The Force will be with YOU... Always!!!' (Hamill, 2018). Likewise actor Chris Evans, drawing from the authority and popularity of his cinematic portrayal of Captain America, tweeted in response to the racist attacks in Charlottesville: 'To the younger generation still choosing a path: dont [sic] be consumed by anger, fear and hate. Its [sic] a lie peddled by ignorance. Love is the truth' (Evans, 2017).

It is important that corporations and storytellers recognize the educational potential of these large-scale commercial stories and their capacity to enhance the civic imagination. While Gunn and Wendig are entitled to their opinion, and likely felt compelled to use their influential platforms to call out what they considered to be unethical behaviour, the manner in which they did so failed to capture the same aspirational tone as their own creative works, and the way in which others have effectively reutilized them.

Gomez (2018) argues that more than ever, modern storytelling relies on the ability for storytellers to listen, in order to effectively guide and redirect audiences to an understanding. Subsequently, there are commercial gains to be made for corporations that listen, and act on, fans' participative feedback. Indeed savvy storytellers will create greater opportunities to encourage participative fan dialogue in order to generate and promote new aspirational themes (Bernstein 2013; Gomez 2017b). Gunn and Wendig would have had a better chance of making their views heard if they had found ways to express themselves, while bringing their audience along for the journey.

Our stories are changing with our culture

To better understand Gunn and Wendig's plight, we should consider the evolving state of our culture, and the role of storytelling within it. As Hartley and McWilliam (2009) state, '[a]s contemporary societies move from manufacturing industry to knowledge-based service economies, the entire array of large-scale and society-wide communication is undergoing a kind of paradigm shift' (p. 4). We can see these shifts when we consider modern storytelling from a semiotic, digital and mythological perspective.

Semiotics teaches us that we can consider storytelling to be a subset of our broader cultural communications, and that all communications are a part of our continuous cultural efforts to describe and understand our lived experience (Lotman 1990). After significant events or what Lotman (2009) refers to as culture explosions (of which the advent of the Internet would be a good example), culture goes through a deep period of self-analysis to understand our changed reality. Important realisations are then communicated, through the use of repetition across different media, in order to keep this knowledge active within our 'non-hereditary collective memory' (Lotman, Uspensky, & Mihaychuk 1978, p. 213) and to integrate it into contemporary culture (Ojamaa & Torop, 2015 p. 63).

This semiotic process is therefore a fundamentally educational phenomenon for all members of culture. Our experience of culture and capacity to describe ourselves is informed by the messages we receive through cultural self-analysis (Ojamaa & Torop 2015, p. 71). However, following the advent of the Internet Hartley and McWilliam (2009) observe that as we continue to come to terms with our increasingly digital culture,

'there is too much attention to self-expression; not enough to the growth of knowledge' (p. 15). Our culture is arguably situated in a state of interrupted semiotic flow. We don't have to look far to find examples of individuals using social media to focus on self-expression above all else. Gunn and Wendig's use of Twitter, and the retaliation and harassment they received in response, speaks to this fact. However, perhaps Gunn and Wendig's public firing as a result of their actions also demonstrates that there is a cultural shift occurring. Perhaps we are entering phase of semiotic course correction and a period of cultural self-analysis.

We can look to the impact our digital culture is having on modern storytelling techniques for clues. The rich field of transmedia studies tells us that while transmedia storytelling is not new, stories are increasingly being told in transmedial fashion, faster than historically possible, because of our access to participative technologies (Freeman & Gambarato 2019; Jenkins 2006a; Jenkins 2019a; Scolari, Bertetti & Freeman 2014). Transmedia storytelling was originally defined as the ability to tell a story across multiple media, with each new element adding something unique to the experience and drawing from the strengths of the medium on which it is based, resulting in an overall experience greater than the sum of its parts (Jenkins 2006a). While much discussion initially centred on the ability for transmedia stories to expand in novel ways using the strengths of a variety of media, it is important to also remember that transmedia storytelling allows the repetition of core ideas across media, performing the semiotic function of reinforcing important educational messages. Jenkins reminds us of this fact in the final phrase of his most recent definition of the phenomenon:

Transmedia approaches are multimodal (in that they deploy the affordances of more than one medium), intertextual (in that each of these platforms offers unique content that contributes to our experience of the whole) and dispersed (in that the viewer constructs an understanding of the core ideas through encounters across multiple platforms) (Jenkins 2016, para.5).

While there is a greater capacity for stories to be spread through our use of technology, in terms of content, the stories that are most likely to spread transmedially require a number of key elements. Firstly, from a production point of view, Gomez has consistently advocated for the importance of aspirational themes and drivers within stories (Bernstein 2013, paragraph 4; Van Gool 2010). Our yearning to grow and explore is central to the human condition, and setting up exciting narrative possibilities opens up practical opportunities to engage audiences and allow for a story to spread across media. Secondly, stories need to connect with the aspirational needs of the culture, at the right time. In the same way that Superman and Captain America became aspirational symbols for Western culture in World War II, the films *Black Panther* and *Captain Marvel* have connected with traditionally underserved audiences, people with African heritage and women respectively, in the modern age of cinema. As Scolari et al. (2014) explain, '[t]he expansion of a narrative is thus at the same time a social, commercial and semiotic necessity' (p. 2). Good stories will spread, when told at the right time. Finally, stories must contribute to the civic imagination. Stories that allow us to imagine things fancifully and without limitation, beyond the restrictions of our lived realities, give us the language to articulate a brighter future, or as Jenkins (2019b) states, '[t]o move beyond the tyranny of the possible, we need to embrace the civic imagination' (paragraph 27). For these reasons, good storytellers must be acutely aware of the heart that powers their storyworld.

We should also consider storytelling from a mythological perspective. Joseph Campbell formulated the monomyth, commonly known as the hero's journey model, through his extensive research into the recurring patterns appearing in myths across cultures and throughout the ages (Campbell 1949). These are stories told, often in environments of limited information, to communicate key instructions to ensure the survival of a tribe, and allow this information to be passed down through the generations. These stories often reinforce the preservation of social structures, and offer tribe members a means through which to understand their lived existence.

In its most simplistic form, the structure of a hero's journey story is as follows: an individual is called to adventure, and often with the aid of a mentor, overcomes a significant challenge for the benefit of society, and on successful completion of the task, returns to society a transformed person. The hero's journey is cyclical in structure, provides a singular, reassuring solution to overcoming a social issue and reaffirming social order, and the protagonist achieves success, often through conflict.

Since Campbell's model has been heavily linked to *Star Wars*, Hollywood producers have used the hero's journey as a formula for creating commercial entertainment. Over time, we have seen Hollywood use the model to primarily tell stories of Caucasian males, with individuals of other genders and ethnicities often

relegated to supporting roles or motivating forces for the protagonist. Protagonists commonly use conflict as a means to solve a problem, whether it be the action heroes of the nineties or the bromance protagonists of the 'aughts. In this way, this storytelling model can be used as a means to reinforce the dominant social order. However it is worth remembering that Campbell believed the hero's journey existed to suit the needs of our culture, and he expected it would evolve at a time when our culture did too (Campbell 1988).

The rise of collective journey

Jeff Gomez argues that that time is now, and on the back of the cultural explosion of the Internet and our increased connectivity to each other, we can see popular stories changing at a structural level to reflect our existence in the age of information abundance. Subsequently, 'the standard tropes of classic storytelling have begun to feel slow, obvious, and dated' (Gomez 2017c, paragraph 3), and we see a new dynamic model emerging, which Gomez calls collective journey.

This new storytelling modality is structured less like a simple circle, and more like the haphazard branches of a lightning bolt. Collective journey stories showcase people working collectively and navigating vast knowledge systems, to create lasting and systemic change. These stories are more representative of modern society and include characters from different racial, gender and sexual backgrounds, with different points of view. Such stories are not wholly dependent on conflict or individuals working in isolation to overcome 'right and wrong'. Instead characters must use their skills in listening and negotiating, to recognise and draw from the skills of others, and drive strong collective action in morally complex environments. As a result, these stories are not focused solely on the achievements of an individual and can take on non-linear directions. Heroes can die, the storyworld can be endless, and all individuals are called to demonstrate greater self-efficacy in a more complex depiction of social structure (Gomez, 2017a).

Gomez points to television shows such as *Game of Thrones*, *Orange is the New Black* and *The Walking Dead* as examples of this emergent storytelling model. We can also see these traits appearing in the Star Wars and MCU franchises when we look at all of their transmedia elements as a whole.

While George Lucas' original Star Wars trilogy is very much rooted in notions of the hero's journey and the transformative journey of Luke Skywalker, under Disney's ownership the franchise is demonstrating more traits of collective journey. The new slate of transmedia stories, including films, cartoons, comics, novels, video games and more, have been foregrounding protagonists of increased racial, gender and sexual diversity working in teams. In the events of *The Last Jedi*, we witness the literal death of Luke Skywalker, the mythological saviour figure, and see him relinquish his control of the force to the universe, making it explicit that anyone has the capacity to become a Jedi. We also explore more complex moralities through characters such as Kylo Ren and Rey, who are seen at times struggling to understand the correct course of action, and DJ, who takes a more neutral and self-serving stance amidst the ongoing war.

Granted the Extended Universe (EU) that originally grew around Lucas' films did achieve similar accomplishments, but the EU was also considered by Lucas and Lucasfilm to be supplementary to Lucas' central story. In the Disney era, these notions of diversity and collective action are becoming increasingly foregrounded, in stories like *Rogue One* and *Star Wars Rebels*, which is important for a franchise with such significant global appeal. Showcasing characters of greater diversity, operating with greater agency, creates a broader range of commercial and cultural symbols that individuals can draw from and remix to tell their own local stories. Star Wars' capacity to advance the civic imagination is greatly enhanced.

Similarly the MCU began as a number of singular hero's journey stories about the Caucasian, male heroes Iron Man, Hulk, Thor and Captain America, which led to the groundbreaking cinematic team up of heroes in *The Avengers*. After the success of this commercial experiment, it became increasingly apparent to storytellers and audiences alike that the team was comprised primarily of white males, and that more diverse characters were required to sustain the narrative integrity of the MCU storyworld moving forward. The growing transmedia sprawl of the MCU franchise demanded a diversity of characters and locations, in order for storytellers to continue telling interesting and non-repetitive stories. Over time it also became clear that featuring protagonists of different genders and ethnicities would open up significant, untapped commercial markets too.

By the time we reach *Avengers: Endgame*, we see an MCU that requires characters to work collectively to overcome the threat of Thanos and what he represents, we see characters negotiating and repairing broken relationships for the greater good, and learn that even the most prominent of heroes can die. Moving forward, the projects announced as part of the MCU's Phase Four indicate that diversity, teamwork and moral complexity will only continue to become heightened in the MCU.

Conclusions

Returning once again to Gunn and Wendig, we can see now that their personal styles for criticising the Trump government were promoting self-expression through conflict, in classic hero's journey style. Their personal messages not only missed an opportunity to add to the aspirational quality of their creative works, but also did not functionally correlate with the commercial stories they were inextricably associated with, especially on social media.

Wendig remained defiant in his views, and has since moved on to other high-profile projects. Gunn also moved on to other projects, including production of *The Suicide Squad* for competitor Warner Bros., but demonstrated significant self-analysis and attrition through his subsequent media interviews and social media posts. Gunn also received public support from fans and a range of prominent storytellers, including the ethnically and politically diverse case of actors who portray the Guardians of the Galaxy in his films. Ultimately Gunn was rehired, and while it would be naïve to attribute this purely to his actions or the public support he received (there are likely significant commercial reasons why Disney chose to bring him back to the MCU from Warner Bros.), it is interesting to observe his journey through a cultural lens. Gunn's own redemption story echoes similarities with the scripted journeys of the fictional Guardians of the Galaxy characters.

From the examples of James Gunn and Chuck Wendig encountering professional difficulties, we can see the risks, as well as the potential opportunities, of being a commercial storyteller in the modern age. There are clearly commercial and professional benefits available to corporations and storytellers willing to listen, and to observe the traits of our evolving storytelling structures. Modern stories are evolving to reflect our digital lives, and these stories have increased capacity to spread aspirational ideas, and improve our civic imagination. As these stories focus on our capacity for working collectively, enhancing civic ties and drawing from the skills of others, storytellers and fans also need to remember the responsibility we have to each other in our communications as we navigate our evolving cultural experiences.

Gunn and Wendig's attempts to create social change did not correlate with the messages or strategies that are increasingly being depicted in the Star Wars and MCU storyworlds. Each had the opportunity to communicate in a more aspirational manner, to acknowledge broader themes of social inclusion and individual agency, and to set a standard for improving civic ties. If they had spoken from their perspective in a way that showcased an ability to converse and interact with all people, not just those with the same world outlook, they could have tapped into the rich themes of collective journey and continued to contribute towards the civic imagination. While there is obviously no guarantee that this approach would cease similar disagreements being raised from those who took issue with Gunn and Wendig's communications in the first place, at a culturally systemic level, there is a greater chance that their ideas would have been better received by being more thematically consistent with the Star Wars and MCU storyworlds.

The story of Gunn and Wendig suggests there are broader cultural machinations at play. Following the cultural explosion of the Internet do incidents such as these suggest that our culture is moving beyond a phase of self-expression to a phase of greater self-analysis? If that is the case, then perhaps it's also worth asking whether now is a good time to act like a hero.

Competing Interests

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