10 The not-so *Fantastic Four* franchise

A critical history of the comic, the films, and the Disney/Fox merger

Robert Alan Brookey and Nan Zhang

When reviewing the 21st Century Fox 2015 release of the *Fantastic Four* franchise, Peter Travers of the *Rolling Stone* pulled no punches: “The latest reboot of the *Fantastic Four*—the cinematic equivalent of malware—is worse than worthless. It not only scrapes the bottom of the barrel; it knocks out the floor and sucks audiences into a black hole of soul-crushing, coma-inducing dullness” (2015, 1). Travers was not alone in his judgment. Todd McCarthy, in the *Hollywood Reporter*, characterized the film as “mad-denyingly lame and unimaginative” (2015, 1). *The New York Times* critic A. O. Scott was so displeased with the film that he willfully and admittedly recycled material from his review of the 2005 release of the *Fantastic Four* that he deemed “fantastic only in its commitment to mediocrity” (2015, 2). These critics’ opinions did not differ much from the public’s assessment of the film. While *Fantastic Four* (2015) only generated a 9 percent rating on *Rotten Tomatoes*, the website’s audience score topped out at 18 percent. These scores placed the film on the website’s list of the worst films of 2015 along such cinematic fare as *Paul Blart: Mall Cop 2* (2015).

The real damage, however, was felt at the box office: The film only grossed \$25 million its opening week, and then only went on to generate \$167 million worldwide.¹ Given that the reported budget for the film was \$120 million, and taking into account the unreported promotion budget, there is a good chance the film lost money. One thing is for certain: Any plans to produce a sequel from this reboot were scrapped by Fox.

One of the more visible critics of the film, Richard Roeper of the *Chicago Sun-Times*, dismissed the *Fantastic Four* as one of the “lesser teams in the Marvel Universe” (2015, 1). Anyone with a passing understanding of the history of Marvel comics knows that this is a mischaracterization. Still, Roeper’s comment begs the question: Just how far has this franchise fallen? A rather definitive answer to that question came a few weeks prior, when Marvel published what was described as the “Triple Sized Final Issue 645” (Ching 2014, 1) of the *Fantastic Four* series (Robinson and Kirk 2015). While Marvel was a bit cagey about discussing the cancellation, Tom Brevoort, Senior Vice President of Publishing, seemed to allude to the decision on his *Tumblr* when he wrote:

There are only so many hours in the day, and so many initiatives you can have going at once. So you need to pick and choose where you want to spend your time and your efforts. [...] If you had two things, and on one you earned 100% of the revenues from the efforts that you put into making it, and the other you earned a much smaller percentage for the same amount of time and effort, you'd be more likely to concentrate more heavily on the first, wouldn't you?

(Brevoort 2014, 5)

Brevoort's rhetorical question is indeed rhetorical because it argues for the legitimacy of the commercial exigencies that drive the comic book industry. In the contemporary media landscape, comic book characters, and superheroes in particular, are extremely valuable intellectual property. In fact, the emergence of Marvel Studios, as we will discuss later, was orchestrated as an effort to capitalize on Marvel characters for the action figure toy market. We should also remember that Brevoort works for a company that was acquired by Disney in 2009, and that acquisition can be viewed not just as the ownership of a company, but also as the cultivation of intellectual property. Indeed, since Bob Iger took over as CEO of Disney in 2005, the company has been very acquisitive, buying up Pixar and Lucasfilm in addition to Marvel. These acquisitions can also be viewed as the accumulation of intellectual property, as both companies produce films that generate a good deal of ancillary products. The fact that Brevoort believes comics artists should primarily focus on properties that yield a great percentage of various revenue streams indicates that he is truly a company man, for both Marvel and Disney.

The decision to discontinue publication of the *Fantastic Four* proved to be a temporary one, because on 8 August 2018, a new *Fantastic Four* comic emerged, curiously resetting the publication history of the comic with the issue designation "#1" (Slott and Pichelli 2018). It would strain credulity to think that this reemergence of the *Fantastic Four* was not in some way related to Disney's acquisition of Fox. Indeed, the history of these two events lines up in an interesting manner. To put a finer point on it, while the *Fantastic Four* is not the prime motive for this acquisition, Disney's interest in Fox clearly had a great deal to do with what happened with the *Fantastic Four*, both its death and resurrection.

In this chapter, we provide a brief history of Disney, highlighting how and why the company began to value intellectual property early on. We will also discuss how Marvel Entertainment became Marvel Studios, and then a company that Disney was willing to purchase for over \$4 billion. We then outline the unfortunate history of the *Fantastic Four* film franchise as executed by Fox Studios and explain how the *Fantastic Four* became a property caught up in the corporate machinations between Disney and Fox.

Our method is best described as a critical historical/descriptive analysis, one that links historic events to contemporary outcomes. Our theoretical

lens is decidedly informed by political economy, or at least the part of that school that focuses on how corporate interests shape production and content (Mosco 1996). Our purpose is to show how corporate ownership and intellectual property rights drove the decision regarding the *Fantastic Four*. One of the outcomes of our inquiry is to challenge the dubious division between the study of political economy and the study of fan culture. In fact, we hope to demonstrate that fans can be active and empowered when they identify and challenge corporate decisions that impact fan cultures.

The trouble with Oswald

Walt Disney's animation career began in Kansas City, but in 1923, he decided to move to Hollywood to make it big. Like many who made this move before him, and after, Disney first struggled to find employment and recognition as an animator. After some qualified success with the *Alice Comedies* series (1923–1927), which combined animation and live action footage, Disney landed a contract with Universal to produce the *Oswald the Lucky Rabbit* cartoons (1927–1938). The contract was negotiated with Disney's distributor Charles Mintz, but Disney's charge was rather vague: Universal wanted a cartoon about a rabbit. Disney and his fledgling animation team created the character of Oswald, and the cartoon series proved popular with audiences and critics. This success, however, did not seem to generate respect from either Mintz or Universal. In fact, when it came time to negotiate the contract for the next series of Oswald cartoons, Mintz dropped his price from \$2,250 per cartoon to \$1,800. When Disney balked at this significant drop in compensation, Mintz threatened to take both the studio and the series away from him. Disney soon learned that most of the members of his animation team had already committed to Mintz and that Universal owned the intellectual property rights to Oswald (Thomas 1994). In other words, Mintz was already set to move forward with the production of more Oswald cartoons, without Disney's involvement.²

It was a humiliating loss for Disney, particularly given that he had to work with his disloyal animation team to finish his commitment to the Oswald series. Yet, simultaneously and surreptitiously, Disney was working on a cartoon entitled *Plane Crazy* (1928), which featured his new creation Mickey Mouse. Unfortunately, *Plane Crazy* failed to find a distributor, but when Mickey Mouse later appeared in the sound production cartoon *Steamboat Willie*, released in 1928, a cultural icon was born (Thomas 1994).

Disney learned an important lesson from this experience; the ownership of intellectual property is necessary for artistic control. Disney would also learn that intellectual property was a valuable commodity. Mickey Mouse began to move merchandise shortly after *Steamboat Willie* appeared in theaters, with the Ingersoll company producing its first Mickey Mouse watch in 1933 (Thomas 1994). Indeed, Disney was a pioneer in the practices of licensing and distributing ancillary products, and those practices have

been expanded and accelerated over the years. More than 50 years after his passing, the Disney company is still committed to the development and exploitation of intellectual property, and any visit to a Disney park reveals how much space is devoted to the retailing of these ancillary products.

Consequently, Disney as a company has become notoriously protective and litigious when its intellectual property is concerned. A few years ago, the Walt Disney Company thought nothing of suing day-care centers in Florida for painting Disney characters on their walls, or going after any other companies (either small or large) that appropriated their intellectual property (Fort Lauderdale News and Sun-Sentinel 1989). More recently, a Michigan baker was sued by Disney for using Marvel and Star Wars characters on his cakes for copyright and trademark infringement (Gardner 2015). In other words, Disney's early lessons are not lost on the current custodians of his company and have clearly informed the company's corporate culture. It is not difficult to see how this commitment to intellectual property, and the understanding of its value, has informed the acquisitions the company has made over the past years.

Soon after Bob Iger took over as CEO of Disney, one of his first major actions was to acquire Pixar in a \$7.4 billion deal. The significance of this deal was compounded by the fact that Iger's predecessor, Michael Eisner, failed to negotiate with then Pixar CEO Steve Jobs on a contract to continue the relationship between Disney and Pixar. Disney and Pixar had enjoyed a successful collaboration beginning with *Toy Story* (1995), but this success also contributed to its undoing. After the success of *Toy Story*, Jobs had signed a multipicture contract with Disney that allowed the companies to share costs and revenue, with the provision that Disney received a cut of the box office receipts prior to the division of this revenue stream. Jobs was looking to secure a new contract, with more favorable terms for Pixar, and Eisner was unwilling to meet his demands (Brookey and Westerfelhaus 2005). Consequently, Jobs had broken off talks with Eisner and was negotiating with the other studios for a distribution deal for Pixar. With Eisner out of the company, Iger was free to negotiate with Jobs, and the deal they cut not only allowed Disney to buy Pixar outright but also gave Jobs a seat on the Disney board and a sizeable share of Disney stock (Holson 2006). Iger's move to acquire Pixar secured all the existing intellectual property associated with the Disney/Pixar collaboration (*Toy Story*, *A Bug's Life* [1998], *Monsters, Inc.* [2001], and *Finding Nemo* [2003]), as well as any and all future productions from the animation studio.

Disney's next big acquisition was the \$4.24 billion purchase of Marvel in 2009. About a decade earlier, Marvel Studios had emerged and had begun developing some significant film franchises, including *X-Men*, *Spider-Man*, and *Iron Man*. Disney's acquisition has accelerated the production of Marvel Studio films, drawing on a variety of Marvel characters and combinations of those characters, as well as an expansion into television production and live stage production. Disney's 2012 acquisition of Lucasfilm

has yielded a similar expansion in the production of content tied to the *Star Wars* franchise. One of the primary drivers of these acquisitions was the intellectual property that already had a dedicated fan base and could thereby be deployed across a variety of ancillary markets (toys, clothing, and videogames) in which Disney already had a sizable footprint.

Disney's acquisition of Fox is a bit more complex. For example, Fox is a studio with a history as old as Disney's, and it has been a major production film studio for several decades. After it was taken over by Rupert Murdoch in the mid-1980s, the film studio became a subsidiary of the larger Fox/Newscorp conglomerate. That conglomerate was then split into two companies in 2013, with the publishing concerns spun off into News Corporation and the media holdings renamed 21st Century Fox (Ellingson 2013). The acquisition of 21st Century Fox secures for Disney the Fox film and television production studios, many of its cable channels, and international systems such as Sky and Star India, but it does not include the Fox broadcast network, the Fox Sports channels, nor the Fox News or Fox Business channels. Where Marvel is concerned, the acquisition means that Marvel will now retrieve the film rights to some important properties including *X-Men* and *Deadpool*, but the circumstances surrounding the rights to the *Fantastic Four* are more complex, as we will discuss later. Although clearly not the only factor, like the other Disney acquisitions, the Marvel intellectual property was likely an important driver for the \$71 billion deal. In fact, the recent history of the *Fantastic Four* franchise provides support for this claim. Before we make that case, however, it may be helpful to revisit the events that turned Marvel into a film studio.

The rise of Marvel Studios

Marvel Comics was founded in 1939, but its brand did not really begin to emerge until 1961, when Stan Lee and Jack Kirby began developing *Spider-Man* and the *Fantastic Four*. In fact, these were some of the first Marvel characters to make the jump to other media, with the first Marvel cartoons and animated television shows appearing in 1966/1967. Because the company began to be more involved in animated production, it was purchased by New World Entertainment in 1986. New World was an independent film production company founded by Roger Corman (a name that will figure prominently in the history of the *Fantastic Four*), but after experiencing financial difficulties, the company would sell Marvel to the notorious Ron Perelman.

Perelman was infamous on Wall Street for acquiring companies and then turning a profit by selling off parts of these companies and their assets; in other words, he bought companies in order to dismantle them. In fact, that appeared to be exactly what was happening to Marvel under Perelman's ownership. By 1995, Marvel's stock had lost half its value and was heading toward bankruptcy. Perelman also fired one-third of Marvel's publishing

office staff, and he was threatening to cease publication of Marvel comic books (Raviv 2004).

While these plans were disturbing to Marvel's fan base, they would spell disaster for some of the companies that did business with Marvel. For example, Toy Biz was a company with an exclusive contract to produce Marvel action figures, a contract secured by giving up 46 percent of the company to Perelman. Fearful that Toy Biz would soon meet the same fate as the other companies Perelman had acquired, the top partners of Toy Biz, Isaac Perlmutter, and Avi Arad, approached Perelman with an idea: to make movies based on Marvel comics (Raviv 2004). If Marvel ceased publishing, the value of the intellectual property rights (the characters) would significantly diminish over time. While this was a loss Perelman could well afford, the situation was quite different for Perlmutter and Arad as their financial futures were at stake. Perlmutter and Arad believed that if the Marvel characters were spun off into films, it would open up a variety of ancillary markets and thereby increase the value of the intellectual property.

One of the sticking points in the efforts to turn Marvel into a film studio was the fact that the film rights for many of their superhero characters had already been sold off to other studios. After several very contentious legal battles, including a corporate bankruptcy, Marvel emerged with Perlmutter and Arad at liberty to pursue film production. The bankruptcy voided many of the previous licensing contracts, so Marvel could negotiate new deals with film studios (Raviv 2004). Those deals involved co-production of the Marvel Studio films with other major studios such as Fox and Columbia.

As was the plan all along, Marvel Studios was also heavily involved in the ancillary product market, with a special emphasis on videogame spin-offs. Even before Disney acquired the studio in 2009, releasing videogames in conjunction with their films was a common practice at Marvel. Games were released for the *X-Men* films (starting with *X-Men* [2000], all three of the original *Spider-Man* films (2002; 2004; 2007), and the original *Iron Man* (2008) film. Videogames were also released from the *Fantastic Four* (2005) and *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer* (2007). Since the Disney acquisition, videogame releases have continued apace with spin-offs for *Iron Man 2* (2010), *Thor* (2011), and *Captain America: The First Avenger* (2011), just to name a few.

In fact, since the Disney acquisition, the performance of Marvel Studio films has been historic. For 2018, the two highest grossing films were *Black Panther* and *Avengers: Infinity War*, with a combined box office revenue total of \$1.3 billion. *Deadpool 2* and *Ant-Man and the Wasp* were also among the top ten grossing films for 2018 with \$318 million and \$216 million in box office receipts, respectively.³ This was a significant improvement from the year before, when Marvel characters only held the sixth (*Spider-Man: Homecoming*) and eighth (*Thor: Ragnarok*) place spots on top grossing films, but generally the studio's track record has been solid. Due to the success of their early films, including the *X-Men* and *Spider-Man*

franchises, Marvel was able to produce *Iron Man* independently, securing a distribution deal with Paramount. Perlmutter and Arad had planned to model Marvel Studios on Disney, and that effort was fully validated when Disney acquired the studio.

Although Marvel no longer publishes annual financial reports as an independent company and Disney does not break out the revenue generated by Marvel specifically, the success of Marvel's films in 2018 alone indicates the value of the acquisition. Tucked away in Disney's 2017 report is this interesting passage about Marvel:

Prior to the Company's acquisition of Marvel in fiscal year 2010, Marvel had licensed the rights to third-party studios to produce and distribute feature films based on certain Marvel properties including Spider-Man, The Fantastic Four and X-Men. Under the licensing arrangements, the third-party studios incur the costs to produce and distribute the films, and the Company retains the merchandise licensing rights. Under the licensing arrangement for Spider-Man, the Company pays the third-party studio a licensing fee based on each film's box office receipts, subject to specified limits. Under the licensing arrangements for The Fantastic Four and X-Men, the third-party studio pays the Company a licensing fee and receives a share of the Company's merchandise revenue on these properties.

(The Walt Disney Company 2017, 11)

Therefore, almost seven years after the acquisition of Marvel, the value for Disney is still the intellectual property rights and the licensing fees. This point brings us back to the Fox acquisition and the *Fantastic Four*.

From the *Fantastic Four* to the not-so-fantastic

The *Fantastic Four* film franchise has had a rather ignoble history. The film rights for the characters were acquired by Bernd Eichinger for the German film production company Constantin Film. It was with these rights that a low-budget *Fantastic Four* film was put into production with Roger Corman in 1992. This production has become part of comics and film culture legend, due in no small part to the fact that the final film was never given a full release to theaters. In fact, many have speculated that the film was only put into production in order to maintain the film rights. The 2015 documentary *Doomed! The Untold Story of Roger Corman's Fantastic Four* interviews several cast and crew members who were involved in the production, and their sense of disappointment in a project they imagined would launch their careers is an uncomfortable combination of the comic and the tragic. The film and the film's trailer are currently (and perhaps illegally) available on *YouTube*, and even a cursory viewing reveals a production that at best could be described as slipshod. The abysmal production values alone provide

sufficient evidence to suggest the film was never meant for a theatrical release, and the fact the film is not even listed on imdb.com is also telling.

In spite of this dubious cinematic venture, the film rights were retained by Eichinger, who then partnered with 20th Century Fox to produce the big-budget *Fantastic Four* release in 2005 and the *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer* in 2007. These films actually had the support of the studio and had production budgets of \$100 million and \$130 million, respectively. Admittedly, the cast was heavy with television talent, and the films appeared well before Chris Evans would have the box office draw to play Captain America, but the studio's commitment to the productions was still exponentially greater than their predecessor. In addition, Fox made sure the film exploited the ancillary market, and among the products spun-off from the films were two videogames mentioned above: *Fantastic Four* (2005), published by Activision, and *Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer* (2007), published by 2K Games. In spite of this commitment, the first film was only moderately successful, with a worldwide box office gross of \$330 million, and the second film fared even worse with a \$289 million worldwide gross. Neither of the films received much critical praise, with the first film only receiving a 27 percent score on Rotten Tomatoes, and the second only performing slightly above that, at 37 percent. From a critical standpoint, the videogames did not do much better. In his review for *IGN.com*, Juan Castro warns readers that while *Fantastic Four* is a "passable action game," players should "rent this one first" (2005, 22). The review for the second game, authored by Greg Miller, was subtitled: "A game so bad it puts Dr. Doom to shame" (2007, 1). Given the disappointing response, Fox passed on the option for a third film in the franchise. Fox decided to reboot the franchise with the 2015 release, a film that was, as noted above, savaged by the critics and only generated \$167 in box office receipts worldwide.

To put it bluntly, Eichinger and Fox have been very poor stewards of the *Fantastic Four* franchise. After nearly 25 years and four productions, the studio has yet to turn this Marvel property into a franchise that stands with other properties from the Marvel universe, most notably the *Avengers*, *Spider-Man*, and *Black Panther*. This is surprising given that the *Fantastic Four* was considered to be one of the first and most enduring successes for Marvel comics. Marvel, too, could not have been happy with the *Fantastic Four* productions, but what the company chose to do about it surprised and disappointed the comic book's fans: Marvel announced it was ceasing publication of the *Fantastic Four*, with the last issue appearing in May 2015, just a few months prior to the release of the last film. The timing was suspect, and certain fan sites voiced their suspicion, referencing the *Tumblr* post by Brevoort we have already quoted. Brevoort (2014) was responding to an inquiry regarding the *X-Men*, a franchise for which Fox also owned the film rights. While fans speculated that Brevoort was also referring to the *Fantastic Four*, even putting his intentions to one side, the comment is certainly applicable. As long as Fox maintained the film rights to the *Fantastic*

Four, Marvel would have limited control over the direction of the franchise and enjoy limited compensation at the box office. This compensation would be further limited for those films that performed poorly at the box office, with the last *Fantastic Four* film being a case in point.

When Marvel Studios began, it was completely dependent on studios like Fox and Sony to finance productions and handle distribution. Even when Marvel started self-financing with *Iron Man* in 2008, it was still dependent on Paramount for distribution. After Disney acquired Marvel in 2009, Marvel was no longer dependent on other partnerships, either for financing or distribution. Instead, Disney had the corporate infrastructure to produce and distribute the films, and manage all of the ancillary products associated with the Marvel universe. In addition, given Disney's history and corporate culture regarding intellectual property, it is not difficult to imagine that they would want to retain the rights to the *Fantastic Four* at a cost; or more to the point, at the cost of the comic's publication. In fact, when the revenues of the film franchises are placed against the revenues generated by comic book publishing, it is clear that Disney had less to lose by pulling the publication of *Fantastic Four*, and much more to gain.

Disney and Fox

Drawing lines of causation can often be a dubious proposition, so in this section, we offer our points as speculative. Nevertheless, the timing of events related to Disney's efforts to acquire Fox and the recent publication history of the *Fantastic Four* certainly invite speculation because they align very closely with important events. For example, the announcement to discontinue the publication of *Fantastic Four* was made in October 2014, during the New York Comic Con, less than a year before the last film was released by Fox. At this point, the film had not generated much buzz, either positive or negative, so the motive behind this move raised suspicion. As Anita Busch, writing for *Deadline Hollywood*, observed: "We had heard that Marvel wanted to use the *Fantastic Four* characters in future Avengers films, so it could be a way for Marvel to put pressure on the studio. Or maybe it doesn't want the competition at the box office as 2015 is gearing up to be one helluva [*sic*] crowded market [...] and Marvel will be vying against Fox and others on a number of tentpole films. Marvel spokespeople could not be reached for comment" (Busch 2014, 1).

Marvel's silence on this issue is not surprising, and to be fair, Brevoort would at least speak to the issue indirectly, as noted earlier. If, however, Marvel wanted to put pressure on Fox, then ceasing publication of *Fantastic Four* had the effect, intended or not, to significantly lower the value of the comic's intellectual property. Indeed, it is important to remember that Marvel Studios was conceived in reaction to Perelman's threat to close down publication of all Marvel comics. This history most likely has not been forgotten at Marvel, even after its acquisition by Disney. And given

Disney's understanding of the value of intellectual property, and its hardball tactics with day-care centers, it is not unimaginable that the cancellation was strategic.

Clearly, Disney's motive to buy out Fox was not completely driven by the rights to the *Fantastic Four* because the deal put much more on the table. Negotiations between Bob Iger and Rupert Murdoch began in August 2017 and continued for the next few months. The boards of both companies came to a preliminary agreement that was announced in December 2017. The deal was finalized in July 2018; on 20 March 2019, the acquisition was officially announced, and the assets not acquired by Disney were formed into a new company called the Fox Corporation. A day prior, the new Fox Corporation began trading on the NASDAQ, and former US House Speaker Paul Ryan was appointed to the new corporate board (Stelter 2019).

As for the timing of this deal, it is worth noting that only three months prior to the July announcement finalizing the merger, Marvel announced that it was putting *Fantastic Four* back into publication. The first new issue of the *Fantastic Four* was released on 8 August 2018, less than two months after the merger was approved by the US Department of Justice. The fact that the comic book was put back into publication at this time seems to signify a renewed interest in this intellectual property. As discussed above, while the *Fantastic Four* may have had little to do with the merger, the merger seems to have had everything to do with the *Fantastic Four*.

Although Disney's acquisition does not secure the *Fantastic Four* film rights for Marvel, they will have the international distribution rights, without which Constantin's production rights have very limited value. For example, with the 2015 reboot, Fox handled theatrical distribution in the US and 18 other territories, including important markets in Europe and Asia.⁴ Furthermore, given the abysmal performance of the last reboot, the *Fantastic Four* film franchise is not very attractive to the other Hollywood studios with international distribution infrastructures (keeping in mind there are now only four others). In other words, even if Constantin does not sell the film rights to Marvel, they may have no other options for distribution partners but Disney, moving forward.

A word about fan culture and political economy

There has been an ongoing and, we would argue, dubious division between the celebration of fan culture as a point of consumer empowerment and the critique of capitalism in the current media climate. Christian Fuchs (2017) provides a strong analysis of this division in his book on social media, particularly when he discusses the way Henry Jenkins imagines participatory culture. As he notes, although Jenkins acknowledges the presence of capital as a driver in media decisions, Jenkins continually positions consumer empowerment as a satisfactory check on those in power. While we would

not agree with Fuchs's references to fascism, we make no apologies for our alignment with the political economists. In addition, it is important to search for moments when consumer empowerment and the critique of capitalism align, not as a satisfactory challenge, but as an opportunity when consumers recognize that their interests are not what drives the decisions of media conglomerates.

When announcements about the cancelation of *Fantastic Four* appeared, one of the most exacting critics of this move was Rick Johnson, founder of the comic book blog *Bleeding Cool*. Johnson first posted about the absence of the Fantastic Four on the cover of Marvel's 75th Anniversary Issue, noting that the absence was a "deliberate, if understandable choice," perhaps indicating Marvel's intention to promote other superheroes in its films and television shows (2014a, 5). Later, Johnson would also comment on the *Fantastic Four* cancelation: "Twentieth Century Fox pretty much has an eternal claim on Fantastic Four and X-Men movies, if they keep making them, after the deal was done during Marvel's bankruptcy days, with very little benefit to Marvel. The belief inside the higher echelons of Marvel is that promoting these properties in comics only benefits Fox's movies at the expense of those from Marvel Studios" (Johnson 2014b, 3–4).

When it was announced that the comic would go back into production, Johnson authored a post in which he provided an extensive analysis of Marvel's efforts to scrub the Fantastic Four from fan culture. In addition to canceling the comic, Marvel shut down the production of posters, stature lines, trading cards, and t-shirts; Marvel even pulled permission for the Fantastic Four characters to appear in an art show. As Johnson (2018) notes, all of this was motivated by Marvel's dissatisfaction with Fox, and he saves his harshest criticism for Brevoort for his obfuscation and deceit regarding the motives behind the cancelation. In other words, Johnson provided a sustained critique of Marvel's cancelation of *Fantastic Four*, one that was fully in step with the practices of political economy. The difference that Johnson provides, and it is an important one, is that his critique is posed to demand better fan service from Disney, which is in contrast to those critics who regard Disney's cultural production in very negative terms (Giroux and Pollock 2010).

Johnson would also fall fully within the camp of the empowered fan, one who has created and monetized an ongoing tertiary text informed by his own love for comic books. Although Brevoort acknowledges Johnson's efforts, his acknowledgment is at best dismissive, and the Fantastic Four is a case that illustrates how easy it was for Marvel (and in turn Disney) to dismiss and disregard the interests of fans. Yes, Johnson had agency; and, yes, his complaints gained attention from Marvel. Yet, in the final analysis, the Fantastic Four disappeared from comic book culture for three years, and its disappearance and reemergence have everything to do with Disney's, and in turn Marvel's, relationship with Fox. In other words, when it comes to the bottom line, fan culture often takes a back seat.

Conclusion

The takeaway from the case of the *Fantastic Four* is not to disregard the importance of fan culture, or to overstate the power of media conglomerates. In fact, to suggest that fan culture may take a back seat to corporate interest is not an overstatement, and it should serve as a call for fan culture to continue to be aware of that fact. We would argue that we need fans like Johnson to continue to recognize when and how their interests are being underserved by media conglomerates, and to continue to challenge those companies and their representatives. It is in the interests of fans to not only celebrate their cultures but also to critique the corporate practices that put those cultures at risk. Admittedly, fans may not have power over corporations. They may not always win, and often they may lose. We would still maintain, however, that this kind of romantic struggle is at the heart of the superhero comic book narrative, and as in those narratives, the struggle must continue.

In fact, the struggle may become more important as media consolidation continues apace, and again, Disney and Fox are a case in point. Now that the deal is secured, Disney has roughly a 30 percent market share of the global film market. Also, with controlling interest in Hulu, Disney will be in a much better position to launch its proprietary streaming service, moving its content off other services, including Pixar films, and the content from the *Star Wars* and Marvel universes. In fact, all of the live action Marvel shows on Netflix have been canceled, including *Luke Cage* (2016–2018), *Iron Fist* (2017–2018), *Jessica Jones* (2015–2019), *The Punisher* (2017–2019), and *The Defenders* (2017). As Julia Alexander (2019) notes, while some of these shows are jointly owned by Netflix and will continue to stream on the service, these cancelations will allow Disney to reboot these series for the launch of their own streaming service. So, unsurprisingly, it seems that Disney plans to use the merger to exercise even more control over the media market. Therefore, it is important for fans to be even more mindful, even more suspicious, and even more vocal in their challenges of corporate maneuvers, particularly when those maneuvers put fan culture at risk.

As for the *Fantastic Four*, in January 2019, Marvel Comics celebrated “Fantastic Four: World’s Greatest Week” on its webpage (www.marvel.com/fantastic-four-week; accessed 31 January 2020), revisiting the history of the comic book and making various announcements about its future. During this week, the webpage posted videos including tips on how to play the *Fantastic Four* characters in the new *Marvel: Future Fight* (2015) mobile videogame, and how to beat Dr. Doom in *Marvel Strike Force* (2018). Therefore, Marvel has already incorporated these characters into their latest videogame releases. Although no plans for a future film were disclosed during this week, there was a special video in which Brevoort is identified as the new editor of the revived *Fantastic Four*. Perhaps we should note that this particular video was preceded with an advertisement for Disney+, the new streaming service that includes a special section for Marvel. In that

section, Disney+ offers up old episodes of the *Fantastic Four* cartoon that aired from 1994 to 1996. Clearly, with the acquisition of Fox and the revival by Marvel, Disney is allowing the Fantastic Four to return with a vengeance, and eager to exploit its intellectual property. As Ben Grimm might say: “It’s clobberin’ time!”

Notes

- 1 All box office data was retrieved from www.boxofficemojo.com/ on 23 March 2019.
- 2 One of Bob Iger’s first actions as Disney CEO was to acquire the rights to Oswald the Rabbit back in 2006. Universal still owned the character, and in an interesting trade, Disney gave NBC Universal ESPN sportscaster to NBC Sports for the intellectual property rights to Oswald. Disney would then incorporate the character into the *Epic Mickey* (2010) videogame, and Oswald merchandise is readily available in the Disney theme parks.
- 3 All box office data was retrieved from www.boxofficemojo.com/ on 23 March 2019.
- 4 This is the information listed on *IMDB* for the film. On an interesting note, and one that illustrates the odd ways of international film distribution, Warner Bros. handled distribution for Belgium, Switzerland, and the Netherlands.

Works cited

- Alexander, Julia. 2018. “Netflix Cancels *Jessica Jones* and *The Punisher*.” *The Verge*, 18 February. www.theverge.com/2019/2/18/18229507/jessica-jones-punisher-netflix-canceled-iron-fist-daredevil-luke-cage-defenders-disney (accessed 31 January 2020).
- Ant-Man and the Wasp*. 2018. Dir. Peyton Reed. USA: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.
- Avengers: Infinity Wars*. 2018. Dir. Anthony Russo and Joe Russo. USA: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.
- Black Panther*. 2018. Dir. Ryan Coogler. USA: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.
- Brevoort, Tom. 2014. “New Brevoort Formspring.” *Tumblr*, 31 July. <http://brevoortformspring.tumblr.com/post/93403610623/so-i-will-ask-a-different-question-why-isnt> (accessed 31 January 2020).
- Brookey, Robert Alan, and Robert Westerfelhaus. 2005. “The Digital *auteur*: Branding Identity on the *Monsters, Inc.* DVD.” *Western Journal of Communication* 69 (2): 109–128.
- A Bug’s Life*. 1998. Dir. John Lasseter. USA: Buena Vista Pictures Distribution.
- Busch, Anita. 2014. “Marvel Cancels ‘Fantastic Four’ Comic Book Series before Fox 2015 Movie Launch.” *Deadline Hollywood*, 13 October. <https://deadline.com/2014/10/fantastic-four-comics-cancelled-2015-movie-850498/> (accessed 31 January 2020).
- Captain America: The First Avenger*. 2011. Dir. Joe Johnston. USA: Paramount Pictures.
- Castro, Juan. 2005. “Fantastic Four.” *IGN*, 28 June. www.ign.com/articles/2005/06/29/fantastic-4-2 (accessed 31 January 2020).

- Ching, Albert. 2014. "Final Issue of *Fantastic Four* Listed for 2015." *CBR*, 5 October. www.cbr.com/final-issue-of-fantastic-four-listed-for-2015/ (accessed 31 January 2020).
- Deadpool 2*. 2018. Dir. David Leitch. USA: 20th Century Fox.
- Doomed! The Untold Story of Roger Corman's Fantastic Four*. 2015. Dir. Marty Langford. USA: Uncork'd Entertainment.
- Ellingson, Annlee. 2013. "It's Official: 21st Century Fox and Newscorp Spilt, With New Shares to Be Issued Monday." *L. A. Biz*, 30 June. www.bizjournals.com/losangeles/news/2013/06/28/its-official-21st-century-fox-splits.html (accessed 31 January 2020).
- Epic Mickey*. 2010. Developed by Junction Point Studios. Published by Disney Interactive Studios. Nintendo Wii.
- Fantastic Four*. 2005. Developed by 7 Studios. Published by Activision. PlayStation 2.
- Fantastic Four*. 2005. Dir. Tim Story. USA: 20th Century Fox.
- Fantastic Four*. 2015. Dir. Josh Trank. USA: 20th Century Fox.
- Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer*. 2007. Developed by 7 Studios. Published by 2K Games. PlayStation 2.
- Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer*. 2007. Dir. Tim Story. USA: 20th Century Fox.
- Finding Nemo*. 2003. Dir. Andrew Stanton. USA: Buena Vista Pictures Distribution.
- Fort Lauderdale News, and Sun-Sentinel. 1989. "Cartoon Figures Run Afoul of Law." *Chicago Tribune*, 27 April. www.chicagotribune.com/news/ct-xpm-1989-04-27-8904070716-story.html (accessed 31 January 2020).
- Fuchs, Christian. 2017. *Social Media: A Critical Introduction*. London: Sage.
- Gardner, Eriq. 2015. "Disney Sues over Edible Cake Frosting Featuring Marvel, Lucasfilm Characters." *The Hollywood Reporter*, 3 September. www.hollywoodreporter.com/thr-esq/disney-sues-edible-cake-frosting-820032 (accessed 31 January 2020).
- Giroux, Henry, and Pollock, Grace. 2010. *The Mouse That Roared: Disney and the End of Innocence*. Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield.
- Holson, Laura. 2006. "Disney Agrees to Acquire Pixar in a \$7.4 Billion Deal." *The New York Times*, 25 January. www.nytimes.com/2006/01/25/business/disney-agrees-to-acquire-pixar-in-a-74-billion-deal.html (accessed 31 January 2020).
- Iron Man*. 2008. Dir. Jon Favreau. USA: Paramount Pictures.
- Iron Man 2*. 2010. Dir. Jon Favreau. USA: Paramount Pictures.
- Johnson, Rich. 2014a. "Reboots, Guardians and No More Mutants." *Bleeding Cool*, 23 May. www.bleedingcool.com/2014/05/23/reboots-guardians-and-no-more-mutants/ (accessed 31 January 2020).
- Johnson, Rich. 2014b. "Would Marvel Really Cancel *Fantastic Four* to Snub Fox?" *Bleeding Cool*, 29 May. www.bleedingcool.com/2014/05/29/would-marvel-really-cancel-fantastic-four-to-snob-fox/ (accessed 31 January 2020).
- Johnson, Rich. 2018. "A History of Why Marvel Comics Didn't Publish the *Fantastic Four* for 3 Years." *Bleeding Cool*, 29 March. www.bleedingcool.com/2018/03/29/history-marvel-comics-fantastic-four/ (accessed 31 January 2020).
- Marvel: Future Fight*. 2015. Developed and published by Netmarble Games. iOS.
- Marvel Strike Force*. 2018. Developed and published by FoxNext Games Los Angeles. iOS.
- McCarthy, Todd. 2015. "'Fantastic Four' Film Review." *The Hollywood Reporter*, 8 August. www.hollywoodreporter.com/review/film-review-fantastic-four-813140 (accessed 31 January 2020).

- Miller, Greg. 2007. "‘Fantastic Four: Rise of the Silver Surfer’ Review." *IGN*, 18 June. www.ign.com/articles/2007/06/18/fantastic-4-rise-of-the-silver-surfer-review-3 (accessed 31 January 2020).
- Monsters, Inc.* 2001. Dir. Pete Docter. USA: Buena Vista Pictures Distribution.
- Mosco, Vincent. 1996. *The Political Economy of Communication: Rethinking and Renewal*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Paul Blart: Mall Cop 2*. 2015. Dir. Andy Fickman. USA: Columbia Pictures.
- Plane Crazy*. 1928. Dir. Walt Disney and Ub Iwerks. USA: Celebrity Productions.
- Raviv, Dan. 2004. *Comic Wars: Marvel's Battle for Survival*. Sea Cliff: Levant Book.
- Robinson, James, and Leonard Kirk. 2015. *Fantastic Four* Vol. 4: *The End Is Forever*. New York: Marvel Comics.
- Roeper, Richard. 2015. "'Fantastic Four': A Lightweight Marvel Origin Story Flames Out." *Chicago Sun Times*, 6 August. <https://chicago.suntimes.com/entertainment/fantastic-four-a-lightweight-marvel-origin-story-flames-out/> (accessed 31 January 2020).
- Scott, A. O. 2015. "Review: 'Fantastic Four,' the Reboot (Wanted or Not)." *The New York Times*, 6 August. www.nytimes.com/2015/08/07/movies/review-fantastic-four-the-reboot-wanted-or-not.html (accessed 31 January 2020).
- Slott, Dan, and Sara Pichelli. 2018. *Fantastic Four* #1. New York: Marvel Comics.
- Spider-Man*. 2002. Dir. Sam Raimi. USA: Sony Pictures.
- Spider-Man 2*. 2004. Dir. Sam Raimi. USA: Sony Pictures.
- Spider-Man 3*. 2007. Dir. Sam Raimi. USA: Sony Pictures.
- Spider-Man: Homecoming*. 2017. Dir. Jon Watts. USA: Sony Pictures.
- Steamboat Willie*. 1928. Dir. Walt Disney and Ub Iwerks. USA: Celebrity Productions.
- Stelter, Brian. 2019. "Former Speaker of the House Paul Ryan Joins Board of Fox Corporation." *CNN Business*, 19 March. www.cnn.com/2019/03/19/media/paul-ryan-fox-corporation/index.html (accessed 31 January 2020).
- Thomas, Bob. 1994. *An American Original: Walt Disney*. Glendale: Disney Editions.
- Thor*. 2011. Dir. Kenneth Branagh. USA: Paramount Pictures.
- Thor: Ragnarok*. 2017. Dir. Taika Waititi. USA: Walt Disney Studios Motion Pictures.
- Toy Story*. 1995. Dir. John Lasseter. USA: Buena Vista Pictures Distribution.
- Travers, Peter. 2015. "‘Fantastic Four’ Movie Review." *Rolling Stone*, 6 August. www.rollingstone.com/movies/movie-reviews/fantastic-four-movie-review-246262/ (accessed 31 January 2020).
- X-Men*. 2000. Dir. Bryan Singer. USA: 20th Century Fox.