

## THE HAPPIEST FANS ON EARTH? AN INTERVIEW WITH HW

By Cailie Golden (7/20)



**Media conglomerate. Award-winning animation studio. A theme park “Where Dreams Come True.”**<sup>1</sup> Disney works hard to be all things to all people; the company’s many properties are supported by a diverse fanbase. There is so much to love from movie franchises like Star Wars and Marvel to cruise lines and sports networks like ESPN.<sup>2</sup> For HW, who began making annual visits to Disney World when she was seven, the theme park is an object of nostalgia. She’s just one of many avid park-goers who keep coming back. We’ll explore Disney’s complicated image through her eyes.

**C:** How would you describe your experience as a Disney fan?

**H:** Personally, I like the parks but not the company itself, because they’re huge and own everything. I love the magic in being a kid again—like you can run down Main Street and no one’s going to think you’re crazy!

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<sup>1</sup> Disney theme parks slogan from 1950-2020

<sup>2</sup> "ESPN, Inc. Fact Sheet". ESPN Press Room EMEA. March 14, 2012. Retrieved May 23, 2022.

Disney's brand relies on the common ground people of all ages share after visiting the parks or watching the movies. Disney runs on nostalgia. The company does, however, tend to control how fans show their appreciation. Good content sparks more content. How do fans transform the media they love? Writing unofficial stories about characters (fan fiction) and redrawing characters in their own style (fan art) are just two of many examples.

When a Star Wars series called "The Mandalorian" began streaming on Disney+, viewers fell in love with its little, green alien they dubbed "Baby Yoda." The TV character sparked an explosion of creativity; keychains, crochet plushies, and stickers featuring Baby Yoda popped up



on sites like Etsy and Redbubble. Disney swept in, making sure every off-brand product was forcibly removed.<sup>3</sup> Moments like these remind us that Disney is a business first. If its management is forced to choose between a fan's happiness and protecting the profit generated by its creative property, Disney will choose the latter every time.

Jenny Keegan describes fandom not only as "the interaction of people with things they like" but also as the way "people resist and rework those things."<sup>4</sup> Fandom is a relationship. Disney can be the "Happiest Place on Earth," as long as you keep the mouse happy. Affirmative fans that remain within Disney's strict bounds—and good graces—maintain their status by purchasing merchandise or media.

**C:** Collecting is a big fan practice for people who love Disney?

**H:** Yeah! I buy ears and pins every time I go to the park, while my brother Garret is more of a Disney history fan. His room is full of the classic stuff... figurines, music boxes. I always tell people: "You think I'm a Disney fan? He's worse!" I guess it's a way to remember all our memories there.

When we frame fandom as a relationship of sorts, we may find it easier to understand how consumers' perspectives can differ based on which facet of the company they interact

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<sup>3</sup> CBSLA. (2020, January 17). Disney cracks down on Bootleg Baby Yoda merchandise sold on Etsy. CBS News.

<sup>4</sup> Keegan, J. (2019, February 22). *Five ways I've defined fan studies*. Louisiana State University Press. Flow. <https://www.flowjournal.org/2019/02/defining-fan-studies/>

with. HW explains: “there are a lot of different types of Disney fans: people who love the movies and love the parks, the classic fans, and the romantic fans.”

HW carries the magic with her. It’s everywhere. She wears a Mickey Mouse necklace daily, decorates her bedroom with Mickey ears, goes to the parks annually, attends movie premiers, and collects souvenir pins. HW’s collection serves as a snapshot of Disney’s thriving consumer culture. She wasn’t always the enthusiast she is today:

**C:** So when did your love of Disney begin?

**H:** My first trip to Disney World! I hated it... until I met Piglet for the first time. That’s probably still one of my favorite memories. I try to visit Piglet every time I go.

HW has decades worth of memories traveling to Disney World and spending time there with family and friends. H may be a fan 24/7, but she is very clear that anyone should be able to enjoy Disney. There’s no such thing as “a fake fan.” Rather than throw labels around to gatekeep the franchise, HW is more interesting in sharing her experience with others.

**C:** Do you connect with other fans? If so, how?

**H:** “I go to the parks. I follow a lot of social media accounts run by students doing the Disney College Program or by parks people who know all the best places to go. I follow the Disney Imagineering Instagram too. So I do a lot of networking on social media, and I like to talk with people about the movies—since I watch all of them.”

**C:** And what do you think makes you a Disney super fan?

**H:** I’m going to work at Disney World this summer and going to movies on opening weekend. Everything I talk about is Disney. People get so annoyed by it. I just love the magic.

There’s certainly a lot to talk about. The number of properties managed by Disney is mind-boggling. As Jason Hellerman puts it, “After acquiring Twentieth Century Fox, it started to feel like Disney owned...well...everything.”<sup>5</sup> His feelings are definitely justified “with the

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<sup>5</sup> Hellerman, J. (2024, March 19). *What Companies Does Disney Own?* <https://nofilmschool.com/What-does-Disney-own>

release of Endgame breaking records, a Star Wars movie coming this Christmas, and a Spiderman sequel AND Toy Story 4 coming this summer.”<sup>5</sup>

Disney may hold a lot of the power, but fans do have a say. Many reacted positively to the company’s control over the Marvel Universe, while the Disney-ification of the Star Wars franchise sparked a bit more backlash. Even with the company’s strict copywrite laws and online censorship as obstacles, fans clap back when Disney does something they don’t like.

**C:** “Disney’s business practices have met with some criticism lately. Does that change anything for you?”

**H:** “The company is pretty big, and, yes, I think Disney ruined Star Wars for most people with all those sequels, but Disney made the Marvel Universe what it is... and back to there being different types of Disney fans: you know people have an opinion about everything. I don’t think that has to affect me. If you don’t like it, don’t buy a ticket.”

Every fan is a consumer in this modern world. As people pay for memories and collect merchandise, they take the Happiest Place on Earth home with them. The weight of nostalgia gives this company an authority that proves difficult to challenge. You don’t want to be on Mickey’s bad side, especially after all the magical memories you’ve made together—this is the power of Disney. Luckily, fans like HW are here to keep him honest.



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<sup>5</sup> Hellerman, J. (2024, March 19). *What Companies Does Disney Own?* <https://nofilmschool.com/What-does-Disney-own>