2. **Han Leia Shot First**

Transmedia Storytelling and the National Public Radio Dramatization of Star Wars

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Shortly after the premiere of *A New Hope*, Richard Toscan, head of the theater department at the University of Southern California, conceived of producing the film as a radio play. George Lucas liked the idea of supporting his alma mater through such a project, especially “[a] time when Star Wars tie-in rights were like a license to print money, and various commercial broadcast and recording interests were pursuing radio licensing.”

In March 1979, he announced a deal that gave KUSC-FM, USC’s public radio affiliate, the rights to produce a radio adaptation for $1. *Star Wars: The Radio Drama* (*TRD*) premiered on March 2, 1981 to massive audiences and immediately “became NPR’s most popular dramatic series.”

In spite of this initial popularity, *TRD* is now familiar to only the most ardent of fans, has largely been neglected by scholars, and has since been overwritten in the canon by the Lucasfilm Story Group’s new continuity system. Radio more generally has all but disappeared as a platform for transmedia storytelling, replaced by digital media such as games and audiobooks. Matthew Freeman argues “that it is the strategies behind the production of transmedia storytelling—rather than the specifically converged structures of contemporary media industries and technologies—that ultimately hold transmedia story worlds together and point their audiences across media.”

This chapter takes Freeman’s argument as its starting point and explicates the aural strategies of *TRD* to suggest that this radio play successfully builds its world by drawing upon the familiar sounds of *A New Hope* while simultaneously exciting its listeners’ imaginations with new sounds centered on the process of character-building. This can best be demonstrated by focusing on the radio play’s depiction of Princess Leia Organa within the context of the larger Star Wars transmedia franchise as it developed in the late 1970s.

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TRD’s premiere represents the endpoint of what could be described as the initial flowering of Star Wars as a transmedia empire between 1976 and 1981. Throughout this period, the basic story of Star Wars was presented to consumers in multiple media platforms—film, novel, comic books, arcade games, and radio—with each platform “exploring different aspects of the shared world.” According to Freeman, one of the most important elements of this shared world is character building, since “character is one way of holding a transmedia world story together.” Take, for example, A New Hope’s depiction of Leia’s capture by stormtroopers, which begins six minutes into the movie. Four troopers search a corridor. The camera cuts to Leia with her trademark hairdo peeking out from around a corner. Her blaster is clearly visible; she holds it with both hands at chest level. The barrel is pointing up. She appears to be alert and resolved. The camera then cuts back to the stormtroopers. The first trooper notices her movement and turns towards her. He sees her down the passageway as she moves back slightly. The trooper informs the other soldiers: “There’s one; set for stun.” As the first stormtrooper raises his pistol, Leia shoots and kills him. She attempts to run away, but the next nearest trooper moves forward and stuns her, causing Leia to fall to the floor. That stormtrooper then says to the other soldiers, “She’ll be all right. Inform Lord Vader we have a prisoner.” As is typical in the film, this 23-second scene emphasizes action and adventure through its quick cuts and musical score over character development or exposition of theme, but it is the representation of Leia as a character in subsequent transmedia presentations of this scene that holds the Star Wars story together.

Fans could also read the novel of the film, originally titled Star Wars: From the Adventures of Luke Skywalker, which was published five months before the film’s premiere. Attributed to Lucas but written by Alan Dean Foster, the novel, which sold out its initial run of 125,000 copies by February 1977, is perhaps most notable for allowing its readers to experience the interiority of characters from the film. Surprisingly, its depiction of Leia’s capture emphasizes the stormtrooper’s point of view over hers and begins by describing his movements: “He was about to turn and call for those behind to follow him forward when he noticed something moving off to one side. It appeared to be crouching back in a small, dark alcove. Holding his pistol

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5 Freeman, Historicising Transmedia Storytelling, 24.
ready, he moved cautiously forward and peered into the recess.”⁶ A “small, shivering figure clad in flowing white” stares up at him. He recognizes her as “the one individual the Dark Lord was most interested in,” and the novel allows the reader to enter his thoughts: “A lucky encounter for him. He would be commended.” As the trooper contemplates his reward, however, Leia’s demeanor changes:

Within the armor his head turned slightly, directing his voice to the tiny condenser microphone. “Here she is,” he called to those behind him. “Set for stun for—”

He never finished the sentence, just as he would never receive the hoped-for commendation. Once his attention turned from the girl to his communicator the shivering vanished with startling speed. The energy pistol she had held out of sight behind her came up and around as she burst from her hiding place.

The trooper who had been unlucky enough to find her fell first, his head a mass of melted bone and metal. The same fate met the second armored form coming up fast behind him. Then a bright green energy pole touched the woman’s side and she slumped instantly to the deck, the pistol still locked in her small palm.⁷

Although the film establishes Leia’s willingness to shoot the stormtroopers, the novelization allows its readers to imagine the consequences of her act more vividly by narrating the stormtrooper’s thoughts and aspirations. She leaves the trooper’s “head a mass of melted bone and metal,” a much more brutal image than the film’s bloodless violence and, in doing so, she has killed a man, not just a nameless, replaceable stormtrooper. Within the transmedia story, this association of violence with Leia begins to accrue around her character and is later passed on to subsequent platforms’ representations of her.

In the weeks leading up to the premiere of A New Hope, consumers could also experience the “Greatest Space-Fantasy Film of All!” in comic-book form via the first three issues of a six-issue series published by Marvel Comics, scripted by Roy Thomas and illustrated by Howard Chaykin.⁸ The comic depicts Leia’s capture across four panels. The first presents her in the foreground, her blaster visible by her side, while a stormtrooper enters

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7 Lucas, Star Wars, 12.
through a passageway. The trooper sees her and exclaims, “There’s one of them! Set weapons for stun!” The second panel reverses the perspective—Leia is now in the background, and the stormtroopers are in the foreground—as Leia calls out, “I’ve set mine to kill!” Her blaster discharges and two of the troopers fall to the ground. The third panel depicts her being stunned and the fourth shows Leia on the ground at the troopers’ feet. One of the troopers states, “She’ll be all right. Report to Lord Vader!” Despite its brevity, the comic departs from the previous versions in two significant ways. First, the conventions of mid-1970s mainstream comics art portray Leia in a much more sexualized way than any of the other texts. Her white dress is tighter and more revealing. Two of the four frames depicting her capture emphasize her femininity by foregrounding her breasts. The third frame particularly presents her in a pose reminiscent of pin-ups: her breasts are prominent and the contours of her torso are visible as she falls backwards. The final frame illustrates her on the floor, surrounded by the boots of stormtroopers, indicating her complete vulnerability. This image emphasizes the physical threat they pose to her as one straddles her legs while the other straddles her head and shoulders. Second, Leia explicitly reveals her intent to kill the stormtroopers even though they have made it clear that their weapons are set to stun. Because the troopers are depicted only as dehumanized physical threats to her in the comic books, Leia’s aggressiveness, militaristic ability, and heroic fortitude in the comic adds to her character in the larger transmedia universe.

*TRD* tells the same basic story as the other media but requires its listeners to imagine the visuals of the film. Radio has often been called “the theater of the mind,” since it “evokes scenes through speech, reverb, filter, segue, and other devices.”9 Frank Brady suggests that *TRD*’s success was due to the fact that “the listener becomes the set designer, the costumer, the casting director,” which creates “more impact, more personal involvement” than watching a theater screen. Because listeners take on an active role in imagining the world of the radio play, Brady argues, “the tactical warfare between the Falcon and the Death Star can become more real, more vital, than they were in the film.”10 While this is probably true, *TRD*’s world-building is nevertheless productively augmented by a listener’s preexisting familiarity with *A New Hope* (as well as potentially the novel and comics).

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The radio play’s version of Leia’s capture illustrates this vividly. Similar to the novel’s incorporation of the stormtrooper’s perspective, only the troopers have dialogue in the radio play’s scene. One stormtrooper instructs his soldiers to “Search every passageway and compartment! You two, check over there behind those power conduits!” A second trooper notices Leia: “Wait! I thought I saw something!” After a brief pause during which he hears a female’s breathing, the second trooper continues, “There she is! Set your weapons to stun!” Unlike the comic book version of this scene, Leia does not say anything to the troopers; we only hear her blaster being fired and the sound of a trooper crying out followed by the thud of his body hitting the floor. The second trooper calls out, “Watch it! She’s armed! Fire!” The audience then hears more blaster fire. Leia moans and we hear her body fall to the deck. The scene ends with the trooper commending his men: “Good shooting. She’ll be all right. Inform Lord Vader that we have a prisoner.” Apart from Leia’s breathing and the sound of her firing her pistol, we have no sense of her in this scene. TRD leaves all of the details—her look, posture, and state of mind, as well as the number of stormtroopers, the length of the passageway, the colors of the décor, etc.—to the listener’s imagination. Listeners who have previously seen A New Hope easily fill in these details by recalling them from the film. Consequently, TRD’s world-building is partially assisted by fans of the film remembering what they have previously seen or read—they already know the basic details of Leia’s capture and can fill in gaps in the soundscape with appropriate details. But its world-building is also partially original due to slight changes to dialogue (the stormtrooper’s lines are different) and the reliance on sound alone (we hear Leia breathe rather than seeing her). The radio play’s voice performers further this same, yet different effect. Only two of the actors, Mark Hamill and Anthony Daniels, reprise their roles, while new performers voice all of the other characters. Most notably, unknown actress Ann Sachs replaces Carrie Fisher as Leia, Perry King performs as Han Solo, and Brock Peters voices Darth Vader instead of James Earl Jones. The latter casting especially changes the audience’s response to the character, since, as Daley notes, Jones’s “resonant, powerful voice was even more definitive of the Dark Lord of the Sith than that black armor, cloak, and helmet were.” Peters’s voice is noticeably less deep than Jones’s, making his Darth Vader sound more mechanical than the character in the film. As a result of the radio play’s use of new sounds, listeners actively build the world of TRD by combining elements that explicitly remind them

11 Daley, Radio Dramatization, 10.
of the film—Hamill’s and Daniels’s voices, for example—with elements that are entirely unique to this medium, creating an especially interactive version of the story.

These latter elements include a number of new plot developments resulting from _TRD_’s expanded running time. While there is less than a half-hour of dialogue in the 121-minute film, the radio play runs for 351 minutes. This substantially longer length allows it to introduce new characters, include scenes from earlier drafts of George Lucas’s screenplay and the novel, and expand plot points only mentioned in the film. As Daley sums up:

Leia Organa’s life on Alderaan and her early Rebel Alliance heroism; Luke’s frictions and adventures with his Toschi Station buddies; how Han Solo gets an offer from Big Bunji and almost backs out of that charter with Luke and Ben; Darth Vader’s malevolent dark side inquisition of Leia, and her courageous resistance—the radio production gave us the opportunity to look into these matters and many more.12

The effect of these scenes on the listener goes beyond simply filling in plot points in the film. Rather, they also suggest that the fundamental strategy behind the production of _TRD_’s transmedia storytelling is an emphasis on character building by giving familiar characters, such as Leia, Luke Skywalker, and even Darth Vader, new and original dimensionality. Daley’s radio dramatization presents seven scenes not contained in the film. While Luke, Obi-Wan Kenobi, Han Solo, the droids, and Darth Vader feature in many of these scenes, three of them feature Leia as the primary character without Luke or Han, which is more than those featuring either of them without her.

By 1981, Leia had already become a subject of film criticism. Dan Rubey, for example, argued in 1978 that “despite her attractive spunkiness and toughness,” Leia “is the traditional damsel in distress—her capture by Darth Vader begins the film and provides the motivation for Ben Kenobi’s return and Luke’s rescue mission.” Although she “does grab a laser gun at one point and fires a few shots,” Rubey maintains that Leia “is dependent on her male rescuers, and the only action she initiates during the rescue almost gets them killed in a garbage crusher.”13 Consumers of the larger Star Wars transmedia universe know that Leia generally has an even more significant role in it than she does in the 1977 film, and, as we have already seen, the

novel and comics place greater emphasis on the preemptive violence that she is willing to use against her enemies, a violence seemingly at odds with her assertion to the Grand Moff Tarkin in *A New Hope* that “Alderaan is peaceful; we have no weapons.”

*TRD* continues and expands upon the association of Leia with violence, casting her as the focal point of a debate on the ethics of violent resistance to oppression, a debate that adds significant weight to her decision to “grab a laser gun” and “fire a few shots.” It does this in three ways. First, the radio play emphasizes that, before her capture, Leia is independent and strategic. Her story is larger than just being captured by Darth Vader. Second, it explores her transition from believing in pacifism to embracing violence, providing her with reasons to take up arms and “showing” her struggle to reconcile her home world’s pacifism with the universe’s need for militarized heroes. Finally, it expands her role after she is captured and valorizes her resistance to Imperial efforts to force her to reveal the locale of the Rebel base.

Two of Leia’s new scenes take place before she is captured. Throughout these scenes, she is portrayed as a capable leader who easily outwits Imperial efforts to reveal her connection to the Rebellion. The first of these scenes is in “Episode Two: Points of Origin,” which begins with the narrator, voiced by Ken Hiller, describing the situation:

> A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away there came a time of revolution, when Rebels united to challenge a tyrannical Empire. The Rebellion had its origins on many worlds, at many levels of society.

> One of the leaders of the Rebellion is the Princess Leia Organa of Alderaan, but neither her high birth nor her status as an Imperial Senator will protect her should her Rebel affiliations be discovered.14

Leia’s ship, *Tantive IV*, has been intercepted and forced to land on Ralltiir, a planet occupied by the Imperial army. As the *Tantive* lands, Lord Tion, the Imperial officer in charge, asks his men, “Do we have our heavy weapons trained on that ship?” A commander responds, “We do, Lord Tion, but the ship appears to be just what she claims, a consular ship on a diplomatic mission.” Tion admonishes the commander to follow protocol: “I have no doubt that she is. Princess Leia of Alderaan is a veritable angel of mercy. Still, we mustn’t become lax.” Tion’s description of Leia as “a veritable angel

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14 *Star Wars: The Radio Drama*, HighBridge Audio, 2007, CD. All subsequent quotations of the radio drama are from this unabridged CD version.
of mercy” solicits a laugh from his inferior officer, implying that Imperial forces do not see her as a threat: training their weapons on her ship is merely standard procedure, even a comical one—especially given her association with what Darth Vader calls a “mercy mission” in *A New Hope*.

Leia, however, is just as feisty in the radio series as she is in the movie, as she immediately demands to speak to Tion by comlink. After identifying herself as “the Princess Leia Organa,” she asks, “Who is responsible for this outrage?” When Tion flirtatiously replies, “A delight to hear your voice again, Your Highness,” Leia ignores his personal overtures and exclaims, “I demand an explanation for this, Lord Tion.” She will be neither flattered nor distracted by his efforts to court her. Tion insists that he would be honored to explain; he patronizingly offers to send his personal landspeeder for her. But Leia rejects it, asserting, “My own is being lowered now.” Leia’s assertiveness during this conversation unsettles Tion’s subordinate officer, who insists that she “has no grounds for objection; our mission on Ralltiir has been sanctioned by the Emperor himself.” Tion replies, “I’m not worried about legalities. I shall now have the privilege of placating a most attractive and influential young woman.” Tion ignores Leia’s moral outrage, reducing her to her age, looks, and social position; to him, she is just a young, beautiful, marriageable heiress. The idea that he will placate her suggests that he sees her as little more than a pampered princess, someone he subsequently calls “the shining jewel in the Organa crown,” and one who can be easily soothed and manipulated.

Leia’s assertiveness, however, only goes so far in extricating her from Imperial hands. Doubting her assertion that she is delivering “medical supplies and spare parts” to Ralltiir, first Tion and then Darth Vader threaten to search her ship. Since the *Tantive* is actually carrying “combat-type medipacks and three surgical field stations” along with “spare parts and power units suitable for military equipment,” Leia must outwit her adversaries to prevent discovery. When Tion is called away in response to a nearby rebel attack, Leia reminds Vader that legally only Tion, and not Vader, has the authority to search the *Tantive*. Vader agrees and leaves to find him so that they can discover what she is concealing. When Leia learns that Tion has installed a surveillance system that will be operational momentarily, she uses the system to allow him to overhear her tell Antilles, the *Tantive’s* captain, that she is interested in Tion but doubts his sincerity. She will only know that he is a true gentleman, and therefore worthy of her interest, if he allows her to leave without searching her vessel. He falls for it. Leia’s assertive interactions with Tion and Vader along with her successful manipulation of the former demonstrates that she is much more than Rubey’s
damsel in distress. TRD suggests that, when confronted by Imperial forces, she is able to think quickly to avoid discovery and capture.

Throughout this initial scene, Leia uses wits rather than violence against the Empire, but the scene also initiates her shift from a philosophy of rebellion as a primarily pacifist humanitarianism to one that embraces violent resistance. During her conversation with Tion, Leia asks why the Empire has suspended the rule of law. Tion explains, “When peace and stability are threatened, it is the Emperor’s duty to intervene, to secure his subjects’ security and well-being.” Leia is incredulous: “Well-being? They're the ones you're arresting!” She specifically objects to the Empire's use of “impressionment gangs and interrogation centers” and nearly exposes her alignment with the Rebellion during her argument over the Empire's injustice. Rather than meekly accept Tion's assumption that the entire planet must be purified of its Rebel sympathies, she questions the ethics of imprisoning and torturing innocent bystanders. She pushes the boundaries of what one can say with impunity, but she does not act to transgress those boundaries publicly. She is still a pacifist, but the experience on Ralltiir has a profound effect on her.

When Leia returns to Alderaan, she does not report immediately to her father, named Prestor in the radio play. Instead, she walks from the spaceport to the palace, a full day’s journey, since, as she tells him, “I had some thinking to do.” Leia’s walk through the countryside leads her to a political epiphany. When her father asks why she’s been “doing all this soul-searching,” Leia explains: “Father, people on Ralltiir have been chased from their homes, penned up like animals, executed without trial. Torture chambers are set up everywhere; they call them interrogation centers.” When Prestor notes that this is the “usual Imperial procedure” and that “you’re lucky to get off with your life,” Leia relates the conclusion of her soul-searching: “It’s time Alderaan stopped resisting the Empire and started fighting it!”

This assertion marks Leia’s transition from a pacifist to someone willing to kill in the name of freedom. It horrifies her father, who insists, “Violence and warfare nearly destroyed us during the Clone Wars.” But Leia now questions “what good [does] … Alderaan's not having a single weapon” do and she suggests that she is prepared to kill: “I didn't start this—the Empire did. I want only to stop it, Father!” While the Alderaanian government, represented by its monarch, does not sanction violence and has banned the use of weapons, Leia's firsthand observation of the Empire's cruelty has convinced her that she must move from the passive resistance of merely providing humanitarian and military support, of standing by while others risk their lives, to a consideration of whether to take up arms and fight violence with violence. In short: she is now willing to shoot first.
The opportunity to fight—and kill, if necessary—quickly presents itself. Lord Tion soon appears at her father’s court and attempts to press his suit of marriage by bragging about his military experience and status within the Imperial Army. The audience hears him enter the next scene while laughing as he continues a conversation begun offstage:

Now I’ll tell you something about these traitors and terrorists who call themselves rebels and freedom fighters. They don’t truly understand war. The fools on that particular planet actually thought that the Empire would negotiate with a pack of fanatics. So when these so-called resistance leaders showed up to parley, we locked the doors from the outside and torched the building!

This speech is delivered as if it were a funny anecdote. Tion laughs at the tale’s end and Prestor plays along and also pretends to find it humorous. But Leia does not. She becomes increasingly angry. In her disgust at Tion’s vision of “an Empire wallowing in blood and death” and “a galaxy of slaves,” Leia accidentally betrays knowledge of the Death Star. Tion immediately catches her mistake and realizes that this finally proves her connection to the Rebellion. When he pulls out his blaster, Leia wrestles him for control over the weapon, which discharges, killing Tion. In contrast to Tion’s earlier image of her as a pampered princess, Leia acts decisively when confronted with danger. Although she admits, “I hadn’t meant for the blaster to hit him,” Leia’s decision to fight stands out. She is now willing to risk her life to support the Rebellion and to oppose the Empire’s immoral oppression. She boards the Tantive once again and leaves to intercept the Death Star’s plans, find Obi-Wan Kenobi, and return both to the Rebel base. These scenes in the radio play thus do more than add to the storyworld’s established narrative; they expand Leia’s character, reinforcing the image of Leia as a strong, independent woman who embodies the radio play’s theme of the necessity of using violence to end the Empire’s oppression.

As we have seen, Leia is subsequently captured, which leads to the third new scene featuring Leia: her torture by Vader aboard the Death Star. This scene also contributes to the way in which TRD casts Leia at the center of its exploration of when one is justified in using violence. While the film stops short of showing her interrogation, TRD’s eighth episode explicitly portrays it. The scene begins with Leia’s usual tactic of appearing in control, demanding that she “be released from this cell and given access to formal legal proceedings!” As the “interrogation device,” as Vader calls it, is heard entering the room, Leia insists that the “torture robot ... violates every rule of
law,” but Vader cuts her off, declaring “The law no longer applies to you! You’re a Rebel, and you’ve refused your one chance for mercy.” As in past scenes, Leia’s initial impulse is to challenge the legality of the Empire’s actions. When rhetoric does not work, she physically resists. In this instance, Vader must hold her still so the device can inject her with a serum. But both forms of resistance—rhetorical and physical—fail. Leia cannot escape. Nevertheless, she persists in refusing to provide Vader with the location of the Rebel base. He tries to convince her that he, too, is a rebel. He appeals to her sense of duty, insisting that her father “commands you to tell us” and asking, “Don’t you wish to please your father?” But this also fails to persuade her, so Vader uses the Force to make her feel “great pain, excruciating pain, ... a universe of it!” Suggesting that her heart is about to burst and that she cannot breathe, Vader takes her almost to the point of death before relenting. But even while screaming in pain, Leia would rather die than reveal the location of the rebel base. When Tarkin subsequently expresses incredulity that Leia, “that slip of a girl,” has defied Vader’s interrogation methods, Vader responds, “I believe that she still holds hope that the stolen plans will eventually be delivered into Rebel hands. Futile, of course, but it sustains her.” Tarkin rejects this explanation, noting that Vader has broken “hardened, resolute men with relative ease.” Tarkin is right to doubt Vader’s justification. Leia’s development in TRD provides the better explanation for her successful resistance: she is now ready to kill and to die to defeat the Empire. It is her clarity of purpose, her belief that violent resistance is an ethical response to the Empire’s oppression, that has transformed her from the woman of high birth who uses her privilege to hide her pacifist support for the Rebellion into a stalwart rebel ready to die or even kill to save the galaxy.

NPR’s Star Wars: The Radio Drama tells its audience the story of how this “slip of a girl” transforms into a Rebel leader willing to shoot first. It casts her as much more than a damsel in distress. She is a dynamic character who undertakes her own moral journey when she sees that passive resistance will not stop the Empire’s totalitarian oppression of the galaxy. She matures into an adult who must make moral choices concerning life and death. Ultimately, Leia embraces violence as an ethical response to the evil perpetrated by the Emperor and his totalitarian military machine. TRD achieves this expansion of Leia’s character using only sound. By framing Leia’s transformation from pacifist to revolutionary, however, in a character-building plot unique to the radio drama, with the familiar soundscape of A New Hope, TRD demonstrates that radio can add incredible depth and complexity to a transmedia franchise.