

SAGA
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An academic *Star Wars* fan journal

The Saga Journal is a monthly on-line academic review dedicated to the in-depth study of the Star Wars saga as presented in George Lucas's six-film series. Our goal is to deliver one of the best collections of scholarly essays on the subject that the internet has to offer.

Here at the Saga Journal, we believe Star Wars is more than just an enjoyable space opera set in a galaxy far, far away. We recognize it as a modern myth, a cultural phenomenon all its own. We want to encourage the literary exploration of all aspects of the story as presented in the Prequel and Original Trilogy films.

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Star Wars: a Cinematic Phenomenon?

by Rebecca Thomas

A toll-free number giv[ing] out information about the release of... Empire Strikes Back was short-circuited in one day when one hundred thirty thousand calls were registered. Fans send in more than two hundred thousand letters a year to [George] Lucas and his leading actors. There are a mother and son who have seen Star Wars... at least four hundred times. Terri Hardin... gained extensive press coverage when she waited two days in line for the premier of Empire... Upon the release of Return of the Jedi, Lucasfilm made sure that a novelization, a record album, a film documentary, a book on the making of the film and an entire new line of merchandising products would come out simultaneously.

George Lucas' *Star Wars* films are some of the most popular of all time; in fact, the term "may the Force be with you" is now recognizable in most countries around the world. But why did *Star Wars* become such a cinematic phenomenon? By exploring the state of America upon the release of *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* in 1977, the recognizable symbolism of this film, and the aesthetics of production, including technological advances in filmmaking, we can access why the first *Star Wars* film was such a success.

George Lucas the writer, producer and director of the *Star Wars* films was just like any other American kid of the '60s; he lived life on the edge and didn't care much for school or the future. Then on Tuesday 12th June 1962 George crashed his Fiat Bianchina near the Lucas ranch in Modesto, the incident was serious and George believed the fact that he was still alive was a miracle. George saw his own mortality, which provided him with the drive to succeed and do something with his life. This change provided perspective, driving George to read avidly in philosophy, history and sociology and also to commit further to succeed with his education by studying film at the University of Southern California.

In 1973 Lucas started work on *Star Wars*, the project he had dreamt of for years. *Episode IV: A New Hope* took approximately two and a half years to write. The final script was 160 pages, a screenplay for a two-hour movie normally being just 118 pages; however Lucas was a perfectionist and his script was planned right down to the second, even footage taken from World War Two news reels of aerial battles for the dogfights was timed carefully.

It was Alan Ladd at FOX who agreed to take on *Star Wars*, although at the time he admitted he didn't really understand the whole concept; however had seen Lucas' other work, including *THX1138* (1971) and *American Graffiti* (1973), and could see his potential. After several delays, FOX released *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* in May 1977.

Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope was released during a period of change in American cinema. From the late 1940s the cinema going audience started to decline due to growing prosperity, the rise of the automobile, suburbanization and perhaps most of all due to the introduction of television. Equally the prosperous studio system of the early part of the twentieth century was breaking down after the 1948 antitrust suit against Paramount. It was the rise of the film school generation in the late 1960s and early 1970s that brought about a new mood to Hollywood.

There was now a whole generation who had grown up with a love of film and this was reflected in education with an increased number of colleges and universities adding film to the curriculum, both at undergraduate and graduate level. Film school graduates, the likes of Francis Ford Coppola, Martin

Scorsese and George Lucas, began to demonstrate that youthful spirit could be more profitable than experience. Films like *Easy Rider* (1969) achieved phenomenal success and youth-cult status on a low budget, exactly what the Hollywood executives were looking for. The new film school generation also led to a rise in film-smart movie goers. A new wave of youngsters emerged who had more leisure time and disposable income, together with a love of film to spend it all on and as a result the industry turned to genre pictures, which had previously been the sole domain of the exploitation market, for example gangster films, teen hot-rod flicks and science fiction adventure.

The science fiction genre in particular made an intriguing mutation with the omnipresent threat of nuclear annihilation. It took the form of myths and fairy tales to provide an escape to another time or place, linking the genre with adventure rather than horror as it had been previously. As T. S. Eliot perceived “humankind cannot bear very much reality” and this escapism provided the avoidance society required.

It was not just the fear of nuclear destruction that saw a shift in American’s attitudes during the 1960s and 1970s. There was a departure from social activism and although Conservatism stayed steadfast, the atmosphere of Americans was evolving from one of liberal reforms. People still cherished the goals of the reform movement and whilst they had seen many successes, with fundamental change in black segregation and barriers being lifted within the political system, they had also witnessed many failures as well. The failures were highlighted by their nature and appeared to outweigh the successes. Americans were dissatisfied and wanted a release from the agitations of Vietnam, civil rights and Watergate.

The hostility encountered by the reform movement, the corruption of the Nixon, and the failure of American policy in Vietnam left the country with a sense of disillusionment. The inability of the United States to defeat North Vietnam had badly bruised the ego of the nation. The animosity directed towards the civil rights and antiwar movement created a feeling of cynicism, as many people began to doubt the country’s commitment to justice and equality. Worst of all was the sense of betrayal engendered by the Watergate scandal. Richard Nixon had asked the American people to trust him, and many came to regret that they had. The great crusade to reform the nation and the world had, it seemed, failed.

Star Wars was set in a universe far away and long ago and “evoked the bygone pleasures of children’s Saturday matinees at the movies,” where the problems of society no longer existed and the audience could return to an age of innocence.

Hollywood had been churning out a succession of gritty down beat grim reality films during the early 1970s; key examples being *Earthquake* (1974), *Towering Inferno* (1974) and *The Poseidon Adventure* (1972), which portrayed an un-imaginable magnitude of desperate situations. Equally anti-hero films such as *The French Connection* (1971) showed the audience that even the good guy was bad and could not be trusted. However by the mid to late 1970s, films that were the most profitable “reassured rather than disturbed the public.” Rather than showing Americans

the negative that they knew from life at this time, films started to portray a more positive note and take the audience to a time when things were better. Even Lucas’ *American Graffiti* (1973), set just eleven years prior to release, returned to an era before the anguish of Vietnam, before the assassination of Kennedy and King, and the disappointment of Watergate. *Star Wars* was set in a universe far away and long ago and “evoked the bygone pleasures of children’s Saturday matinees at the movies,” where the problems of society no longer existed and the audience could return to an age of innocence.

The opening credits of *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* start with the words “A long, long time ago in a galaxy far, far away” as if to truly evoke the feelings of “once upon a time,” like a modern fairy tale. Lucas had “long been intrigued with the idea of creating a modern day fairy tale” and the response from the teenage audience towards his previous film *American Graffiti* (1973) satisfied George that there was more need than ever in America for this type of story. “There is a whole generation growing up without any kind of fairy tales...And kids need fairy tales.”

George Lucas has been hopeful since childhood that someone would release a “romantic-fantasy-adventure story set in a distant time.” However what Hollywood produced was nothing more than cumbersome, immature science fiction films with an easily anticipated plot line. Accurately noticing an opening, Lucas “borrowed liberally from the Flash Gordon serials he had watched as a child,” analyzed an abundance of classic films and read contemporary science fiction novels to give his film story line appeal to audiences who were weary of the cinematic sex and violence apparent during the late 1960s and early 1970s, and wanted to return to classic Hollywood style action adventures.

The structure of the *Star Wars* story follows the classic Hollywood narrative form of the early part of the twentieth century. It has a clear beginning when the characters are introduced: Darth Vader and Princess Leia on board her consular ship, the *Tantive IV*; the two droids R2-D2 and C-3PO as they escape the *Tantive IV* and land on the remote desert planet of Tatooine; then Luke Skywalker and finally Obi-Wan Kenobi on Tatooine. Things are peaceful and there is order. Then the middle section of the film establishes the conflict. There is disorder and the characters head off on a journey to try and restore order: Storm troopers searching for the droids kill Luke’s aunt and uncle, forcing Luke to leave Tatooine with the droids and Obi-Wan on a journey to take the droids to the planet of Alderaan to help the Rebel Alliance fight the Empire. Finally, the conflict is resolved and order is restored when the Death Star is destroyed and the fight against the Empire is won; peace falls on the galaxy once more. The classic Hollywood narrative form similarly recalls the nostalgia of traditional filmmaking as recognizable symbolism for the audience.

The use of recognizable symbolism to create a familiar story line in *Star Wars* included a story pattern which can be found throughout classical mythology. George had developed an intense interest in the great themes of the epic struggles between good and evil he had discovered in literature; “I was trying to get fairy tales, myths and religion down to a distilled state, studying the pure form to see how and why it worked,” Lucas said. In particular George was enthralled by the writings of Joseph Campbell. The basis of Campbell’s work into comparative religion and mythology is a main undercurrent in the *Star Wars* story. In his book *The Hero with a Thousand Faces* (1949) Joseph Campbell describes the “monomyth,” which is often referred to as the “Hero’s Journey”:

A Hero ventures forth from the world of common day into a region of supernatural wonder: fabulous forces are there encountered and a decisive victory is won: the hero comes back from this mysterious adventure with the power to bestow boons on his fellow man.

Campbell himself cites other examples of classic mythology to explain the “monomyth.” For example, “Jason...who [leaves] the cave in which he was brought up in order to search for the Golden Fleece and then returned with this prize to recapture his homeland[,] and Prometheus, who traveled to Mount Olympus, stole fire from the gods, and brought it back to earth.”

Just like the classic Hollywood narrative the story line in *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* adheres well to Campbell’s description of the three stages of a “monomyth.” First there is the departure, or separation. Luke a bored and restless teenager is living on the remote planet of Tatooine; however “the

time for the passing of a threshold is at hand” and the arrival of the two robots, R2-D2 and C-3PO, with a secret message heralds the “call to adventure.” The first step of the hero’s journey cannot proceed without the help of a supernatural aid; “it may be some little fellow of the wood, some wizard, hermit, shepherd, or smith, who appears, to supply the amulets and advice that the hero will require. ’ In the case of *Star Wars*, Ben Kenobi, once the rebel General and Jedi Knight Obi-Wan Kenobi and now a mysterious hermit, arrives in the story and gives Luke his fathers old Light Sabre. “Aided by the advice, amulets, and secret agents of the supernatural helper” the hero is now ready for his Initiation; the second stage of his journey. In this second stage one of the tests or ordeals that the hero has to endure is described by Campbell: “The hero dreams that a snake wound itself around his body, the crept up to his neck.” “The [hero] is absolutely abandoned and alone in a deep hole of a cellar. The walls of his room keep getting narrower and narrower, so that he cannot stir. ’ In *Star Wars*, Luke is plunged into the garbage crusher and nearly drowned by the snake like Dianoga, just before the waste processing starts and the walls of the garbage crusher start to close in. The third and final stage of the Hero’s journey, according to Campbell is the Return: “The full round, the norm of the monomyth, requires that the hero shall now begin the labor of bringing the runes of wisdom...or his sleeping princess, back into the kingdom of humanity, where the boon may redound to the renewing of the community, the nation, the planet, or the ten thousand worlds.” Indeed Luke has rescued Princess Leia and returns her and the plans for the Death Star to the rebel forces, so they may defeat the Empire concluding the final part of the monomyth or Hero’s journey.

Besides the fantasy aspect of fairy tales and the monomyth, Lucas wanted to provide a clear cut distinction between good and evil, unlike the anti-heroes that had obscured American cinema since World War Two. George sort more traditional values to please disillusioned Americans. “He needed a timeless fable that could demonstrate, not pontificate on, the differences between right and wrong, good and evil, responsibility and shiftlessness.” It was fundamental, therefore, for characters to be well defined in their roles, hence “the storm troopers of the (evil) Empire are dressed in Nazi-style uniforms, while Han Solo...wears the vest, holster, and boots of a cowboy hero,” providing easily recognizable images of heroes and villains for the audience to relate to.

While Lucas wanted to demonstrate positive values thought the characters in *Star Wars*, he also realized the protective culture of the 1950s had gone. Traditional religion was becoming obsolete and moral values appeared to be disintegrating. Lucas explained: “Nobody’s saying the very basic things; they’re dealing in the abstract. Everybody’s forgetting to tell the kids, ‘Hey, this is right and this wrong.’” George needed something simple and universal to get his message across. By comparing religions and tracing them back to the teachings of the great prophets, Lucas and his colleague Gary Kurtz saw a lot of similarities in the “ethics of responsibility and self sacrifice”; “The core philosophies are very very similar.” This gave them the idea for The Force; a universal deity for people to believe in, not a singular religion or a single god, but a saviour for everybody to demonstrate positive values.

George was desperate to get the message of positive values across to the younger generation; however he claimed that *Star Wars* was not just a children’s movie. The story line in *Star Wars* actually has something for all members of the audience. The action and futuristic technology appeals to male members of the audience, while the love rivalry between Luke and Han is also a classic screen jealousy and adds a subtle romantic twist providing interest for female spectators. However the average of movie goers had reduced. In 1970-1971 over forty-three percent of the audience was aged between twelve and twenty; by the end of the 1970s this figure had risen to fifty percent. Likewise the twenty-one to twenty-nine age bracket represented thirty percent of the audience at this time. Accordingly seventy-five percent of cinema goers were under the age of thirty. Therefore the fact that the character and mythological fairy tale story line attracted children was extremely beneficial.

It is the special effects in *Star Wars* that make this mythological fairy tale into a reality. Lucas and his crew were going to have to develop a whole new world whilst ensuring that the setting was different from any that movie audiences had ever seen before to give the film an accessible edge. However many of the effects George envisaged had never been attempted before. Previously many directors had avoided using special effects because the technology was just too wearisome and expensive; in effect the industry was dying: “Warners once employed a hundred special-effects technicians...Now there were none. Background painters and matte artists...now worked freelance on films...everyone assumed the art would die with them.” As there were no specialist companies in the industry, Lucas created Industrial Light and Magic (ILM) in July 1975 as a subsidiary of Lucasfilm Ltd. to actualize his own effects. In all \$2.5 million of the budget for *Star Wars* was spent in special effects alone, which, at the time, was unprecedented.

In order to assist with the revolution in the effects industry that *Star Wars* required to bring the magic to the screen, in June 1975 Lucas turned to John Dykstra, an “up and coming light in the world of effects.” It had taken eight week for Industrial Light and Magic to construct the sets ready for the special effects of the space battles before filming could even start and even then the results looked disastrous, Lucas recalled, “It was terrible. I knew it wasn’t going to work. The ships looked like little cardboard cut-outs, and the lasers were big and fat and looked awful. We couldn’t use any of it.” Dykstra had been experimenting with new camera techniques using blue screen technology, “a special process that makes the background disappear under special lighting.” Previously models were hung on wires and the camera had been moved towards them, but this did not allow for precision as movements could not be duplicated exactly, which was essential when using a starry background. Other special effect technicians, like Wally Veevers on *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), had tried to produce the precision required, but the method was very time consuming with some shots taking hours to film. By keeping the model stationary and moving the camera around it, Dykstra had found an easier method of filming, and by replacing the worm gear previously used with electronics, allowed for the exact increments required to obtain the precision required. Additionally electronic motors could be placed inside the model’s turrets, for example, to allow for more intricate and realistic movement and effects. The system became known as the Dykstraflex and revolutionized the effects industry.

The motion-control system developed for *Star Wars* was...named the “Dykstraflex.” The freedom the system offered to repeat precise camera/model movements allowed for fast-moving foreground action to be played out against perfectly synchronized backgrounds. “This allows complex, matched-move, multi-element matte shots by shooting the foreground against a blue screen and then taking that program of motions to a twin camera system. A separate background element can then be photographed with matching motions,” explained Dykstra... “When the two elements are combined, the appearance is that of real-time photography—allowing pans, tilts, rolls, and accelerations, on shots having a multitude of elements that were shot at different times, on separate cameras.”

Further radical methods in *Star Wars* were seen in the production and editing. To give the actors the space to evolve into a scene, George developed a “seamless shooting style.” Instead of filming twenty or thirty “takes” of a scene, which was usual in the industry, Lucas just took four or five, but these were longer than normal, thus allowing the actors room to develop their characters and give them the depth of reality. To move from scene to scene Lucas used wipes and irises, not only did these serve to promote the narrative, but also they evoke nostalgia for the old movies in which such devices were common. Equally, George used roll-up titles at the start of *Star Wars*, which were indicative of the 1930s and 1940s serials and conjured up the magic of that era. Therefore Lucas used simple methods to give the film depth, reality and nostalgia.

The music of *Star Wars* gives the film depth, and provides an emotional anchor. Traditionally science fiction films had used futuristic electronic style sound tracks and with the advent of Disco during the 1970s, Lucas looked to be taking a huge risk in calling for an old fashioned symphonic score with “Korngoldian sentiment and Holstian bombast”; however John Williams seemed to pull out all the stops to exceed Lucas’ expectations. The eighty-seven piece London Symphony Orchestra created “a rich pastiche of Richard Strauss, chromed in brass, with a swashbuckling march theme right out of Strauss’s Don Juan” and the militaristic four-over-four beat of the sound track provided a recognizable feel, reminiscent of the victory of World War Two, thus providing a familiar tone to the unfamiliar surroundings of the film.

Everything visual was going to be unfamiliar. What should be familiar was the emotional connection that the film has through the ear to the visceral.

Lucas was keen that *Star Wars* have a plethora of recognizable trappings. The soundtrack, the first to use of Dolby stereo sound, used new but also natural and everyday sounds. For the sound of the laser blasters a wrench hitting a tightened mast guy support wire was used. Equally, the costumes were to be functional and not flashy to provide an organic, familiar atmosphere. There were large parts of the back-story that could not be told in the film, for example “the nature and structure of the Empire, Luke’s background, the Jedi—none were explained.” Lucas decided on an exception solution; he wouldn’t explain anything. By concentrating on the story line and taking for granted the outlandish places and weird creatures, Lucas depicted a common way of living and thus it became as familiar as real life to the audience.

The outlandish places the story goes are taken for granted. The film depicts a common way of living, and everybody does it. It makes it more believable, quite frankly...There were laser swords, but it was more like, “Here, kid, take your father’s old laser sword”. And it’s in a leather case...The aliens walked around. They were just there.

Star Wars changed the way we look at movies and how movies are made. The film’s ground breaking special effects gave the unfamiliar a sense of reality, which when combined with the emotion provoking music and clever way of presenting the strange story as an everyday narrative enables the spectator to be engulfed in the experience, not wanting it to end. However, as Lucas explained, “If it [*Star Wars*] were just an adrenaline-rush movie, it wouldn’t be here 20 years later. There are other things going on that are complicated and psychologically satisfying.” This could be found in the plethora of recognizable symbolism found throughout the film. The tales of heroes taken from classic mythology and the simple fight between good and evil in the modern fairy tale theme are not obvious, but give the narrative a familiar tone; something easily understandable. Equally the fact that the Force provides a universal deity, drawing on different religions and not promoting a singular religion or god, makes the story accessible to all no matter what their background. The universal accessibility extends to a story line that is suitable for all: young or old; rich or poor; male or female. The “audience share a subconscious emotional reaction to a movie—when it’s as popular as *Star Wars*, the shared emotion becomes a cultural force.” Overall *Star Wars* combines the unfamiliar with the familiar in an accessible yet exciting new manor.

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The film also appears to have been released at the right time. 1977 saw a whole generation who had grown up with a love of film, many of which had gone on to study film at college or university. This generation appreciated the new special effects and deeper symbolism apparent in *Star Wars*. The full title of the movie; *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope* also had a tone of irony to the time. America was feeling a sense of disillusionment over agitations of Vietnam, civil rights and Watergate and needed a new hope to move forward.

The fact that *Star Wars* is a cinematic phenomenon comes from the combination of its nostalgic feel, sense of familiarity, dynamic effects or promotion of hope, and as Sir Alec Guinness suggests “Failure has a thousand explanations. Success doesn’t need one.”

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Recommendation

Modern Science through the Eyes of *Star Wars*

Exhibit: *Star Wars: Where Science Meets Imagination*

Created by: Boston Museum of Science & Lucasfilm Ltd.

Location: Museum of Science and History, Fort Worth, TX

Presented by: Bose Corporation

Information URL: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Star_Wars:_Where_Science_Meets_Imagination

Reviewed by LadyAeryn.

It's not every day that *Star Wars* comes to you -- or in my case, within three hours of me. When I found out the "*Star Wars: Where Science Meets Imagination*" traveling exhibit was coming to the Ft. Worth, Texas Museum of Science and History this summer, I knew there was no way I wasn't going. After going, I can easily say that if you live within reasonable -- or heck, even slightly unreasonable -- driving distance of one of the remaining cities on this exhibit's schedule, it's well worth making the time to check out.

"Imagination" is a self-paced walk-through exhibit that employs an extensive collection of props and costumes from all six *Star Wars* films to illustrate examples of corresponding advances in real-life modern technology. This exhibit easily had a greater wealth of artifacts than the Lucasfilm Archives at Celebration IV earlier this year (in hindsight, I wonder if this wasn't part of why things were so relatively spare in Los Angeles). Luke's landspeeder from *A New Hope*, which you see immediately upon entering the exhibit (looking just as beaten-up as it did in '77) is but the beginning. If you ever wanted to see Boba Fett's blaster, Palpatine's lightsaber, the inside of Vader's helmet, or a Wookiee's toenails up close and personal, or design your own Mos Eisley or Artoo -- this is your chance.

The exhibit is organized into sections, each dedicated to a specific aspect of *Star Wars* life/technology and its modern Earth counterpart: spacecraft/hovercraft, life in extreme environments like Hoth or Tatooine, robotics, and so forth. Near models of Luke's X-wing, the *Tantive IV*, and the *Millennium Falcon* are models of Earth hoverplanes and rockets; next to Artoo and Threepio are robots that can speak and recognize faces as well as little Roomba robot vacuum cleaners; next to Vader's suit, Anakin's robotic arm from *Attack of the Clones*, and a 2-1B Rebel medical droid are real-life self-correcting prosthetic limbs, synthetic skin, and even a prototype for a cybernetic human heart. Looking at these, it's not so hard -- at least it wasn't for me -- to imagine that one day not too far from now we might actually have a "fully functional" Artoo or Threepio walking around our planet.

Most of the displays include an informative behind-the-scenes video featuring interviews and insights from cast and crew of the *Star Wars* films as well as experts in the scientific fields highlighted in the exhibit. Additional video and sound bites are available on the optional self-guided multimedia tour, which my sister and I purchased at the beginning of the tour for \$5 each, and was well worth it.

There're also a number of hands-on displays one can easily lose a lot of time at. In the Tatooine section (not far from costumes for Anakin, Padme, a Jawa, and male/female Tusken Raiders) there's a row of computer consoles where visitors can design their own spaceport or moisture farm as part of a virtual community. Near the end of the exhibit is an area where you can design and test your own robots. The very end of the exhibit is the most dangerous hands-on part of it all (especially for your wallet): the

exhibit store! (Afterwards I learned that some stops on this exhibit's tour had included a life-size flight simulator experience of the *Millennium Falcon's* cockpit, but unfortunately I saw no sign of in Ft. Worth. The Anakin-phile in me was also bummed that his *Revenge of the Sith* costume had no gauntlet in sight, but these instances were hardly a detraction from the overall impressiveness of the exhibit.)

Prior to visiting this exhibit I wasn't terribly excited about the "real-life" science part of it all -- I wanted to see the the pretty costumes and props. As we walked through, though, my sister and I both found ourselves fascinated by the non-*Star Wars* side of it too. You can spend an hour in the exhibit and catch most of the interesting material there; we easily spent nearly two hours. Flash photography is allowed, so don't forget your camera. And don't be afraid to show your fannish side -- just as great as getting the chance to be both educated and entertained by our favorite movies, this is a chance to share in the geekery with others just as devoted. Even some of the museum staff had gotten into it, wearing *Star Wars* t-shirts or Jedi robes. Those who are just casual fans of the series, though, should get enjoyment out of this too.

The exhibit is currently set to leave Ft. Worth on September 3, 2007. Its next stop is at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago from October 2007 to January 2008, with stops in Minneapolis and Philadelphia to come in later 2008.

Discovering *Star Wars*

Isaac

The *Star Wars* Universe was opened to me on a cold Christmas morning. The year, I believe, was 1986, and my parents had rented the three original movies. All the toys that year were the *Star Wars* toys my parents had been collecting and saving for my sister and me. That morning we finished assembling the toys, put in the movies and discovered the Galaxy Far Far Away. To this day I continue to watch the movies and play with, err, collect the toys.

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