

How To Fix The Force Awakens

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I think I've figured out how to salvage The Force Awakens. Don't get me wrong, it's a good movie, a damn fun and refreshing movie, but it's widely acknowledged to still have deep problems, especially in the second half. Surprisingly there's basically one change that I think could have turned it into a great movie.

And no, I'm not talking about R2-D2's random map bit. Yes the whole map-to-Luke mcguffin was kinda forced, but JJ could have easily focused in on some part of R2 after BB-8 leaves him and let a small light start blinking to remove the perceived arbitrariness of his later awakening. That's trivial to solve and will probably be done in a special edition.

No, I'm talking a structural change, a plot change: The New Republic senate shouldn't have been destroyed until just before the end of the film.

What if, in the final battle, Starkiller Base wasn't gratuitously firing on a tiny little rinky-dink Resistance base they could have as easily just bombed, but on the New Republic itself? And then it *succeeded*. Sure our heroes still manage to destroy the New Order's superweapon, but they do so *after* the major damage has been done. With this delay the emotional emphasis changes. *They fail to save the day*. They merely survive to slink off in a suddenly changed galaxy, and what hope they manage to scrounge from defeat becomes all the more desperate.

The critical moment goes something like this: Han confronts Ben, the star is finally drained away to nothing and darkness covers them, Kylo kills Han, Chewie howls and shoots Kylo. Leia is slammed. Rey and Finn fire their blasters in despair, that's when we see Starkiller Base finally fire, casting everything in red and orange to match Kylo's saber. Finn and Rey scramble into the snow blown up from the firing and we cut to the magical hyperlaser slamming into the Senate and destroying the Republic's mighty fleet. Leia crumples. Rey and Finn are scrambling through the snow, Chewie trying to escape the troopers, everything is in tatters, and that's when Chewie blows the charges, Poe flies in past an escaping Kylo and blows the regulator. Then Kylo confronts Rey and Finn and everything returns to the normal trajectory we saw on screens.

Why is this better? Well because it breaks the A New Hope story to a significant degree and double-emphasizes the loss of Han, making the film more dark. Imagine if Yavin IV had actually been destroyed before Luke had managed to blow the Death Star. It also swings the otherwise largely indiscernible political context back into focus in a way that actually works. In the first cut of the film JJ had Leia send a representative to the New Republic to argue on her behalf that the First Order was a pressing threat. JJ was right to take that out of the final film because it

involved us randomly cutting away from our new heroes over to Leia *before* she shows up on Takodana and has her perfect introduction with Han. However what was lost with these cut scenes is any remote understanding of the wider political situation, which makes TFA's conflict feel like a forced rehash. Suddenly the Empire's back and the Rebellion is too, and oh there's this other thing for half a second.

With the destruction of Hosnian Prime moved back to the final act there's room for the political situation to be spelled out first.

There's really no point in having the Hosnian system be destroyed while our heroes are on Takodana. Rey has her force-vision and runs away, Finn is about to depart and then the version of *The Force Awakens* we got has *two* things happen at once: Starkiller Base fires and Kylo's forces descend on Maz's castle. Only one of those is really necessary. All Finn needs as motivation to turn around and seek Rey is the First Order attacking Maz's castle and thus directly putting her in danger.

Further the scene where Finn and others look up and see distant exploding planets has widely been noted as profoundly insulting to the audience. Star Wars has an explicit speed of light and that doesn't let you immediately see what happens on planets half a galaxy away by merely looking up in the sky on a different planet in a different system. This scene is hot garbage. JJ has done this kind of shit before (putting Spock on another distant planet where somehow he can see Vulcan be destroyed in the sky with his bare eyes), and he got hate for it. JJ doing it again is just flagrant disrespect.

Star Wars is far from a hard SF franchise — it has sound in space and wizards — but a major part of why fans love it so dearly is in its world-building. Star Wars would be a but a pale fraction of what it is without compendiums explaining every species and vehicle. Attention to consistency and detail is a critical part of respecting your fans by showing you love the galaxy too. Star Wars is not serious science fiction by any stretch of the imagination, but neither is it something as halfassed as say Moffat's Doctor Who, a campy fairy tale that doesn't bother with consistency but focuses on cute momentary spectacle that almost immediately sours the moment you turn a couple neurons to think about it.

Instead of the destruction of the Hosnian system you could simply have Hux give his speech and use Starkiller to *start* draining a star. (This would also remove the slightly confusing bit where Starkiller has a star and daylight when firing for the first time.) The look of the base beginning to drain a star is profound enough. The planet is *eating a star*! Hux says they will power up with it and fire across the galaxy! There's no story reason the whole process should only take twenty minutes in-universe. Indeed dragging out the draining of the star over the entire last acts helps add to a sense of the magnitude of this superweapon and how it's different than the Death Stars.

This disruption — the beginning of the draining of a star — could be sufficient for the Resistance to take note ("massive disruptions in hyperspace"). Or Finn could be the one to relay the message about Star Killer base in reaction to Rey being taken hostage.

What this enables is scenes with Leia trying to contact the Republic to warn them. This is where the Republic refusing to deal with her and the difference between the mighty Republic and the weak Resistance can actually be shown to the audience. Leia can try to contact with a hologram and get the runaround and rejection by senators or bureaucrats. Think of her talking to a sympathetic senator who's helped shield her from other factions in the Republic and finance her little Resistance but who feels like she can do no more, and relaying Leia's fears to the Senate

would mean openly admitting being in contact with Leia. “But this superweapon could destroy the Republic!” “They’d arrest me rather than hear from you.” You could also imagine her contacting the admiral of the mighty Republic fleet — and this would be a great moment for Ackbar to appear and actually be a character, someone sympathetic, but tied down by his leadership role. And maybe he does get a few ships away, or presses for evacuation, but it’s too late in the final act. Alternately you could have Leia send a delegate to try and convince people to evacuate, and ultimately have her die on the planet, after periodically cutting to her efforts to save folks during the rest of last acts.

Leia thus emerges more clearly as a Cassandra character and her Resistance is situated clearly against a New Republic that is happy to keep a treaty with the remnants of the Empire. And then the end of the film involves her both being right, to hideous consequences, as well as losing Han.

Even with everything else the same, this makes for a very different movie than *A New Hope*, indeed it blurs aspects of both *A New Hope* and *The Empire Strikes Back*. The loss of the mentor isn’t in the middle as with Obiwan’s death, it’s at the end. The deep catastrophe isn’t in the middle as with Alderaan, but at the end. Our heroes survive and The First Order is impeded, but it’s more of an *Empire Strikes Back* sort of situation. Except even worse, more of a *Revenge of the Sith* sort of situation because everything has changed and all the good guys have left is hope. People run up to greet the survivors, but there is no cheering victory. The “find Luke” ending is reminiscent more of the “find Han and that bounty hunter” ending of *ESB*, but it also becomes all the more meaningful, because we have a more immediate sense of him being truly *needed*.

This single plot change doesn’t make *The Force Awakens* a completely novel experience, it remains a hash of things that have worked before, but it mixes things up further than the direct retread of *A New Hope* we got. And it provides a good way to actually demonstrate the political context at an appropriate time, without slogging down the film or arbitrarily interrupting the early adventures of Finn & Rey.

What’s also astonishing about this change is how little screentime it would change. Some shots like Kylo and Hux watching the first firing would have to be changed to them watching the star being sucked down. You’d get a couple extra minutes of Leia or her delegate trying to warn the Republic, trying to get people to evacuate. And you’d change some dialog in the Resistance base and move the shot of the Hosnian destruction to the moments between Kylo killing Han and Poe making his trench run. You could have Starkiller fire as viewed by the X-wing pilots, but then Poe notices the hole Chewie blew in the energy regulator. And in this version there’s still enough energy remaining in Starkiller from the sun after firing that it can be released, engulfing the base.

(Notice further that you can keep the shots of Han and Finn looking up, but pair those shots with the descent of the First Order ships. Indeed, in any case, this is something I’d strongly encourage being done in a special edition to remove the whole “we can instantly see another planet exploding from across the galaxy” insult.)

But despite at most adding no more than a few minutes such changes would significantly slow down the the rushed mess of the film and give it a more coherent and unified feel. From Takodana on it’s a race to save the (ungrateful and unaware) New Republic from the New Order’s superweapon. The main characters *fail*. And in doing so Han’s death isn’t minimized by the immediately following trivial success easily blowing up yet another death star. Similarly neither is the victory at Endor by the Rebellion seemingly cast aside. We get to see that the Galaxy has had 30 years of something resembling peace and liberalization. The victory of *RtoJ* isn’t already

basically trashed by the time TFA opens, instead the entire film clearly and slowly lays out the rise of the First Order from a minor power to the supreme power in the galaxy and the demolishing of everything accomplished at Endor.

And this gives *even* more power to Rey's fight with Kylo. Everything is freshly ruined. Her father figure has been murdered, her new friend lies possibly dead, and the New Republic has *just* been destroyed. Everything they were fighting against has come to pass. Poe's pitiful squadron has been shredded. Kylo is seemingly unstoppable. And then she musters her strength, overcomes the fear and trepidation that has hounded her, calls out to the Skywalker lightsaber and it flies past Kylo into her hand. She masters her rage in a moment of absolute loss, both personal and across the galaxy, and finds clarity and serenity.

Destroying the Republic senate at the *end* after a long buildup would take everything good about the film and turn it up to 11.

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