

How Star Wars Should Have Ended

Reflections on Taste, The Expanded Universe & Radical Politics

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September 19th, 2011

I'm feeling profoundly under the weather so it's as good a time as any to indulge in that most venerable of radical pastimes, ranting about Star Wars.

I discovered Star Wars the same way any poor eight-year-old did in the early 90s, through the comics section at my local library. Dark Empire and Tales of the Jedi were richly watercolored and stunning in their scope. And eventually I got bored enough to follow up on their source films. It didn't take long for me to realize that Star Wars was an acceptable geekdom in the otherwise harsh projects. Star Wars was *gangsta*. And the root of this I suspect lies in its dramatically different character from Star Trek, Lord of the Rings or the myriad superheroes and chain-mail wearing dragon-slayers cranked out monthly. Star Wars feels familiar.

Having turned to the comics section only after exhausting the rest of the stacks, I was knowledgeable enough to recognize the technological trappings as laughable, but gracious enough to appreciate the sly self-effacing shrug in "*a long time ago, in a galaxy far, far away*." The realism of Star Wars is its resonance with our common experience of 'how reality works.' Reality is complicated, gritty, lived-in, with more components than you can ever experience or understand. Obi-Wan and Luke don't know the names of all the alien species dicking about in Wuher's cantina and it wouldn't occur to them to try. The galaxy is a big place. And the Empire's success in this context is awe-inspiring and despair-inducing even while being obviously incomplete. Star Wars is what the world looks like to kids dealing dope on street corners. Scraping by in the chaotic brutal periphery, proud of the various impressions of home and community found there, using fantastic tools without the slightest understanding of how they work, in awe of the state while waking up every morning simmering in hate for it. Star Wars creates an environment in which the colors are brighter but everything else is the same. And then it wraps us up in the fantasy of meaningful resistance.

Maintaining this essential "tone" of Star Wars has been probably the most uproarious issue in the last three decades of popculture. Everyone knows the prequels dropped the ball, although the list of widely identified missteps is a bit shallow in description (more on that later). But Star Wars has been grappling with this burden from the very beginning. Some poor sod at Marvel Comics is told "we've got a license" and all of a sudden he's forced to make difficult decisions about what would best signify the "star warsness" of a story as opposed to a Buck Rogers story. It's not enough to draw some familiar outfits or even capture the characters' voices, what fans

are addicted to is the feel of the world. And it's an inarguable fact that almost everyone has been failing to nail that in one way or another ever since.

I'm not going to suggest that my extensive fandom (which collapsed before high school) or presumed media studies prowess grants me perfect depth in analysis. Every writer and artist that's worked on Star Wars has brought their own subjective lens and I'm not immune. But I do have one very simple point that I think should unarguably frame the issue:

The most potent and successful component of Star Wars was the taste of reality that suffused its fantastical nature.

Lucas believed his winning formula was the genre mixing pot, something he struggled to stir up in the prequels and Lucasfilm has slightly more successfully adopted as their guiding light in the T-Cannon. But this is wrong. Objectively and empirically wrong.

And now, in recognizing that, I'd like to talk about what can and could have been done to save the taste we all long for and yet have all but given up on re-experiencing.

Let's start with Return of the Jedi. I've held onto an idealization of RotJ for far too long, mostly through the way my earlier experience with Dark Empire and Ian McDiarmid's starkly redeeming performance in most of the prequels set the Emperor front and center in my head. But the too cool for school bros that kvetched obnoxiously about the Ewoks not being uber badass mech-driving Wookies actually had a point. Lucas had a really good idea with the Ewoks — a tiny band of dismissably cute primitives ends up being critical in the Empire's downfall — but he focused too much on them and too little on the unavoidably eye- and mind-catching rebel fleet. The Ewoks go from being a realistically unexpected counterpoint to an off-tone chirpy Fern Gully fairy tale.

In the process we're denied a chance to soak up the random realness of the assembled rebel fleet (either before battle or during). The sudden diversity we glimpse finally has the opportunity to sell the notion of the Rebellion. We want to see a whole variety of aliens, capital ships and one-off fighters. Even an eight-year-old can't swallow the idea of the near monolithic resistance army almost as clean-cut as the Imperials.

You see this is where Star Wars inevitably loses me, and where I think it also begins to lose everyone else whether or not they fully recognize it. Simply put the actual ranks of the Rebellion are portrayed as nearly as white (human) and clean-cut as the Empire. Han, Luke, Leia and Chewie in so far as they aren't are an *exception* against that backdrop. And in being allowed to be that exception they're implicitly an elite. RotJ does some nice things to consciously try and rectify all this: introducing the Mon Calamari, Lando's Sullustan copilot, sticking a Dressellian into the mission briefing, making the Endor strike team extras scruffy hippies with beards, long hair and varying baggy clothes. But it doesn't go anywhere far enough. And the moment the continuity of novels and comics picked up after the second Death Star gets vaporized that same unimaginative, undetailed, monolithic interpretation of the Rebellion (and the war) started spiraling out of control. The Rebellion immediately became The New Republic and all of a sudden the whole damn struggle wasn't about overthrowing totalitarianism and breakin' the law as one pleases but rather restoring the rightful regime. The Empire half-collapses and The New Republic steps in to take over. A very conventional war is fought for five or six years and then there's a single galactic congress and a single galactic military and everything is essentially the same as under the Empire except shit gets voted on. Everything from there on out is basically a Star Trek story minus the scientists.

(It's a pretty obvious reality that the Star Wars tone cannot allow for the existence of scientists. Most writers, no matter how stupid, have caught on to the paradigm dissonance it would create

and stepped aside. Indeed the best explicitly banished science out to the fringes of Star Wars history. One of my favorite summations was the throw away factoid that no one knows how hyperdrive works and no one cares. Sadly in both our world and theirs the mindset of science is alien and *unrealistic* to the average person. Star Wars has tinkerers and engineers but the horizon of its aspirations is the horizon of the capitalist and working man. This is why midiclorians were so repulsive to the fans. And why building a ridiculously scaled up blaster to shoot rebellious planets was more swallowable than discovering $e=mc^2$ and carpet bombing them with nukes.)

Star Wars took a turn for the suck a long time ago and those mistakes have been continuously compounded by everyone writing in its world since. The stream of what revamps writers are caught in showcases the growing desperation to get back to the roots. The obvious piece of advice: *Stop Writing About Han, Luke and Leia! Keep characters obscure rather than dynastic and focus on separate concurrent sagas about little people!* Is a waste of breath — we're talking about space-fantasy genre trash after all.

But it's worth asking the question, hypothetically what developments after Endor would still retain the rich Star Wars feel?

To answer that I think it's necessary to get a tad political.

First I'd like to point out a number of positive things about the prequels that were entirely new yet felt solidly Star Wars: Shitty battle droids produced en masse by rich people to create their own private armies? *Fucking good idea*. Palpatine's slow machevellian rise to power. The Republic deteriorating to showing its inherent unviability. The Jedi being scared and reflexively conservative. A local dispute with a WTO/IMF stand-in. Secession. Shiny things with a hint of decay... Granted, Lucas screwed up and made things ridiculously dynastical, rammed the camera directly at big issue stuff (battles, debates, etc) rather than dancing around the periphery, and thought things like slapstick, 50s kitch, and cheesy romance were the perfect additions to his formula. Oh and neutering Iain McDiarmid's menace with a silly latex-and-force-lightning debacle and hell, shitty dialogue mixed with shitty, shitty acting. But mainly he fucked up at something that was a good idea and one that he actually meant to accomplish: Moral quagmire. Every once in a while the prequels stop fearfully candy coating everything and start to embrace the theme that shit is fucked up and folks can't be sure anything they do means a damn. The inescapable point of any hypothetical Star Wars prequels was always going to be how ridiculous the notion of a monolithic purely good team is. When Alec Guinness' Obi-Wan speaks of the Old Republic he does so with some obvious nostalgia, but it's also clearly tempered with depression, not at the impediments to its restoration, but at the realization that it was an unworkable delusion.

So here's my proclamation: The Rebel Alliance is not some orderly conspiracy by political powers to restore the Republic, rather it has to be an alliance of rebels emerging in different places and different contexts for vastly different reasons. Oh there's rebellion everywhere, proles shouting "five-oh" and taking out stormtroopers in back alley shoot outs, terrorist cells blowing up upper class human civies on Eridu, businessmen hiring pirates to attack Imperials getting to close to their illegal bacta operation. There's slave rebellions on Kashyyyk and secret worker councils in the Kuat shipyards and speciesist underground armies and liberal dumbfucks on Alderaan and ideologues of Every Conceivable Stripe. Roving clusters of buddy fighter pilots making attacks where they can, working off of one or two official contacts with other resistance groups. Shit is complicated. So the Yavin 4 resistance was largely humans bankrolled by rich core world dissidents (Alderaan, Chandrilla...) and they may have been a logistical center best tied to the other

groups. But they're dwarfed by all different kinds of actions and uprisings. Slowly growing more tied together and making some serious gains but suffering starker attrition as they do.

I'm partial to the notion that Palpatine, being Sith and a genius, was irreplaceable. If keeping a Galactic Empire tied together was remotely feasible without massive psionic magic the Republic would have become an Empire long ago. And I'm partial to the notion that the Imperial Navy was crippled at Endor. So even while many, many people and classes were indebted and dependent on the Empire their hold *was* shattered in much of the galaxy immediately following Endor, including Coruscant (that's what you get when you build your ridiculous city planet on top of miles of lumpenproles). The Imperial power structures that manage to persist (economic, political and military) end up splitting in a variety of ways. In many cases the regional governors assume sovereign control over their territories. The Imperial Navy as a whole probably holds together quite well, lumping up in one or at most two broad regions. Maybe there's some epic civil war, maybe not. However you cut it "Empire" is a self-evidently outdated word. A regional body (probably over a chunk of the core) faced with fraying effects all around needs an ideological narrative to even make sense. Notions of purity, elitism and order have to be harped on much, much harder (causing openly recognizable inefficiencies in some respects). Everywhere else Imperial structures persist by means of superficial shifts matched with appeals to Old Republic "great civilization" narratives.

For the vast majority of the galaxy the collapse of the Empire means a sudden return to local governance. Corrupt administrators, republican governments, traditional rulers, gangsters, warlords, corporate operations... With a ton of un-ruled marketplaces as well as idealic fringe communities as well.

It's utterly preposterous to assert the Rebel Alliance would hold together in these conditions. Until Endor there had never been anything close to a single coherent "rebel fleet". Ackbar is sick of all your traps. (Also your non-traps. The only decent genders have tentacles.) He's going home to Mon Calamari. Obviously. Because that's his motivation. Or if he has an ideological one for the shape of the galaxy as a whole (communist!, anarchist!, libertarian!, fish-philosophy!) then fine, he has that, but there's just no way in hell it's going to be uniformly shared by all the different components of the rebellion. The vast majority are just doing it for their homeworld, or their families or revenge or general insurrectionary spirit. Sure some rich planets that have fallen from the Empire's grace long in an abstract way for the privileges they had under the Republic — but they just broke the back of the only military force anywhere near capable of bringing everyone else in line.

Nobody gives two shits what some human in a big robe says on the remains of a looted Coruscant. (And oh yeah, there's a *massive* amount of looting/piracy in the immediate aftermath of Endor as the luckiest dispossessed start divvying shit up and entropic egalitarian forces rush back into the market.) Cooperation? Don't shit me. Everyone remembers what everyone else got up to under the Empire. And they all restructured differently. Everyone in power fears every other new planetary power for either being an iota too radical or an iota too conservative. Between such parties setting up even the loosest of galactic federations makes no sense. There isn't an overarching enemy to be fought against, it's not even clear who still is "Imperial" and who isn't, but there *are* uncountable threats springing up all over the place as well as rubble and workcamp files to be sorted through back home. The Alliance was a success, now it's over.

That said undoubtedly some groups forged in the rebellion would continue kicking. Whether through shared ideology or simply having no home to return to. Some folks like Wedge and

Hobbie would cluster in different ways, decide on targets/priorities and keep fighting. But there is absolutely no simple big picture. There are no maps of the galaxy half in red and half in blue, gradually ceding to blue.

And Leia is most definitely **not** elected Chancellor of Everything from media popularity and hero worship. (Star Wars doesn't have a galactic press or internet in any relevant way, it's not a sedate information-age setting. Kids fix their father's landspeeder and deal deathsticks out by the slave pens. Remember, it's the sort of world where "I *just received word* that the Emperor has dissolved the senate" makes sense. Where Leia has to personally drag a little bit of data from one star system to another with a whole fucking starship. Folks aren't checking live feeds on space-twitter.)

That said, Star Wars is an optimistic bit of fantasy and I have some optimistic paths the galaxy could take without chucking all sense of gritty reality.

First, Luke actually trains Leia. They gather, inspire and collaborate with other force sensitives. And then search for surviving Jedi knowledge, vanquish local evils and forge their own way. Not at the center of things, but at the periphery. The Jedi remain a faint, passing legend for a long time. They do not chuck Star Destroyers around with their minds. Nor are there creatures that block their access to the energy field of life itself. They do not set up shop on Yavin IV just because we've seen it before and anything that's been seen has to have its backstory explained (missing the whole point!). They are wanderers. Healing and freeing. And no longer chained to the flag of a centralized government or reactionary tradition they slowly start to make progress in aggregate. There is no Jedi council or even an order. No one Jedi ever encounters or even learns of, much less communicates with, more than a tiny fraction of their kin. But dictators, oligarchs, gangsters and politicians dissolve in their wake and more utopian, collectivist societies emerge. (Also, incidentally, Ben's impression in the force never goes away. That's not something unique, it's just what happens to every damn Jedi who meditates on what life wants rather than what they want. Vader was surprised by this because he hadn't finished developing as a Jedi.)

Second, trade becomes impossible to regulate. Smugglers and other agorists proliferate wildly until their various mutual-aid networks become the most stable galaxy-spanning social institutions. Taxation is impossible for the same Iain Banks space-is-3D reasons — at least without the sort of massive capital investment that disappeared with the Empire. Entities like the Trade Federation can only emerge in the context of a larger state. Asteroid bases and hijacked capital ships go from obscure relay points to major conduits of culture and civilization. A proliferation of small non-localized pirates is certain, but this isn't impetus for the creation of large scale governance because there's nothing a government could do any better than mutual aid / insurance networks. All this erodes the hell out of regional governments and core worlds with unsustainable cultures suffer badly. (Poor Coruscant was always going to end up another Nar Shadda.)

The long term future of the Star Wars galaxy is in space, even more so than before. A populace split more fairly between sedentary planet-sized governments / collectives and flowing circuits of the cheerfully nomadic free-wheeling traders criss-crossing the stars. The peace that is ushered in hardly complete, but it's better regulated and more egalitarian than the Republic ever was.

Writers have always assumed the Republic arose from colonizers attempting to keep in contact and assert control during an era in which space travel was less well known. A time where the relatively few ships that existed were financed by institutions. In which the galaxy was a lot emptier for travelers with possible dangers around every corner. Over its existence those initial conditions have slowly changed. I like this interpretation because it gives meaning and substance

to the massive social shift Palpatine wrought. The Empire was an intelligent if desperate attempt to adapt the Republic's outdated mechanisms and drive to deal with the now teeming and highly connected galaxy.

Basically a totalitarian Empire makes sense, a rotting and unsustainable Republic makes sense, a teeming complex anarchic and increasingly more nomadic post-collapse culture also makes sense. But a more or less decent galactic-sized democracy instantly formed and accepted out of the goodness of all the Rebels' hearts? Totally unbelievable. And basically a stubborn Liberal lack of imagination.

In short the only believable future is one in which the death-stick dealing teens win. The world doesn't go back to bureaucrats, committees, corporate laws, and stodgy religious institutions. Or if it starts to the forces leading that push are fought just as furiously as the Empire was. The only new world coming is one of the Han Solos and Lando Calrissians. The grubby working class, the petty criminals and entrepreneurs. Frequently sketchy, but basically decent.

The major upsets when they exist are not from the development of new scientific breakthroughs (pah!) but from discovery of new functions in the ancient tech everybody is already walking on. Or the discovery of ancient unknowably storied locales like Korriban. (Indiana Jones tapped the same Lucas genius for making you feel like there was too much rich context to ever pick apart.) There are no Sith because the Sith with their very specific historical grievance (christ it'd be nice if the piling up KOTOR era stuff managed some tangible motivations beside the over-harped and cartoonish "hate makes you powerful" shit) died with Palpatine. Rather there are Jedi who fuck up, Jedi who disagree on bad days, and psychopaths who were lucky enough to be successful at moving the nickle around with their minds when they were eight. Shit can get dramatic, stakes can get relatively big scale, but not so big — the empire's dead and with it the only time in thousands of years there was even the economic capacity for things like Death Stars much less the social context to apply it meaningfully. On the whole the Galaxy starts living a bit more nomadic and anarchic like The Culture except without any conscious or noticeable moral enlightenment. Factions jockey back and forth. Local powers try to act imperialistically. Ideologies clash and shift. The Jedi go on. Quietly. Less perceptibly.

That's how Star Wars ends in my head.

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