

List 3, Essay Question 19:

The Star Wars story world has been around for almost 25 years. What factors have contributed to its continued interest and popularity?

At the age of 5, it was surely the event of the day for me, when my father arrived home. One night, I was at my room when the door rang and I rushed inside to open the door for my father. He had three toys in his hand! It was more than the event of the day for me when my father brought a present to me but this time it was even more than that... The three carded-figures my father gave to me were unlike any other thing I've seen until that moment. I rushed back to my room and started to remove the cards. When I was finished with removing the cards and putting their accessories on, I asked my parents what their names were. They were "Amanaman" (one of the creatures in the Mos Eisley Cantina in Tatooine), "R5-D4" (the droid that Luke and Obi-wan would buy from Jawas but then was replaced by R2-D2) and... "Darth Vader"(if this essay had audio support you know which anthem would play here). These were Star Wars action figures in my house! At the age of 5, I fell in love with something for the first time in my life.

In 1977 a movie changed the popular culture forever. The following two sequels made up the legendary trilogy. And over the years it became the most popular work of the art of cinema. It became a madness. But are the special effects, intergalactic plotline, deep characters and the wild imagination enough to fully understand why after 25 years, Star Wars story world hasn't lost a bit from its popularity? (Maybe a bit from its dignity with the new prequels but...) We can analyse the reasons of this immense popularity in two main factors: *myth factor* and *marketing factor*.

Star Wars story world has everything you can expect from a myth. It has the basic elements that can be found children's stories, and that are common in any culture you could think of. Some sources consider Star Wars a medieval romance set in outer space. It is pretty much true because George Lucas mainly based Star Wars on the Feudal Japan stories. Symbolisms of Feudal Japan is all over Star Wars; emperor, princess, Jedi knights, sabres duels... etc. Not only that but also themes like "good vs. evil", "heroes and villains", "magical princes and ogres", "transmission of power from father to son" are all from both early western and eastern folklore writings. Joseph Campbell wrote in *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, that "It has always been the prime function of mythology to supply the symbols that carry human spirit forward, in counteraction to those other constant human fantasies that tend to tie it back."¹

Costumes and settings are vital during the creation of this *timeless* and *alien* story world. Far Eastern influences can be easily seen on the robes of Yoda, Obi-Wan and other Jedi as a symbol of wisdom. Tie fighter pilots and some other empire forces' masks and appearances resemble the dark samurai image. Also the suits of Lando and Leia in Bespin have definitely the eastern touch. Western is another theme we encounter throughout the story. Considering the overall effect of Western over Sci-fi it would be impossible not to see any Western in Star Wars anyway. Bounty hunters, fugitives, shoot-outs and Han Solo... Han is a typical western hot shot with his gunslinger costume, his jacket and his gun. It is not only Western but Star Wars has an over all feel of the past too. As a part of a technique to create timelessness, Lucas has used many *past* themes and images as well as futuristic ones. Ancient war

¹ Henderson, Mary S., *Star Wars: The Magic of Myth*, 1997, Bartom Books, New York

weapons, primitive structures and inferior races (Ewoks, Tusken Raiders, Jawas) are some of the elements that give us the feel of the past. This feel is also used to make a distinction among primitive and poor planets, races and characters. While we see high-technology settings in Coruscant and Death Star, planet Tatooine is very poor and inferior considering Mos Eisley Cantina, Sand People and the Jabba's Palace. Each setting describes a totally different environment from the other one which makes the story richer. Coruscant is like a cyber-Egypt with all the pyramid-like architecture. Tatooine looks rather like an Arabic-metropolis, in the middle of the desert, with scary Stormtroopers patrolling around, people wear robes and a little outlawed too if you know what I mean. Death Star is the biggest space-ship ever in any story with an incredibly advanced technology. Where next to that, in the moon of Endor, the primitive Ewoks live in trees and worship C3PO thinking he is a God. All these mythic settings help to emphasize the diversity and the huge-size of Star Wars story world.

Star Wars is also wrapped up with the global issues of the 70s. George Lucas, living his teenage years in the aftermath of World War 2, clearly uses the image of Hitler's Germany while creating the fearful image of the Empire. Darth Vader's ultimate charismatic and evil look is complete with his German WW2 like helmet. The infantry of the empire is called "Stormtroopers" in the first place and the Imperial Guards resemble the Gestapo which is the ultimate, unquestionable force. "Costumes for Imperial officers borrow from the look of Bavarian Chevaulagers, 1915. Flying ace Baron Manfred von Richthofen, the "Red Baron" wears the same uniform tunic."² The dog-fights of the WW2 are disguised as the legendary X-Wing vs. Tie-Fighter battles in space. The *goal of setting a republic and fighting against the empire as rebels* is yet another politic theme which is very favourable for Americans in 1977 for sure. And the philosophical theme of *man vs. machine* is presented to us in the conflicting character of Darth Vader. Another global issue of the late 70's which found life in this *alien* Star Wars story world was the "fear of an ultimate nuclear weapon". Just like the doom machine in Kubrick's *Dr. Strangelove*, Death Star is the ultimate image of power and destruction in Star Wars. And all these small details are masterfully created by some of the best costume and art designers ever. Plus the legendary special effects and the make-up which not only won the Oscars but also established the basis for the mighty Lucas Arts. So with the help of groundbreaking make-up and special-effects, this mixture of different cultural, historical and mythical elements within a setting far, far away... made Star Wars one of the greatest stories ever told in the literacy.

The second factor for Star Wars to become a legend is of course... marketing. Star Wars single-handedly changed the concept of "toy". Little *lead-soldiers* of my father's childhood mutated and resurrected in the setting of a total fantasy (such a head-trip for the spirit of *soldier figures*, don't you think?). In this new form and package, soldier figures were more than an anonymous part of stereotype troops. But each figure was a different character with his/her/its own past, background, race, goals, allies and enemies. Having the characters from the motion picture, from the Star Wars universe itself, with your imagination you were now in the storyline, altering, directing and creating your own side-stories. Each time you played you added something to the Star Wars story world. It was a new form of madness and it earned Star Wars crew some big bucks. Not only the teenagers were mad about these figures but also the adults were highly interested in these toys not mentioning kids at

² Henderson, Mary S., *Star Wars: The Magic of Myth*, 1997, Bartom Books, New York,(

the age of five... I still imagine my father that night; entering a toy store in Istanbul to buy his son a toy before coming home. Coming across Star Wars figures as toys for ages 4 and up, he must have been pretty excited to buy three of them at the same time. So here we have the story of the huge success of Kenner Products. "In 1977 Kenner Products negotiated license for Star Wars property, which went on to become the company's most powerful toy success. Kenner Products broke the \$200 million sales mark, doubling its sales in just three years, due in large part to the enormous success of Star Wars."³ "A major revolution in the toy industry, and for that matter, in the entertainment industry, was the widespread success of Kenner's *Star Wars* line in 1977. *Star Wars* radically changed the profile of the action figure market, taking the size of the figure down to 3-3/4" and bringing retail price down making it possible for the first time for kids to collect them all!"⁴ At the year of 1983, already 300 million Star Wars related toys were sold in just 6 years. Today we still observe this wave heavily in action toy industry. Hence the official motto of Pokemon... "Gotta catch 'em all!"

Marketing is maybe *the* most accelerating and widely spreading phenomenon in the last 2 decades. With the rise of capitalism, globalisation, cable-TV, internet and etc etc... The way of our life has been shaped with the marketing philosophy. Art is shaped by marketing. Cinema industry, TV industry, toy industry, graphic design industry, all of them boil down to one huge market. Moreover, the bedtime stories for children, go through a delicately-planned marketing process. I was raised while shaping my imagination with mainly G.I.Joe's. And it wasn't bad, I still adore them. My brother grew up with the naïve cyber-fantasy culture and feeling of Pokemon and he loves them. You see the steps from Star Wars, to G.I.Joe, to He-man, to Pokemon, to Digimon... That's why Star Wars is the primary building-block in the shaping of human kinds imagination, downgrading the whole concept to a kid's mind.

It is not only action figures... Much more things in the world took place giving Star Wars great opportunities to be more and more popular. After the Star Wars Trilogy, it was the 80's. In 80's and particularly in 90's, arcade games, consoles and PC gaming industry became the major interest platform for kids and teenagers. (And today those kids and teenagers make up the middle-aged market segment for the new consoles and PC games.) So in 80's and 90's every console, every arcade machine, every new configurational-PC platform had their variety of new games to tempt people to buy new consoles or upgrade their PCs. So there was a need for new-age stories which should be highly compatible with being turned into various types of computer games. And guess what... Star Wars games dominated the interactive entertainment for video game console systems and personal computers! After the great success of the Star Wars Trilogy, a huge company was born; Lucas Arts. "Since its inception in 1982, LucasArts has continually been heralded for its focus on creating rich, immersive worlds for players to discover. Lucas Arts games continually receive critical acclaim and attain commercial success, with the company's products often earning Game of the Year honours, including multiple awards from the Academy of Interactive Arts & Sciences."⁵ So considering that the interactive entertainment for video game console systems and personal computers dominate the interests of children for the last at least decade, Star Wars had an even a more powerful influence with computer games than action figures. Each and every console (Atari, Nintendo64, GameBoy, Amiga, Commodore64, Sega Master System,

³ <http://www.kennertoys.com/history/history2.html>

⁴ http://www.hasbro.com/pl/page.corporate_history_hasbro/dn/default.cfm

⁵ <http://www.lucasarts.com/about/>

Playstation, Gamecube, Playstation2, Xbox) had Star Wars games for sure. And PC platform? Games like “X-wing vs Tie-Fighter”, “Dark Forces”, “Rebel Assault I-II”, “Jedi Outcast” and many more became huge successions for both players and PC game market. This multi-layered characteristic of the Star Wars story world enabled Lucas Arts to easily create many different side-stories and altogether make-up a huge time-line, thus enabling many games with entirely different and deep settings and plotlines. In each game you expand your knowledge of Star Wars a bit more and you become a part of it a bit more.

So in conclusion, ironically, while creating an alien story world, George Lucas made the people think of Star Wars not only as non-alien but also as very close to their inner worlds indeed. Anyone can find some detail they love or a part of their culture in Star Wars. Anyone can come across Star Wars during watching TV, in a movie, playing a computer game, reading the papers... so this *in your face* popularity of Star Wars gave birth to the Jedi religion... It is not only a web site you know (www.jediism.org), in August 2002 “more than 70,000 people in Australia have declared that they are followers of the Jedi faith, the religion created by the Star Wars films. A recent census found that one in 270 respondents - or 0.37% of the population - say they believe in the force, an energy field that gives Jedi Knights like Luke Skywalker their power in the films. Most of the 70,509 people who wrote Jedi on their census forms were suspected to have done so in response to an e-mail encouraging all Star Wars fans to get it recognised as an official religion.”⁵ “When you look at it you probably have got about 5,000 people in that 70,000 that were true hard-core people that would believe the Jedi religion carte blanche,” Australian Star Wars Appreciation Society president Chris Brennan told ABC Radio. “The original Star Wars trilogy appeared at a time when 95 percent of Americans said that they believed in God, but only 43 percent attended religious services. It is no wonder that these movies with their stories of rebirth and redemption and conquest of good over evil took on the power of myth. Values that had seemed lost to society were given new life in star Wars: chivalry, heroism, nobility and valor.”⁶

So with the help of multi-cultural concept, accelerating marketing, digital entertainment and all the other issues that shape the world today, the Star Wars story world grew more and more not losing a bit from its continued interest and popularity.

⁵ <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/entertainment/2218456.stm>

⁶ Henderson, Mary S., *Star Wars: The Magic of Myth*, 1997, Bartom Books, New York

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